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**“The distant pandemonium of the sun”:
The Novels of Cormac McCarthy**

**Ph.D. Thesis
Tiffany McKirdy
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October 2001**



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Tiffany McKirdy

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Chapter One: (pp. 1 - 87)

Landscape, Society and the Individual in Cormac McCarthy's Novels

This chapter considers the incursion of a form of Emersonian transcendentalism in the earlier Southern novels. The second part focuses on the Western novels and includes discussion of the relationship between man and nature and the influence of the ideologies which underpin both nationalism and Manifest Destiny. The gradual conflation of landscape and text in the western novels, the increasing internalisation of landscape and the tendency towards erasure that threatens to subsume/ absorb the traveller/ narrator, are also addressed.

Chapter Two: (pp. 88 – 147)

A Consideration of Corpses: Literary and Cinematic Autopsy in Cormac McCarthy's Prose

The second chapter examines the various narratorial strategies employed by McCarthy, focussing on the image of the corpse in his first three novels. The influence of Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Joyce on McCarthy's narrative strategy and the role of the 'author' in his work are considered in the introduction. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the position of the reader as 'spectator' is examined and finds that the anamorphosis of the narrative style mimics cinematographic changes in perspective and point of view. The voice of a sadistic and misogynist narrator is addressed with reference to *Child of God*, which also draws on feminist theories of voyeurism and scopophilia. The relationship between the author and the 'spectator/ reader' is related to classic films (Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, for example) and issues of identification practices and specular relations are discussed with reference to film theory. The depiction of 'death hilarious' in *Outer Dark* compares McCarthy's conflation of horror and humour with both the earlier prose of Flannery O'Connor and contemporary cinema.

Chapter Three: (pp. 148 – 282)

The Representation of the Female in Cormac McCarthy's Novels

The final chapter addresses the issues arising for the female reader from the representation of the female in the misogynist narrative. The association of the female with supernatural and death is considered, together with the stereotypical images of the *mater dolorosa* and the prostitute. The play on absence and presence and the use of the metaphor animal-as-female is considered as it allows McCarthy's novels to veil the representation of the female as 'other' through a series of disavowals. However, an abject fear of the maternal can be seen in the numerous depictions of the monstrous-feminine, the 'vagina dentata' and the conflation of birth and death which displays a horror of both maternity and paternity.

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Introduction

Cormac McCarthy was born in Rhode Island in 1933. He is the third of six children (the eldest son) and he was originally named Charles, after his father. It is not known whether his family or Cormac himself changed his name to that of the Irish King, the Gaelic equivalent of 'son of Charles'. The family moved to Knoxville in 1937 and his father became a lawyer for the Tennessee Valley Authority and in 1967, the family moved to Washington D.C., where Charles senior was the principal attorney in a law firm. McCarthy was raised as a Roman Catholic and he attended the Catholic High School in Knoxville, going to the University of Tennessee in 1951-2. He then joined the U.S. Air Force in 1953 (serving two years in Alaska where he hosted a radio show), until 1957. He returned to the University, where he published two short stories in the student literary magazine, *The Phoenix*, calling himself C.J. McCarthy, Jr., winning the Ingram-Merrill Award for creative writing in 1959 and 1960. McCarthy married Lee Holleman and they had one son, Cullen. They lived in Chicago while McCarthy wrote *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) and then moved to Sevier County, where the marriage ended.

McCarthy received a travelling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and in 1965, although he intended to visit the home of his Irish ancestors (Blarney Castle was built by a King Cormac McCarthy), while on board the liner *Sylvania*, he met Anne DeLisle, a young English singer/ dancer working on the ship, marrying her in England in 1966. After receiving a Rockefeller Foundation Grant (1966-8), they toured Europe, settling for a while in Ibiza, where McCarthy completed *Outer Dark* (1968). They returned to Tennessee (living in a barn near Louisville, which McCarthy renovated himself) and in 1969, McCarthy received the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Writing. In 1973, *Child of God* was published to mixed reviews. Following this, McCarthy worked on his screenplay *The Gardener's Son*, which was premiered in 1977. By the time McCarthy moved to El Paso in 1976, he had separated from Anne DeLisle. *Suttree* was published in 1979, although McCarthy had reputedly been working on it intermittently for twenty years or more. In 1981, he received a so-called 'genius grant' – a MacArthur Fellowship – and in 1985, *Blood*

Meridian was published and hailed by many as a masterpiece. However, it was his second western, *All The Pretty Horses* (1992), the first volume of the *Border Trilogy*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller, and sold 190,000 hardback editions in the first six months. His play, *The Stonemason*, written in the mid-1970s, was published in 1994. The second instalment of the trilogy was *The Crossing* (1994) and McCarthy's most recent novel to date is the final part, *Cities of The Plain* (1998). He has also written an unpublished screenplay, *Whales and Men*.

McCarthy's reclusive lifestyle has ensured that little is known beyond these bare facts, although he is rumoured to have married for the third time and is still living in El Paso, working on his next novel.¹ While the success of *All The Pretty Horses* prompted interest in McCarthy's earlier novels, he remains a relatively unknown writer, and Billy Bob Thornton's recent (2000) film of the novel was a resounding failure. Vereen Bell's *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988), was the first monograph about his works, followed by Robert Jarrett's *Cormac McCarthy* (1997). However, in the past few years, there has been a significant increase in critical appraisal of McCarthy's work, resulting in numerous scholarly articles, a *Southern Quarterly* Special Edition (Spring 2000), and three anthologies: *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (1995); *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (1993, rev. 1999); *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy* (2000).

The following thesis is divided into three chapters: 'Landscape, Society and the Individual'; 'A Consideration of Corpses: Literary and Cinematic Autopsy in Cormac McCarthy's Prose'; 'The Representation of the Female in Cormac McCarthy's Novels'. Although this would suggest discrete categorisation, there is some necessary overlap between the chapters. Therefore, in the first chapter, 'Landscape, Society and the Individual', the second half, which focuses on the western novels and includes a discussion of the relationship between man and nature and the influence of the ideologies which underpin both 'nationalism' and Manifest Destiny, is necessarily considered largely in terms of the narrative voice. This is partly because (with the exception of the judge) in *Blood Meridian* the narrator is the only source of

¹ All of the above biographical information is from the Cormac McCarthy website, www.cormacmccarthy.com.

information, so that the narrative strategy of 'optical democracy' is an important aspect of the politics of landscape in the western novels. This chapter also includes a consideration of the incursion of a form of Emersonian transcendentalism in the earlier Southern novels, an increased sense of alienation to be found in *Suttree*, and the focus on the interior 'landscapes of the mind' of McCarthy's cowboy protagonists. The relationship between the landscape, society and the individual is seen to incorporate different forms of 'communities' and notions of 'home'.

The second chapter, 'A Consideration of Corpses: Literary and Cinematic Autopsy in Cormac McCarthy's Prose', examines the various narratorial strategies employed by the author, focussing on the image of the corpse in McCarthy's first three novels. The influence of Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Joyce on McCarthy's narrative strategy and the role of the 'author' in his work are considered in the introduction. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the position of the reader as 'spectator' is examined with reference to the description of Kenneth Rattner's murder and the use of a narrative strategy which mimics cinematographic changes in perspective and point of view. The voice of a sadistic and misogynist narrator is discussed with reference to Lester Ballard's many female corpses and his 'Lessons in Masculinity' in *Child of God*, which also draws on feminist theories of voyeurism and scopophilia. The relationship between the author and the 'spectator/ reader' is related to classic films (Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, for example) and issues of identification practices and specular relations are discussed with reference to film theory. Finally, the depiction of 'death hilarious' in *Outer Dark* compares McCarthy's conflation of horror and humour with both the earlier prose of Flannery O'Connor and contemporary cinema.

Finally, 'The Representation of the Female' is examined. This chapter may seem inordinately long, and the title perhaps a misnomer or even hopelessly optimistic, given the narrative space allowed to most of McCarthy's female characters, and the fact that they appear as no more than vague impressions of misogynist stereotypes, rather than fully-formed characters. However, while paternal relationships within McCarthy's novels are seen to be the source of a sense of alienation which often instigates the sons' compulsion to leave home, it is maternal relationships which are the real problem for McCarthy's male protagonists. While the fathers may, like Huck

Finn's 'Pap', provide a narrative function in initiating their sons' deracination, it is the mothers (or rather, the representation of the female as either a *mater dolorosa*, a monstrous harridan, or an unsettling combination of both), who ensure that the sons stay away. Their negative influence is significant, particularly as McCarthy's sons display an abject and pathological fear of the maternal.

The choice of the title quotation from *Blood Meridian* is typical of one of McCarthy's many narrative voices, which threatens apocalypse in arcane language. It also refers to the many 'phallic' sunsets which pervade McCarthy's novels, and implies the linguistic pun on sun/son/Son, which is particularly appropriate, given the troubled paternal relationships in his fiction. In addition, 'Pandemonium' was the neologism of John Milton, who coined the term in *Paradise Lost* to describe the capital of hell, a place where many of McCarthy's protagonists appear to reside.

It becomes apparent through discussion of the above elements, that the paradox, contradiction and ambivalence which adhere to McCarthy's narratives, can be usefully addressed by considering the following chapters as they interrelate and may illuminate the intertextuality of McCarthy's novels. For example, it is the plethora of narrators who are responsible for the depiction of both the relationship between landscape, society and the individual and also the representation of the female in McCarthy's novels. In the first chapter, the notion of 'family' and its larger manifestations in 'community', 'region' and 'nation', is seen to be both fragile, disempowering and even dangerous, and this clearly influences the representation of the female in relation to both 'home' and 'nation'. In the second chapter, McCarthy's 'cinematic' narrative strategy, which incorporates many stylistic features of his avowedly favourite writers and employs a variety of voices, means that the position of the reader in relation to the texts and the corpses within, ensures a combination of discomfort (even horror and repulsion) and pleasure. The final chapter draws on previous discussion of a misogynous narrator in *Child of God* and also the political ideology of McCarthy's cowboy protagonists. Therefore, while the three chapters offer discrete readings, they are most usefully considered as they inform and relate to each other.

Chapter 1

Landscape, Society and the Individual
in Cormac McCarthy's Novels

Landscape, Society and the Individual

Cormac McCarthy's work can most usefully be approached by examining the interrelation of predominant themes and narrative strategies within all of his novels. Edwin Arnold has proposed that 'these books speak to one another whatever their setting and, with each response, deepen and expand and give shape to McCarthy's overall artistic vision'.¹ He suggests that the intertextuality does 'tell a definite story', and that the story is 'as old as the hills of Tennessee and as profound as the desert of the Southwest [...] McCarthy writes about the passing down of heritage or the failure of that passage, the intergenerational communion which, like the fence holes in *Blood Meridian* seems "less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality"' (BM, 337).² This chapter includes a discussion of how the individual, the community and the environment interrelate, particularly given McCarthy's protagonists' overwhelming sense of dislocation, alienation and deracination. The pervasive influence of landscape and the relationship between man and nature are explored in all of his fiction, although the focus will be on the transcendentalism of *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy's first novel, and the 'optical democracy' (a term used by McCarthy's narrator to describe the relationship between man and the deserts of the Southwest) of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's first western. The vigilantism of the early southern novels and the gradual fading of 'optical democracy' in the *Border Trilogy* will be briefly considered.

The communities and individuals of McCarthy's novels are essentially tied to the surrounding landscapes, although they are largely oblivious to them. The landscapes of his Southern novels can be contrasted with those of his later Western ones. Similarly, there is

¹ Edwin T. Arnold, 'The Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction', in *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (El Paso, Texas: Texas Western Press, 1995), pp. 17-23.

² *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in The West* (London: Picador, 1990) {1st pub. New York: Random House, 1985}. Further references will be in the abbreviated form, BM.

a movement from the 'blighted inhabitants' of Red Branch, Tennessee, in McCarthy's first novel, through Knoxville's 'community of the damned' in *Suttree*, to a concentration on the Mexican society and 'border communities' of *Blood Meridian* and the *Border Trilogy*. Despite the vagaries of time and place, the examination of the landscapes, communities and individuals therein, provides an insight into the complexities of American exceptionalism, as it is articulated in McCarthy's depiction of those elements which constitute society: the individual; the family; the community; the nation, and the landscapes in which they reside. The basis of such an examination rests on the fact that McCarthy is as interested in 'landscapes of the mind' as he is the Appalachian Mountain ranges and Mexican deserts. It is importantly the narrator who describes the landscapes and through the narrative voice, McCarthy makes the reader aware of the optical illusion that adheres to landscape. His novels are also preoccupied with the liminal, borders and boundaries, both literal and figurative. This is evident in the landscapes, the horizons and setting suns implying the outermost limit and the edge of the world and also a limitless expanse. The notions of 'family' and its larger manifestation, 'community', are imbued with both fragility and horror: fragility in the ever-present sense of impending disintegration, and horror in the substitute families and communities which the individuals encounter, from the 'grim triune' of *Outer Dark* to the scalp-hunting gangs of *Blood Meridian*.

Fenceposts, boundaries and borders which are a feature of all of McCarthy's novels are balanced, or rather, unbalanced by equally dominant images of limitlessness, deracination and wandering. McCarthy appears to interrogate the paradox that borders imply limit and restriction at the same time as they represent a threshold and the possibility of expansion. There are several descriptions of the endless endeavour of man to map, to colonise and to mark out territories and frontiers. While this is perhaps seen more literally in *Blood Meridian* and the expansive terrain of the Southwest of his *Border Trilogy*, McCarthy's earlier novels interrogate borderlands, both literal - the setting of the Appalachian mountains (one of the first 'evolutionary' stages in colonising the West) - and psychological, as the limits of depravity and perversity are explored, particularly in *Child*

of God. Many of McCarthy's protagonists inhabit a dreamworld which exists on the border between wakefulness and sleep, truth and fiction, the unsocialised self and the community. It is this lack of socialisation which results in a desperate search for an authentic identity, although the notion of these protagonists as representative of Everyman is alternately proposed - the murderous necrophiliac Lester Ballard is 'a child of God much like yourself perhaps' (*Child of God*, 14) - and denied, as Cornelius Suttree discovers while in his febrile state: 'I learned that there is one Suttree and one Suttree only' (*Suttree*, 461). Therefore, while physical borders between countries are a pervasive feature of McCarthy's western novels, all of his work deals with borders, although these may be less to do with geographical boundaries than psychological and ontological exploration.³

A discussion of geographical borders inevitably invites consideration of the depiction of the people who populate any region, the communities contained therein, and the ideology which underpins nationalism. In *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson understands 'nationality, 'nation-ness' and 'nationalism' to be 'cultural artifacts of a particular kind', which have changed meanings and today 'command [...] profound emotional legitimacy'.⁴ He writes in an 'anthropological spirit', suggesting that nationalism belongs with 'kinship' and 'religion', rather than with 'liberalism' or 'fascism' (5). His definition of nation is 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign':

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [...] In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/ genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (6)

³ Robert Jarrett, for instance, points out one 'distinctive trait' of McCarthy's fiction is 'to be positioned on and to investigate overlapping border and peripheries – whether regional, cultural, or historical'. Robert Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, (New York: Twayne, 1997), p. vii.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.5.

The changing depiction of the individual within both the community and the surrounding landscape in McCarthy's novels, will be examined in this chapter. This reveals a movement from an early agrarian and transcendental impulse in *The Orchard Keeper* (with a brief consideration of the exploration of the 'horror' which is contained in the notion of 'community' in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, and the sense of 'gothic loneliness' and urban alienation in the 'community of the damned' in *Suttree*), to the violent depiction of nationalism and American imperialism in *Blood Meridian* and its legacy as it is experienced by McCarthy's 'cowboy' protagonists in the *Border Trilogy*.

While *Blood Meridian* refuses an anthropocentric vision through the narrative depiction of man and nature, suggesting instead that the inexorable 'progress' of man in history is also a death-ridden process of regression, this is addressed in all of McCarthy's novels. The notion of both individual and collective improvement and transformation which are central to the mythology of American exceptionalism, and in particular the ideology which sees American nature as a benign model of democracy, are replaced in McCarthy's work with a sense of history (both personal and universal) which places society, the individual and nature in a mutable and uneasy relationship to each other. The sunsets that pervade McCarthy's fiction are both hopeful ('the evening redness in the west') when imaged as the benign promise of a new day, and apocalyptic (a 'blood meridian'), a reminder of the violent atrocities committed by man.

**“The Whole of Nature is a Metaphor for the Human Mind”:
Transcendentalism and Simultaneity in *The Orchard Keeper*.**

The Orchard Keeper is the story of the triangular relationship between a young boy, John Wesley Rattner, an aged woodsman called Uncle Ather Ownby who tends both the ruined apple orchard and the corpse of John's father, and Marion Sylder, entrepreneurial bootlegger and the murderer who deposited the corpse in the spray pit. John Wesley forms

relationships with both of these men, unaware of their involvement with his father.⁵ McCarthy juxtaposes descriptions of man's isolation in nature and the notion of the transcendental 'self' with the equally compelling sense that however much his protagonists display a desire for isolation, a sense of the past, both genealogical and geographical, persists. The father/son relationship is crucial to the narrative and usually initiates the actions of the male protagonists, the absent fathers remaining throughout these novels as constant reminders of both a genealogical inheritance and the emotional, spiritual and ideological inheritance of a patriarchal tradition. It is often the actions or absence of the father that prompt the male protagonist to leave home, so that the idea of 'home' for most of McCarthy's 'sons' is, from the onset, a fragile (if not frightening) concept. Similarly, the notion of 'family' is often imbued with recrimination, so that the larger manifestations of 'community' and 'nation' are not automatically embraced because both can be threatening rather than comforting, an idea which is developed in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* and reaches its apotheosis in *Blood Meridian*. There is a troubling relationship between the patriarchal figures of McCarthy's Southern 'homes' and the patriarchs of the Old South, and the ideology of Manifest Destiny which underpins the sense of 'community' and 'nation' as they are understood by their 'sons' who inherit the American Dream.

Richard Gray addresses the distinction between nationalism and regionalism in his recent book, *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism*.⁶ He considers the 'instabilities' which can occur 'when a culture perceives itself as marginalised', noting that the stories based in Southern mountain areas (the 'highlands' and 'hinterlands'), for example, force the reader to 'pluralize our idea of a regional culture and to see Southern mythmaking as a process, a developing series of discrete stories' (xii). Gray's emphasis is on 'variance and pluralism' and he makes the point that 'aberration' is 'a fundamentally slippery term because it is contextually,

⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper* (London: Picador, 1994) {1st pub. New York: Random House, 1965}

⁶ Richard Gray, *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

reciprocally defined', so that the dialectical opposition between 'norm' or 'center' and 'aberration' or 'margin', means that the South has historically been defined from a national 'norm' (xiii). Gray proposes that 'the note of exile sounds like a melancholy bell through Southern writing' (26), and that its 'determining features [...] include a compelling inwardness, a stifling sense of claustrophobia, a scarcely concealed hysteria, and the habit of looking backward, not only for comfort but the means of salvation' (32). As shall be discussed here, McCarthy's Southern narratives do conform to Allen Tate's description of the 'backward glance' of the Southern renaissance, 'a literature conscious of the past in the present'.⁷ The crucial difference in McCarthy's narratives, however, is the absence of any sense of either nostalgia or salvation. While the gothic elements of McCarthy's fiction which blur the distinction between life and death are discussed in the second chapter, the different borders which exist between the feelings of 'proud isolation' and 'cultural inferiority' identified by Gray as endemic in Southern literature, are also explored in McCarthy's fiction. McCarthy appears to be the antagonist of the 'regionalist piety' identified by Gray in the essays which made up Tate's *Southern Renaissance* (1953), a stance exacerbated by the 'indelible sense' of 'homelessness' which, as Gray suggests, marks all of his novels (443). This is an important point, for in McCarthy's novels, the West is also a place where 'the note of exile' sounds loudly and the reader is forced to 'pluralize [his/her] idea of a regional culture and to see [Western] mythmaking as a process'. Furthermore, Gray proposes that McCarthy's work is most usefully approached by accepting his 'hybridity' and examining the 'confluence' of the often apparently contradictory critical readings of his work (443-4). This chapter will consider the similarities and differences between the relationship depicted between man, society and the landscape in his novels, although the suggestion will be that there is an increasing focus on the 'landscapes of the mind' of the later cowboy protagonists. Gray also emphasises this aspect of McCarthy's writing, which identifies a 'mixed, plural medium that all of us inhabit now': 'the border territory that is our place of being in the world, made only the more starkly remarkable to us all (including Southerners) by the collapse of those cultural

⁷ Cited in Gray (96). From *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas D. Young (Athens, Ga., 1974), 191.

barriers that used to give us shelter – the illusion of belonging to one stable community and set of traditions’ (444). While the literal geography of McCarthy’s first four novels is that within the one-hundred-mile radius of Maryville, Tennessee, as Gray notes, all the landscapes in these novels are ‘liminal’ and constantly changing as the author ‘is intent on melting down the structures of perception’ and acknowledging the ‘fluid social geography of the contemporary’ (444). While Gray proposes that ‘wandering is both the narrative rhythm and the narrative subject’ of McCarthy’s novels, he also highlights an aspect of this constant crossing and recrossing the landscape which draws attention to a potential problem in the ‘dissolving and reconfiguring’ of the once static oppositions: ‘civilized and savage, past and present, South and West, town and wilderness and, more recently, the United States and Mexico’ (444):

The landscape of all McCarthy’s novels is a liminal, constantly changing one, on which different human cultures encounter one another’s otherness, and appropriate it through language. (444)

The appropriation of the ‘other’ is considered in the third chapter in greater detail and in this chapter, a discussion of the cartographic impulse in *Blood Meridian* will address McCarthy’s depiction of the encounter with the other and the ideology of Manifest Destiny which motivates it. The intertextuality of his work is suggested by the fact that McCarthy’s first western does, after all, begin with the kid’s birth in 1833, in Tennessee. Therefore, it is not only the characters who wander throughout the novels, it is also the novels themselves which take a ‘backward glance’ and cross and recross between past and present. *Blood Meridian* is set one hundred years before not only *All The Pretty Horses* (a point made by several critics who link the kid with John Grady Cole), but also *The Orchard Keeper*. Similarly, *The Crossing* is set around the same time (the 1940s and 50s) as McCarthy’s final southern novel, *Suttree*. While the differences in the story of Billy’s failed attempt to return a female wolf to the mountains of Mexico and that of Suttree’s existential musings in Knoxville, Tennessee could hardly be more different, as Gray suggests ‘McCarthy’s stories are as “homeless” as his characters are because they have no fixed coordinates beyond those supplied by a potentially endless circling’ (449). McCarthy makes this point repeatedly in all of his novels. In *Outer Dark* Culla is ‘from nowhere,

nowhere bound' (240), in *The Crossing* Billy is told 'All tales are one' (133), and in *Blood Meridian*, the men are described engaged in 'inversions without end upon other men's journeys' (BM,121). This makes the concept of 'home' a particularly unstable one in McCarthy's world, so that he appears to offer a bleak parody of the concept of 'family' and societal institutions (the church, the law) which would underpin a sense of community. The 'families' of these novels are 'broken' at their most fundamental level, as the protagonists of McCarthy's novels are in most cases not only 'homeless', but also fatherless.

Kenneth Rattner is the first in a long line of abandoning fathers in McCarthy's fiction. Even the log cabin he moves into with his wife and son is 'abandoned' and he 'left there four days later with twenty-six dollars, alone and southbound' (23), having successfully stolen the wallets from the injured and dying victims of the Green Fly Inn disaster, 'Weather and termites conspired against this haven and brought it to ruin' (25). Although Rattner is unable to forge any familial bonds while alive, it is ironically his corpse which links the three protagonists. While Rattner benefits from the demise of the Inn, the legacy he leaves for his son is a hazy memory fuelled by his wife's disillusioned bitterness and sanctimonious piety, combined with a desire for revenge which is not shared by John Wesley, as she tells him: 'You make half the man he was and you'll be goin some' (66). Like many of the dwelling places in McCarthy's fiction, the Rattners' home is invaded by nature, with wasps' nests in the rafters and 'borers and woodworms' slowly eating away at it. In fact, the rootlessness and abandoned state of the inhabitants are reinforced by the fact that, officially, they do not exist: 'They paid no rent on either house or land, as claimants to either or both properties were non-existent in deed as the house itself' (62).

In spite of his absence, the figure of the father in McCarthy's novel is an omnipresent one. In *The Orchard Keeper*, John Wesley Rattner forms relationships with both Old Arthur Ownby and Marion Sylder, the man who has killed his father and the man who tends his corpse. Both of these surrogate father figures are incarcerated by the end of the novel as a result of their association with Kenneth Rattner, Sylder in prison and Ownby in a mental

asylum, so that even in death, Rattner deprives his son of potential father figures. In the only two novels in which the protagonists become fathers, the sons die. The infant son whom the father abandons and later witnesses being murdered and eaten in *Outer Dark*, is the loathed product of an incestuous relationship, and the abandoned son of Cornelius Suttree, is only mentioned when his father hears of his death.

In *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy blends a pastoral idealism with dystopian surrealism (sex, death and metamorphosis being a preoccupation of the latter), informed by notions of reincarnation from Eastern philosophy and Celtic mythology. The reader is regularly provided with dates, although left with a sense of ambiguity and provisionality enforced by the equivocal endings of McCarthy's fiction.⁸ While Arthur Ownby might represent an older, pastoral vision and while the degenerate and criminal families depicted in the novel are by the end 'myth, legend, dust', there is a real sense that no significant advance has been made. It only becomes clear at the end of the novel that the prologues describes narrative action which occurs in the final pages, as John Wesley watches the men chopping down the tree when he visits his mother's grave, and then leaves through the gap that they have made in the fence.⁹ This confirms the idea of cyclical degeneration and regeneration and a sense of stasis in terms of man's understanding of nature.

Many critics have written about the relationship between the characters and the landscape in McCarthy's fiction. Natalie Grant has proposed that in *The Orchard Keeper* 'nature depicted as a surreal, often hostile environment bounds, emphasises and defines

⁸We are told that Marion Sylder was born in 1913 and the novel begins when he is 21. John Wesley visits his mother's grave three years after she has died, which Mildred Rattner's headstone tells us was 1945, and throughout we are given precise dates. For example, 'The Green Fly burned on December twenty-first of 1936', 'On the morning of fifteenth of November' John Wesley first sets his traps and 'Some time after midnight on the twenty-first of December it began to snow'. However, while Ownby interrogates the social worker about his own date of birth, suggesting that this, the 13th June 1913 was 'kindly a bad start' - he undermines his own sense of superstition and points out the ridiculous nature of the man's questions when he then asks him 'Was your daddy over twenty-eight when you was born?' Similarly, the demise of the Inn occurs on the date of the pagan festival of the winter solstice. However, Ownby cannot, or does not, provide his own date of birth.

⁹ Similarly, in *Outer Dark*, the nightmare that Culla Holmes has at the beginning of the novel is alluded to again through his encounter with the blind man at the end. In *Child of God*, Lester Ballard's

McCarthy's characters [as] personalities who are revealed in their relationship to a natural world that objectifies their psychological boundaries, or lack of them' (61).¹⁰ Terry Witek has proposed that McCarthy reverses the Emersonian notion that 'nature is a metaphor for the human mind':

[...] the world is not a metaphor for us: we have not constructed it, it has constructed us. We are therefore its metaphor, its fragile dwellings whose patterns of impermanence finally display, despite the efforts of McCarthy's protagonists, an endurance of their own [...] Cormac McCarthy does not deny that the spaces we inhabit are metaphors for our collective identity. On the contrary: they match precisely and mercilessly to teach us that no place in the world is home, that everywhere is a potential campsite, that every boy must be the frontiersman of what will turn out to be a grave-sized chunk of earth. Therein lies the ferocious power of McCarthy's treatment of domestic space in his novels. (142)¹¹

McCarthy rejects the projection in both Emersonian transcendentalism and luminism of the myth of America's progress and exceptionalism as a continual process of encountering and civilising nature. The conflict between past and present is for McCarthy never clearly defined, as it is the process of transformation and change which matters, and the ongoing negotiation between spiritual and moral values of the past and those of a newer world. Far from endorsing the exceptionalist rhetoric of nineteenth century writers such as Whitman and Emerson, who felt that man's relation to nature was what could define not only an individual sense of identity but also a democratic society which could overcome an increasingly dominating culture of commercialism and materialism, McCarthy's critique of American destiny never loses sight of the past.¹² While his fiction is set in the 'American' South and the 'American' West, his writing is less regional than universal. In his later

announcement when he turns himself into hospital, 'I'm meant to be here', reiterates his sentiment at the beginning of the novel, when he is being evicted from his home.

¹⁰ Natalie Grant, 'The Landscape of The Soul: Man and the Natural World in *The Orchard Keeper*', *Sacred Violence: A Readers Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (Texas Western Press, 1995), pp. 60-69

¹¹ Terri Witek, 'Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces', *Southern Review* 30 (January, 1994): 136-42

¹²In 'Democratic Vistas' (1871), Whitman saw America in terms of its future rather than its past and claimed that the terms American and democratic are synonymous, and in 'Nature' (1836), Emerson proposed that a knowledge of nature achieved in isolation in the wilderness, is the only way to discover a 'true identity' which reveals the individual self as a 'particle of God'. This exceptional relationship with nature was, as Emerson outlined in 'The American Scholar' (1837), the way towards an American culture that would be self-reliant and cut off from the materialism of the present, and an ideal American society would be modeled on American nature.

'western' novels, the aftermath of the Mexican-American war during the 1840s and the experiences of his 'cowboy' protagonists of the *Border Trilogy*, consistently explore the notions of both 'man' and 'American' in relation to nature, society and war.

McCarthy's vision is closer to that of Hawthorne and Melville, who criticised the optimism of the democratic ideals contained in the rhetoric of Whitman and Emerson, in particular the ability of either the individual or the collective to escape the past. McCarthy's protagonists are cast into a wilderness, and their isolation and deracination focuses on the relation between the individual and society, although, like Hawthorne's exiled outcasts, they are not endowed with a privileged relation to nature which reveals an inherently democratic consciousness, nor are they allowed to escape their past. As Deborah Madsen points out in *American Exceptionalism*, Emerson always assumed that nature was benevolent towards humanity:

[...] the very concept that nature might be hostile or indifferent to human destiny would contradict the entire set of Romantic assumptions upon which Emerson's thinking was based, as it would upset the inherited Puritan assumptions about the divine subtext communicated by American nature to God's chosen people. In Emerson's view, a view which Melville and Hawthorne found deeply disturbing and problematical, the destiny of America depended unquestionably upon the readability of the American landscape and the benevolent message to be found there: a message that would describe the glorious destiny awaiting the new nation. (82)¹³

The opening chapter of Cormac McCarthy's first novel can be read as a summation of an ongoing interrogation of man's relationship with nature that preoccupies his work. The prologue describes three men attempting to disentangle a wire fence from a fallen elm tree:

The tree was down and cut to lengths, the sections spread and jumbled over the grass. There was a stocky man with three fingers bound up in a dirty bandage with a splint. With him were a Negro and a young man, the three of them gathered about the butt of the tree. (3)

Unable to separate the fence from the tree, the man 'took hold of the twisted wrought iron, the mangled fragment of the fence, and shook it. It didn't shake. It's growed all

¹³Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

through the tree, the man said [...] The Negro was nodding his head. Yessa, he said. It most sholy has. Growed all up in that tree' (3). The naiveté of these men in believing that the fence 'grewed all through the tree' is reiterated throughout McCarthy's work in images of boundaries imposed by man on nature which expose man's belief in an inherent power over nature and a futile desire to contain and structure nature, which is echoed in the need for society and community.¹⁴

In his essay 'The Place of the Past in the American Landscape', David Lowenthal proposes that the first decades of nationhood 'gave rise to a comprehensive antihistorical mystique that has had lasting consequences for both the American landscape and the American personality':

A new land unburdened by history, a new people unhampered by their forebears: these were not only aspirations but recognized facts of life, contrasting especially with European obeisance to the past. These feelings were rooted in perceptions of the landscape itself. (90)¹⁵

As Lowenthal points out, an 'explicit and emphatic' opposition to the past 'underlies much of nineteenth century environmental and architectural practice', so much so that the intensely antihistorical bias made Americans feel that their 'unique destiny' actually demanded this disengagement (91). The political motif of the breaking of imperial bonds was clearly articulated by Thomas Jefferson who proposed that each generation was a

¹⁴This image is returned to time and again. In the epilogue to *Blood Meridian* (1985):

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground [...] On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones 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 [...] (337)

In man's attempts to map out terrain and lay claim to the land, the action is that of automatons in which the act of marking borders is validation in itself. The 'progress' of these men is paradoxically one of inexorable regression. For every fence post there is a corpse, and these structures are subject to the same decay.

¹⁵ David Lowenthal, 'The Place of The Past in the American Landscape' in *Geographies of The Mind: Essays in Historical Geosophy*, eds. David Lowenthal & Martyn J. Bowden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp 89-119.

'distinct nation' and that therefore each new generation should not be burdened by previous institutions, whether legal or familial:

[...] the dead have no rights. They are nothing; and nothing cannot own something [...] Our Creator made the earth for the use of the living and not of the dead [...] One generation of men cannot foreclose or burden its use to another.¹⁶

In addition, a 'radically new ideal personality emerged' which, as Lowenthal points out, was described by R.W. B. Lewis:

[He was] an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling [...] The national and hence the individual conscience was clear just because it was unsullied by the past – America [...] had no past, but only a present and a future.¹⁷

An important element of this rejection of the past was the rejection of any parental influence,¹⁸ so that Americans are able, in Tocqueville's words to 'imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands': '[..] the tie that united one generation to another is relaxed or broken; every man there loses all traces of the ideas of his forefathers or takes no heed of them.'¹⁹ Lowenthal suggests that two theories justified an American 'contempt for the past': 'a cyclical view of history widely current during the Enlightenment, and an exceptionalism that excluded America from the framework of world history'(93). It has been noted, however, that for the South, the literary 'backward glance' provided the basis for a 'regionalist piety' which further excluded it from the framework of American history (Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 22-26). This is a dilemma which is addressed in McCarthy's depiction of the past in the present which can be seen in the relationship between the

¹⁶ Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, July 12th, 1816 in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Ellery Burgh, 20 vols. (Washington: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907) 15:42 –2,3

¹⁷ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1955) pp 5,7

¹⁸ Henry David Thoreau contended that 'having lived some thirty years [...] I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors'. *Walden and Other Writings*, 1854 (New York: Random House, Modern Library, 1937).

¹⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835) trans. Henry Reeve, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred Knopf, Vintage books, 1945) 2:104-6

individual, the landscape and society. Therefore, McCarthy's cyclical narratives owe more to Janus than to a Jeffersonian dismissal of the past.

Thoreau emphasised the need to break with England, described as 'an old gentleman who is travelling with a great deal of baggage, trumpery which has accumulated from long housekeeping, which he has not the courage to burn' and in *Walden*, he proposed the need for 'purifying destruction.' (*Walden*, 60-1) This social philosophy meant that history was eliminated not only from the minds of men but also from their surroundings. Jefferson's insistence on the 'sovereignty of the present generation' extended to include not only landscape, but law. The periodic 'purifying destruction' expounded by Thoreau, was articulated by Holgrave in Hawthorne's *House of The Seven Gables*:

Our public edifices – our capitols, state-houses, court-houses, city-hall, and churches – ought [not] to be built of such permanent materials as stone or brick. It were better that they should crumble to ruin once in twenty years, or thereabouts, as a hint to the people to examine into and reform the institutions which they symbolize. (207)²⁰

In *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy appears to satirise this 'purifying destruction'. The 'public edifices', from the graveyard which both begins and ends the novel to the court-house, prisons and government tank of Red Branch, are symbols of decay, needless bureaucracy and corruption rather than renewal and reform. The community is perilously close to disintegration and the impermanence of the societal structures of the living are imaged in the Green Fly Inn, which is 'built on a scaffolding of poles over a sheer drop' and during rough weather becomes reminiscent of Melville's *Pequod* and her crew:

On such nights the inn-goers trod floors that waltzed drunkenly beneath them, surged and buckled with groans. At times the whole building would career madly to one side as though headlong into collapse [...] To them the inn was animate as any old ship to her crew and it

²⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of The Seven Gables*, 1852 (New York: Washington Square Press, 1940).

bred an atmosphere such as few could boast, a solidarity due largely to its very precariousness. (13)

The first disaster at the Inn is apocalyptic in its dimensions:

[...] single figures began to be sucked away in attitudes of mute supplication [...] the figures clutching at the rails began to turn loose their holds, coming away by ones and twos like beetles shaken from a limb, and the entire wreckage descended in a slow tableau of ruin to pitch thunderously into the hollow [...] the atmosphere inside seethed with inchoate violence [...] and they fell upon each other murderously and fought far into the night. (26)

However, the final demise of the Inn is described in quite different terms:

The Green Fly Inn burned on December twenty-first of 1936 and a good crowd gathered in spite of the cold and the late hour. Cabe made off with the cashbox and at the last minute authorized the fleeing patrons to carry what stock they could with them, so that the warmth of the fire and the bottles and the jars passed around took on a holiday aspect. (47)

As the building is consumed by fire it 'dropped vertically into the pit [...] it is there yet, like the last remnant of that landmark, flowing down the sharp fold of the valley like some imponderable architectural phenomenon'(47). There is here reiterated a precarious sense of community and a strange combination of ritual propriety and carnivalesque exuberance in this celebration.

McCarthy provides a detailed description of the Appalachian mountains:

East of Knoxville, Tennessee the mountains start, small ridges and spines of the folded Appalachians that contort the outgoing roads to their liking. The first of these is Red Mountain; from the crest on a clear day you can see the clear blue line of the watershed like a distant promise. (10)

Nature 'contorts' man-made structures. In summer, 'the red dust of the orchard road is like powder from a brick kiln [...] Hot winds come up from the valley like a rancid breath'(10). The parched landscape of the mountains is an oppressive, malignant and hostile environment where plants 'flourish with a cynical fecundity.' (11) The forests have a 'primordial quality' and 'under the west wall of the mountain is Red Branch', a

community built up of backwoodsmen and migrant families 'who reproduced with such frightening prolificness that their entire lives appeared devoted to the production of the ragged line of scions which shoeless and tattered sat [...] and stared out across the blighted land with expression of neither hope nor wonder nor despair' (12).²¹ The inhabitants and itinerant families are worn down by the environment. Even the more successful inhabitants like Increase Tipton, the 'patriarch of a clan whose affluence extended to a dozen jerrybuilt shacks strewn about the valley in unlikely places [...] endowed with an air transient and happenstantial as if set there by the recession of floodwaters', are unable to cling onto their temporary triumph over nature as 'even the speed with which they were constructed could not outdistance the decay for which they held such affinity [...] Some terrible plague seemed to overtake them one by one' (12).²²

Near the beginning of the novel, Ownby is described contemplating the 'long purple welt of the Great Smokies' which prompts a pastoral dream reminiscent of Yeats' 'Lake Isle of Innisfree':

If I was a younger man he told himself, I would move to them mountains. I would find me a clearwater branch and build me a log house with a fireplace. And my bees would make black mountain honey. And I wouldn't care for no man.

He started down the steep incline.- then I wouldn't be unneighbourly neither, he added. (55)

It appears for a while, when he is taken in by some men on the Chilhowee Mountain, that the old man has found his 'bee-loud glade' (193-5). McCarthy appears to simultaneously promote Ownby's vision of Yeatsian romanticism and to undermine it. He articulates the

²¹Although this may recall the Red Branch Cycle of Celtic mythology, the notion of heroism and deity is replaced with decay and tragedy.

²² The image of men blasting through nature (Ownby's house is 'musty, dank and cellar-like' (58) and covered in fungus, almost consumed by the wilderness which surrounds it) is echoed in the journey of the old man who passes the old quarry, 'the tiered and graceless monoliths of rock alienated up out of the earth and blasted into ponderous symmetry, leaning, their fluted faces pale and recumbent among the trees, like old temple ruins', although here the remnants of the quarrying have rendered the landscape seemingly ancient compared to the solid steel tank squatting on the mountain. (189) McCarthy does not seem to promote an elegiac, bucolic existence, as progress can be viewed as 'natural' eventually, 'like old temple ruins', just as the remains of the Green Fly Inn can be likened to 'some imponderable architectural phenomenon.' (47)

contradictory impulses to be alone in nature and the importance of a sense of community. Ownby's cyclical view of history, his past role as orchard keeper and his ritual guarding of the corpse mean that the sense of constant renewal is undercut by images of decay and destruction, both the 'purifying destruction' advocated by Thoreau and the more brutal destruction of the forces of the law.

The constant battle for dominion between man and nature is imaged in the government tank: 'Curled in a low peach limb the old man watched the midmorning sun blinding on the squat metal tank that topped the mountain' (51). The sun 'blinds' the tank although the tank appears to have dominance, 'topping' the mountain. Further up the road is another man-made structure, a concrete tank that had been used as an insecticide spray-pit, although 'these past six years it had served as a crypt which the old man kept and guarded' (52). Ownby had embarked on a ritual guarding and preservation of Kenneth Rattner's corpse, tending it as he would an orchard, and although 'it was still there, what of it had weathered the seasons and the years', the mythical figure of the orchard keeper is as precarious as that of Sylder as the 'prodigal son' or the heroic cowboy. (54)²³ Each winter Ownby 'cut a cedar to serve for wreath and covering':

It took years to fret them into the aromatic humus [...] these things he observed, for he was a watcher of the seasons and their work. By the coming Christmas he would have cut the seventh cedar and with this he felt might come to an end his long deadwatch. (90)

However, when he looks for the corpse 'there was nothing. The dead had risen and gone; no revenant mourned here the unburied remains' (91).²⁴ Ownby's sense of the cyclical nature of life and his propriety over the tending of the corpse are shattered by this discovery and it appears to prompt his visit once again to the government tank, situated in

²³Similarly, the fisher king myth in *Suttree* is undermined by the protagonist's own musings: 'He said that he could have been a fisher of men in another time but these fish now seemed task enough for him.' (14)

²⁴Our first sight of Rattner is his angry assault on a driver who has ignored him as he tries to hitch a lift: 'You wouldn't pick up Jesus Christ, would you, he asked.' (8) The fact that his corpse 'had risen and gone' is an example of the narrator's macabre sense of humour which punctures the pretensions of the characters.

'A barren spot [...] mercurial and luminescent as a sea, the pits from the trees had been wrenched on the naked bulb of the mountain as moon craters':

And on the very promontory of this lunar scene the tank like a great silver ikon, fat and bald and sinister [...] the great dome stood complacent, huge, seeming older than the very dirt, the rocks, as if it had spawned them of himself and stood surveying the work, cleanly and coldly gleaming and capable of infinite contempt. (93)

Here, the tank appears not only to dominate the landscape, but to have 'spawned' the nature which surrounds it, appearing more 'natural'; and older than nature itself. Ownby seems strangely awed by the tank's presence as he 'clung there wrapped in the fence for some time [...] he did not move except that he licked the cold metal of the diamonded wire with his tongue' (93). This seems to satirise the transcendental experience of man in nature, combining an act of homage with tactile desire.

In McCarthy's unpublished screenplay, *Whales and Men*, one of the characters asks, 'But why do we feel so alien in this world? [...] We were put into a garden and we turned it into a detention centre' (57).²⁵ It is often difficult to differentiate between the natural and the human world in McCarthy's fiction, although industrialisation and modern capitalism have changed the nature of that relationship. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Leo Marx identified a form of 'complex pastoralism' which arose as a result of the impact of industrialisation on the American literary imagination.²⁶ In his view, the most 'profound contradictions of value of meaning' in American life arose from the fact that 'within the lifetime of a single generation, a rustic and in large part wild landscape was transformed into the site of the world's most productive industrial machine' (343). Marx takes as representative of this 'complex pastoral' mode, which synthesises the 'real' world with 'an idyllic vision', writers such as Hawthorne, Thoreau, Twain and Melville. Focussing on

²⁵*Whales and Men* is part of the Southwestern Writers Collection in the Albert B. Alkek Library at Southwest Texas State University. Although the manuscript is not dated, it appears that McCarthy wrote it between *Blood Meridian* and *All The Pretty Horses*. Cited in James D. Lilley 'Of Whales and Men: The Dynamics of Cormac McCarthy's Environmental Imagination' in *The Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No.2. (Winter 2000):111-122

²⁶ Leo Marx, *The Machine In the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

Hawthorne's 'Sleepy Hollow' of 1844, Marx proposes that the sudden shriek of the locomotive whistle which disturbs Hawthorne's 'simple pleasure fantasy', is then 'transformed by the interruption of the machine into a far more complex state of mind' (11-15). He argues that 'it is difficult to think of a major American writer upon whom the image of the machine's sudden appearance in the landscape has not exercised its fascination', although he adds that the contradiction between the pastoral impulse and industrial reality means that these writers only manage to attain a 'virtual' and not a real resolution to the existence of the machine in the garden (16). Russell Reising has pointed out in his reading of Marx's thesis that in his concept of a simple contradiction between pastoral myths and technological reality, 'Marx ignores the revolution in social relations which the opposition reveals' as this 'is deflected into a discussion of industrialism rather than of the human significance of the social relations inherent in capitalism' (149).²⁷ Reising cites an earlier cultural theorist, W.F. Taylor, who had foregrounded the importance of the social element, the human problem of the 'machine in the garden':

What our novelists put on *unfavorable* record, what they subjected to telling exposure and criticism, was not the Machine itself but the misuse of the Machine by Society; not industrialism *per se* but the workings of an industrial order administered by *laissez-faire* capitalism. (Taylor, 1942, 325)²⁸

When Arthur Ownby goes to take a 'second look' at the government tank, he is equating this with an early voyeuristic experience and adolescent fear of women. Later, he shoots 'a crude X' in the same tank, and it appears that he is representative of the 'keeper' of the pastoral idyll, responsible for keeping the machine from the garden. However, the conflation of the threatening machine and his earlier sexual excitement, in a moment of almost inexplicable violence complicates this image beyond the simple contradiction of the 'complex pastoralism' which Marx had identified in nineteenth century literature. In *The Orchard Keeper*, it is not the law *per se*, but the corruption and abuse of the law, not the tank *per se* but the mystery and officialdom that quite literally 'surrounds' it in the form of

²⁷ Russell Reising, *The Unusable Past: The Theory and Study of American Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1986).

²⁸ W.F. Taylor, *The Economic Novel in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942).

the A.T.U. guards (who later blast their way through Ownby's house), that is found wanting. The tank also ironically provides cover for Sylder's illicit bootlegging. Similarly, Sylder's car is repeatedly heard shattering the rural idyll, as does the sound of gunshots, and John Wesley's fascination with the ancient steel traps which he uses for hunting is not dissimilar to Sylder's fascination with his car – both are exploiting resources – one is merely a newer machine than the other. In fact, McCarthy's fiction repeatedly makes the point that the problem lies not with the machine in the garden, but rather the 'machine' in man. From the blighted inhabitants of Red Branch to the men who move 'like mechanisms' across the plains at the end of *Blood Meridian*, there is a direct link between nascent capitalism and an assault on nature.²⁹

As many critics have pointed out, three generations are represented in *The Orchard Keeper*. Old Arthur Ownby communes closely with nature: 'he was a watcher of seasons and their work' (90). While nature often seems benign when associated with Ownby, 'Light pale as milk guided the old man's steps over the field to the creek and then to the mountain', he is also a 'lover of storms' and is exposed to the full force of the flood later (88).³⁰ Whereas Ownby is repeatedly described as one with nature, Marion Sylder appears to represent the modern, entrepreneurial man who has become affluent by leaving Red Branch, rejecting a carpentering trade in favour of less 'wholesome' pursuits: 'This affluent son returned upon them offering no olive branch but hard coin and greenbacks and

²⁹ This is humorously depicted in Gene Harrogate's many assaults on nature in *Suttree*, from 'melon-mounting' to bat culling. Before he has honed his capitalist aspirations, he is described in a field of melons, the unfallen man in nature, kneeling 'in the rich and steaming earth' among the 'plump forms supine and dormant.' (32) This description is interrupted by the overtly sexual incursion of the machine in the garden as the train, 'her harpie-throated highball wailed down the lonely summer night. [Harrogate] could hear the wheels shucking along the rails and he could feel the ground shudder', and the additional cliché of the simulated orgasm of the star which 'arced long and dying down the sky' (32).

³⁰ The third part of the novel begins 'Sometime after midnight on the twenty-first of December it began to snow [...] the snow was still wisping down thickly, veiling the trees beyond the creek and the mountain itself, falling softly, and softly, faintly sounding in the immense white silence' (131). The old man and his hound seem enveloped and protected by the snow as he reads old copies of *Field and Stream*. He dozes, wakes and looks across the yard 'brilliant against the facade of pines beyond, a cardinal shot like a drop of blood'. Similarly, as he approaches the pit, his movement is 'bound' with nature: 'The moon was higher now [...] the blackened limbs of the trees falling flatly as paper across the path and the red puddle of the moon moving as he moved, sliding sodden and glob-like from limb to limb, fatly surreptitious, watching as he watched' (89).

ushering in an era of prosperity, a Utopia of paid drinks' (29). He returns to the Green Fly Inn, entering like some latterday Western hero 'resplendent in gray gabardines, the trousers pressed to a knife edge, the shirt creased thrice across the back in military fashion, his waist encircled by a strip of leather the width of a whip-end. Clamped in his jaw was a slender cheroot' (14). Ownby intermittently sees the lights of Sylder's car, although his world is contrasted with Sylder's violence and the iconography with which he is associated is ancient and quite different:

He had cut a pole of hickory, hewed in octagonal and graced the upper half with hex-carvings - nosed moons, stars, fish of strange and Pleistocene aspect. Struck in the rising light it shone new white as the face of an apple-half. (46)

Ownby's 'accessories', the goat horn and carved pole seem to originate in a different century from the shiny suits and sleek cars of Sylder. However, Sylder is increasingly portrayed in a way that makes him closer to Ownby than either of them could imagine. When Sylder watches Ownby firing blanks in the shape of 'a huge crude X across the face of the tank' (97), he shifts the whiskey to his car 'with a hobbling half-run', and after his car accident, he sets off 'with a hopping gait', which sounds more like the old man. When John Wesley tells Sylder about Gifford trying to arrest him, Sylder tells him that they will not arrest a fourteen year old boy: 'Anyway, don't let him bother you. I'll tend his apples for him my ownself. He knowed you didn't have no daddy, nobody to take up for you in the first place' (160), thereby combining his paternal role with the role of the orchard keeper. Both men are hunted by Gifford, the local sheriff, although when the sheriff and his men arrive to arrest Ownby, the old man remains calm and even takes on the demeanor of the 'cowboy' outlaw hero as he shoots one policeman in the leg and in response to the sheriff's commands for him to come out, he 'lit his cigarette and took a deep pull'. Suddenly, he has become a military, professional killing machine as he recognises the inefficacy of the sheriff's command to his men to 'stick together':

That didn't make much sense to the old man. He pulled twice more on his cigarette and put it out and crawled under the stove [...] One of (the deputies) was dressed in khakis and looked like an ATU agent. The old man marked their position, wiggled back out from

under the stove, riposted to the window and shot them both in quick succession, aiming low. Then he ducked back to his stove, broke the shotgun, extracted the shells and reloaded. (187)

Immediately afterwards, the old man is once more subsumed into nature as he sets off with his hound and a sledge 'south along the road, until they were pale shapes in the rain.' (188) The violence and destruction caused by the forces of law as they attack the now vacated house ('they lobbed teargas bombs through the windows and stormed the ruined house from three sides and the house jerked and quivered visibly under their gunfire') makes them look completely ridiculous (188).

John Wesley and Arthur Ownby do not meet until the third section of the novel. The 'cardinal shot like a drop of blood' which the old man hears is followed by a description of John Wesley meeting Warn Pulliam and his friends, who have just shot a rabbit. The notion of crossed paths, fate and inevitability is everywhere in this novel, although all of the protagonists are unaware of the sense of a familial structure and even 'community' which exists, as events happen in a disjointed, seemingly haphazard fashion. This sense of solidarity is evoked also through the way in which the young boys embark on a series of 'tall tales' which echo the 'chorus of elders' discussing the car found in the creek and 'speaking slowly and with conviction upon matters of profound inconsequence' (116). The two protagonists who would be expected to be the most different given their ages are John Wesley and Ownby. However, the boy shows an affinity for Ownby's lifestyle on the fringes of society and seems at one with nature. Sylder and Ownby also lead entirely separate lives, although their narratives are interrupted by each other's actions throughout the novel and they are shown to have a great deal more in common than is given by our initial impression of their separation by generation and lifestyle.

McCarthy's work is inevitably compared to that of Faulkner. In the only interview that McCarthy has given to date, he acknowledges simply that 'the ugly fact is that books are made out of books. The novel depends on its life on the novels that have been written', and certainly both writers can be accommodated within the Southern literary tradition,

sharing a macabre sense of humour and a determined and lucid grasp of the grotesque.³¹ However, it appears that most critics who make this comparison see Faulkner as ultimately a more humane writer who allows at least a glimmer of hope and a hint of redemption to be introduced into the lives of some of his characters. Several critics have lamented McCarthy's apparent lack of moral values which would perpetuate a Southern social-economic-ethical tradition and would underwrite the mythic significance of the landscape and the communities therein, something like Faulkner's series of related myths based on the conflict between traditionalism, represented by the Sartoris family, and the antitraditional modern world, represented by the Snopes.

Robert Jarrett argues that 'McCarthy's early fiction [...] acknowledges its debt to twentieth-century Southern literature' but he sees it as 'reconstructing' both 'that literature's assumptions about Southern culture' and 'the literary and cultural construct termed "the South"', by pointing to differences between the Appalachian setting of his novels and the larger South.³² This reconstruction also occurs through 'a sensibility, style and structure characteristic of modernism' (7). Walter Sullivan's early review of *The Orchard Keeper* locates the novel 'in the middle of agrarian influence', suggesting that 'the Southern renaissance [...] is still alive' and although he later revised this reading, as Jarrett suggests, his association of McCarthy's novel with the 'Southern renaissance' is an important point, 'for by it he inserts the novel within a series of literary works that constitute a cultural and literary tradition viewed by Sullivan and other Southern critics to be at a critical stage, in danger of dying but with possibilities of revival' (8). Three generations of twentieth-century Southern literature were defined by prominent reviewers and academic critics, including Walter Sullivan, Cleanth Brooks, Louis Rubin and Lewis Simpson, beginning with the 'Fugitives' (named after a literary journal published between 1922 and 1925) and 'Agrarian' writers, through a second generation of writers with increasingly modernist tendencies, including Faulkner, to writers such as Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor whose work assumes the disappearance of the antebellum

³¹ Woodward, *New York Times Magazine*.

³² Robert Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*.

Southern culture. Jarrett proposes that because of 'their acceptance of the disappearance of the agrarian South', these third generation writers were 'compared invidiously to Faulkner': 'Thus [...] Walter Sullivan uses the fiction of Walker Percy and Cormac McCarthy to define and denounce the new generation of writers who write as contemporary writers (or as 'Gnostics' or 'existentialists') and represent the death of the Southern renaissance and its mode of writing' (10). Although the suggestion of literature as a site of historical tension, split between a modern and traditional Southern culture, is applicable to McCarthy's early work, Jarrett argues that 'the specific historical crisis that forms and informs McCarthy's fiction is different from that of his predecessors':

McCarthy's early fiction reconstructs prior Southern writing in part by pointing to radical discontinuities between the present and the Southern past - discontinuities that, furthermore, could be traced within Southern culture and its history [...] both [his first two novels] point more to an ironic disjunction rather than a tragic continuity between past and present. (11)

Jarrett proposes 'the twin motifs of connection and disconnection constitute the core' of *The Orchard Keeper*, imaged initially in the description of the paved highway which connects the hamlet of Red Branch with Knoxville, so that the three protagonists 'represent a local version of traditional Southern culture newly transformed into the unconventional' by these urban connections. The novel, according to Jarrett, 'fully critiques the Agrarians' and Faulkner's assumption of an essential or meaningful continuity between Southern past and present' (11). In McCarthy's novel, Jarrett argues, all three main characters 'are linked by their common exile from the values and lifestyles of a newly dominant urbanized South' represented by the state highway, the government officers and welfare officials, governmental institutions like the bounty office where John Wesley trades in his hawk, the government tank which so infuriates Ownby, and the Brushy state penitentiary in which he is incarcerated. John Wesley represents 'the contemporary or postmodern Southerner' who by the novel's end 'has become a figure of the Southerner-as-exile, uprooted and cut off from his genealogical past'; Arthur Ownby is representative of the earliest generation of Southerners, although his experience of the Civil War has left him with 'no allegiance to or fondness for the antebellum South'; finally, Marion Sylder is

'the representative second-generation Southerner' who leaves the Appalachian hills during the depression to work in a factory, and returns as an entrepreneurial bootlegger, 'alienated from both the agrarian and mercantile Southern economy and unable to adopt Ownby's impoverished subsistence lifestyle' (12-13). However, it is possible to suggest that these characters, even Sylder and Ownby, have more in common than any of them realise. In addition, the cyclical nature of all of these early novels hints at a constant pattern of regeneration and degeneration. At the end of the novel, John is referred to as 'young Rattner', implying a somewhat sinister and yet inevitable genealogical inheritance, and he is described watching a wagon 'shimmering in waves of heat rising from the road' which 'dissolved in a pale and broken image' (244), just as in the opening episode his father sees 'far down the blazing strip of concrete a small shapeless mass' which 'gained briefly the form of a pickup truck, whipped past and receded into the liquid shape by which it came' (7). It appears that the 'genealogical past' is something that McCarthy's earliest protagonists never truly escape from and that the father figures of the Old South do not simply disappear. This becomes increasingly significant in McCarthy's later novels, as the 'past' becomes another country, that of Old Mexico, which is mythologised and romanticised in the minds of the cowboy protagonists, just as the Old South had been in the minds of the Agrarians.

Jarrett argues that, in contrast to Faulkner's exploration of Southern culture through adaptations of the Oedipus complex or Freudian family romance, 'the weak metaphoric fathers' of McCarthy's first two novels 'suggest that [...] Faulkner's Southern patriarchy has largely disappeared [...] McCarthy's protagonists may be sons, but they are largely depicted as autonomous'(21). However, it is possible to argue that this does not make them 'autonomous', as their fathers are a constant source of anxiety and suffering, so that Jarrett's assertion that Kenneth Rattner 'has the most central role of all fathers in McCarthy's fiction, but even he is relegated to the opening chapter and one more brief appearance before the scene of his death', seems to ignore not only the presence of Rattner (or his corpse) throughout the novel, but also the characters of both Culla Holme in *Outer Dark* and Cornelius Suttree in *Suttree*, whose paternity is the source of abject

misery and guilt. It is true that, as Jarrett proposes, the 'weak, dead, absent or denying fathers of McCarthy's fiction point toward an imaginative repudiation of the central importance of the patriarchal father and family in Southern culture and the South's heroic myth of its history figured in the revered patriarch - Robert. E. Lee or Colonel Sartoris - of the Confederate Lost Cause' (23). However, it is also true that, while these beleaguered father figures 'point towards' such a repudiation, they also consistently highlight such a paternal legacy. Jarrett concludes that 'to the new generation of Southern writers and critics the South is no longer defined largely by reference to the 'fathers' of the Civil War':

The patriarchal antebellum slaveholders and Confederates have been replaced by a new set of terms, figures, and historical events, including the civil rights demonstrations and race riots of the 1960s. Or perhaps more crucially, the meaning of Southern history - the Lost Cause - has been revised as another historical lie, as deluded as Culla's own lie or as Mrs Ratter's fictional lie to John Wesley, which creates Kenneth Rattner, the heroic and pious husband and father. (23)

In *Suttree*, 'Weird Leonard' tells the hero that his father's body, which Suttree had helped him to dispose of in the river, has been found: 'He come up, Sut. Draggin all them chains with him' (417). Suttree's laconic reply speaks volumes - 'Fathers will do that' - and encapsulates McCarthy's darkly comic comment in these novels about the inability of all sons to rid themselves of the enduring presence of a paternal legacy.

The fact that the lives of the three main protagonists are seen to be so inextricably intertwined, means that the resulting sense of community in *The Orchard Keeper* conforms to Benedict Anderson's understanding of the nation or region as an 'imagined community', so that 'regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (7):

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [...] In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be

distinguished not by their falsity/ genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined (6).³³

In his examination of the 'cultural roots of nationalism', Anderson argues that 'our conception of simultaneity [...] is of such fundamental importance that, without taking it fully into account, we will find it difficult to probe the obscure genesis of nationalism':

What has come to take the place of the medieval conception of simultaneity-along-time is (as Walter Benjamin describes it) an idea of 'homogenous, empty time', in which simultaneity is, as it were, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar. (24)

The transformation of the meaning of simultaneity and its importance to the imagined community can be examined by considering 'two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper' (24-5). Anderson's contention is that 'these forms provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation' (25). Added to these could also be theatre and forms of aural communication, such as song and storytelling:

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) through history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (26)

Therefore, the imagined community can be 'immediately conjured up' by such novelistic traditions as the description of a particular time and place and the simultaneous discussion of events (or a particular event) by several or even hundreds of anonymous people who do not know each other. Through his readings of José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* (*The Itching Parrot*, 1816), Anderson proposes that the 'national imagination' can be seen at work in the descriptions of 'the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the

³³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991)

world outside' (30). Importantly, the 'horizon is clearly bounded'; in this case 'it is that of colonial Mexico', so that the 'sociological solidity' is conjured up by the use of plurals during a picaresque 'tour d'horison' of 'hospitals, prisons, remote villages [...] none in itself of any unique importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence) of the oppressiveness of *this* colony'(30). A sense of regionalism (the 'Appalachian' south, 'colonial' Mexico) is therefore not always commensurate with a larger understanding of nationalism and, as such, can be a source of both empowerment and disempowerment, and contains the paradoxical notion of the strength of the disempowered through 'imagined communities'.

While the implications of McCarthy's narrative technique, in particular his frequent direct address to the reader, is examined later, it is worth noting the emphasis on 'simultaneity' in *The Orchard Keeper*. Throughout the novel, the notion of both 'deep, horizontal comradeship' and the 'temporal coincidence' in the 'steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity' of the three main protagonists is striking. Similarly, McCarthy's 'tour d'horison' of institutions in which his protagonists are incarcerated, from the Brushy State penitentiary, courthouses and prisons of *The Orchard Keeper* to the prisons and hospitals of Knoxville in *Suttree*, suggest a similar representative oppressiveness in the twentieth century Appalachian South. McCarthy appears at times to agree with Hawthorne's protagonist Holgrave in his advocacy that all 'public edifices' should periodically 'crumble to ruin', although he seems less optimistic about the possibilities of 'the people' examining and reforming the institutions which they symbolize.

It is after visiting Arthur Ownby in the asylum and Sylder in prison that John Wesley goes to the courthouse in order to try to trade back the hawk he had brought in the previous August. He has by this time experienced the absurdity of the law, its bullying tactics, exemplified in the disposal of the hawk which he discovers they do not keep and are without 'some value or use commensurate with a dollar other than the fact of their

demise' (233).³⁴ When he is told that they have been burned, it is as though he feels tainted in his dealing for bounty at the courthouse, making an analogy between his treatment and attitude to the bird and the treatment meted out to his surrogate father figures at the hands of the law: 'He looked about him vaguely [...] And thow people in jail and beat up on em [...] And old man in the crazy house [...] I cain't take no dollar. I made a mistake, he wadn't for sale' (233). McCarthy's protagonists rarely experience explicit moments of enlightenment or Joycean 'epiphanies', and here John Wesley articulates his resentment that he had unwittingly subscribed to and benefited from the same official bureaucracy which has incarcerated both Sylder and Ownby.

While Sylder is imaged as a latterday 'cowboy' hero at the beginning, returning after his years of self-imposed exile from Red Branch, he warns John not to be heroic: 'you want to be some kind of goddamned hero. Well, I'll tell ye, they ain't any more heroes' (214).³⁵ The inept and ridiculous questioning by the social worker from the Welfare Bureau underlines Ownby's distance from any form of bureaucracy, as his description of the old man on his form – 'Definitely an anomic type' – is one that could equally be applied to most of the inhabitants of Red Branch, highlighting the difference between the social worker's sense of 'society' and 'community' and that of the protagonists. The welfare worker does not recognise the alternative sense of community which arises from the precarious bonds of 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (222). Sylder, like Ownby, attaches importance to 'neighbourliness' and a sense of community, when he thinks of what he wants to say to John Wesley about the sheriff Gifford:

He's a rogue and a outlaw hissself and you're welcome to shoot him, burn him in his bed, any damn thing, because he's a traitor to boot and maybe a man steals from greed or

³⁴Ownby also tells John that 'they's even a bounty on findin dead bodies, man over in Knoxville does pretty good grapplehookin em when they jump off the bridge like they do there all the time (p.228)', which preempts McCarthy's later novel, *Suttree*, and also makes John's hawk bounty seem like an innocent but somewhat sinister precursor in the death trade.

³⁵In *The Crossing*, John Cole and Rawlins both think of themselves, or rather, wonder if the people they come across south of the border, will think that they are 'vaqueros'. In the later Western novels, the 'pushing time' which John Wesley experiences in wanting to move forwards, is reversed, as their desire to be 'real' cowboys is a desire for a past time and an old heroism.

murders in anger but he sells his own neighbours out for money and it's few lie that deep in the pit, that far beyond the pale. (214-5)

This expresses a moral code that exists within this precarious community, which means that Huffeker doesn't give Gifford the old man's address and the 'congress of ancients' in the bar doesn't respond to questions about Sylder's car in the river (116). It is exemplified in the return of Ef Hobie: 'A prodigal return (Petros - Brushy mountain - eighteen months, illegal possession of liquor) that attracted a great number of well-wishers' (23). In all of these novels the law, here represented by Gifford and Legwater, the 'county humane officer' who shoots dogs in front of screaming children, is seen as corrupt and therefore the lifestyles of the society of outlaws appear less reprehensible.

McCarthy combines in *The Orchard Keeper* a comment on the idea of the transcendental 'self' which simultaneously embraces and rejects its basic tenets. In his essay on 'The Place of the Past in the American Landscape', David Lowenthal suggests that it is possible to identify a 'continuing dialogue between revolutionary and traditionalist ideals' in the American attitude to the past as it is contained in the landscape, which has important implications for both the 'American mind' and the American environment.³⁶ He proposes that although there was 'no overnight *volte-face* from faith in progress to a passion for the past', the Civil War and a decade of Reconstruction, led to a dissatisfaction with the present and also, through the celebration of the centennial itself, a nostalgic remembrance of a 'more hopeful, less sanguinary' Revolutionary struggle (107). It was no surprise that the America which appeared to have become 'corrupt, acquisitive, imperialistic', looked back with some regret (107). As Lowenthal concludes, 'the ebb and flow of historical self-awareness, of anachronistic recognition, of concern with heritage are themselves historically causal' and that nations are continually rewriting their histories 'forgetting much, denying more, and replacing past perspectives with new national images and explanations' (109). He proposes that although the Jeffersonian rejection of the past and the characteristic view, articulated in *The Democratic Review* of 1842 that 'the whole

³⁶ David Lowenthal in *Geographies of The Mind*.

essay of our national life and legislation has been a prolonged protest against the dominion of antiquity in any form whatsoever', has been modified by a disenchantment with the present and romantic nostalgia, the presence of such sentiments continue to linger.

As Benedict Anderson has suggested 'it is difficult today to recreate in the imagination a condition of life in which the nation was felt to be something utterly new' (195). The endings of McCarthy's novels repeatedly describe the continued deracination and alienation of his protagonists and for both the individual protagonists and the communities which they encounter, it seems that despite attempts to ignore the past (genealogical, historical and environmental) and to achieve an 'ideal' sense of 'isolation', these are futile. One way in which McCarthy denies the reality of the isolation of his protagonists necessary for the transcendental experience, is by frequent allusions to the 'simultaneity' of the different protagonists who make up this community, as outlined by Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. While his protagonists reject the past and any genealogical or societal inheritance - John Wesley attempts to 'escape', Marion Sylder goes into self-imposed exile and Ownby wishes for his 'bee-loud glade' - there is a pattern of connection and disconnection between individuals who affect each others' lives. A sense of community persists through the narrative structure which parallels the 'community of ancients' with John Wesley and his friends and the simultaneous activities of all of the characters, so that the overall premise of the transcendental experience in nature being a way of finding a true 'self' conforms to a dialectical model which both satirises the notion of self-transcendence, at the same time as it illustrates the need for escape as the result of genealogical or familial pressure. As family can be understood as a microcosm of community and the larger society, the breakdown at this level indicates alienation as a 'natural' condition. However, the 'myth, legend, dust' which prevail at the end of McCarthy's first novel suggest that the past continues to exert pressure on both the present and the future. This becomes a crucial thematic element of his later novels.

The characters in *Outer Dark* (1968), McCarthy's second novel, about an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister which results in their son being murdered, are

preoccupied with not only a literal sense of 'naming' (Rinthy wants to name her child and both Culla and Rinthy are asked repeatedly about their provenance), but also with the idea of home (their surname, Holme, is imbued with black irony) and community that this implies. When Culla meets a blind man at the end, he comments 'they's lots of people on the road these days', and the blind man agrees: 'I pass em ever day, people goin up and down in the world like dogs. As if they wasn't a home nowheres' (240). The perpetual motion of the laconic trio of murderers, the 'grim triune', echoes the incessant quest of Culla and Rinthy. Culla wanders through the 'landscape of the damned' which is *Outer Dark*, and the 'seething and mutinous crowd', the 'delegation of human ruin' depicted in his nightmare which begins the novel, become his reality as he is relentlessly pursued by the 'grim triune' (5-6). In *Outer Dark*, notions of time and place are at best vague and there is a suggestion that some of these communities may indeed be 'imagined' (in particular, the 'grim triune') as part of Culla's continuing nightmare from 'dark to dark'.

The 'parallelism' or 'simultaneity' which Benedict Anderson has proposed as necessary for a community's sense of nationalism to be developed, is skewed by both form and content: the constant movement between 'dream' and 'real' time; the rupture brought about by the typographical features which separate Rinthy, Culla and the 'grim triune'; and perhaps most of all, in the supernatural qualities of the 'father' figure of the 'grim triune' who appears to defy all notions of time and place, qualities replicated in the figure of *Blood Meridian's* judge. *Outer Dark* provides a parody not only of the notion of 'family' and 'community' but also the sort of 'deep horizontal comradeship' described by Anderson as necessary for the nation to imagine itself as community.

Child of God (1973) drew inspiration from newspaper reports about a man who had committed murder and necrophilia. It is a fictionalised account of Lester Ballard's descent into madness. He is evicted from his home at the beginning of the novel, having suffered abandonment by both his mother, who ran away, and later his father, who committed suicide. He becomes increasingly isolated from the community, and his story in the first half of the novel is intercut with 'witness' statements from various citizens. His physical

moves from home, to hovel and eventually to a cave where he stores his corpses, is paralleled in his increasingly psychotic criminal activity, which changes from voyeurism to murder and necrophilia. While the community rejects Ballard as one of their own, preferring to think of him as a psychotic aberration, McCarthy's narrator suggests that he is 'a child of God much like yourself perhaps' and throughout, the reader is reminded of man's predilection for violence (4).

Ballard is associated not only with nature, but with an increasingly ahistorical or even prehistorical environment, living in caves and haunting primeval forests, 'At one time in the world there were woods that no one owned and these were like them' (127). As Robert Jarrett has suggested, *Child of God* 'reverses' Lewis's thesis of the innocent American Adam: 'Unlike Thoreau at Walden Pond, Ballard's isolation in nature neither regenerates nor restores a lost innocence; it corrupts this contemporary version of the American Adam' (41).³⁷ An ironic comment on Walden Pond and Thoreau's meticulous cataloguing and 'housekeeping' is also seen in Ballard's psychotic version of this, and in his increasing belief in his own power: 'Disorder in the woods, trees down, new paths needed. Given charge, Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men's souls' (136). While the possibility of Ballard being 'in charge' is bleakly humorous, suggesting that these delusions are the real product of complete isolation in nature, his repeated belief in his ability to order things, whether it is snow falling – 'and it did' - or a girl dying - 'She did' - as Jarrett points out, 'his unerring aim with the rifle, his unthinking violence [...] are fascistic, stemming from a drive to impose a willed order on those persons who thwart his desire' (41).³⁸

Both Gary Ciuba, in his reading of 'mimetic desire and sacred violence' enacted in *Child of God*, and Edwin T. Arnold see Ballard as a 'scapegoat' for the community, 'that embodies their weird alienation and stoked violence but also their terrible sadness, their

³⁷ Robert L. Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Twayne, 1997).

³⁸ For example: 'Now freeze, you son of a bitch, he told the night beyond the window pane./ And it did' (103); 'Die, goddamn you, he said. She did' (119); 'He told the snow to fall faster and it did.' (139)

potential nothingness' (Arnold, 57).³⁹ Vereen Bell sees Ballard as 'a bizarre aberration certainly' but also representative of the community's 'collective nightmare'(40), while Winchell argues that 'if McCarthy's mode of narration is meant to suggest that Lester has become a mythic figure for his community [...] we have to wonder what it is about that community which causes it to make such myths'(303).⁴⁰

McCarthy's third novel makes sinister connections between vigilantism and voyeurism, the former being a form of self-appointed 'legal' watchman and the latter as it connects sexual pleasure with watching, although both are to do with power, control and surveillance. In his writing on the history of America, Hugh Brogan proposes that 'the South had been a violent region before the Civil War and had a long tradition, going back to the colonial era, of what was known as 'regulation'; of vigilantism; of taking the law into your own hands' (378).⁴¹ He suggests that 'this tradition was now savagely reactivated' by the 'brutal techniques' of the Ku Klux Klan. Although by 1873 the Klan 'had ceased to ride', their techniques survived, with a new Klan being set up in 1924, 'beyond its talent for terrorizing Jews, Catholics and Negroes in rural parts it had little to offer but scandals of greed, corruption and sexual hypocrisy' (519), and similar 'societies' continue to be revived. Brogan states that by the 1870s, 'Southern opinion fastened on what it took to be the glamour, the courage, the patriotism of the 'night hawks', and thereafter violent extremism was legitimated in Southern politics' (378). The presence of hawks in McCarthy's writing always signals danger and usually death. Ballard has earlier watched two hawks and 'he did not know how hawks mated but he knew that all things fought' (169). This sentence occurs immediately after the description of the activities of the

³⁹ Gary M. Ciuba, 'McCarthy's *Enfant Terrible*: Mimetic Desire and Sacred Violence in *Child of God*', in *Sacred Violence: A Readers Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (Texas: Texas Western Press, 1995), pp. 77-87

Edwin T. Arnold, 'Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables', in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, *Southern Quarterly Series*, 1999), pp. 45-71

⁴⁰ Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

Mark Royden Winchell, 'Inner Darkness: or the Place of Cormac McCarthy', *Southern Review* 26, April 1990:293-309

⁴¹ Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America* (London: Penguin, 1985).

vigilante groups, the White Caps and the Bluebills, and the carnival atmosphere of the last public hanging. Ironically, this can be compared once more to the method of choice for corpse manipulation of both Ballard and the sheriff's officers. In *Child of God*, McCarthy parallels the hounding of Lester Ballard with the activities of earlier vigilante groups and extends the motif of the 'hunt' from the trapping of animals in *The Orchard Keeper*, the beleaguered quest and more insidious suggestion of the hunting (or haunting) of Culla Holme in *Outer Dark* by the 'grim triune', to the proliferation of images of the hunt in *Child of God*.⁴² In a novel also suffused with images of voyeurism, the movement from a passive 'vigilance', literally, a watchful state, to an active engagement with the methods and attitudes of vigilantism as a method of taking the law into your own hands - militancy, bigotry and violence - draws more parallels between the angry mob and the angry individual.

The sheriff who torments Ballard throughout, is frequently described as 'the high sheriff of Sevier County', an allusion to his sense of self importance. During the flood, he and his deputy pick up Mr Wade, who tells them that he had been told by an old woman 'Its a judgement. Wages of sin and all that. I told her everybody in Sevier County would have to be rotten to the core to warrant this' (164). When the sheriff tells his deputy, Cotton, that Mr Wade can tell him about the White Caps, Cotton responds that it had seemed a good idea to 'keep people in line'. Mr Wade tells him, however that 'they was a bunch of lowlife thieves and cowards and murderers' (165). A rival vigilante gang hunted them down unsuccessfully 'and never met but one time and that was by accident', although both groups 'were sorry people all the way round, ever man jack a three hundred and sixty degree son of a bitch, which my daddy said meant they was a son of a bitch any way you looked at em' (165). He then describes the heroic deputy, Tom Davis, who successfully captured and executed the Bluebills and White Caps, and the carnival atmosphere of the last public hanging in 1899, once Davis had been elected as sheriff:

⁴² Early on in *Child of God*, Ballard witnesses men hunting and later his hovel is literally invaded by a pack of hounds.

[...] they hung on the courthouse lawn right yonder [...] I remember there was still holly boughs and christmas candles [...] People had started into town the evenin before [...] Rolled out blankets on the courthouse lawn [...] you couldn't get a meal in town [...] Women sellin sandwiches in the street [Tom Davis] brung em from the jail, had two preachers with em and their wives on their arms and all. Just like they was goin to church. All of em got up there on the scaffold and they sung and everybody fell in singin with em [...] Whole town and half of Sevier County singin I Need Thee Every Hour [...] And then that trap kicked open from under em and down they dropped and hung there a jerkin and a kickin for I don't know, ten, fifteen minutes. Don't ever think hangin is quick and merciful. It ain't.(167)

His description recalls the 'holiday atmosphere' on the occasion of the Green Fly Inn burning down in *The Orchard Keeper*, of a community held together by its very 'precarious' nature and the many 'mob scenes' in *Outer Dark* where the community is seen baying for blood. It also seems reminiscent of the 'platform of the pillory' in the market-place of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, in which there was for each public flogging or execution 'the same solemnity of demeanour on the part of the spectators; as befitted a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical' (50,55).⁴³ The mob mentality, in its violence and bloodlust, seems a precursor to the scalp-hunting gangs of *Blood Meridian*, and the sanctimonious pretence that their motivation is to give Lester Ballard's victims 'a decent burial' is no different from the crowd at the last public execution described by Mr. Wade.⁴⁴

In *Child of God*, William Schafer suggests that McCarthy's fascination is with 'the resonance of human deeds', as he concentrates on 'the socialised self necessary for imagination - but displaced and really at risk in society', and how acts of evil affect the community.⁴⁵ However, it is possible to apportion some guilt to that same community, in the witness accounts of the exclusion and increasing alienation of Lester Ballard, the rejection of him at church and his initial experience of an ineffectual, bullying and corrupt

⁴³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) {1st pub. 1850}

⁴⁴In *Blood Meridian*, Captain White tells the kid that his vigilante gang of scalphunters 'are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land', having proposed that there is neither 'government' or 'God' in Mexico (34).

⁴⁵ William J. Schafer, 'Cormac McCarthy: The Hard Wages of Original Sin', *Appalachian Journal* 4 (Winter 1977): 105-19, p.113.

system of justice. In addition, the 'meanness of folks' is not something new, as McCarthy frequently points out, and in this novel, the old man's tale of the carnival atmosphere at the last public hanging, the depiction of the 'high sheriff of Sevier County' and his deputies, and the vigilantes who torment Ballard, underline this.

The influence of Emersonian transcendentalism has been considered with reference to *The Orchard Keeper*. Suttree (1979) also contains an interrogation of transcendentalism, particularly in its depiction of the alienation of the eponymous hero, both in the wilderness of the Gatlinberg Mountains and in the city of Knoxville. Suttree's sense of alienation is seen to arise not only from familial estrangement but also a preoccupation with death that finally denies the very premise of newness and self-creation espoused by the democratic idealism of transcendentalism. Although McCarthy's hero, like Thoreau, withdraws from society, instead of being made anew, he is haunted by his 'doublegoer'. In addition, his experience mimics the hallucinogenic state of *delirium tremens*, rather than a form of transcendentalism, and his periodic withdrawal from society is paralleled by his desire to return to the 'community of the damned', and the bars, brothels and marketplace of the McAnally Flats.

In the novel's long prologue, which takes the form of a prose poem, McCarthy seems to warn the reader that this is not going to be an easy read as the narrator, like those of ancient epic poems, makes a direct appeal to the reader to enter into the apocalyptic scene described and to be metaphorically dragged through the sewer:

Dear friend now in the dusty clockless hours of the town when the streets lie black and steaming in the wake of watertrucks and now when the drunk and the homeless have washed up in the lee of walls in alleys or abandoned lots and cats go forth highshouldered and lean in the grim perimeters about, now in these sootblackened brick or cobbled corridors where lightwire shadows make a gothic harp of cellar doors no soul shall walk save you. (3)⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The italicised prologue is one of the many narrative features which has prompted a comparison between James Agee's *A Death in the Family* (1956) and McCarthy's later novel.

This is certainly McCarthy's *Waste Land* and, as with Eliot's poem, Dante's inscription at the entrance to hell in the *Divina Comedia* (iii.I) appears to be a source of inspiration (which Eliot acknowledged): 'This way for the sorrowful city. This way for eternal suffering. This way to join the lost people [...] Abandon all hope ye who enter!'⁴⁷

Eliot's wasteland is an indictment of civilisation absorbed in destruction which cannot be stopped except by an individual understanding of the social and moral crisis. There is a movement towards an understanding in *The Waste Land*, although the overwhelming impression is that while one 'voice' may have seen the light, this cannot save those who are still struggling unaware and personifying the philosophy of Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*: 'Birth, and copulation, and death/ That's all the facts'. In the figure of Suttree, it is also possible to identify a movement towards an individual understanding, suggesting that the 'fragments [...] shored against [our] ruin' can indeed be united by the act of imagination (however surreal this may be) by which the less salubrious inhabitants of McCarthy's 'unreal city' cohere. There is a greater sense of community between the people living in Knoxville's urban slum, and a more direct exploration of what this means than has been seen in previous novels, although this sense of stability is paradoxically shaped out of the fragile nature of their existence, so that they depend on each other for survival. From the 'dog eat dog' existence of the penitentiary to the 'interstitial wastes' of McAnally Flats, these are friendships forged in adversity and the precarious community which results is predicated on violence.

Suttree makes his first of two trips into the Gatlinberg Mountains, dogged by the haunting presence that he refers to as his 'antisuttree', although he never encounters this 'doublegoer'. He is reminded of 'other times more than he would have liked' and after several nights and the 'first few dawns [which] half made him nauseous, he'd not seen one sober for so long', he appears to hallucinate in his state of heightened and sober awareness:

⁴⁷ T.S.Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London:Faber & Faber, 1961) {1st pub. 1954}. *The Waste Land* was first published in 1922.

Yellow leaves were falling all through the forest and the river was filled up with them, shuttling and winking, golden leaves that rushed like poured coins in the tailwater. A perishable currency, forever renewed. (283)

From the minutiae of the 'small figurines' (ironically at the bottom of a bottle, which is not a new phenomenon for Suttree) and the drip of the 'bell loud' rain, to the sweeping gestures of the hallucination of the 'mauve monks', Suttree's experience of being alone in the wilderness is hallucinogenic rather than transcendental. His movement from city to wilderness means a movement also from the urban 'community' to a solitary state in nature. There is a suggestion, as there is in most of McCarthy's other novels, that there is a degree of anthropological regression involved in this transition. There is a crucial difference between Suttree as a man alone with himself in the wilderness and as a lonely man in a crowded city. The repeated allusions to Suttree's extreme loneliness mean that this becomes a refrain throughout the novel. He can feel his 'Sunday loneliness seep away' when he is with the 'fellowship of the doomed', and while in the penitentiary, he feels a 'barrenness of heart and gothic loneliness' (23, 50).

In contrast to the transcendental experience of man in nature and the notion that he would be made 'whole' again, Suttree's feeling that he is being shadowed by another figure, 'some doublegoer, some other Suttree' which eludes him, gives rise to a fear that:

[...] should that figure fail to rise and steal away and were he therefore to come to himself in this obscure wood he'd be neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling with this ghostly clone from sun to sun across a hostile hemisphere forever. (287)

Therefore, the loneliness that Suttree experiences in the city, is paralleled with his sense of alienation in the wilderness. When he travels to the Reese family's camp on the mussel bank of the river, 'when he woke in the smoky dawn he felt alien and tainted, camped there in the wilderness [...] As if the city had marked him. So that no eldritch daemon would speak him secrets in this wood' (316). When he returns to the city, he feels 'alien and not unhappy', as he feels 'very much a resident of the city.' (380) Suttree shows an

affinity for domesticity, as he cleans his houseboat, although his 'home' itself symbolises the contradiction in the sense of a home that can be moved, so that this 'refugee reprieved from the river and its fishes' is simultaneously embracing and rejecting the notion of 'home' (381).

With the exception of McCarthy's drama, *The Stonemason*, Ab Jones, a surrogate father-figure to the eponymous hero of *Suttree*, is the only African American character in McCarthy's work who is given any form of narrative function. When he goes with Suttree to visit the 'black witch', Mother She, she recounts to him 'aspects of his past', which succinctly conjure up Ab's life: 'legends of violence, affrays with police, bleeding in concrete rooms and anonymous coughing and groans and delirium in the dark' (280). Although he has learned to tape his own wounds in order to avoid detection by his wife, telling Suttree 'bein a nigger is a interestin life', his story of the 'wrath of the path', his wounds and scars suffered at the hands of the police, attest to a very different sense of 'community' from that outlined by Benedict Anderson (203-4):

The black wiped his eyes with one huge hand. Stories of the days and nights writ there, the scars, the teeth, the ear betruncheoned in some old fray that clung in a toadlike node to the side of his shaven head. (108)

Ab Jones dies and Suttree becomes a fugitive in the city, leaving shortly afterwards. Ab Jones' story finally emphasises the racism inherent in the idea of 'nation'. As noted, Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities' and 'deep horizontal relationships' between men is finally found to be unsustainable and breaks down completely when the experience of 'community' and 'nationalism' is analogous with the fascist, vigilante activity of the Ku Klux Klan, the 'wrath of the path' which has blighted Ab Jones' life, highlighting the disempowerment of certain communities within the larger nation.

Although the 'simultaneity' of the 'imagined communities' in *The Orchard Keeper* have been noted, it is worth considering the argument of those cultural theorists who take issue with Anderson's idea of nationalism. E. J. Hobsbawm, for example, argues that definitions

of 'nation' are inevitably lacking because the criteria used (language, psychology, ethnicity etc.) are themselves 'fuzzy, shifting, ambiguous'.⁴⁸ He agrees with John Breuilly's criticism of Anderson's assumption that 'the self-evident success of nationalism means that nationalism is very strongly rooted in the thought and behaviour of people'.⁴⁹ Hobsbawm examines the changes in the concept of 'nation' and points out that 'nationalism comes before nations', so that the element of 'artefact, invention and social engineering which enters into the making of nations' should not be ignored, citing Ernest Gellner:

Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent [...] political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: *that* is a reality.⁵⁰

Hobsbawm situates the 'nationalist question' at the 'point of intersection of politics, technology and social transformation', so that although the phenomena arising are 'constructed essentially from above', he stresses the need to take into consideration an analysis from 'below', 'in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist' (10):

First, official ideologies of states and movements are not guides to what is in the minds of even the most loyal citizens or supporters. Second, and more specifically, we cannot assume that for most people national identification – when it exists – excludes or is always or ever superior to, the remainder of the set of identifications which constitutes the social being. (11)

While further problems which arise from Anderson's theory of nationalism are addressed in the second part of this chapter, Hobsbawm makes an important point applicable to the depiction of nationalism as it is contained in all of McCarthy's novels. As he suggests, 'national consciousness' does not develop evenly 'among social groupings and *regions* of a country' and that 'political nationalism' means a certain blindness to the facts of history (11).

⁴⁸ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nation and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁴⁹ John Breuilly, 'Reflections on Nationalism' in *Philosophy and Social Science*, 15/1 (March, 1985): 73.

⁵⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: OUP, 1983).

Therefore, McCarthy's southern novels have been seen to interrogate the basic premise of Emersonian transcendentalism and the notion of a democratic idealism which adheres to the relationship not only between the individual and nature, but also as it relates to the larger manifestations of home – the community and the nation. The American Dream is something which is not only fragile, but also dangerous. The reconciliation of man with nature, while glimpsed in the figure of 'the orchard keeper', Old Arthur Ownby, is not sustained in the other novels, so that the concept of democratic equality inherent to the social philosophy of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman is finally seen to be incommensurate with man's experience. One important impediment to the realisation of American transcendentalism in McCarthy's novels, is the depiction of man as bound by both time (a genealogical and political past) and place. The almost complete lack of self-knowledge in McCarthy's early characters, means that the transcendental impulse is denied to them, epiphanies are rare, and the result is an equivocal expression of alienation.

The following section will examine the relationship between the landscape, the nation and the individual contained in McCarthy's western novels. The harmony embraced in an organic relationship between man and nature is seen to be non-existent in the 'optical democracy' of the landscape of *Blood Meridian*. In all of the western novels, the politics of landscape and in particular the importance of perspective (the conflation of 'seeing' and 'knowing') is seen as a dilemma underpinned by nationalist and imperialist ideology, exposing the ambivalence of the desires and fears of McCarthy's cowboy protagonists.

“We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land”: The Politics of Landscape in *Blood Meridian* & The *Border Trilogy*

In his introduction to the British Film Institute’s Modern Classics edition of *The Right Stuff*, a film released in 1983 about America’s attempts to conquer space based on Thomas Wolfe’s novel of the same name, Tom Charity quotes the director Philip Kaufman: ‘*The Right Stuff* is a return to the roots of the Western. It was made in answer to the question: ‘What happened to the Western?’’ (8)⁵¹ Charity lucidly describes the Western as Cormac McCarthy and many others have approached the genre:

The Western is the quintessential American genre, where white America grapples with its character, its conscience and its sense of self. The Western affords America an heroic vision of its history and heritage, a mythology to call its own. It romanticises the pioneer and mythologises the wilderness. It negotiates the ambivalent terrain between law and anarchy, social responsibility and individual freedom, stasis and flux. Its trajectory is inevitably towards obsolescence: by the time the Western became established, the West was all over bar the shouting, and as the genre matured, ‘progress’ had begun to sound like a dirty word. It is the purest form of movie, the starkest and most physical of philosophical dramas. It is prone to announce itself with an iconic rider against the landscape, and often ends the same way. It is a very masculine genre, trading on fantasies of absolute male autonomy, dexterity and moral imperative. It is fundamentally concerned with the construction of the hero. (8)

It is possible to read *Blood Meridian* and the *Border Trilogy* as a tetralogy. Not only is *All the Pretty Horses*, the first of the trilogy, set exactly one hundred years later than *Blood Meridian* (1949 and 1849 respectively), the intertextuality of McCarthy’s work is evident in the close association between ‘the kid’ of *Blood Meridian* and John Grady Cole of *All The Pretty Horses*. McCarthy’s earlier novel follows ‘the kid’ as he engages in the gruesome business of filibustering and scalp-hunting in the Mexican desert of the nineteenth-century, and his *Border Trilogy* follows other ‘kids’ who seek to escape from

⁵¹ Tom Charity, Introduction to *The Right Stuff* (British Film Institute Publishing, 1997).

their Texas homes and explore the 'whited areas' of their maps, which is 'old Mexico'. The continuity between these novels therefore is geographical, historical and political, as the voice of Manifest Destiny is articulated. While there is a movement from the detailed depiction of warfare in *Blood Meridian*, to a focus on confrontation between individuals in the *Trilogy*, one common denominator of these novels is violence. It is simply packaged in a more 'palatable' and apparently less political form in the later novels. McCarthy suggested to Richard Woodward of the *New York Times* in 1992 (in the only interview that he has given) that *All The Pretty Horses* may be 'just a snare and a delusion to draw you in', and he was correct.⁵² *The Crossing*, the second part of the *Trilogy*, is set in the 1940s. It tells the story of Billy Parham's attempt to return a pregnant wolf to the mountains of Mexico, his return with his brother (following the murder of his parents), and his final crossing as he brings back the body of his brother from Mexico. *Cities of the Plain*, the last novel of the trilogy, brings together John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, now 18 and 28 respectively. The year is 1952 and they both live and work on Mac McGovern's ranch, a large cattle spread located on the far Southeast corner of New Mexico a few miles from El Paso and Juarez over the Texas and Mexico borders. It is clear from the outset that their way of life is under threat, as the U.S. military is about to take over the land.

While the aftermath of the Mexican-American war (1846-48) and the border erected as a result of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo provides the setting for *Blood Meridian*, as John Wegner has pointed out, 'wars and rumours of wars' are a pervasive feature of the trilogy (COTP, 61).⁵³ There are overt references to the Mexican Revolution and repeated allusions to the after-effects of both World Wars (John Grady's father in *All The Pretty Horses* and Troy in *Cities* are both war veterans) and the more recent threat of nuclear weapons. There is a suggestion that Billy is watching the effects of the atomic bomb tested at the Trinity testing site at the end of *The Crossing* and Mac McGovern's land is

⁵² Richard B. Woodward, 'Venomous Fiction', *New York Times Magazine* (April 19th, 1992), pp. 28-40

⁵³ John Wegner, "'Wars and rumours of wars" in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy', *Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No.3 (Spring, 2000): 59-71.

requisitioned by the army in *Cities*, in order to extend the White Sands Missile Range (Wegner, 69). As Wegner argues, it seems that 'McCarthy's southwestern works grow less historically and geographically specific', so that *Blood Meridian* could be said to offer 'a counter-argument to the trilogy's almost wistful and romantic look at the pre-industrial Southwest' (60-1):

John Grady, in particular, would have done well to read *Blood Meridian* before setting out across the border searching for his Big Rock Candy Mountain. McCarthy's novels are bound by their region, just as the Southwest remains bound to itself and its history. It is a regions re-defined from the Mexican North to the American Southwest by war, and it is a region where some areas still have more in common with Mexico City than New York City. (60)

The difference between the 'optical democracy' of the landscape in *Blood Meridian* and the 'wistful and romantic look' at the mythologised landscape of the Southwest in the trilogy will be considered here. The importance of place, particularly that of a disempowered region whose 'history is shrouded in war', as part of a nation and also subjugated to the 'nationalism' of other nations, is seen to change in the course of McCarthy's western novels (Wegner, 68). Therefore, although the past has meant that both John Grady and Billy are 'disinherited by war and war's machinery' (COTP, 204), there is an increasing focus on interior 'mapping', as they 'become men unified by war and violence, and this war creates a map of existence of each person, a map both distinct and overlapped by the maps of others' (68). Therefore, the gradual change in the 'cartographic impulse' of these 'cowboy' protagonists will also be examined.

Robert Jarrett has noted the importance of landscape to the ideology of Manifest Destiny:

The ideology of Manifest Destiny held that one race, the Anglo-Saxon, combined with the political form of republican government, comprised an elect nation that held the true title to American landscape; justification for the individual and communal enterprise of expansion and settlement lay in the subjugation of nature both within man and without. (70)⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Robert Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Twaine, 1997)

While McCarthy's Southern novels have been examined as they relate to Benedict Anderson's writing on 'imagined communities', his Western ones appear to interrogate the fuller implication of Anderson's statement about the more violent impulses of 'a deep, horizontal comradeship': 'Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the last two centuries, for so many people, not so much to kill, as [to be] willing to die for such limited imaginings'(7).⁵⁵ He proposes that there existed three 'institutions of power' which were seen to change 'in form and function as the colonized zones entered the age of mechanical reproduction':

[These were] the census, the map, and the museum: together, they profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion – the nature of human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry. (164)

Anderson points out that 'it is difficult today to recreate in the imagination a condition of life in which the nation was felt to be something utterly new' (195). In the final section, 'The Biography of Nations', Anderson proposes that nations 'have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural':

All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivion, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives. (204-5)

Virginia Wright Wexman has examined the intersection of gender and landscape and the social anthropological basis for several film genres.⁵⁶ Wexman's study details the ways in which star (John Wayne), genre (western) and the American mythology of nationalism interconnect. She argues that Benedict Anderson's reference to the concept of nationhood as 'an imagined political community – and imagined both as inherently limited and sovereign', encourages a loyalty which ignores inequality and exploitation. As she points

⁵⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991)

⁵⁶ Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating The Couple: Love, Marriage and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Wright Wexman cites the American Marine Corps League in 1971 who called Wayne the man who best exemplifies the word 'American' and points out that Wayne

out, there is a further contradiction at the centre of this 'myth of imagined community', for 'nationhood is conceived not only as an imagined community' characterised by 'deep horizontal comradeship' but also as a 'hierarchy of group identities', so that within any geographical space there will be one dominant cultural profile. This particular contradiction has been barely disguised within the ideology of American nationalism through a series of 'metaphors and catchphrases', including 'the melting pot', 'the salad bowl', and 'separate but equal' (72).

Wright Wexman notes, 'the state most prominently identified with the [western] genre, Texas, has a notable history as contested territory', and that even in those westerns in which 'land is not overtly an issue [they] almost invariably refer to its central place in the genre by setting an inordinate number of scenes against the grandeur of the natural landscape' (77). Many critics have noted the influence of landscape painters such as Frederic Remington on this tradition, in which the images identify the nation with nature to the extent that nationalism is associated with landscape. Wright Wexman suggests that the typical representation of landscape in the western, in high-angle long shots, can be equated with 'the European colonialist discourse on Africa', in which the landscape is 'rendered as a discovery by the seer, who is placed in a position of dominance over what is displayed'. It is possible to bring this analogy closer to home by considering Gillian Rose's description of 'the hegemonic masculine gaze' at landscape typified in geographical images and texts.

In *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, Gillian Rose writes of the 'hegemonic geographical imagination' and the 'masculinist gaze' of the geographer in a discipline that has traditionally excluded women.⁵⁷ She proposes that 'geographical knowledge aims to be exhaustive. It assumes that, in principle, the world can be fully known and understood' (7). This is certainly how the judge appears to see things as the

has been repeatedly 'praised as an exemplary American by a number of prominent public figures, including six United States presidents' (74).

⁵⁷ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1993).

archetypal Enlightenment figure who takes the notion of masculine rationality and importantly the idea that knowledge is power, to its extreme. Rose explains the importance of the gaze to the nineteenth-century male explorers who founded the academic discipline: 'They made no connection between the world as it was seen and position of the viewer, and the truth of what they saw was established by that claim to objectivity', adding that it is important to note that 'in the context of the imperialist origins of geography, that not only did a masculinity enable this claim to be exhaustive; so too did the whiteness of these geographers' (9).

As John Beck has suggested, McCarthy 'deliberately yokes landscape, perception and politics in a way that enables him to develop a disturbing discourse of power and knowledge that runs through the Southwestern novels', although 'conventional relationships between observation and cognition do not apply' (211).⁵⁸ This means that the reader is placed in a privileged position in relation to the descriptions of landscape and the discourse of power and geopolitical elements contained therein. Beck contends that McCarthy's 'suspicion of representation' means that 'the novels as texts themselves are precariously placed, testaments to their own inadequacy', a suggestion that I would like to expand on. In addition, Beck stresses the importance to McCarthy of the posting of witnesses: 'For he is clear that vision itself is a trickster and must be accompanied by another, more sanguine knowledge that passes through the blood of generations' (216).

Another important consideration in examining what precisely McCarthy is doing with the individual in the landscape, has to take into account the language used by the narrative voice to describe not only the landscape through which the characters travel but also the specular relationship between individuals and that landscape. It has been noted, particularly of *Blood Meridian*, that both the language and the landscape appear at times to be the most dominant feature of McCarthy's novels, so that the individuals therein can

⁵⁸ John Beck, 'A Certain but Fugitive Testimony': Witnessing the Light of Time in Cormac McCarthy's Southwestern Fiction', in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester University Press, 2000), pp209-217

appear to be pawns in an authorial game. While the narrative style of McCarthy's work is discussed in further detail in Chapter 2, the narrative voice in the western novels is especially important in the larger picture of the relationship between man and nature and the politics of landscape.

The following section will examine the figure of the judge in *Blood Meridian* as a figure representative of not only Manifest Destiny, but also McCarthy's ongoing interrogation of a visual ideology inherent in the imperialist project. Following on from this, McCarthy's narrative strategy in his depiction of nature, and particularly of the 'optical democracy' of the desert landscape, is considered in the light of both Gillian Rose's account of geography's 'hegemonic gaze' and the complex oscillations between the panoramic and the particular which reveal a preoccupation with a dilemma between sight and insight, where 'seeing' and 'knowing' are either conflated (by the judge, Glanton and Captain White for example) or become terms of binary opposition. Finally, the *Border Trilogy* will be examined in the light of Beck's proposal that 'the texts themselves are precariously placed, testaments to their own inadequacy', as the voice of optical democracy recedes, and the narrative incorporates a politics of landscape which emphasises the interior 'mapping' of the American mind and the exterior 'alien' country of Mexico.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Elements of the 'cartographic impulse' of McCarthy's cowboys are addressed in further detail in Chapter 3, as they inform the representation of the female in the *Border Trilogy*.

Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West

“Your ideas are terrifying and your hearts are faint. Your acts of pity are absurd, committed with no calm, as if they were irresistible. Finally, you fear blood more and more. Blood and time.” Paul Valéry (epigraph to *Blood Meridian*)

“There’s no such thing as a life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone 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 will be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.” Cormac McCarthy

Blood Meridian is the story of a boy, referred to as ‘the kid’, who escapes a miserable childhood in Tennessee following his mother’s death during childbirth:

See the child. He is pale and thin [...] His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him [...] He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man [...] At fourteen he runs away. (3)

The kid travels through Texas, joining first a gang of filibusters under the command of Captain White (in 1849) and then a group of scalp-hunters, led by Captain John Joel Glanton. The historical sources of the novel have been minutely detailed by John Emil Sepich.⁶⁰ One member of this gang, who wishes to be ‘suzerain’ and who represents McCarthy’s most horrifying figure of anthropocentrism, Manifest Destiny and paternity, is ‘judge’ Holden.

⁶⁰ John Emil Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian* (Louisville: Bellarmine CP, 1993). Sepich examines, among many other documents, the autobiography of Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), written late 1840s and first published in 1956, in which he recounts his experience as a member of Glanton’s scalp hunting gang.

Vereen Bell proposes that McCarthy's 'metaphysics of violence' means that he 'presses the psychology of the frontier theory to its logical, appalling extreme. It is not a story for the squeamish, least of all for the philosophically squeamish. But it compels us to call forth from ourselves a capacity for understanding evil that the various meanings of our lives otherwise cause to be suppressed' (199).⁶¹ In *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, Patrick Shaw states that *Blood Meridian* 'is the alpha and omega of the novel of violence':

It is not a novel about violence. It is not a novel in which violence is incidental. It is not a novel in which violence is central. It is violence, period. Remove violence from the narrative mix, and *Blood Meridian* de-coheres. (132)⁶²

Shaw proposes that the reader is forced to identify in some way with the novel's protagonists and its violence as we 'must live intimately with rape, genocide, infanticide, disemboweling, torture, and general savageness. This vicarious life requires that we become as bestial as the scalp-hunter and as callous as Judge Holden [...] Some readers may be unwilling to commit to such a devilish compact, choosing instead to see a theodicy secreted in the novel's hellish weave' (134).

Blood Meridian stands as a radical exposition of Walter Benjamin's statement that 'there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'⁶³ The complex characterisation of the historical figure of Judge Holden and Captain Glanton, combined with the opulent, esoteric and often biblical language used to describe the visceral, make this novel seem transhistorical, prehistorical or even ahistorical. It has been described as a Western, an anti-Western, Christian and anti-Christian, humanist and anti-humanist, with critics variously ascribing the greatest 'power' in the novel, equivalent to that traditionally attributed to the hero, to the narrator, the landscape, the language,

⁶¹ Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

⁶² Patrick W. Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence* (New York: Whitston Publishing Co., 2000)

⁶³ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, (Fontana, 1968), pp. 257-260 {1st. pub. As *Schriften*, 1955)

Judge Holden, the 'kid', or even Glanton. Dana Phillips, for example, has suggested that McCarthy's work 'seems designed to elude interpretation', largely due to his dense prose style, 'remarkable for its syntactic complexity, its recondite vocabulary, its recording of minute detail and its violent intensity, as well as for an uncanny almost scriptural stateliness'(434).⁶⁴ He doubts that knowledge of the historical basis of the novel 'offers any real hermeneutic advantage', as he rejects the notion of any allegorical or symbolic qualities. As Phillips points out, *Blood Meridian* seems to be distinctive for what it is *not* in terms of other works of fiction which pertain to retell the true history of the West. It is not 'postmodern', it does not 'resemble other contemporary novels constructed from similar sources' and it does not 'attempt to engage history, to explore the psyches of characters and explain the meaning of the events it describes', so that the 'blackness of darkness' in McCarthy's novel is a literal darkness: 'In *Blood Meridian* darkness is not a 'theme', a dire metaphysical possibility mad characters can urge upon saner men, but a reiterated fact' (438).

In the epilogue, men 'move haltingly like mechanisms':

[...] they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality [...] track holes that run to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some contrivance 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 [...] He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (337)

The epilogue appears to contain an echo of the novel as a whole, and reiterates the idea that there is no 'inner reality' which will explain or exonerate the actions of these men. Throughout the novel, McCarthy simultaneously charts the progress of the men in the reiteration of the phrase 'They rode on', with their regression, not only in history but also in evolution:

Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their

⁶⁴ Dana Phillips, 'History and the Ugly facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*' in *American Literature*, Vol.68. Number 2. (June 1996): 434-460

own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all. (172)

The scalp-hunters are not only devoid of personal histories, they are depicted as prehistorical in a way which comes dangerously close to erasing any sense of human agency. This description also prefigures the epilogue in which, following the trail of violence and death, the initial image of a new beginning, 'In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground', is followed by the 'wanderers in search of bones' (337). The 'validation of sequence and causality' is again linked with nature, 'striking fire out of the rock which God has put there', and the 'searchers' and 'gatherers' become indistinguishable from the man mapping out the border as 'they all move on again.' McCarthy merges, in the final image, the bones and the border posts, the sense of history of the 'bloodlands of the West' in which the idea of 'progress' connotes horror and barbarism.

McCarthy repeatedly depicts horrific scenes of slaughter and *Blood Meridian* exposes the American Dream of progress, civilization and settled community as it is contained within the formula western, as a myth that has run out of validity. The filibusters and scalp-hunters 'ride on' or 'move on' inexorably, but they do not progress. There is no hero, innocent or otherwise who, as outlined by Jane Tompkins, is in pursuit of an 'unquestioned goal', and with whom the reader identifies, so that 'what the reader and hero feel at the end [...] is a hard-won sense of achievement' and a 'form of satisfaction the narrative affords' through the successful overcoming of a 'severe and demanding experience' (12).⁶⁵ It would perhaps be more accurate in this case to suggest that the act of reading McCarthy's novel is a physically demanding experience and in itself a 'hard-won' achievement.

As Timothy Parrish and Elizabeth Spiller have proposed, although it is revisionist 'McCarthy's version of American history offers little comfort to those who would rewrite

⁶⁵ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, (Oxford: OUP, 1992).

American history from the point of view of the peoples who were obliterated so that American history might fulfil its Destiny' (461).⁶⁶ They contend that Jane Tompkins' book 'exemplifies the kind of revisionist history that McCarthy ruthlessly critiques', particularly 'picturing the West as fantasy realm where we Americans invent and reinvent ourselves'(461-2). Certainly, McCarthy would have anticipated what Tompkins was horrified to discover when she visited the Plains Indian Museum: 'There was no such thing as life lived in harmony with nature. It was bloodshed and killing, an unending cycle, over and over again, and no one could escape' (190).

**“Nothing exists without my knowledge”:
The Judge as Imperial Artist.**

In *American Exceptionalism*, Deborah Madsen proposes that the Western hero is the vehicle for those values 'celebrated by the Western', including (among others) 'territorial expansion', 'national identity', 'racial (white) superiority' and 'violence (when used with restraint)' (124).⁶⁷ Therefore, the Western hero encapsulates the idealised American, 'living out the extreme significance of America's exceptional destiny' and enjoys 'a special relationship with nature; there is a sympathetic relationship between hero and wilderness. The landscape is something to read and for those who are literate, nature is legible'(124). The only character in all four western novels for whom the landscape of the Southwest is 'legible', is the judge in *Blood Meridian*, making him an extremely frightening exemplar of the 'idealised American.'

The judge is described as having 'saved' the filibusters, although in this scene, as he makes gunpowder out of rocks, he is both the figure of God establishing himself as 'the Word', Christ delivering His Sermon on the Mount ('the Saviour'), Satan the 'sooty-souled

⁶⁶ Timoth L. Parrish & Elizabeth A. Spiller, 'A Flute Made of Human Bone: *Blood Meridian* and the Survivors of American History', *American Cultural Studies*, 1999 No.23: 461-81.

⁶⁷ Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

rascal', and an alchemist, the 'bloody dark pastryman' who mixes the gunpowder into a 'foul, black dough, the devil's batter' (124-130). Susan Rosowski has highlighted the significance of language to the colonial project, 'for it is by language that we may commit, then justify, the cruellest violence'(177).⁶⁸ The judge, as representation of 'law' and also 'language', repeatedly contradicts himself in his false metaphysics and empty rhetoric, although the temptation is to apply his aphorisms and 'parables' to McCarthy's text as though they offer a crucial insight into the meaning of the novel, explain the psychological motivation of the men and the entire history of not only man but nature. While the Judge's post-Enlightenment, proto-Nietzschean pronouncements have been seen by some critics as a 'genuine metaphysic' (Bell, 120), others, such as Dana Phillips, have warned against the 'literary performances' of the judge: 'Holden is not a ventriloquist's dummy perched on the novelist's knee' (442). Bell contends that it is the kid who is the judge's 'true adversary', as 'a man of scruples' (119).⁶⁹ The judge accuses the kid of refusing the perverse sense of morality embraced by the other men: 'There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your heart some clemency for the heathen' (BM, 299). He later tells the kid : 'you sat in judgement on your own deed. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you pledged a part [...] Each was called upon to empty his heart into the common and one did not' (307). The kid is accused, in effect, of individualism, of some capacity for scruples and morality, the proof of which lies perversely in the fact of his survival. It is the judge's proclamation that 'War is God', which Bell proposes is 'supported in the novel by a genuine metaphysic that piece by piece the judge articulates': 'The judge's false religion originates in the same existential vacuum as any other; and given the distortions that logic can thrive upon, it is as rational as any other' (123).

⁶⁸ Susan J. Rosowski, 'Molly's Truth-telling, or, Jean Stafford Rewrites the Western' in *Reading the West: New Essays on The Literature of the American West*, ed. Michael Kowalewski, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp157-177.

⁶⁹ It is conventional for critics, following McCarthy's example, not to emphasise the anonymity of the kid by the use of inverted commas.

The judge's Nietzschean claims that 'moral law' is subverted by 'historical law [...] at every turn', that 'men of God and men of war have strange affinities' and that what all men are fighting against is 'emptiness and despair', are later contradicted as the historical absolute becomes less certain: 'Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not'(250, 329, 330). However, while the Judge's speeches should not be accepted as merely an echo of McCarthy's own sentiments, his *is* an important narrative 'voice' of anthropocentric and imperialist rhetoric, in juxtaposition to the relative silence of the other men who, as Vereen Bell has argued, may wish to 'distance themselves' from his 'pretentious rhetoric, but prove his case in their deeds'(123).

In the final pages, the judge tells the kid that 'only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war [...] only that man can dance, and in the final paragraph, the judge himself is seen dancing: 'He says he'll never die [...] he is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die' (335). In one way, the novel invites the reader to believe not only in the authority, the 'genuine metaphysic' and power of the judge, but also the inevitability of death. And it is often an anonymous death without a history. McCarthy does not provide an account of the intervening years between their meetings and the judge asks the kid 'did you post witnesses?', although it is possible that 'the man' (as the kid is renamed at the end of the novel) placing post holes in the epilogue is the same one who has confronted the judge. The judge has no definable origins and therefore has no provenance (310), which undermines his status as a representation of a true historical figure, and the final image of him as the incarnation of evil and symbol of death which will live 'forever' in history, is less of an achievement in the light of the epilogue. Finally, the narrator reiterates the notion that death always contains a sense of history and vice versa, and that the inexorable 'progress' of man in history is also a death-ridden process of regression, so that the immortality claimed by the judge becomes more of a punishment than a triumph.

Blood Meridian forces the reader to confront a sense of history which is full of contradictions and paradoxes. The rich, evocative, cultured language, full of neologisms

and arcane references, is at odds with the slaughter and death it describes. The judge is based on an historical figure in Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession*, and he holds an intellectual power which aligns him with the concept of European Enlightenment and mankind's 'progress'. However, his false cry 'All dead save me' to the Indians, is in one sense true. When the filibusters ride into Chihuahua, 'they bore on poles the dessicated heads of the enemy through that fantasy of music and flowers', although they are later driven out of the desecrated town by the townspeople who paint 'Mejor los Indios' on the walls (165). The scalp-hunters are like 'beings provoked out of absolute rock' and 'moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them' (172). They are described as prehistoric savages 'ornamented with human parts like cannibals' and covering themselves with 'slickers hacked from greasy halfcured hides', so that they look like 'wardens of some dim sect sent forth to proselytize among the very beasts of the land'(189, 187). Death is a fact of life for men who literally ornament themselves with death, either in the form of weaponry, the scapular of dehydrated ears which Toadvine, Brown and eventually the kid wears, or 'some man's heart, dried and blackened' kept by the old hermit the kid meets at the beginning of his travels (18). Captain White's speech to the kid about the Mexicans, 'a race of degenerates', and his claim that the soldiers are 'to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land', means nothing to the kid (who has never heard of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo), and eventually his only hope of survival is to claim that he is a 'seasoned indiantkiller' (34,79).

Jonathan Pitts has suggested that the thematic focus of the novel is that man bears a 'symbiotic relationship' to the world: 'there is no drive to see what else is out there, since man knows he is dissimilar and alien' (12).⁷⁰ The exception to this is the judge, who is representative of 'the novel's narrative dilemma [...] that no amount of visual perspicacity will reveal the truth' (12). Pitts writes that 'the problem, like the wanderings of Glanton's

⁷⁰ Jonathan Pitts, "Writing On: *Blood Meridian* as Devisory Western", *Western American Literature*, Vol. 33. (Spring 1998):7-25.

band, is recursive and inexorable, since it is the very frontier-bound constitution of sight which fragments the world' (12): 'And so these parties [are] divided upon that midnight plain, each passing back the way the other had come, pursuing as all travellers must inversions without end upon other men's journeys' (BM, 121). Pitts argues that the judge is 'the narrator's pilgrim' (12), although while it is tempting to identify the judge with the narrator and the readers with the 'squatters in their rags' who are taken in by the judge's speculations, 'and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools' (BM, 116), he suggests that this identification does not work because the narrator is making 'an implicit moral judgement of the judge' (13). He remains, however, a 'crucial character for the narrator' because 'in his ersatz (and often comical) intellectualism and quasi-philosophical nihilism, he represents the historical consciousness of the Emersonian man in the violent bloodlands of the West':

In this landscape the universe is particularity to the point of chaos. The judge sifts and studies as much intellectual ruin as animal, geological, and archaeological ruin. He looks for the universal by examining the particular, but unlike Emerson he finds not a unity but a sameness. (13)

Pitts goes as far as to suggest that, at some points, the narrator describes the judge 'with relative tenderness' as he seems 'earnest and sincere in his efforts to study the textual evidence and thematic traces, to understand experience' (13), as, for example, when he 'roamed through the ruinous kivas picking up small artifacts and he sat upon a high wall and sketched in his book until the light failed' (BM, 139). Pitts points out that here the judge is 'looking' and not just 'seeing': 'To draw is to look, examining the structure of appearances. The drawing of a tree shows not a tree, but a tree being looked at' (15). Drawing is clearly the prephotographic form of representation. However, McCarthy's writing incorporates an apparent scepticism about the visual artefact as a form of representation – in particular photographs and maps – although this distrust of the visual medium can be extended to include the text or book as a visual artefact. His prose has frequently been described as 'cinematic', usually with reference to his western novels and the descriptions of the landscape. A tension between word and image, man and nature, and

representation and thing - as these potential dualisms relate to perspective and vision - is staged in the landscapes of McCarthy's westerns. The judge recalls that 'he'd once drawn an old Hueco's portrait and unwittingly chained the man to his own likeness. For he could not sleep for fear an enemy might take it and deface it' (141). This is not only a lesson in 'self-consciousness' as Pitts suggests, but also prefigures all of McCarthy's other novels, which are set after the introduction of photography.⁷¹

Pitts' idea that the narrator of *Blood Meridian* is a sort of Emersonian 'subject-lens' which works on one level as it 'sees all things in the landscape as it tracks the scalphunters and the central figure of the judge' and on another level, it 'takes its own structure as its theme, engaging the reader in a similarly trackless search for something luminous in the narrative' (16), is undermined by the narrator's statement that 'the will to deceive that is in things luminous may [...] post men to fraudulent destinies' (BM, 120). As the following chapter discusses, McCarthy's narrator rarely recedes and *Blood Meridian* is no exception. The narrator's interjections repeatedly remind the reader of another presence which invites the reader's collusion. When Sproule is described being attacked by a bat, 'folding its wings over him' as he sleeps, the narrator simply adds 'Not soft enough', and when the kid and Sproule are described arriving at a crossroads, the narrator again intercedes with one of many rhetorical questions: 'what else to call it' (66,67). When Glanton chooses a card from a juggler, the juggler reaches for the card but it has vanished, and the narrator interjects with another direct address to the reader: 'perhaps Glanton had seen the card's face. What could it have meant to him?' (95) At times, the narrator even hints at some vague level of understanding, or appreciation of nature, as when Glanton examines a leaf, turning it 'like a tiny fan by its stem' before dropping it and watching it fall. While the reader is told 'its perfection was not lost on him', we are given no indication as to the relation between observation and cognition (BM, 137). The narrator describes the judge as he 'pressed the leaves of trees and plants into his book and he

⁷¹ For example, in *The Crossing*, a blind Mexican revolutionary tells Billy "that it was not a matter of illusion or no illusion [...] He said that the light of the world was in men's eyes only for the world itself moved in eternal darkness [...] secret and black beyond men's imagining and that its nature did not reside

stalked tiptoe the mountain butterflies', telling the men that the 'freedom of birds is an insult to me': 'whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent [...] only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out will he be properly suzerain of the earth' (198-9). It is the judge who says that 'the man who believes 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' (199). He copies into his notebook some ancient Indian wall paintings and proceeds to scrape away one of the designs which represents the whole, 'leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been' (173). Similarly, when the judge has been sketching his 'finds' into his ledgerbook, these include a 300 year old suit of armour which 'he sketched in profile and in perspective, citing the dimensions in his neat script, making marginal notes' (140). The judge then casts these artefacts into the fire and one of the gang, a man named Webster suggests that 'no man can put all the world in a book. No more than everthing drawed in a book is so' (141). When Webster insists that he does not want his 'crusted mug' to join the other sketches, the judge replies that 'every man is tabernacled to 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).

Jane Tompkins has written of the power of the landscape, particularly that of the desert, which is 'the fullest realization of the genre's drive toward materiality, the place where language fails and rocks assert themselves':

But by the same token it is the place where something else becomes visible, an ineffable thing that cannot be named [...] The landscape, which on the one hand drives Christianity away, ends by forcing men to see something godlike there. (85)

While Pitts argues that this 'something else' is 'the disembodied power of transcendent sight', which must remain 'like Emerson's transparent eyeball, invisible in order to work', it is important to note that the benefit of any 'transcendent sight' is the narrator's and his

in what could be seen or not seen.'"(TC, 283) He comments on the very idea of 'witness', telling Billy of the 'ultimate sightlessness of the world' (294).

alone (19). In many ways, *Blood Meridian*, becomes a radical exposition of the judge's statement that 'War is god [...] Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favour of the weak. Historical law subverts them at every turn' (BM, 249-50). For, although the judge is as much a pawn in the narrator's game as any other character (he has to live forever after all), in a typical McCarthy narratorial 'tease', some of the judge's pronouncements he does appear to agree with, such as 'Words are things' and 'Books lie'⁷² (85, 116). The narrator repeatedly undermines the judge's authority, his claim to be 'suzerain' and his statement that 'nothing exists without my knowledge'. This is later contradicted when he tells the men 'even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it' (245). The narrator also reminds the reader late on in the novel, that it was he who invented the judge:

Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there any system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unravelling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg. (310)

It is also the narrator who describes the landscape and the human and animal life therein, although it is apparent that the reader is made more aware of the significance of landscape than the protagonists could ever hope to be.

⁷² David Holloway has noted the 'deconstructive properties' of some of the judge's statements and 'the steady accumulation of detail which drips a logic of *differance* relentlessly into the very fabric of the text', so that while the judge 'aims to totalize all existence within himself by controlling the act of representation, that control is cumulatively undone by the deconstructive rhetoric of the text itself.' (193). "'A False book is no book at all": The Ideology of Representation in *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy*' in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) pp. 185-200.

**“In the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and man and rock become endowed with unguessed kinships”:
The Cartographic Impulse in *Blood Meridian* & *The Border Trilogy*.**

Steven Shaviro has described the ‘nauseous exhilaration’, the ‘baroque opulence’, the ‘frighteningly complicitous joy’ and the ‘savage irony’ of *Blood Meridian*.⁷³ He suggests that the language of McCarthy’s novel ‘caresses the harsh desert landscape, slides amorously over its surfaces’ and ‘is in intimate contact with the world in a powerfully non-representative way’, so that the ‘prose enacts *an erotics of landscape*’(145,153-4). Thomas Pughe has suggested that the narrator’s ‘apocalyptic vision of Western history is [...] juxtaposed to a primal, geological one; at either extreme [...] human civilization disappears into nature’ (378).⁷⁴ Similarly, Dana Phillips states that ‘It is *Blood Meridian*’s adherence to its description of events to the protocols and paradigms of natural history that gives it epic resonance’:

[...] the American West in McCarthy’s fiction is not the New World but a very old world, the reality of which is bedrock. We might periodicize him [...] as a writer not of the ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’ eras but of the Holocene, with a strong historical interest in the late Pleistocene and even earlier epochs. (452)⁷⁵

By placing his characters at such a distance, both psychologically and metaphorically, as de-individualized and prehistoric, ‘in a time before nomenclature was all’, *Blood Meridian*, as Phillips suggests ‘does not wholly reject the notion of value, but the values it describes are not ones for which we have ready terms’:

⁷³ Steven Shaviro, “‘The very life of the darkness’: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*’ in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold & Dianne C. Luce, Southern Quarterly Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) pp. 145-158.

⁷⁴ Thomas Pughe, ‘Revision and Vision: Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*’, *Revue Française d’Etudes Américaines*, 1994, Vol.17 No.69: 371-82.

⁷⁵ Dana Phillips, ‘History and the Ugly Facts of *Blood Meridian*’, *American Literature*, Vol. 68. No.2, (June 1996):434-460.

For McCarthy, the history of the west is natural history. This is a history of forces, and the processes by which these forces evolve into the forms to which we give names are not our own. Thus the present is also a time 'before nomenclature'. (172)

As noted, it is also a history of traces. Both history and death are subsumed into the landscape of *Blood Meridian* so that anthropocentrism is refuted and any notion of human will rationalized by the judge is diminished to the point of erosion.

Phillips cites the judge's statement that 'the only mystery is that there is no mystery' in support of his argument that there is no 'competition' between man and landscape, but instead they exist as 'parts of the same continuum [...] There is no supernatural elevation of consciousness', and 'it is precisely this lack of human implication that some find *Blood Meridian*'s most disturbing feature' (446-7). When Glanton and his gang 'fall upon a band of peaceful Tiguas', devastation ensues and there are the by now familiar descriptions of scalped corpses 'with their peeled skulls like polyps bluely wet'. However, even as this is described, the reader is told of the scene's disintegration:

In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of a few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people lived in this place and in this place died. (174)

Therefore, this short passage serves as at once an elegy for the massacred and 'peaceful Tiguas' at the same time as the narrator undermines his own description as literary and fictitious.⁷⁶ It seems that at times nature colludes with 'man' to eradicate his monstrous deeds, destroying all evidence, and thereby distorting the facts in the same way that 'man' distorts landscape by imbuing it with meaning according to the ideology which underpins his cultural vision. The language McCarthy employs suggests symbolic meanings at the

⁷⁶ In a similar way, at the end of *The Orchard Keeper*, we are reminded of the frailty of both word and image, as the story of John Wesley Rattner is that of a protagonist who 'no longer cared to tell which were things done and which dreamt' and the gravestones are a reminder of the fleeting nature of existence, as 'Over the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses. No atavar, no scion, no

same time as it denies the possibility of knowing what that meaning is. Similarly, the 'history' of the Tigua Indians is announced as fiction even as it is described. McCarthy's novel depicts scenes, images and landscapes of apocalyptic violence and death, although almost rhythmically juxtaposed with these are parallel images, scenes and landscapes, which erode, but do not 'cleanse', the scene. There are the remains of prehistoric Indian civilizations, 'wooden crosses propped in cairns of stones where travellers had met with death', the slaughtered encampment of Apaches, 'the bones and skulls scattered for half a mile' and evidence everywhere of the ravages of war (62, 90). An Indian village will not exist in history, 'in the circuit of a few suns all traces of the destruction of these people would be erased' and anonymity will be conferred on the dead: 'Callaghan's headless body floated anonymously downriver, a vulture standing between the shoulderblades in clerical black, silent rider to the sea' (174, 262). Therefore, nature is repeatedly seen as being not only the antagonist of man, but also often collaborating with man in erasing the violent facts of history.

Larry McMurtry has suggested that 'no matter how hard historians try to focus on the historic West or the geographic West, the West-in-the-mind's eye subtly but almost invariably intrudes'.⁷⁷ The 'west-in-the mind's eye' – all those iconic images associated unconsciously with the West and encapsulated, indeed perpetuated, exaggerated and even in some cases invented in the genre of the western film – are addressed directly in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*, as it moves from the naïve and romanticised 'west-in-the-mind's eye' encapsulated in the dreams and hopes of the 'cowboy' heroes as youths, to an image of depleted heroism. However, there is a sense that *Blood Meridian* in its violence and bloodlust, its iconic, dangerous landscapes, its universality and ahistorical sense of war, also hints at just such a reversal, prefiguring the precarious nature of the mythic status of the cowboy. McMurtry adds that, 'for this we have the camera to thank', so that the 'mental archive of images of the West' built up by photographers and

vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the people that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust.' (OK, 246)

⁷⁷ Larry McMurtry, review of *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, ed. Howard Lamarr in *The New York Review of Books*, 35th Anniversary Issue, October 22nd, 1998, pp38-41

cinematographers (for example, John Ford's use of Monument Valley as representative of the West), resulted in 'a personal West-in-the-mind's-eye in which we see an eternal pastoral, very beautiful but usually unpeopled, except for the Marlboro Man' (40). He suggests that if 'we go to photography for information, rather than fantasy', it becomes apparent that 'for people who actually lived in the West', often 'those great spaces were usually just isolating and that fine light often just brutal' (40). John Beck has also suggested 'a matrix of concerns which bonds the nature of the photograph and the trope of the desert' (210).⁷⁸ In his examination of the desert as 'a site for political and spiritual testing', Beck proposes that it 'signal[s] and invite[s] annihilation' as a place where 'three-dimensional vision is collapsed into a flat, depthless surface', so that 'the relationship between perception and knowledge is vividly revealed':

McCarthy's desert is an actual and metaphysical space which provides a testing ground for the moral positions assumed by his protagonists in the face of a universe apparently bent on destruction, and for his own narrative and formal concerns. (210)

Towards the end of *Blood Meridian*, Glanton's gang of scalp-hunters are described in their most desperate and bedraggled state, as the corpses of animals 'with their necks stretched in agony' and the mummified corpse of a crucified Apache are sights that they have become immune to, as the narrator insists 'they rode on' (247). Not only do they appear unaware of the corpses they encounter, they also appear unaware of the landscape, as they cross a 'vast dry lake with rows of dead volcanoes ranged beyond it', although the narrator appears to be describing a state of numbness and stupor brought about by the searing heat, as the gang are likened to 'noctambulants', and it is here that the now legendary 'optical democracy' crops up:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and

⁷⁸ John Beck, ' "A Certain but fugitive testimony": Witnessing the Light of Time in Cormac McCarthy's Southwestern Fiction', *Myth, Legend Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, Ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) pp. 209-216.

nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinship. (247)

Importantly, the distance between the narrative voice and the (albeit sometimes limited) dialogue of the male protagonists means that there is a contradiction between what the narrator describes as 'optical democracy' and what these men experience. However, none of the characters, including the 'kid' are attributed with any thoughts at all on the 'optical' – whether democratic or not. The exception to this is the Judge, as he articulates the encapsulation of the imperialist gaze of Manifest Destiny. Although by far the most erudite and loquacious character in all of McCarthy's fiction, the judge is a figure of evil whose pronouncements we learn as a reader, are not to be trusted. The 'neuter austerity' in which men and rocks are endowed with 'kinship' is contradicted by the experience of these men. The judge's furious attempts to first appropriate and then eradicate his various 'finds', and the experience of McCarthy's later protagonists who find themselves (or rather do not 'find themselves') in a place which is 'alien' and 'strange' to them, could also hint that 'optical democracy' is only an apparent phenomenon, akin to optical illusion. After all, the narrator states elsewhere that 'death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape', thereby drawing attention once more to the illusionary element in 'seemed' and the predominance of death which obfuscates and impairs the perspective and visual ideology of the viewer (48).⁷⁹ There are several other instances which indicate the predominance of optical illusion that adheres to the landscape. For example, McCarthy seems to highlight the discrepancy between the apparent rigour and clarity of his nineteenth-century protagonists' 'hegemonic gaze' of pleasure and appropriation, their cultural vision - and reality. When Glanton looks through his telescope to identify the clouds of dust in the distance, he believes that the group of 'ragged Indians' are nothing more than 'a parcel of heathen stockthieves' with which they can have a little 'sport'. These turn out to be the Comanche raiders (51).

⁷⁹ The Collins concise dictionary definition of 'optical' includes the following, as it relates to the lens: 'aiding vision or correcting a visual disorder.'

Virginia Wright Wexman has noted how western films identify the nation with nature and nationalism with landscape.⁸⁰ Land and the acquisition of property was seen by American colonists as a cultural imperative, as Captain White tells the kid: ‘hell fire son, you don’t need no wages.[...] We goin to Mexico. Spoils of war. Aint a man in the company wont come out a big landowner’ (BM, 30). As Wright Wexman notes, the westerns which depict the landscape as ‘the virgin land’ to be occupied and transformed from a ‘wilderness’, echo the imperialist discourse which demands the necessity of imposing borders, ‘defining borders and scanning perimeters’, with the titles often signalling the imperialist appropriation of land and imposition of boundaries, in particular rivers (for example, Hawk’s *Red River* [1948], *Rio Bravo* [1959], and *Rio Lobo* [1970]):

The idyllic Western landscape setting is typically animated by the placid movements of horses, wagon trains, or cattle being driven to market. Invariably the presence of domestic animals ties the figures of the European intruders into the landscape in a bucolic portrait of people whose activities are harmoniously integrated with nature. (78)

The above description would not be familiar to any reader of McCarthy’s first western. Instead, in *Blood Meridian*, following the attack by the Comanches, the kid and Sproule find themselves alone ‘and they were very small and they moved very slowly in the immensity of that landscape’ (56). In the following few pages, the ‘castaways’ are described struggling ‘across a terra damnata of smoking slag’, as they come across a dead mule, a ‘bush that was hung with dead babies’, dead horses, goats and sheep, and then the church in which were ‘heaped [...] the scalped and naked and partly eaten bodies of some forty souls who’d barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen’ (58-62). In addition, there are goats, cats, chickens, vultures, prairie vipers, wolves, flies, lizards, hawks, more dead mules, a ‘dead child with two buzzards sitting on it’ and finally, the bat which attacks Sproule while he is sleeping (58-64). They encounter some Mexicans who offer them water and advice which seems closer to McCarthy’s depiction of the man in landscape, as they then ride off, ‘When the lambs is lost in the mountain [...] They is cry. Sometime come the mother. Sometime the wolf’ (65):

⁸⁰ Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Sproule sat without moving. The kid looked at him but he would look away. He was wounded in an enemy country far from home and although his eyes took in the alien stones about yet the greater void beyond seemed to swallow up his soul. (65)

The experience of these men does not conform to Mary Louise Pratt's description of the empty landscape as personified as the metaphorical 'face of the country', one which is 'more tractable' and 'returns the [colonist's] gaze, echoes his words, and accepts his caress.'⁸¹ Instead, the men are described descending the mountain 'their shadows contorted on the broken terrain like creatures seeking their own forms' and as they reach the valley floor 'and set off across the blue and cooling land, the mountains to the west of jagged slate [were] set endwise in the earth and the dry weeds heeling and twisting in a wind sprung from nowhere' (65). They sleep 'like dogs', dig with bones in the sand to try to find water and when they arrive at a 'crossroads' of sorts, they 'stood scanning the landscape for some guidance in that emptiness' (66-7). They think that they can see a lake 'shimmering in the distance', which turns out to be a mirage and the only wagon that they see is 'a carreta, lumbering clumsily over the plain, a small mule to draw it' (67-8). The landscape is both feminised in the 'scaloped canyon walls' which 'rippled in the heat like drapery folds' and also masculine, in the 'pulsating', 'malevolent', phallic sunsets (56, 44-5). When Glanton and his band come across the slain argonauts, the narrator describes the remains of their charred wagons and the grotesque corpses, adding that the 'expriest' (Tobin), 'asked if some might not see the hand of a cynical god conducting with what austerity and mock surprise so lethal a congruence' (153). The narrator continues 'the posting of witnesses by a third and other path altogether might also be called in evidence as appearing to beggar chance, yet the judge, who had put his horse forward until he was abreast of the speculants, said that in this was expressed the very nature of the witness and that his proximity was no third thing but rather the prime, for what could be said to occur unobserved?' (153). Later, the kid is described situated on a high ridge and separated from the gang, as he observes 'the collision of armies remote and silent upon the plain below'

⁸¹ Mary Louise Pratt, 'Scratches on the Face of the Country: Or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen', in *Critical Enquiry*, 12.1 (1985): 119-43.

and the reader shares his perspective: 'the dark little horses circled and the landscape shifted in the paling light and the mountains beyond brooded in darkening silhouette' (213). From a distance, the battle seems not only insignificant but unreal against the dominating backdrop of the mountains. Once again, as the kid watches, darkness comes in a 'sudden rush' leaving the scene 'cold and blue and without definition' (213). Therefore, McCarthy's narrator repeatedly plays with notions of perspective and observation which reminds the reader that, indeed, some things do 'occur unobserved' and that the 'very nature of witness', the difference between seeing and knowing, is brought into question.

Jonathan Pitts points to the language of *Blood Meridian*, 'vehicular and transitive', that makes the narrator 'the most interesting aspect of the novel even though he/ she is nameless, disembodied, and seemingly very cold-blooded' (8). He proposes that the narrator 'enacts an alternative to Emersonian transcendentalism and Turnerian progress' and that the voice of the narrator 'is both detached and engaged, tyrannous and forgiving, literary and historical, factual and imaginative' (23-4). Pitts suggests that McCarthy's narrator 'sees everything in exquisite detail but has nothing much to say about it', which sounds much like the film camera which sweeps across the landscape or focuses on the minutiae contained within it (8). Therefore, *Blood Meridian* 'is a parable of American seeing, a critical account of the 'American religion of vision' and 'the tyrannical ambition of the American eye to see all' (8), and 'optical democracy' is an 'intellectual and spiritual equilibrium', in which 'everything is necessarily luminous':

The concept of an optical democracy is [...] central to *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy sets individual, historically specific acts of violence against this intellectual and spiritual equilibrium as a kind of historical corrective. This violence, in the optical democracy of Turner's frontier vision, is necessary and inevitable, a given not needing cultural interpretation and congenial only to a detached contemplation. So McCarthy's narrator is nameless, a disembodied eye or ocular presence somewhere above a landscape in which 'all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships' (BM, 247). (18)

David Holloway has argued that 'optical democracy' is 'a phenomenological prose style which picks apart the distinction between nature and culture, dispersing into textuality and *jouissance* the metaphysical notion upon which such distinctions are grounded' (193).⁸²

Elsewhere, Parrish and Spiller have suggested that the 'historical vision' of *Blood Meridian* comes through the 'Indian eye' discussed in Richard Rodriguez's essay, 'Indian':

Rodriguez's figure of the 'eye' suggests an American history that informs our actions but escapes our consciousness. Because we see our history as something we have created by acting upon others, we cannot imagine the way in which others have acted upon us. [Rodriguez] is after a redescription of history that only metaphor can provide: a different way of seeing American history [...] following the line of Rodriguez's metaphorical eye, McCarthy imagines a cyclical American history predicated on violence. (465)

As the authors point out, 'what the European could not know, what he could not see through his telescope peering westward, was the eye already watching him, expecting him, waiting for him' (465). However, they also suggest that *Blood Meridian* 'does not portray how the Indians absorbed the Europeans', instead making the point that 'American history and Indian history both derive from the landscape itself' (465). They suggest that McCarthy explores this perspective through the kid, 'who is the eye of the novel', adding that although his vision is comprehensive, it is not 'comprehending' (465).

In arguing that McCarthy's novel is 'devisionary', Pitts is proposing that it goes further than a 'revisionary' Western, which more often than not simply critiques the myths, symbols and iconography only to then re-inscribe them. Instead, the voice of the narrator 'challenges the assumptions underlying the American religion of vision that there is a truth

⁸² David Holloway, "A false book is no book at all": The ideology of Representation in *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy*, in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy* (Manchester University Press, 2000). Elsewhere, Holloway examines McCarthy's 'ecocritical re-envisioning of the relation between man and natural objects which has become known as optical democracy' as analogous to the medium of photography (in this case, of Edward Weston and Ansell Adams) which 'throws us back on modernism's search for 'the Quintessence', the unmediated moment or epiphany when what is conceived to be the artifice of life is stripped away.' (44) in "'A longing which has clouded their minds": Seeking Transcendent Space in *Blood Meridian* and the *Border Trilogy*' in *Proceedings of the First European Conference on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. David Holloway, (Miami: Cormac McCarthy Society Publications, 1999) pp. 40-48.

out there, over the next hill, if only we can take in the panorama of possibility to get closer to it':

[...] the genius eye/ I that emerges in McCarthy's novel [is] a self-consciousness irresolvably transcendent and immanent – a sort of bifocal. What the bloody facts of *Blood Meridian* show us is the capacity of language to articulate and question the ideology of American vision. (9)

However, while Pitts proposes that the first sentence of the novel "See the Child" contains 'the tyrannous ambition of the American eye/ I', it is important to note that this also self-consciously draws attention to the descriptive power of the narrator, a point made more complex when the final line of McCarthy's last western novel is considered: 'The story's told/Turn the page' (Pitts, 9). This finally draws the reader's attention once again to the book as material artifact and therefore the visual ideology inherent in the book and the metaphor 'landscape-as-text' which appears to conform to John Beck's assertion that 'the novels as texts themselves are precariously placed, testaments to their own inadequacy.'⁸³ Therefore, the 'eye/I' of the novel appears to be a problematic distinction to make and highlights the difficulty of differentiating between the intellect and perspective as the judge, the narrator, the kid and even the landscape can be considered as the 'eye/I' of the novel. The gradual decrease in the depiction of 'optical democracy' in the *Border Trilogy*, occurs in conjunction with an increased focus on the individual and a merging of landscape/ text and story. This implies a further difficulty in McCarthy's prose, which highlights the movement of language between the opaque and the transparent, and is exemplified in the use of metaphor.

⁸³ The typography of McCarthy's novels appears to acknowledge the pictorial elements. For example, the nineteenth-century layout of titles in *Blood Meridian*, the interpolation of 'witness' accounts in *Child of God*, the italicized sections of *Outer Dark* which set the 'grim triune' apart, and the long italicized prologue to *Suttree* which directly addresses the reader, suggesting McCarthy's interest in authorial flourish and 'performance'. However, 'Books lie' says the judge in *Blood Meridian*, which it has been suggested McCarthy agrees with, and *Cities*'s astonishingly romantic final invocation to 'turn the page', appears to draw the reader back to the physicality of books as artifacts. For McCarthy, maps, pictures, photographs and even gravestones – any form of visual artifact - must never be taken as a form of 'witnessing'. The proliferation of images and consequently the multiple stories or interpretations of images, means that the very notion of a 'truthful' image becomes untenable.

If, as E.L. Doctorow has suggested, 'the development of civilizations is essentially a progression of metaphors', then McCarthy's Western novels conform to this - the layering of metaphors at once illuminates and obfuscates meaning and interpretation - and deny any idea of 'progression', thereby negating the effect and resulting in what many have described as a 'transhistorical' or 'ahistorical' west.⁸⁴ McCarthy explores the notion of cultural vision by articulating the pull on the cultural imagination at the same time as he destroys it, a combination of iconophilia and iconophobia. The term 'revision' which is one that many critics have used to describe McCarthy's western novels, implies a different way of looking. One way in which McCarthy explores the validity or otherwise of the ideologies which underpin notions of cultural memory, collective identity and national symbolism is through his experimentation with perspective and the use of a 'visual ideology' which creates familiar images - for example, man in nature and particularly, the cowboy in the West - only to distort or destroy them.

Concentrating on feminist interpretations of nineteenth-century landscape paintings in Europe and North America, Gillian Rose traces how Nature as Woman and Woman as Nature was an inherent part of a masculinist discourse about both space and place.⁸⁵ Rose draws on the arguments of Annette Kolodny's work on the metaphor of 'land-as-woman' and feminist writers such as Laura Mulvey, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose and their re-readings of Freud and Lacan, to suggest that ultimately 'the disembodied gaze of knowledge is masculine' and furthermore, that the connection between identity and vision means that this is most often a 'voyeuristic' gaze which relies on distance: 'The voyeuristic gaze is investigative and controlling, instituting a distance from and mastery over the image' (106).⁸⁶ Rose takes issue with those 'cultural geographers' (citing Barnes

⁸⁴E.L. Doctorow, *Poets and Presidents: Selected Essays, 1977-1992*, (London: Macmillan, 1994) {1st pub. New York: Random House, 1993}

⁸⁵ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993)

⁸⁶Interestingly, many of the 'pleasures' and 'fears' which Rose proposes are available to man in nature, are simply not an option for McCarthy's characters. Annette's Kolodny's explanation of the 'pleasures' of this metaphor would hardly be recognisable to a reader of McCarthy's novels any more than to one of his male protagonists:

and Duncan's anthology as an example), who use a deconstructive methodology which, to Rose, implies that the 'author of the landscape/ text is dead' and that, furthermore, this 'removes the geographer from the interpretive rules that he applies to the texts of others, and renders him invincible as an author – all-seeing and all-knowing. Thus, there is a 'distant authority' which remains so that 'knowledge, texts, evidence are asserted over and against emotion' (101).

In their introduction to *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*, Trevor J. Barnes and James S. Duncan point out the irony that little attention has been paid to 'writing' in human geography, considering that 'the very root meaning of the word 'geography' is literally 'earth writing' (1).⁸⁷ They suggest that the predominance in literary theory of 'intertextuality' means that writing is 'constitutive, not merely reflective; new worlds are made out of old texts and old worlds are the basis of new texts'(3). They cite the anthropologist James Clifford:

A conceptual shift, 'tectonic' in its implications, has taken place. We ground things now, on a moving earth. There is no longer any place of overview (mountaintop) from which to map human ways of life, no Archimedian point from which to represent the world. (1986:22)

While the essays included in this anthology draw on a broad range of tropes employed in the representation of landscape, the editors point out that the terms 'landscape' and 'text' are themselves 'ambiguous' and that the 'social-life-as-text metaphor is easily applicable to landscape because it too is a social and cultural production':

Thus a landscape possesses a similar objective fixity to that of a written text. It also becomes detached from the intentions of its original authors, and in terms of sociological

...what is probably America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine – that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification – enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction. (73)

Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of The Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1975).

⁸⁷ *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*, eds. Trevor. S Barnes & James S. Duncan (London & New York: Routledge, 1992).

and psychological impact and material consequences the various readings of landscapes matter more than any authorial intentions.(6)

Among the common beliefs of the twelve papers contained therein, 'the most basic is that landscapes, social action, paintings, maps, language, and of course, written documents are all held to be susceptible to textual interpretation' (13). In addition, there is a shared belief that 'mimetic representation is a pipe dream', that the objects of enquiry (whether maps, texts, paintings etc.) should be 'approached intertextually' and that 'the concept of power is central, not only to the constitution of the objects of study, but to their representation' (13). On the whole, the majority of contributors appear ill at ease, or at least suspicious about the use of metaphor, either because of its inherent elitism, implying 'committed readers' (Smith), the implicit power relationships of the 'metaphor of the sign' (Olssen), or the inefficient narrowness of physical and biological metaphors used in economic geography (Barnes). In addition, John Pickles argues that all maps are a form of discourse and proposes an intertextual approach, an idea expanded by Brian Harley who suggests that maps should not be considered the result of objective science but as part of a cultural system. He posits cartography firmly within a 'power/ knowledge matrix', contending that 'cartography's position within the matrix is made more powerful because of its sly rhetoric of neutrality' (17). The 'sly rhetoric of neutrality' of the cartographic impulse is encapsulated in the language used by McCarthy's narrator to describe the 'optical democracy' of the landscape, which has enabled readers and critics to attribute the 'power' of *Blood Meridian*, in terms of both observation and cognition, to so many different agencies (even briefly, to the Indians). The progression of metaphors in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* can be seen in the changing emphasis from 'landscape' to 'portrait' and the interior 'mapping' of his border cowboys.

In *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, Scott Michaelson and David Johnson propose that the 'soft' borders are those that they will focus on: 'produced within broadly liberal discourse: benevolent nationalisms, cultural essentialisms, multiculturalisms, and the

like – in short, the state of ‘border studies’(1).⁸⁸ Interestingly, by comparison, they write that in Michaelson’s workplace, El Paso, ‘one sees the most clearly virulent form of border production literally in the back yard of the university’:

Along the Rio Grande are miles upon miles of cement trenches, chain-link fences, light-green paddy wagons, uniforms, binoculars, and soon , perhaps, steel walls, as well as multiple paranoid discourses of national and racial contagion. (1)⁸⁹

In his paper ‘Compromised Narratives along the Border’, Russ Castronovo proposes that, rather than considering border writing as a means of undermining ‘the inviolate sovereignty of the nation’, it should be considered that ‘negotiations along the border also have the unintended counterpurpose of solidifying and extending racial and national boundaries’ (196). He suggests that narratives of border crossing often contain ‘unpredictable moments of national consolidation’, can be seen as ‘an exemplar of American exceptionalism’, and a place where nationalism is ‘the response to the permeability and fluidity of border culture’ (196). Castronovo calls for an examination of ‘the pitfalls for racial ideology and the cul-de-sacs of inescapable nationalism predatorily inherent to borders’, adding that borders ‘need not be sites of division: rather as the sutures of a national cohesion, they can offer an imaginative topos for the articulation of ‘transcendent’ ideals of racial supremacy and political unity’ (198, 202). He suggests furthermore that ‘although crossing borders is a powerfully subversive act, its impact may be limited, capable of dismantling a construct like the nation only temporarily before the deconstructive potential of border discourse is reconstructed *back* within the very system being challenged’ (200). He stresses the need to not ignore the inevitable relations of cultural power, a pattern of domination and subordination which is an inherent part of cultural relations, and cites Keating’s observation that border crossers create ‘new myths [...] that provide radical alternatives to the existing social structures’ and proposes that ‘the imperial frontier and the border [do] correspond in their indebtedness to a romanticized novelty about regions beyond traditionally mapped boundaries. This overlap

⁸⁸ *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, eds. Scott Michaelsen & David E. Johnson, (London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁸⁹ McCarthy has lived in El Paso since 1976.

suggests that resistant narratives borrow – perhaps are compelled to borrow – from narratives made available by hegemonic culture’ (200). In McCarthy’s case, this is clearly the western genre.

In *American Exceptionalism*, Deborah Madsen cites Jane Tompkins’ assertion that the Anglo-Saxon men who were responsible for the spread of the empire across North America ‘[were] peculiarly able to adapt to immediate conditions and subdue the environment to their will’ and adds that ‘it is this will to domination that characterises the hero’s relation to everything: land, animals, women, men, his own body’ (126). The apparent contradiction in Madsen’s assertion that the relationship between the Western hero and nature is both ‘sympathetic’ and a struggle characterised by the hero’s ‘will to domination’, reveals perhaps a paradox inherent to the Western and one which McCarthy appears to engage with. His cowboy protagonists do not appear to have the qualities which Madsen associates with the traditional Western hero who ‘is perfectly in harmony with his surroundings and has of them a more profound appreciation’, ‘his acute perception of the significance of the landscape’ or a special ‘sympathetic relationship with the wilderness’:

It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of the landscape within the Western genre [...] In fact, the relationship of the characters to the landscape in which they live is as important as the way in which they relate to each other [...] Nature shows what is necessary in a man and the landscape then tests and proves who possesses those qualities. (128)

Gillian Rose has noted a change in the meaning associated with the term ‘landscape’, which can be applied to a reading of McCarthy’s westerns. She proposes that ‘landscape’ changed (during the mid Twentieth-century) from its early literal understanding as ‘the scene within the range of the observer’s vision’ to being increasingly interpreted as a formulation of the ‘dynamic relations’ between a society or culture and its environment: ‘the process of human activity in time and area’, highlighting the (body) politics which adhere to the idea of ‘landscape’ and the ‘cul-de-sacs of inescapable nationalism predatorily inherent to borders’, outlined by Castranovo (Rose, 86). The *Border Trilogy*

reflects this change, as the emphasis is on the individual 'portrait' and the interior landscapes of the mind, as well as the exterior and 'alien' landscape of Mexico, a country which denies McCarthy's cowboy protagonists' attempts to 'map' (read, 'colonise', 'discover', 'penetrate') it from the onset.

In his essay, 'Region, Power, Place', William Bevis proposes that the 'leaving home' plots of classic American literature 'embody quite clearly the basic premise of success in our mobile society':

The individual advances, sometimes at all costs, with little or no regard for family, society, past or place. The individual is the ultimate reality; hence individual consciousness is the medium of knowledge, and 'freedom' is a matter of distance between myself and the smoke from another's chimney. Isolation is the poison in this world of movement, and romantic love seems to be its primary antidote. Movement, isolation, change, personal and forbidden knowledge, fresh beginnings: these are the ingredients of the American Adam, the man who would start from scratch. His is the story we tell and always in our ears is Huck Finn's strange derision: 'I been there before.' (28-29)⁹⁰

Like Hawthorne and Melville, McCarthy explores in his early novels the consequences of the meaning of 'community' and 'society' on the individual and vice versa. This is done through casting his heroes into the wilderness and paradoxically scrutinising community/society by examining the experiences of the individual isolated in nature and with only a peripheral relation to the larger community. The impulse to explore the 'whited areas' of the maps south of the border of Texas, is initially seen to be driven by the romanticised notions which the young heroes of McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* have not only about Mexico, but also about themselves. Their sense of identity is constructed as much around ideological borders as geographical ones. Both Billy and John Grady are repeatedly warned about the inaccuracy of maps and their tales confirm the importance of lived experience over dangerously romanticised dreaming. While, after several border crossings, they have both 'been there before', the Mexico they return to each time reverses the basic premise of 'freedom' and 'fresh beginnings' inherent in the trope of the American Adam.

⁹⁰ William Bevis, 'Region, Power and Place' in *Reading The West: New Essays on The Literature of the American West*, ed. Michael Kowalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp21-43.

In *All The Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins leave San Angelo to go to Mexico, following John Grady's mother's decision to sell the family ranch. However, they quickly discover that not only is their journey impeded by the fences, but they also have to spend their first night on the side of the highway (31-2). They ask a Mexican the following morning if he knows 'that country down there', to which he replies, 'I never been to Mexico in my life' (34). The oil company roadmap only shows the travellers the cartographic details 'as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond all that was white' (34). Rawlins asks one of many naïve questions which reminds the reader of their innocence and youth as he articulates a confused and ignorant cartographic impulse, suggesting perhaps 'it aint ever been mapped?', and adding, 'there ain't shit down there' (34). They allow another younger boy, Jimmy Blevins, to ride with them (his justification for joining them is 'cause I'm an American') and they all 'make for the alien shore like a party of marauders' (45). They see themselves as 'desperadoes' and 'cowboys', as they sit 'drinkin cactus juice in Old Mexico' (51). The first fifty or so pages, then, describes a comical and almost ludicrous sense of the 'cultural vision' and cartographic impulse of these young 'marauders.'

Daniel Cooper Alarcón has proposed that it is John's final conversation with Rawlins, once they have returned to Texas, that 'contains the novel's most interesting irony' (64).⁹¹ Rawlins suggests that John Grady could get a job on the rigs, adding 'this is still good country' (299). John Grady agrees but tells him 'it aint my country':

Where is your country?

I don't know, said John Grady. I don't know where it is. I don't know what happens to country. (ATPH, 299)

Cooper Alarcón contends that John Grady's comment 'is suggestive of the familiar story of the American male who leaves 'civilization' behind to seek a different way of life in the 'wilderness' but unwittingly becomes an agent of colonization, transforming his wilderness

⁹¹ Daniel Cooper Alarcón, "'Doomed Enterprises": McCarthy's Mexican Representations' in *Southwestern American Literature*, Vol.25 No.1, (Fall 1999):58-66.

refuge into that very thing he had sought to escape' (64). Therefore, that fact that John Grady cannot make sense of what happens to country 'is perhaps indicative of his inability, despite all that has happened to him, to see that he and his romantic ideals are very much a part of what happens to country' (64). Cooper Alarcón argues that, even considering the possibility that the novel may be 'a demonstration of the dangers of steeping oneself too deeply in storybook values and of trying to live one's life in accordance with romantic ideals', he concludes that 'McCarthy's Mexican novels fit neatly within the Infernal Paradise tradition, doing little to challenge its assumptions and conventions', with the novel's *paradiso* taking place at the hacienda where John Grady 'proves himself to be a super-cowboy' and then descending into the Inferno of the Saltillo prison (61,64-5).⁹² He argues that the reason the boys go south instead of west is 'nostalgia' as the 'mythological Mexican landscape' can be viewed as a 'pre-industrial utopia', which by the twentieth-century, the west could not be (64).⁹³

George Guillemin has suggested that 'allegory and melancholia join forces in redefining pastoralism within the Border Trilogy', so that literary pastoralism is reconceptualized 'along posthumanist, ecopastoral lines' through the 'profound melancholia' of a 'homogenous narrative voice' and an 'underlying allegorical meta-discourse' which is 'the loss of the pastoral vision of harmony between man and nature' (72-3).⁹⁴ While the incursion of literary pastoralism has been considered with reference to *The Orchard Keeper*, it was found that the 'machine in the garden' was less problematic than the machine in the man. John Grady is also associated with the orchard (and the American Adam in the 'garden') at the beginning of *All The Pretty Horses*, as he and Rawlins are

⁹² Cooper Alarcón also notes the less than 'subtle' name of the hacienda – Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción [Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception], - which also represents 'a chance to reclaim the inheritance that was denied him by his mother.' (62) This aspect of McCarthy's novels is addressed in full in the final chapter.

⁹³Two recent films have prompted similar polarised responses in their depiction of Mexico. *Traffic* (dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2000), in which all of the Mexican scenes were shot in sepia tint and *Amores Perros* (dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2001), in which the director used silver tint. See *Sight and Sound*, February 2001, Vol. II, Issue 2, pp53-4 and *Sight and Sound*, May 2001, Vol. II, Issue 5, pp. 39-40 & p68.

⁹⁴ George Guillemin, ' "As of some site where life had not succeeded": Sorrow, Allegory, and Pastoralism in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy', *Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No.3 (Spring, 2000): 72-98.

'like young thieves in a glowing orchard' as they ride into Mexico, and later he could almost be riding through Arthur Ownby's orchard :

He rode through a grove of apple trees [...] and he picked an apple as he rode and bit into it and it was hard and green and bitter [...] He rode past the ruins of an old cabin [...] There was a strange air to the place. As of some site where life had not succeeded. (225-6)

Guillemin suggests that in McCarthy's pastoralism 'landscape and characters share their fate (the negative materiality of death) and status (the positive materiality of life) as existential equals due to the erasure of all previous utopian pastoral hopes', so that nature is imbued with allegorical meaning 'but without any promise of transcendence' (83). While the intrusion of the 'machine in the garden' has been seen to be addressed in both a serious and humorous way in *The Orchard Keeper* and in *Suttree*, the description of the train at the beginning of *All The Pretty Horses*, does indeed, as Guillemin suggests, describe the 'industrial invasion of pastoral space' (87):

It came boring out of the East like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance and the long light of the headlamp [...] creating out of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness [...] (ATPH, 3-4)

With Leo Marx's writing on literary pastoralism in mind, Guillemin proposes that 'the trilogy cultivates images of the machine in the garden from the start in order to allegorize the pastoral protagonist's alienation and melancholia as terminal and as tied to the alienation and melancholia of nature itself' (87). Therefore, while McCarthy acknowledges the 'obsolescence of utopian pastoralism', his novels retain a 'nostalgia for a pastoral ideal that is wilderness rather than garden' (88).⁹⁵ Finally, Guillemin appears to agree with Alárcon's comment regarding the irony of John Grady's announcement that he does not 'know what happens to country' (ATPH, 299). Guillemin concludes that McCarthy's 'ecological statement' in the trilogy 'consists of little more than a metaphysical flirt with nature', so that there is a danger that the author's 'ecopastoral allegoresis may well

⁹⁵ However, Guillemin identifies this 'wilderness' which prompts the boys 'nascent ecopastoral awareness', lies not in the landscape, but in the wild wolves and horses with which, as he suggests they enjoy a 'rather unconventional' communication with (89). A point expanded on in the final chapter.

exhaust itself in reinstating nature as a literal fact and liberating it from its anthropocentric reduction to an object of human appropriation' (95).

At the end of *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady still dreams the same dreams that 'something was afraid and he had come to comfort it' and he has a conversation with Billy, which echoes his earlier discussion with Rawlins (204). John Grady tells Billy that he would return to Mexico, although Billy tells him 'I never once come back with what I started after' and that 'vaqueros' make little in the way of wages, suggesting that 'sooner or later they're goin to run all the white people out of that country' (217). John tells him that 'if there's anything left of this life it's down there', although Billy disagrees, articulating (almost, for Billy never really makes the connection between his instincts and the reasons which underlie them, earlier having told John 'I think you just end up tryin to minimize the pain', 78) an awareness of John Grady's romanticised 'storybook ideals':

I don't even know what life is. I damn sure dont know what Mexico is. I think it's in your head. Mexico. I rode a lot of ground down there [...] Everbody I ever knew that ever went back was goin after somethin. Or thought they was [...] There's a difference between quittin and knowin when you're beat. (COTP, 218)⁹⁶

There is, however, as early as *All The Pretty Horses*, a suggestion of McCarthy's increasing focus on the landscapes of the mind of his protagonists. John Grady tells the others about an old man's description of Mexico which made it 'sound like the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Said there was lakes and runnin water and grass to the stirrups', adding 'I can't picture country like that down here from I've seen so far' (55). Later, he lies awake at night 'while he contemplated the wildness about him, the wildness within', and before dawn, he 'walked out to study the new country as it shaped itself out of the darkness below them' (60). So, very quickly the 'Big Rock Candy Mountain' image is shattered as they come across some Mexicans 'a rough lot, half dressed in rags [...] they smelled of smoke and tallow and sweat and they looked as wild and strange as the country they were in' (61-2). John Grady could 'tell nothing' from watching 'their black eyes' and

⁹⁶ Billy's comments often undercut John Grady's idealism. His deadpan statement to John Grady about 'shoppin for whores', suggests a far less romantic view of his friend's intentions. (COTP, 120)

later they are described in an even worse state than the Mexicans, retching wildly after drinking too much cactus juice. At the end of the first of three parts, they drink coffee with some vaqueros, for most of whom 'the country to the north was little more than a rumor. A thing for which there seemed no accounting' (95).

The Crossing, as Richard Gray has suggested, 'acknowledges the symbiotic link between land and story, travelling and telling' (459).⁹⁷ The reader is told that Billy's 'own journeying began to take upon itself the shape of a tale', and later he tells another traveller that 'whether a man's life was writ in a book someplace or whether it took its form day by day was one and the same for it had one reality and that was the living of it' (TC, 331 & 379). In his article, 'Topographies of transition in Western American Literature', Stephen Tatum concentrates on *The Crossing* in his examination of McCarthy's 'cartographic metaphors', proposing that his novels both 'rehearse' and 'revise' important issues about the relationship between the individual and place, although his comments are pertinent to the trilogy as a whole.⁹⁸ Tatum writes of the 'spoken and unspoken hunger of memory and desire which motivates the actual and imaginative explorations both of one's own country and also of that country hovering over there just beyond the visible distance' and how knowing the country 'ineluctably entails ethical matters concerning how one lives and for what one lives':

As McCarthy's various novels about the southwestern borderlands insist, knowledge of self is inseparable from a knowledge of the body's location in place.

[...] especially in more recent western American literature, writers deploy geographical tropes associated with mapping and place naming or the circulation of bodies across borders in order strategically to represent and then critique, and sometimes parody, the colonizing imagination's perpetual desire for mastery, stability, and containment. (312-3)

Therefore, Tatum proposes that identity and self-knowledge 'must be regarded as an iterative matter, as a repetitive sequence of migrations and border crossings during which selves are created, disavowed, and re-created' (313). However, his suggestion that John

⁹⁷ Richard Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 2000.

⁹⁸ Stephen Tatum, 'Topographies of Transition in Western American Literature', *Western American Literature*, (Winter 1998), Vol.32, No.4, (Winter, 1998): 310-52

Grady Cole and the Parham brothers are 'always seen to be translating what looms up before their eyes' and are thereby 'themselves often translated', is perhaps where McCarthy goes even further in his exploration of the relationship between the individual, the landscape and the societies therein, as it is possible to argue that their experiences, including what they have 'seen' and 'witnessed', has not 'translated' them at all. There is certainly evidence of a lessening of the cartographic impulse, as far as Billy is concerned, although the conversation they have towards the end of *Cities*, suggests that, as Cooper Alarcón has argued, John has not been 'translated' by his experiences.

Tatum considers the work of the postmodern geographer Edward Soja who in writing of Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia', contends that time and space exist on a dialectical continuum, so that 'space' should not be regarded purely as 'either a mental construct or a physical form' (Soja, 143). Especially for western American writers, space is, according to Tatum, not a 'static [...] fixed homogenous void' but a 'highly volatile category that is crossed by temporality' (315). Therefore, combining the prevalence of cartographic imagery and Soja's theory of space, 'in a kind of dialogic encounter', Tatum considers 'the topography produced as interior and exterior landscapes' and 'how the translation of landscape features into words and images graphs a topography in which received history and traditions (McCarthy's sense of 'landmarks') are transformed and reclaimed (McCarthy's sense of 'knowing the country')'(317). He argues that the 'map and icon' worldview has been replaced in the twentieth-century history of post-colonial migrations, with cultural forms which no longer 'respect [...] boundaries and regularities, displaying instead considerable overlap and hybridity' (324). In *The Crossing*, Billy is told by an old man that, although he is a 'huérfano' (orphan), 'he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world':

[...] because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself. He said that the world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts. For while it seemed a place which contained men it was in reality a place contained within them and therefore to know it one must look there and come to know those hearts. (134)

Billy is refused entry into the army on three occasions because of an irregular heartbeat and Tatum proposes that this advice given to Billy in *The Crossing* by the Indian ‘centers on the image of the heart, figured here as a synecdoche, the central part of the human boy that represents the whole of the human essence’, indicative of how ‘the external landscape [...] becomes spatialized also as a topography of transitions on the body’s margins and its interior space of the heart’ (329-110):

If the space of the heart graphs an internal topography of transitions, then the mouth of the cave, considered as ‘borderlands’ of emergence and descent, locates a topography of transitions at the intersection of interior and exterior landscapes. As such personification suggests, topographies of transition appear both as the intersection of rings and lines in the external landscape (For instance, the mouths of caves) and as the intersection of interior and exterior landscapes at bodily orifices (the caves of mouths). (338)

Tatum’s consideration of the politics of space draws on Gillian Rose’s writing on ‘paradoxical space’ as a critique of hegemonic notions of space and the ‘map and icon’ worldview. Rose defines ‘paradoxical space’ as ‘multi-dimensional, shifting and contingent’ and paradoxical in that ‘spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside – are occupied simultaneously’ (140). However, it should be noted that the ‘central theme’ of Rose’s book is the argument that ‘various forms of white, bourgeois, heterosexual masculinity [has] structured the way in which geography as a discipline claims to know space, place and landscape’ (137). Therefore, what she terms ‘paradoxical space’ is also a space ‘elsewhere’, beyond ‘the limits of masculinist discourse’ and therefore ‘this paradoxical sense of space can challenge the exclusion of masculinist geography’ (139-140). Given that Rose goes on to examine ‘descriptions of oppressive spaces as territories in which women, and others, are caught’, McCarthy’s descriptions of spaces, from the womb/ grave/ cave imagery of both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, to the *haciendas* and brothels of the *Border Trilogy*, are similarly imbued with the sense of the oppressive space for women (141). This is addressed in the third chapter.

In *Writing Worlds: Discourse Text & Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*, Jonathon Smith has suggested, the very meaning of the metaphor of landscape as text not only implies a 'committed reader' but also suggests 'a certain elitism by those who use it'. Similarly, John Pickles points to the difficulty of these metaphors⁹⁹:

Like the map the landscape is a particularly good example of a 'text' which has been presumed to require a straightforward literal reading, but which actually poses great problems of interpretations and requires a rigorous hermeneutic analysis. Indeed, as texts the map and the landscape present innumerable problems of determining authorship, establishing a syntax and structure by which to read (and knowing what not to read), and distinguishing and relating the various levels of determination that historically constituted any given map or landscape. (223)

McCarthy addresses precisely the problem of 'determining authorship' outlined by Pickles, and the inherent problems of the over-burdening of metaphors of reading maps and landscapes as texts. By the time of the end of the *Border Trilogy*, in the epilogue of McCarthy's most recent novel – the year is 2002 – Billy Parham is 78 years old. Following a drought in west Texas which has wiped out the cattle, he has worked as a movie extra in El Paso, and is now 'somewhere in Central Arizona', sleeping rough 'beneath a concrete overpass' (265). He meets the unidentified figure of death/ his imagination/ another vagrant who is referred to as 'the narrator'. They discuss dreams and their 'reality', the possibility of 'dreams within dreams' and of an inherited but unconscious 'knowing'. The man tells Billy that 'Our waking life's desire to shape the world to our convenience invites all manner of paradox and difficulty [...] But in dreams we stand in this great democracy of the possible and there we are right pilgrims indeed' (283-4). He tells Billy that he had tried to draw a map in order to create a picture of his life and in response to Billy's scepticism about the efficacy of this pursuit, tells him : 'You say that the life of a man cannot be pictured. But perhaps we mean different things. The picture seeks to seize and immobilize within its own configurations what it never owned. Our map knows nothing of

⁹⁹ 'The Slightly Different Thing That is Said: Writing the Aesthetic Experience', pp73-86 & 'Texts, Hermeneutics and Propaganda Maps', pp193-231 in *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*, eds. Trevor J. Barnes & James S. Duncan (Routledge: London and New York, 1992).

time. It has no power to speak [...] Yet in its final shape the map and the life it traces must converge for there time ends' (274). He suggests that 'the immappable world of our journey' is closely tied to the landscape:

A pass in the mountains. A bloodstained stone. The marks of steel upon it. Names carved in the corrosible lime among stone fishes and ancient shells [...] The silence. The gradual extinction of rain. The coming of night. (289)

The enigmatic force of the dream world, its unresolved paradoxes and temporal and spatial distortion, by the time of *Cities of the Plain*, usurps the natural, physical landscape. Nature has become a backdrop which is in danger of becoming eroded, the 'all-American cowboys' drive pick-up trucks and lament a way of life that has become, like the previous generations of Red Branch in *The Orchard Keeper* 'myth, legend, dust'. As Billy tries to sleep, a smell of 'wet creosote' comes from the desert and 'to the west stood what he took for one of the ancient Spanish missions of that country but when he studied it again he saw that it was the round white dome of a radar tracking station' (289). Then he sees 'a row of figures struggling and clamoring silently in the wind' who appeared to be 'dressed in robes', although he discovers in the morning that they were 'only rags of plastic wrapping hanging from a fence where the wind had blown them' (289). McCarthy's narrative discourse no longer focuses on the power of nature to eradicate evidence of man's existence, but displays a parallel danger in the conflation of landscape and text or story, as the narrator tells Billy 'those stories which speak to us with the greatest resonance have a way of turning upon the teller and erasing him' (277). The 'grandeur' of optical democracy appears to have abated and the likelihood of 'unguessed kinship' between man and nature seems slim. Billy is overwhelmed by the kindness of the family who take him in when he reaches New Mexico, telling the mother, Betty 'I'm not what you think I am, I aint nothin. I don't know why you put up with me', but this is contradicted by the narrator as Betty pats his hand. Here, the conflation of map, landscape and text (or story, in this case Billy's), perfectly demonstrates McCarthy's changing artistic vision and the 'democracy of the possible'. Billy's claim to be 'nothing' is, after all, refuted by the narrator as he describes his hands: 'The ropy veins that bound them to his

heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God's plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world' (291). There is a gradual collapsing of the boundary between word and image, so that by the end of *Cities of the Plain*, both maps and landscapes become subsumed by this convergence of the visual and the verbal. The narrator is, after all, describing to Billy his own attempts at self-portraiture, which incorporates the metaphor of map and landscape as text or story. While McCarthy's preoccupation with borders announces itself in the title to his trilogy, *Blood Meridian's* epilogue stands as a precursor to this and the end of *Cities of the Plain* returns to consider literal and figurative borders. The fading voice of optical democracy throughout the *Border Trilogy* implies both the parallel fading of the voice of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism and the gradual muting of the landscape which has suffered, together with the more hopeful suggestion of a 'democracy of the possible'. It should be noted, however, that while in the *Trilogy* the emphasis is on the 'landscapes of the mind' of McCarthy's protagonists, as 'country' becomes an increasingly abstract concept and the 'map and icon' worldview is defeated in the face of experience, a further problem with metaphor persists in the depiction of animal-as-female. It has been suggested that McCarthy reverses the Emersonian notion that 'nature is a metaphor for the human mind'. However, the incursion of the female into the twentieth-century setting of the *Border Trilogy*, signals a change in the 'cartographic impulse' of McCarthy's cowboys, as the pervasive metaphor of animal-as-female suggests that the cultural vision and the ideology which underpins the imperialist agenda is not necessarily depleted as the 'optical democracy' recedes. While Terri Witek's proposal that in McCarthy's novels 'the earth is no grieving woman but merely itself, trackless and yet filled with signs that refuse to yield up their significance', is certainly true, an important feature of these novels is the pervasive reappearance of the 'grieving woman' elsewhere, particularly in McCarthy's many images of the *mater dolorosa*.¹⁰⁰ This will be addressed in the final chapter.

¹⁰⁰ Terri Witek, 'Reeds and Hides', 1994.

Chapter 2

A Consideration of Corpses: Literary and Cinematic Autopsy in Cormac McCarthy's Prose

The Art of Narrative - Introduction

“The boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where one ends and the other begins?” Edgar Allan Poe

Death is everywhere in McCarthy's prose. While the corpses which litter *Blood Meridian* have been noted, together with the literal and psychological borders which are a dominant feature of his western novels, McCarthy's focus on corpses in all of his novels interrogates those 'boundaries [...] at best shadowy and vague' which exist between life and death. The role of the narrator of death is an important one, for it is his voice that determines the relationship between the reader/ spectator and the characters, dead or alive. Therefore, following a brief consideration of the literary influence of writers such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Joyce, this introduction will address the use of different narrative voices and the figure of the author in McCarthy's work, particularly as they relate to the aforementioned writers. In addition, the specifically 'cinematic' qualities of McCarthy's narrative technique will be discussed with reference to both classic and contemporary film throughout this chapter.

In the following sections, the earliest description of death in these novels will be analysed from the position of the spectator/ reader in *The Orchard Keeper*, with particular emphasis on McCarthy's use of anamorphosis and manipulation of point of view. *Child of God* will be examined in the light of influential feminist film theorists' analysis of different forms of voyeurism and a misogynous narrator who describes in chilling detail the grotesque conflation of life and death in the psychopathic mind of Lester Ballard. The macabre humour and constantly changing point of view in these novels draw obvious parallels between McCarthy's narrative style and contemporary cinema, in terms of both genre and cinematography. This element of McCarthy's narrative style, the close proximity between horror and humour, will be addressed with particular reference to the 'death hilarious' of *Outer Dark*.

David Punter contends in *Gothic Pathologies*, that 'Gothic is the paradigm of all fiction, all textuality' and that by considering the 'abstract' forms of Gothic, the text, the body and the law that an analysis of a 'literature of terror' is made possible (1-5):¹

Terror goes so far: it goes as far as the dismemberment of the mind and the dismemberment of the body. All of this it does; and yet, in its most everyday and hideous forms, it remains haunted by something other than itself.[...] Always, though, it is haunted, shadowed, by textuality; for the very existence of the text is testament, witness to a limitation on the power of terror. (3-4)

Punter argues that the 'paradoxical centrality of Gothic' can be identified in the 'violently distorting prism' which the reader finds is the only avenue available to understanding the Gothic hero. This distortion of perspective is partly due to the use of unreliable narrators who appear to delight in the persecution, obsession and violence which mark the Gothic. In addition, Punter notes the particular 'bodily terror' of the 'female Gothic', in which 'the maternal body is an emblem for all vulnerability, for the animal as much as for the human, and thus in the animal layers of the psyche.' (14) This aspect of the Gothic, the 'formations of sadism and masochism' which appear in 'projected and introjected torture of the mother' (14-15), is particularly applicable to the following reading of *Child of God*. The Gothic is also linked to the notion of abjection, as defined by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, a point elaborated by Jerrold E. Hogle in his essay 'The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Progress of Abjection': 'The Gothic [...] depicts and enacts these very processes of abjection, where minglings of contrary states and culturally differentiated categories are cast off onto antiquated and 'othered' beings' (296).² There is nothing more abject than the corpse, a point which is discussed in the third chapter in relation to the 'monstrous-feminine' in *Child Of God*. It is worth noting also that *The Orchard Keeper* begins and ends in a graveyard, location of choice for gothic tales, and McCarthy's early short story, 'Wake For Susan', centres on the dream inspired by the tombstone of the girl of the title. Similarly, the ruined mansion that Suttree visits, the use of tombstones as tables in Ab Jones' roadhouse and Suttree's obvious obsession with death in all its forms (including the 'hunter' and his 'hounds'), indicates the

¹ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, The Body and The Law* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998).

² Jerrold E. Hogle, 'The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Progress of Abjection', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, Ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) pp293-303.

influence of the gothic tradition on McCarthy's southern novels.

While the following readings can be applied to McCarthy's narrative technique in all of his work, they are linked not only by the interrogation of the position of the 'spectator/ reader', but also by the incursion of the 'gothic' which frequently haunts the narrative. Therefore, each section will also briefly consider in what ways this gothic haunting occurs, a consideration which will be found to be an apt precursor to the examination of the representation of the female in the final chapter.

The narrator is implicated in issues of power, authority and language. In McCarthy's novels, the linguistic complexity and labyrinthine style wrestle with religious and philosophical concepts and yet are tortuously lacking in definition, or rather, make a series of didactic statements which appear to contradict each other. The often hybrid form of narration in these novels, which includes an omniscient narrator, a documentary style of recorded witnesses, a series of interpolated stories and a surreal stream of consciousness, results in the destabilising of already fragile identities and a frequently alternating subjectivity. The use of different narrative voices and the consequent role of the reader/ spectator is one of the most fascinating elements of McCarthy's work.

Brian Harding has noted that Nathaniel Hawthorne's sometimes conspiratorial or confessional tone is misleading, as this 'air of intimacy with his readers is illusory: it masks complexities of attitude that may include hostility' (xxxv).³ It has even been suggested that Hawthorne despised his readers,⁴ and it is possible to detect a similar hostility in one of McCarthy's narrators, although the narrator of the later western novels is discernibly less aggressive. In his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Harding points out that there have been many 'mutually incompatible' interpretations of Hawthorne's novel, in part because of a narrator who 'could not simply be identified with 'Hawthorne' but had, instead to be regarded in some sense as a character in the story' (xxxix). This narrator is in turn, censorious, equivocal and

³ Brian Harding, Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne, (Oxford University Press, 1990) ppvii-xlii {1st Pub. 1850}.

⁴ John G. Bayer, 'Narrative Techniques and the Oral Tradition in *The Scarlet Letter*', *American Literature* 52, 1980: 250-64.

moves between an abdication of authority and a position which 'gives credence to the superstitions of the age that reinforced the male prejudice against women' (xxxiii). Harding points out that at times, such a narrator acts not just as an 'unreliable witness', he can also be 'distinctly dangerous'. He tells the reader that Pearl 'was a born outcast of the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin' (93), but she is also portrayed as an emblem of truth and emotional honesty, so that, as Harding suggests, 'in making her a 'living hieroglyphic' (207) – the scarlet letter personified – the narrator again presents the reader with the problem of interpreting signs' (xxxiv).

While there is a tradition in literature of equating the male writer's act of creation with that of labour and birth, McCarthy's attitude to the process of writing is dismissive. In his interview with Richard Woodward, he simply states: "Writing is way, way down at the bottom of the list [...] of all the subjects I'm interested in".⁵ In response to the suggestion that he was influenced by writers such as Faulkner, McCarthy replied that 'The ugly facts are that books are made out of books [...] The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written'. McCarthy includes among those he considers the 'good writers', Melville, Dostoevsky and Faulkner and dismisses those writers who do not 'deal with issues of life and death'.⁶ He therefore places himself within a tradition of writers whose influence he acknowledges, although perhaps displaying an 'anxiety of influence', which is more directly related not to his novelistic 'fathers' but rather to the fact of creation itself. His attitude to the creative process, his reluctance to engage in any discussion surrounding the inspirational source of his writing, is not merely ambivalent. In his introduction to *Sacred Violence*, an anthology of essays about McCarthy's work, Rick Wallach refers to McCarthy's long career 'with its extended period of obscurity tantamount to exile itself'.⁷ As Madison Smartt Bell has suggested, McCarthy 'shunned publicity so effectively that he wasn't even famous for it', appearing to actively reject his role as

⁵ 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction', Richard Woodward, *New York Times Magazine*, (April 19th, 1992): 28-31+

⁶ For example, Proust and Henry James he considers 'strange': 'To me that's not literature'.

⁷ Rick Wallach, 'The McCarthy Canon Reconsidered', in *Sacred Violence*, (Texas Western Press, 1995)

'author'.⁸ Roland Barthes famously announced that 'to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing'.⁹ In fact, McCarthy conforms well to the Barthesian model of the 'modern sriptor', seeming to readily acknowledge that 'the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture', in addition to adopting a narrative style which is consciously engaged in questions of 'authority'. This is heightened by his reluctance to talk about his writing which makes difficult 'the task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work'. McCarthy's equivocal endings highlight his refusal of closure. Vereen Bell has described the 'cryptic intelligibility' of his work: 'One strength of McCarthy's novels is that they resist the imposition of theses from the outside, especially conventional ones, and they seem finally to call all theses into question' (xiii).¹⁰

Roland Barthes's famous dictum that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' and his assertion that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination', are particularly pertinent to an examination of McCarthy's narrative strategies.¹¹ The interplay of narrative voices in his fiction seems paradoxically to both confirm and undermine Barthes's theory. The time of Barthes's writing on the death of the author (1968), coincided with the movement in film criticism towards 'auteur' theory, initiated and promoted by the editors of the French film journal, *Cahiers du Cinema*. Therefore, at a time when the position of the author of literature was becoming increasingly unstable, there was a significant theoretical embracing of the 'auteur' in cinema, which led to the categorisation and interpretation of films according to the director and which distinguished between the talent of the 'auteur' (who was deemed responsible for all aspects and stages of the completed film, including all *his* idiosyncrasies - and they were invariably male) and the more mundane output of the 'mêteur en scène'. It is those 'cinematic' aspects of McCarthy's prose style which can be attributed, at least in part, to the movement

⁸ Madison Smartt Bell, 'The Man Who Understood Horses' in *The New York Times Book Review*. 17th May 1992, 7:9+

⁹ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (Fontana/Collins:1977), pp.142-8 (written in 1968)

¹⁰ Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988)

¹¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', 1968

between an 'author' who resides in the background and is happy to 'play dead', and a flamboyant (and at times both cynical and misogynistic) 'auteur' who forces the reader to notice him at work.

John Grammer has written that *Outer Dark* 'like much of McCarthy's work, seems positively turgid with moral import, and yet it is difficult to say just what the moral issues involved might be'. He asks why incest should demand such 'dire retribution', adding 'and whence, in McCarthy's apparently godless universe, does this retribution come?' (36)¹² In *Blood Meridian*, the judge asks a rhetorical question which reverberates throughout McCarthy's work: 'If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now?' (146).

An echo of Wallace Stevens can be detected in the notion of an indefinable higher authority. This is hinted at in one of McCarthy's narrator's favourite descriptions for his characters, as figures beseeching and pleading with the 'nothing that is not there/ and the nothing that is.'¹³ Almost all of McCarthy's protagonists are at some stage described as 'supplicants'. Among many other examples, in *The Orchard Keeper*, Kenneth Rattner's voice is a 'strained octave above normal, the pitch of supplication', and the victims of the Green Fly Inn disaster are 'sucked away in attitudes of mute supplication.' (33,25) In *Outer Dark*, Culla is described in his nightmare as 'caught up among the supplicants', as later he is described as 'supplicant, to the mute and windy heavens.' (5, 35) In *Suttree*, the opening pages describe the bridge lights reflected in the river below as they 'trembled in the black eddywater like chained and burning supplicants.' (29) The attitudes of 'supplication' forced upon his characters, appear to suggest a desperate need for a higher authority.

¹² John M. Grammer, 'A Thing Against Which Time will not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy's South' in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold & Dianne C. Luce (University Press of Mississippi: 1999) pp.29-45

¹³ Wallace Stevens, 'The Snowman', *Selected Poems*, (Faber and Faber: 1990),p.7. In 'The Social Responsibility of A Poet', Stevens wrote of the 'experience of annihilation' following the 'death of the gods', and his poetry begins from this point of near-apocalyptic vision. However, his insistence that the 'pressure of reality' is brought to bear on a 'spiritually violent world', is counterbalanced or ameliorated by his proposal that it is the power of the imagination which could sustain a religious belief, so that it is also the power of the imagination in conjunction with reality, which can lead to a new knowledge that it was man who 'invented the gods': 'The final belief is to believe in a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.'

David Holloway has suggested that McCarthy's epilogue in *Cities of The Plain*, his 'parting shot', is 'framed within a deconstructive problematic which addresses the act of writing, and the philosophical limitations of that act' (41).¹⁴ He proposes that when the stranger tells Billy that 'those stories which speak to us with the greatest resonance have a way of turning upon the teller and erasing him' (COTP, 277), 'he is simply following the moral of his own story to its logical conclusion' (41):

It might then be that the storyteller in the epilogue, in simultaneously positing the disappearance of McCarthy's own narrative, is offered us as something like a figure for authorship itself. Or more, specifically, the figure for authorship as conceived within the limitations of our own historical moment: self-cancelling, denuded of hermeneutic agency or effectivity, always on the point of reinscription within whatever structures it might seek to understand or oppose. (41)

There are several contenders for this position of authority in McCarthy's fiction, although they are all ultimately 'self-cancelling, denuded of hermeneutic agency or effectivity'. The various forms of address employed by McCarthy's narrators, from the sneering interjections of a misogynist narrator to the detached and omniscient observer, means that there exists a plethora of authorities, further complicated by the many storytellers within the narratives. The merging of truth and fiction is nowhere more apparent than in the frequent use of interpolated stories within McCarthy's novels. The presence of the shadowy 'Tiresias' figures of false prophets, priests, shamans, fortune-tellers and simple story-tellers who inhabit his novels repeatedly exposes the frailty inherent in the human need and desire not only for facts with which to underpin their experiences but also, in the telling of stories, parables and 'tall tales', the way in which myths and legends take shape and grow. Therefore, a complex relationship is developed between the narrator, storyteller, listener (particularly given that McCarthy's protagonists are not always effective 'listeners', often unable to differentiate between knowing and understanding) and reader. Furthermore, it has been noted that the voice of the narrator repeatedly undermines the pronouncements of the judge in *Blood Meridian*, while at other times appearing to condone his aphoristic statements. Similarly, other characters in McCarthy's westerns are given the 'authority' to articulate sentiments that McCarthy appears to agree with,

¹⁴ David Holloway, "A longing which has clouded their minds': Seeking Transcendent Space in *Blood Meridian* and the *Border Trilogy*", *Proceedings of the First European Conference on Cormac McCarthy*, Ed. David Holloway (Miami: Cormac McCarthy Society, 1999) pp. 40-8.

adding to the general discomfort of the reader. Like the judge, the figures of Dueña Alfonsa (*All The Pretty Horses*) and Eduardo (*Cities of The Plain*) are dangerously seductive characters, in that their pronouncements at times are eerily prescient and seem to offer some sort of 'answer' or logic in the midst of chaos.

In her essay 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors', Nina Baym proposes that 'the myth of artistic creation, assimilating the act of writing novels to the Adamic myth, imposes on artistic creation [...] gender-based restrictions' (138).¹⁵ Baym argues that both nature (particularly the wilderness) and a constraining culture are encoded as female. Furthermore, she contends that 'the description of the artist and of the act of writing which emerges when the critic uses the basic American story as his starting point contains many attributes of the basic story itself', therefore excluding women even further: 'Fundamentally, the idea is that the artist writing a story of this essential American kind is engaging in a task very much like the one performed by his mythic hero' (136-7). The 'implicit union of creator and protagonist' is summed up in an anthology, *Theories of American Literature*:

Such a condition of nearly absolute freedom to create has appeared to our authors both as possibility and liability, an utter openness suggesting limitless opportunity for the imagination, or an enormous vacancy in which they create from nothing. For some [authors] it has meant an opportunity to play Adam, to assume the role of an original namer of experience. (4-5)

Noting the obvious restrictions for female authors, Baym laments the systematic exclusion of female authors from the literary canon, and argues that 'American authors have been particularly obsessed with fathering a tradition of their own', pointing out the 'facile translation of the verb 'to author' into the verb 'to father' (139).

The fathers in McCarthy's novels have been seen to have troubled relationships with their sons, often abandoning them (Kenneth Rattner in *The Orchard Keeper*, Lester Ballard's father's suicide in *Child of God*, Culla Holme in *Outer Dark*, the 'kid' of *Blood Meridian* whose father has turned to alcohol, John Grady Cole's father's

¹⁵ Nina Baym, 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors', in *American Quarterly*, 1981 Vol. 33 (2): 123-139

inability to keep the family ranch). The paternal relationships constitute a litany of disasters, and the 'surrogate' father figures are divided into murderers (the 'grim triune' of *Outer Dark*, the judge of *Blood Meridian*), or vagrants, alcoholics and criminals (the Ragpicker, 'Daddy' Watson and the hero himself in *Suttree*, and Marion Sylder in the *Orchard Keeper*). This means that the father/ Father figure is often heard in the powerful authorial voice, which McCarthy's narratives create a need for, that manipulates the characters *and* the reader. In *Blood Meridian*, the judge tells a parable about a harnessmaker which seems to address a major dilemma for the 'sons'/ readers of McCarthy:

Now [the] son whose father's existence in this world is historical and speculative even before the son has entered it is in a bad way. All his life he carries before him the idol of perfection to which he can never attain. The father dead has euchered the son out of his patrimony. For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods. (BM, 145)

It is worth noting a trait familiar to two of the film directors whose work can usefully be compared with McCarthy's, particularly as it relates to the relationship between the spectator/ reader and the author/ 'auteur' of McCarthy's cinematic prose. Alfred Hitchcock famously appeared in a cameo role in all of his films (getting on a bus, appearing in an advert in a newspaper etc.), as did Sam Peckinpah.¹⁶ The supreme moment of irony of the latter was perhaps his appearance in *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid* as Will, the coffin maker who urges Pat Garrett towards his historic confrontation with Billy. Will/ Peckinpah calls Garrett 'a chicken-shit, badge-wearing son-of-a-bitch' (Peckinpah considered Garrett a coward and a traitor), telling him to 'Go on. Get it over with.' The scene therefore sees the filmmaker appearing to condemn the protagonist whom he had helped to create and identifying his own art with that of the coffin maker.¹⁷ These highly self-reflexive directorial flourishes add to the sense of the director as 'auteur', responsible for everything and everyone (including himself) placed before the camera, but it also emphasises the close proximity between what it means 'to author' and 'to father'. It is not difficult to imagine McCarthy fashioning small 'cameo' roles for himself within his narratives. While a coffin maker would

¹⁶ Quentin Tarantino could also be included.

¹⁷ Stephen Prince, *Sam Peckinpah and The Rise of UltraViolent Movies*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1998) Prince notes that in this scene, Garrett (James Coburn) stops and offers Will a drink, which he declines. In the film, Coburn smiles slightly at this and later said that it was the only time that he had seen Peckinpah turn down the offer of a drink. (198-9)

certainly be appropriate, perhaps his equivocal endings are a result of his inability to resist another 'appearance' of sorts: from the 'orchard keeper' to the 'fisher king' and beyond, there is a sense that these roles really belong to the 'auteur' of McCarthy's fiction, who takes the opportunity (as the blind man entering a swamp in *Outer Dark*, the unidentified driver of the car in *Suttree* who stops for the hero although 'he'd not lifted a hand' and simply says 'lets go', the 'puppet-master' referred to by the Dueña in *All The Pretty Horses*, the 'narrator'/ dreamer in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain* and the myriad of storytellers and Tiresias figures) to enter the scene once more. Just as the various 'authorities' of his fiction, including the judge of *Blood Meridian*,¹⁸ the Dueña Alfonsa of *All The Pretty Horses* and Eduardo in *Cities* (all of whom sound uncannily similar) exhibit a will to power and a tyrannical ambition, so too does the voice of 'the deity that presides over' McCarthy's world which, as Madison Smartt Bell has proposed 'has not modelled itself on humanity; its voice most resembles the one that addressed Job out of the whirlwind.' (11)¹⁹ Certainly, if ever there was a need for a god, it is in McCarthy's fiction. Although McCarthy may employ many different narrative strategies and voices, ranging from a lyrical pastoralism to a pathological morbidity (including the sadistic, voyeuristic and misogynist) it is possible to note a further resemblance between McCarthy and James Joyce. Hugh Kenner suggested of Joyce that he is 'always present' in *Ulysses*: 'and no talk of that dyad of technicians, the self-effacing narrator and the mischievous Arranger, should permit us wholly to forget that fact.' (68-9)²⁰ Similarly, McCarthy is 'always present' amongst the plethora of other voices and narrators, reminding the reader that like judge Holden, he 'will never die'. Tobin's response to the judge's announcement that 'the mystery is that there is no mystery', could equally be applied to the authorial voice in these novels: 'As if he were no mystery himself, the bloody old hoodwinker' (BM, 252).²¹

¹⁸ As noted in Chapter 1, the judge's voracious appetite for facts and figures and his desire to collate, copy and destroy anything (including the hieroglyphic drawings he finds) is an extension of the role of the author-god who desires to be 'suzerain' and who proves his sovereignty time and again by the very virtuosity of his linguistic pyrotechnics - not unlike those of the narrator who describes the landscapes of *Blood Meridian*.

¹⁹ Madison Smartt Bell, 'The Man Who Understood Horses', *New York Times Book Review*, 17 May 1992, sec.7: 9+.

²⁰ Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses*, (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1980)

²¹ Stanley Fish has proposed that in *Paradise Lost*, the reader is 'surprised by sin' and thrown into a state of disorder through 'verbal humiliation', followed by 'education': 'Milton secures a positive response to the figure of God by creating a psychological (emotional) need for the authority he represents'. He compares the 'stoic sincerity' of the 'close and sinewy' syntax of God who 'calmly orders events', with Satan's 'serpentine trail of false beginnings' and his 'irresponsibly digressive' labyrinthine rhetoric. Although Fish's proposal appears to posit too severe and didactic an intention on

While his various figures of authorship may well be 'erased' in the telling of their tale, the power to do this lies with the author, who can (as Peckinpah/ Will urges Pat Garrett to 'Go on. Get it over with') instruct the readers on the final page of his latest novel that 'The story's told/ Turn the page.'

In his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, Robert Levine proposes that Melville 'has proved eerily prescient on many of the critical concerns that would come to engage twentieth-century theorists', pointing to *Moby Dick* as anticipating almost every contemporary theoretical perspective, from 'interrogations of gender, sexuality, race, and nation', 'materialist criticism', 'reader-response criticism', 'neopragmatism' and 'Derridean deconstruction' to 'cybercriticism'.²² While not wishing to make such flamboyant claims on behalf of McCarthy, or to posit too much significance on his expression of admiration for Melville, it is possible to identify the influence of Melville on McCarthy's work and in particular, his narrative strategy.²³ Levine also suggests the pain and the pleasure of interpretation of Melville's 'authorial labours':

Alternately presenting himself as guide and con artist, his texts act as scriptures of the age and testaments to blindness and silence, Melville insistently calls attention to the risks, stakes, limits, and joys of interpretation. Attempting to rise to the interpretive challenge, while at the same time remaining aware of the inevitability of a certain sort of enlightening failure, would seem to be the fate of his most sympathetic readers. (4)

In an afterword to this anthology, Andrew Delbanco proposes that Melville's writing displays, particularly in *The Confidence-Man*, an author aware of the 'incongruities with which any and every civilization is stitched together':

Milton's poetic strategy, while he denies the reader the 'educative' element proposed by Fish, McCarthy does create a need for a figure at least something like a god, at the same time as his fiction appears to deny the possibility. Stanley Fish, *Surprised By Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997, 2nd Ed.) {1st ed. 1967}

²²*The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, Ed. Robert. S. Levine, (Cambridge University Press: 1998), p.4

²³Melville was accused of an absurd eclecticism; obfuscating erudition and willful obscurity ('wantonly eccentric' and 'outrageously bombastic' from the *Literary Gazette* of 1851) and similar judgements have characterised much of the criticism of McCarthy's work. As Tony Tanner has pointed out in his introduction to *Moby Dick*, and again parallels can be drawn with the critical reception of McCarthy's work, 'although quite a number of reviewers baulked at what was perceived as 'purposeless extravagance', most recognised Melville's 'almost unparalleled power over the capabilities of language.' *Moby Dick* (Oxford University Press: Oxford World's Classics Edition, 1998) {1st Pub. 1851}(p.vii)

For postmodern readers alert to this patchwork quality of experience, Melville's fascination derives from his unflinching recognition that every culture is contingent, transient, and, in its inevitable claim to divine sanction, absurd. (283)

He suggests that the 'distinctive quality' highlighted in the anthology is that, in a revision of Emerson's phrase in *Nature* (1836) that 'The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common', the Melville discussed 'is one who believes that a mark of wisdom is to see the *ridiculous* in the common' (183).²⁴ The humour in McCarthy's fiction may be macabre, malicious and grotesque, making the elements of satirical humour appear gentle by comparison, but in these early novels he is always witty, even if the reader does not always enjoy his humour. *Suttree* is his most consistently humorous novel, populated with picaresque, absurd and ferociously witty characters, although it is easy to dismiss (or rather, to miss entirely) this essential element of his narration as an unsavoury adjunct to the 'amoral', 'nihilistic' and/or 'depraved' contained within these early novels, all terms used by critics to describe both the characters and the subject matter of *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*.

Delbanco proposes that Melville's 'irreverent humor that spares no dignitaries, platitudes, prejudices, or idols' is balanced by the 'contrapuntal theme of the extreme fragility of culture as something that should lightly be discarded' (284). In his depiction of death, his scrutiny of corpses and the endless absurdity of the postures of the dead and dying, McCarthy writes of death as ridiculous, an absurdly comic imitation of life itself. Inversely, life can seem to be an imitation of death, as in the case of Culla Holme (*Outer Dark*), or in the conflation of life and death for Lester Ballard (*Child of God*). The fact that so many of his corpses are made to look humorous adds poignancy and real horror to the descriptions of the death of, for example, Culla and Rinthy's child.

There is also a more sinister voice at work in McCarthy's fiction, however, in the lingering presence of malevolence and misogyny. Attributing misogynist sentiments to a distinctive, autonomous and therefore dislocated 'voice', rather than the author himself, would appear to be disingenuous. Equally, it is not possible to argue that the

²⁴ James Joyce apparently responded to the early, often vitriolic reviews, which judged *Ulysses* (1921) as depraved and formless, among other things, with the exhortation 'If only someone would say the book was so damn funny'.

expressions of misogyny are merely a part of a larger expression of misanthropy. There is, after all, a deepening sense of humanity in the later novels, which can be partly attributed to the increased focus on the subjectivity of the more empathetic and fully-rounded characters, so that to be told that one of McCarthy's cowboy protagonists is 'a child of God much like yourself perhaps', would certainly be a less disconcerting thought than the notion that the reader might be aligned with a murdering necrophiliac. In McCarthy's first three novels, this narrator becomes increasingly misogynous. From *The Orchard Keeper's* bleak portrayal of the *mater dolorosa*, through the image of maternity which is threatening in its pathos in *Outer Dark*, to the sneering interjections of the narrator in *Child of God*. This is clearly of significance in the examination of the representation of the female in these novels in the final chapter.

Just as Hugh Kenner has identified a narrative duet between the stage manager, the 'housekeeper' and a lyrical technician, 'the Arranger' in Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Robert Levine identifies the voice of both the 'guide' and the 'con artist' in Melville, it is important to examine McCarthy's fiction in terms of its narrative strategy, as he incorporates the styles of two of his avowedly favourite writers in a distinctive and original manner. The lack of a moral centre in McCarthy's work which many critics have identified and even despised is in part attributable to the fact that McCarthy's narrator is not merely 'mischievous' and 'malicious' (as Kenner describes the Arranger) or a 'con artist', but almost psychotic, so that this voice becomes disturbing in its extremity. Mark Royden Winchell has written of the 'increasing horror of McCarthy's vision' in the early novels, comparing him with Faulkner who he argues 'was at heart a moralist': 'In McCarthy's universe that center either doesn't exist or cannot hold' (294).²⁵ However, it would seem that while many critics have identified a lack of 'moral center' to McCarthy's novels, his 'vision' is made more horrific by the lack of moral endings. Furthermore, this accusation of amorality can be attributed

²⁵ Mark Royden Winchell, 'Inner Dark, or The Place of Cormac McCarthy', *Southern Review* XXVI, (April 1990): 293-309. Similarly, Peter Josyph has asked of *Blood Meridian*, whether we must 'check our ethos at the door, to fully enjoy McCarthy's *epos*?' He paraphrases McCarthy's description of the judge, suggesting that 'whatever its antecedents, the novel is something wholly other' than the sum of John Emil Sepich's identified historical sources: 'here are the manifest sources for McCarthy's dreams: but what are the sources for his *dreaming*?' 'Blood Music: Reading *Blood Meridian*' in *Sacred violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Wade Hall & Rick Wallach, (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995) pp169-189

Chapter 2

A Consideration of Corpses:
Literary and Cinematic Autopsy in
Cormac McCarthy's Prose

to the different narrative strategies of these authors. In *The Sound and The Fury*, for example, Faulkner defines his characters by their acutely different interior monologues, although there is little evidence of the intrusive consciousness of the narrator until the final chapter. McCarthy's distinctly amoral narrator, however, is never far away.

**Communicant, Hierophant or Troglodyte:
The Reader in *The Orchard Keeper*.**

In *The Orchard Keeper*, Johnny Romines delights in the telling of his own tall tales to the other boys, reminiscing about 'the time we dynamited the birds [...] slowly, smiling from time to time' and Arthur Ownby tells his 'painter' tale as if 'contemplating with satyric pleasure some old deed' (141). Similarly, there is a narrator who seems to delight in his power of manipulation over his audience with an ironic awareness of the reader, who is forced to move between participation and voyeurism. The reader becomes one of the 'communicants, troglodytes gathered in some firelit cave' (152), the description combining the contradictory impulses of the omniscient narrator for 'communion' with the reader (in the image of the Christian Eucharist) and alienation (in the image of the solitariness of the ancient cave-dweller), which parallels the forces of attraction and repulsion which propel the protagonists. Ownby is described as 'some old hierophant', which seems ironic, given that he does not interpret the esoteric mystery of his 'painter' story (which the reader has access to through his memories), at the same time as he is telling the boys a story about how he had revealed and undermined the local mystery of the 'painter', which had turned out to be a 'hoot-owl', all those years ago. Tony Tanner has pointed out the significance of the comparative mythologies and religions contained within Melville's *Moby Dick*, including Hinduism and Christianity 'but most importantly Egyptian', noting the frequent occurrence of the word 'hieroglyph'.²⁶ While he suggests that this is partly attributable to the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics by Champillon (mentioned

²⁶Tanner points out that Hawthorne's description of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* is of a 'living hieroglyph' and in Melville's novel, the markings on the side of the sperm whale are 'hieroglyphical' (p.xxv-xxvi). Tony Tanner, Introduction to *Moby Dick* (Oxford University Press: Oxford World's Classics Edition, 1998)

in Melville's novel) in the 1820s, which had influenced an interest in symbolism in American writing, 'hermeneutics and matters concerning all aspects of 'interpretation' were of quite particular interest to American writers'.

McCarthy's description of Ownby as 'like some old hierophant', combines Melville's predilection for a 'characteristic provisionality' in his frequent use of the speculative similes 'as if', 'seemed', 'like', with the aforementioned foregrounding of an indecipherable hermeneutics. Ownby cannot explain his own fear of cats and his tale is interspersed with esoteric mysteries, which the reader must labour to piece together and to understand. There is a constantly shifting point of view and repeated movement between the subjective first-person thoughts and memories of the characters and omniscient and authoritative narrator who seems like that described by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'The Artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent paring his fingernails' (397).²⁷ The reader becomes alternately a 'communicant' who shares in the 'eucharist' of the narrative, a 'troglodyte' who is alienated and displaced by narrative idiosyncrasies and changes in point of view, and a 'hierophant', as the reader is allowed privileged information, access to the characters' thoughts, and an 'omniscient' view of the action. This last position, however, is somewhat of a joke, as finally there are elements of McCarthy's story that remain unfathomable. However, in McCarthy's world, the reader is rarely allowed to laugh for too long.

McCarthy's earliest novel introduces some central thematic concerns in a narrative style preoccupied with point of view and perspective. The terminology employed by film critics and theorists to describe camera angles, point of view, perspective, *chiaroscuro*, long shot and close-up, are all applicable to this style. In addition, film theorists' psychoanalytical interrogation of theories of 'voyeurism', 'scopophilia', 'identification' and 'spectatorship', can be usefully applied to a reading of McCarthy's novels. While many of these terms have clearly been derived from

²⁷ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in *The Essential James Joyce*, (London: Harper Collins, 1994) pp203-432, {1st pub.1916}. It is possible also to imagine a certain agreement in McCarthy's novels with Lynch's response to Stephen's 'prating about beauty and the imagination': 'No wonder the artist retired within or behind his handiwork after having perpetrated this country' (397).

literary criticism, they are particularly apt when applied to McCarthy's prose when understood as they relate to its cinematic qualities. A visual and 'cinematic' quality resides in the narrator's descriptive technique. This narrative style also mimics the way in which camera angles and point of view can be used to place the reader within the scene described and enforce identification with different characters, never withholding the scrutinising gaze of death enacted by corpses. An examination of one episode in *The Orchard Keeper* illustrates these qualities.

The pivotal passage, in which Marion Sylder kills Kenneth Rattner, is an episode that combines a foreshadowing of the interwoven parts played by the three main protagonists and a highlighting of the reader's position in response to the narrative voice. This episode follows several short sections in which the two characters' movements are interwoven, although they do not meet. There is a description of Sylder's prodigal return to Red Branch, his bootlegging activity and his callous treatment of his sexual (mis) adventure with the young girl in the church, and also Rattner's theft from the victims of the first Green Fly Inn disaster. Both men have therefore been established as existing outside a conventional moral system. They meet when Sylder finds Rattner sitting in his car:

The face stared at him with an expression bland and meaningless and Sylder groped for some, not cause or explanation, but mere association with rational experience by which he could comprehend a man sitting in his car as if conjured there simultaneously with the flick of light by the very act of opening the door. (33)

Rattner asks him for a ride to Knoxville, and Sylder identifies something 'loathsome' about him and experiences 'a profound and unshakeable knowledge of the presence of evil' (33). Whereas in the earlier scene he had deliberately brushed the girl's leg with the gearstick, here he moves it viciously in the hope of unsettling Rattner, but 'the man went on, droning, his legs now crossed in an air of homey comfort, slightly rocking' (35). Rattner has a sinister control and Sylder feels mounting panic and fear: 'You bastard, Sylder thought. It began to seem to him that he had driven clear to Atlanta for the sole purpose of picking up this man and driving him back to Maryville' (35). In contrast to Sylder's 'sharp' appearance, Rattner is described as repulsive and loathsome, even to the bartender who watches him drink 'with both fascination and disgust, as one might watch pigs mate' (23). McCarthy's description

of Ratter's 'blandness' draws attention to the 'conjuring' trick of the narrator in placing Rattner there, as if to highlight one of the many narrative devices at his disposal. It is in effect an elaborate description of meaninglessness, as Sylder sees his face in the light of the match 'like the downlidded face of some copper ikon, a mask, not ambiguous or inscrutable but merely discountenanced of meaning, expression' (360).

There is a mounting sense of tension as the reader is made aware of Sylder's own fear and panic in the presence of this 'loathsome' man. The scene gradually takes on a nightmare quality as Sylder 'drove in almost a trance, the unending and inescapable voice sucking him into some kind of oblivion', and when Rattner attacks Sylder with the car jack, there ensues a fight which from Sylder's point of view, takes place in slow motion, 'somnambulant'; here, crucially, the reader is identifying with Sylder's feelings. The narrator then describes the postures of the men from different perspectives as they lay on the road 'the man with his face in the dirt and Sylder on top of him, motionless for the moment as resting lovers' (36-8). The third person narration which objectifies the scene describes Sylder as 'he crept forward and placed one leg behind the man's head, elevating it slightly, looking like some hulking nurse administering to the wounded' and crushes his neck. There follows a 'close-up' from Sylder's point of view as he was 'watching him in a sort of mesmerized fascination, noting blink of eye, loll of tongue' (39). When Rattner eventually dies Sylder 'looked at the man again and time was coming back, gaining, so that all the clocks would be right', suggesting his own desire for this scene to be 'dreamlike' as a way of evading any responsibility for the crime which he has committed (40). Sylder then loses consciousness, and when he awakes, once again, the reader is drawn into Sylder's subjective viewpoint:

Morning. Lying with his cheek in the dust of the road he had a child's view, the jack looming like a fallen tree and beyond that the man face-upward like a peaceful giant composed for sleep. (40)

The descriptions 'as resting lovers', 'like some hulking nurse' and 'like a peaceful giant' confer upon this scene of murder a surreal and almost fairy-tale quality, as though even during the moment of its happening, it has become through narration part of what by the end of the novel is 'myth, legend, dust' (246).

By the time the father and son arrive in their pickup truck (a typical McCarthy 'tease' - this may be the truck which had ignored Rattner earlier) asking if Sylder needs help, he has dragged the body so that it is just visible beneath the car as 'they came shuffling around the rear of the car with an air of infinite and abiding patience'. By this time, the reader has not only been made to identify with Sylder, but is somehow complicit in his crime:

Sylder turned slowly, his eye raking over the scene, trying to imagine what it looked like: the feet protruding solemnly from under the car, the car itself with the hole torn in the quarterpanel and in the door the dent where the base of the jack hit and the jack lying in the road. (42)

The narrator therefore accurately describes the scene as the farmers see it but also does this from Sylder's point of view, so that the reader becomes collusive in his attempts to deflect their interest, and even finds the humour in the narrator's interjection of the adjective 'solemnly' - surely not what either Sylder or the farmers would think. The narrator has painted such a repellent picture of Rattner, both physically and morally, that the reader not only identifies with Sylder, who seems to be by comparison an opportunist, adventurer and here a victim, but even *wants* Rattner to die and then for Sylder not to get caught. The reader has become complicit in this macabre comedy. When Sylder asks the men for a lift to Topton to have his shoulder seen to, he waits until they are in the truck and then 'stooped on one knee and spoke loudly to the corpse' (43). As the man has started the truck, Sylder is able to pretend that his 'buddy' has told him that he is almost finished and therefore he refuses the offer of a lift. By this time, the reader is almost entirely sympathetic to Sylder's thoughts, identifying with his desperate '*Will you go now? Will you go?*', although the narrator drags out the suspense by making the truck almost splutter to a halt as they drive away. As Sylder pulls the corpse from under the car, once again, the reader is confronted with the grotesque reality of the situation, guilty of the same voyeuristic temptations as Sylder who 'tried not to look when the head emerged then gave up and had a good look. The eyes were leaping from their sockets, an expression of ghastly surprise, the tongue still poking out' (44).²⁸

²⁸Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) is heavily indebted to the gothic, from the sinister isolation of the Bates Motel to the central figure of perversion and it was one film responsible for Hitchcock's title as 'the master of suspense'. When Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) pushes Marion Crane's car into the

In this relatively short episode, the reader has been subtly forced to make a judgement concerning degrees of amorality when confronted with the struggle between the criminal opportunist Sylder, who becomes almost 'heroic' in the sense that he successfully defends himself against the 'evil' Rattner. In the movement from nightmarish violence to macabre and comic suspense, the reader is forced from a position of objectivity to an increasingly subjective identification with Sylder, becomes eventually complicit in his actions and thoughts and finally is confronted with one of McCarthy's many humorous corpses, 'an expression of ghastly surprise, the tongue still poking out.'

The anamorphosis of the narrative style which forces the reader to see the protagonists from different angles is both amusing and mystifying. In the opening passage, the reader 'sees' the mirage of the truck from Rattner's point of view, and here he is seen from a variety of angles, from Sylder's perspective to that of the third-person objectivity of an omniscient narrator. However, just as Mr. Wade in *Child of God* says of the vigilante gangs at the turn of the century, Rattner is 'a three hundred and sixty degree son of a bitch, which my daddy said meant they was a son of a bitch any way you looked at em'(165).

McCarthy's narrative moves between the clarity and particularity of William Carlos Williams' poetry, the pure description of immediate experience and the need espoused by the poet to dispense with the obfuscation of symbolism, and the shifting perspective and deliberate complexity of those poets like T.S. Eliot, who felt a need to 'labour to be difficult'. In *Spring and All*, Williams wrote that 'to refine, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is a but a single force – imagination': 'in the imagination we are [...] locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic

marshes (Janet Leigh, who he has just murdered in the famous 'shower scene'), the director uses all the resources of identification technique to enforce the spectator to collude with the murderer in wanting the car to disappear. There is a long shot from Norman Bates' point of view as he watches it floating on the surface, so that the spectator shares his relief when it gradually sinks and then is reminded of their complicity by a close-up of Norman Bates' sinister smiling face. Just as the 'air of infinite and abiding patience' of the men in the truck in McCarthy's novel makes them threatening in their innocence, and the truck spluttering almost to a halt, makes the reader identify with Sylder's 'Will you go now? Will you go?' (43) In *Suttree*, there is a similar scene, in which Suttree has stolen a police car and rolls it into the river: 'For a while he could see the dark hump of it in the river and then it slowly subsided and was gone.' (*Suttree*, 442) Hitchcock has been accused of moral ambivalence, of drawing no discernible distinction between good and evil, and of somehow making the audience disconcertingly, and perhaps

caress of author and reader'.²⁹ Writing in *The Dial* in 1922, Kenneth Burke called Williams 'the master of the glimpse', citing 'Danse Russe' as an example of the 'quirky aspect of his genius [...] a poem delightfully alien to the pomposities that Eliot did so much to encourage' (57). Certainly, when Eliot projects crazy, absurd moments on to the alienated, dispossessed and pretentious protagonists of his earlier poems (J. Alfred Prufrock, for example), he makes them appear as the desperate affectations of ridiculous people, whereas Williams seems to celebrate the moments of the extraordinary within the ordinary, the imagination acting on reality as performing a liberating function. In 'The Artist', Williams provides a glimpse of the theatre in everyday life, the performance of 'an entrechat/ perfectly achieved' by 'Mr. T/ bareheaded/ in a soiled undershirt.' While the reader of McCarthy also experiences the 'fraternal embrace, the classic caress between author and reader', this is often an embrace which produces an uncomfortable sense of complicity and voyeurism. The 'glimpse' is frequently of corpses, so that the reader is relieved by the plethora of voices and shifts in perspective which distract from this 'embrace', such as those found in Eliot's poetry.

While McCarthy has professed admiration for Eliot's contemporary, James Joyce, for McCarthy's protagonists there is no experience of 'timeless moments' of spiritual receptiveness (as in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*) or of the 'epiphanies' of Joyce, moments in which time is transcended and vision is crystallised. By contrast, the community of Red Branch stare 'out across the blighted land with expression of neither hope nor wonder nor despair' (12), and epiphanies are few in McCarthy's world. However, the narrator forces the reader to 'see' things by repeatedly undermining the verisimilitude of descriptive prose. Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit clearly illustrates the complexity of visual perception and indeed, the animal analogy is particularly apt when applied to McCarthy's tendency to conflate, in a humorous and macabre way, humans and animals. The importance of perception in his writing is linked to ideas of authority, meaning and belief, which remain ambiguous and elusive. If to perceive is also to 'understand', this is only ever an

unconsciously, aware of the impurity of their own desires. McCarthy has been accused of a similar moral ambivalence and gratuitous violence.

²⁹ William Carlos Williams, 'Spring and All', *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. J. Hillis-Miller (New York: Prentice-Hall inc., 1966).

imperfect, subjective and ultimately incomplete understanding, so that there is always another view and a different perspective. McCarthy endlessly questions not only the understanding and assumptions of his characters, but by also questioning both their authority and beliefs and those of the narrator, the reader is everywhere implicated in and forced to question his/her ways of seeing/ understanding. Perception is always subject to the interpretation of factors in the external world.³⁰

While *Suttree* is most obviously indebted to Joyce's *Ulysses*, it is possible to detect a Joycean narrative voice in all of McCarthy's novels. In his writing on *Ulysses*, Hugh Kenner has written about the different narrators present in the novel. He proposes that a new style of narrative was one of 'pervasive indifference' which 'corresponds [...] to a certain Dublin indifference on the part of the talkers'.³¹ David Heymann was the first critic to examine the intrusions of an autonomous presence in Joyce's *Ulysses*, suggesting that this narrator should be called 'the Arranger':

The intrusion of this consciousness is perhaps the most radical, the most disconcerting innovation in all of *Ulysses*. It is something new in fiction. It is not the voice of the storyteller: not a voice at all, since it does not address us, does not even speak. We do not hear its accents, we observe its actions, which are performed with a certain indifference to our presence. (cited in Kenner, 65)

As Kenner points out, the Arranger is not completely indifferent to the reader, citing the famous example 'Leopold cut liverslices. As said before he ate with relish the inner organs', which refers to the paragraph two hundred pages before in which Leopold Bloom is introduced: 'Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls.' Clive Hart suggested that this presence in 'Wandering Rocks' is a 'harsh and awkward narrator [...] whose difficult personality is the most salient thing about the chapter'. While Hart writes that the Arranger is representative of the spirit

³⁰ McCarthy's animism and distortion of perspective are also aligned with the Gothic narrative tradition. In *Gothic Pathologies*, David Punter links the Jungian notion of 'anima' as the feminine principle present in the male unconscious with both the 'animation' of the human body and 'animalism', as it connotes a preoccupation with the physical. Punter points out that animation can be frightening, as it is associated with 'a certain version of incarnation, or perhaps better reincarnation, but one which is frequently conceived in Gothic as according to a devolutionary dialectic rather than according to the 'law' of evolution' (215). *The Orchard Keeper* not only persistently conflates humans and animals, it is also haunted by the idea of reincarnation. For example, Arthur Ownby is terrified by the idea that his wife may return to haunt him in the form of a cat, an idea which is explored further in the following chapter.

³¹ Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses*, (George, Allen & Unwin, 1980)

of Dublin itself, 'endowed with a distinctive personality' and 'capable of a great deal of malice, of deliberate Schadenfreude', and Kenner calls this a 'sour xenophobic indifference' (65), it is possible to see a similar narrator at work in McCarthy's fiction. This narrator also draws on a distinctive personality, although here it is a specifically 'Southern' personality, who takes great delight in drawing attention to the act of narration itself and the 'tall tales' which are an essential constituent of both Southern literary tradition and Southern humour. In this respect, he is closer to another element which Kenner identifies with this narrator, that of 'virtuosity', as he 'epitomises the [Southern] knack for performance' (66).

As Kenner also suggests, this narrator exists 'side by side with a colourless primary narrator who sees to the thousand little bits of novelistic housekeeping no one is meant to notice' (67), although 'lounging in this drudge's shadow, the Arranger may now and then show his hand', particularly when observing character consciousness, often insidiously drawing attention to the 'fluctuating boundary between character and language', so that the reader is aware of a presence whose observations 'hover just this side of being malicious' (67). Therefore, in *Ulysses* 'very often small questions of tone and motive [...] turn out to pertain to the ascription of forms of words', so that the resulting portrait or observation is ambiguous, interpretable as either savage or endearing. Characters exist, as Kenner notes, 'in a zone of interference' between 'their' words and 'the practices of James Joyce'. The same could be said of McCarthy's novels, as often thoughts and feelings ascribed to characters are verbalised by a more erudite, learned and 'literary' narratorial voice:

A character in *Ulysses* (in a city of talk) is an interference phenomenon between 'his' language and language not his, sometimes other characters', sometimes the author's. (70)

In McCarthy's novels there are several narrators at work. One of these is the voice which insistently draws the reader into the writing process, while at the same time distancing itself by the self-reflexivity evident in the many doubtful interjections and one of this narrator's favourite disclaimers, 'perhaps'. At times, this narrator hovers on the brink of parody and seems to withdraw. In *The Orchard Keeper*, when the headlights of Marion Sylder's car light upon the three children at the side of the road, they are described as being like animals caught in the headlights 'deer perhaps' (17).

Mrs Rattner is described sewing buttons with 'a ritualistic look, a nun at beads perhaps'(61), and in *Child of God*, this narrator suggests that Lester Ballard may be 'A child of God much like yourself perhaps'(4). In *The Orchard Keeper*, this same narrator relates the stories which had been spread about Sheriff Gifford and his deputy finding the car used by Marion Sylder for his bootlegging activities. As they winch it out: '[...] the lid fell off and glass poured into the creek - someone said later for thirty minutes - for a long time anyway'(13). These intrusions draw attention to the importance within the narrative of the 'tall tales' and almost coerces the reader into the actual coining of appropriate similes and metaphors, as when Legwater (the sheriff's deputy) is described sitting with 'an attitude toad-like but for his thinness and the spindle legs dangling [...] a long-legged and emaciated toad then' (16). When Gifford accompanies the beleaguered Legwater back from the spray pit, he looks at him 'with pity, or with contempt' (241), and in *Outer Dark*, Culla hears a mockingbird 'or some other bird perhaps'(183). Therefore, it is possible to suggest that in McCarthy's fiction, there are no 'hierophants', only false prophets and aspirant hierophants, and even the omniscient narrator purports not to have all the answers.

McCarthy enjoys a similar characteristic provisionality of speculations to those found in Melville. The 'games' that the narrator plays, drawing attention to the writing and particularly the descriptive process, means that the narrative stance changes from third person objectivity to that of the 'troglodyte', which is the position the reader is most often occupying, ostensibly sitting around 'like communicants about a firelit cave'. However, this narratorial coyness is disingenuous, as although Vereen Bell has suggested that the novel's random point of view 'defies even the illusion of authorial control', it is also possible to suggest that McCarthy's highly developed sense of the absurd, has resulted in a narrator who delights in the 'games' of modernism, acting as both a 'guide' and a 'con artist' (as Robert Levine describes Melville's narrators), an 'arranger' and a 'housekeeper' (as Hugh Kenner describes those of Joyce).³² It is possible that it is the figure of the narrator who is the 'orchard keeper' of the title,

³² Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1985).

Robert S. Levine, Introduction to *the Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, (Cambridge University Press: 1998).

Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses*, (George, Allen & Unwin:1980).

closer to the author-god of Joyce who sits 'paring his fingernails' and refuses to play dead.

While McCarthy's first corpse haunts the narrative of *The Orchard Keeper*, in *Child of God*, the corpses become a symbol of Lester Ballard's inability to distinguish between life and death. They also serve as grim reminders of the multiple patriarchal and misogynist utterances (from both the characters and the narrator) which provide a troubling justification for Ballard's comprehension of the female corpse as a focus for aesthetic contemplation, in a grotesque exaggeration of Edgar Allan Poe's claim that the death of a beautiful female is the most 'poetical' topic in the world.

"All the trouble I ever was in was caused by whiskey or women or both": Lessons in Masculinity in *Child of God*.

Drawing on previous discussions of the relationship between the figure of the narrator and the spectator/ reader of McCarthy's prose, the depiction of necrophilia and extreme voyeurism in *Child of God*, takes on particular significance for the female reader. However, it becomes apparent through analysis of several different scenes in which the point of view of the spectator/ reader moves between a position of identification with McCarthy's protagonist and one of distance, as the reader follows his gruesome manoeuvrings, that this places both the male and female reader in an uncomfortable position. A particularly misanthropic narrator appears to announce this as his goal in the opening pages of the novel, when he intimately confides in a direct address to the reader the suggestion that Lester Ballard is 'a child of God much like yourself perhaps' (4).

Outer Dark provoked a critical reaction which frequently praised McCarthy's 'absolute literary virtuosity'.³³ Vereen Bell found it 'brutally nihilistic' and also 'chaste, shapely and compassionate', although many reviewers detected a poor

³³Walter Sullivan, "Where have all the flowers gone?", Part II: the Novel in the Gnostic Twilight", *Sewanee Review* 78 (October, 1970):654-64.

imitation of Faulkner in the arcane vocabulary and narrative idiosyncrasies.³⁴ However, *Child of God*, inspired an examination of the bleakness of the human condition which moved some critics to condemn not only its subject matter as depraved but also the method of narration as sensationalist. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Richard Brickner wrote about the 'carefully cold, sour diction of his book – whose hostility towards the reader surpasses even that of the world towards Lester Ballard – (that) does not often let us see beyond its nasty 'writing' into moments we can see for themselves, rendered', adding that 'such moments, authentic though they feel do not much help a novel so lacking in human momentum or point.'³⁵ Doris Grumbach, on the other hand, wrote in the *New Republic*, that McCarthy's novel had caused her 'to thrash about for some help with the necessary description of my enthusiasm', articulating a 'problem' which has become a central preoccupation of most criticism of McCarthy: 'Whenever a theory of esthetics enters into the discussion of a novel it tends to distract somewhat from the point, that the *experience* of the book is the real thing, that there are varieties of such experience, and that some of them, a few of them, are so intense, so, well, *religious*, as to elude description by the critic attempting to communicate what he has felt.'³⁶ Others, however, have had no difficulty in describing their feelings of revulsion. Mark Royden Winchell combines praise of McCarthy's impressive authorial ability with denigration of his subject matter, accusing him of creating an interior world of Lester Ballard which is a 'cesspool of perversion that is not only unnatural but a grotesque parody of much that is human', adding that in the outside world 'we find not even the rational jungle of Darwin but an absurdist wasteland where chaos and pointless brutality take the place of natural law' (295).³⁷ Finally, Winchell describes McCarthy

³⁴ Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Baton Rouge: Univ. Of Louisiana Press, 1985

³⁵ Richard.P. Brickner, 'A Hero Cast Out, Even By tragedy', *New York Times Book Review*, 13th January, 1974, 7:6-7

³⁶ Doris Grumbach, 'Practitioner of Ghastliness', *New Republic* 170, 9th February, 1974:26-28
 Nell Sullivan has examined the difficult appeal of McCarthy's writing, arguing that for critics who see McCarthy's work as radically existentialist or essentially moral, 'such theological/philosophical criticism of the texts fails to explain the fundamental delight many of us have experienced in reading McCarthy's works.'(115) Sullivan proposes that they 'can best be understood as examples of what Roland Barthes describes as 'the text of *jouissance*', which Sullivan defines as one which 'transcends the question of morality characterized by its unsettling effect, the discomfort it produces [...] goes beyond pleasure to create tension in the reader.' (127) 'Cormac McCarthy and the Text of *Jouissance*' in *Sacred Violence: A Readers Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (Texas Western Press, 1995):115-125

³⁷ Mark Royden Winchell, 'Inner Dark: or, The Place of Cormac McCarthy', *Southern Review* XXVI, April 1990:293-309

as 'a mastercraftsman with all the courage of his perversions'. The following examination of *Child of God* includes a discussion of how it is possible to read McCarthy's fiction as depicting a world where the 'experiences' of the reader, including those that touch on the 'religious', can be ascribed to the fact that the 'chaos and pointless brutality' which Winchell proposes usurps 'natural law', in fact *is* natural law. In many ways, this is a more frightening prospect than simple detachment in an 'absurdist wasteland', particularly when the 'mastercraftsman' (who is, importantly, a cynical, misogynous and sadistic narrator) is determined to insinuate that we share 'his perversions'.

Lester Ballard makes the claim about the 'trouble' whiskey and women have brought him to an inmate at the Sevier County jail who introduces himself as 'Nigger John' and tells him that 'I cut a motherfucker's head off with a pocketknife':

Ballard waited to be asked his own crime but he wasn't asked. After a while he said: I was supposed to of raped this old girl. She wasn't nothin but a whore to start with.

White pussy ain't nothin but trouble.

Ballard agreed that it was. He guessed he'd thought so but he'd never heard it put that way.[...]

All the trouble I ever was in, said Ballard, was caused by whiskey or women or both.(53)

Ballard's claim about women and whiskey is followed by the sentence 'He'd often heard men say as much', and exemplifies his dangerously compulsive mimicry of the misogynistic sentiments espoused by the male characters he encounters. When Ballard turns himself in at the end of the novel, telling the nurse at the hospital 'I'm meant to be here', far from implying that he has undergone a transformation which has brought about a sudden self-awareness and acknowledgement of his criminality, as some critics have suggested, he is articulating a sentiment which not only paraphrases the first section of the novel when he is evicted from his home, it also implies that he has finally become 'wanted'.³⁸ Given the deracination and alienation

³⁸The polemical responses of critics to Ballard's statement are indicative of the overall debate which surrounds both the novel and particularly the amorality of its central figure. John Lang proposes that 'Ballard glimpses enough of his own moral darkness to return to the hospital from which he was abducted' (94), Brian Evenson agrees, considering that 'he reenters society, declaring with his words that he has accepted society's disparaging vision of himself.' (44) Andrew Bartlett writes 'make no mistake: resignation or repentance, this choice is a kind of suicide, because Ballard belongs to the ancient mountain and not to modern society' (150), and Robert Jarrett suggests merely that 'Ballard asserts his own affiliation with society, nonchalantly turning himself in.' (39)

experienced by the self-exiled protagonists of the rest of McCarthy's fiction, it appears doubly ironic that Lester Ballard is the only one to announce any sense of 'belonging' and to choose incarceration rather than flight. After he is falsely arrested for the rape of the woman on the roadside, he scrutinises the wanted posters with what seems to be bemusement rather than fascination or revulsion. The combination of the 'wanted' posters and the sheriff's assumption, 'I guess murder is next on the list ain't it?' are perhaps for a sociopath a way of perversely reaching out to the community and feeling 'wanted' (56). His eviction at the opening of the novel initiates his alienation and isolation and cuts him off finally from his father (as the rope in the barn implies, his presence still lingers), but also suggests that the 'lessons' which he has learned from a patriarchal society and his treatment at the hands of the law lead to his attempts to mimic in a perversely delusional and pathological way the attitudes of men. His crime has been to act out in an exaggerated way the misogynistic attitude of society. Mark Royden Winchell proposes that the interior world of Lester Ballard is a 'cesspool of perversion that is not only unnatural but a grotesque parody of much that is human', accusing McCarthy of 'gross sensationalism', although his observation that by the time Ballard commits necrophilia there has occurred 'enough garden-level depravity to titillate the prurient imagination', reveals precisely one of the points which *Child of God* is making.³⁹ When the girl with the idiot child/brother tells Ballard 'You ain't even a man. You're just a crazy thing', she unwittingly touches on the root of Ballard's pathological behaviour, his desire to be a 'man', which he believes is to be a predator of women, all of whom are sexually available. He counters her assertion with 'Why don't you show me them nice titties' (117-8).

A misogynous narrator describes women as repellent slatterns and they are always viewed (literally, in most cases, for Ballard is a voyeur) in grotesquely sexual terms:

The dumpkeeper had spawned nine daughters and named them out of an old medical dictionary *gleaned from the rubbish he picked*. These gangling progeny with black hair hanging from their armpits now sat idle and wide eyed day after day in chairs and crates about the little yard cleared out of the tip while their harried dam called them one by one to help with chores and one by one they blinked their sluggard lids. Urethra, Cerabella, Hernia Sue. They moved like cats and like cats attracted surrounding swains to their midden [...] They fell pregnant one by one. He beat them. The wife cried and cried. (26, my italics)

³⁹ Mark Royden Winchell, 'Inner Darkness: Or the Place of Cormac McCarthy', *Southern Review* 26, April 1990:293-309

Ballard 'had eyes for a long blonde flatshanked daughter that used to sit with her legs propped so that you could see her drawers'(28). One day she flirts with and teases Ballard and another man:

Beyond the little trailer the old man walked against the sky rolling a tire and a ropy column of foul black smoke rose from a burning slagheap of old rubber. Shit, she said. If you'ns ever got any of this you never would be satisfied again.

They watched her saunter up the hill toward the house. I'd like to chance it, the man said. Wouldn't you, Lester?

Ballard said that he would. (30)

Here the girl is imaged against the 'slagheap' and the impression is that being 'gleaned from rubbish', they are destined 'one by one' (repeated three times) to behave like slatterns. What Ballard does not know is that the dumpkeeper, also imaged in the background, has raped at least one of his daughters, and the mention of the 'peach drawers' in this harrowing scene, implies that it was this daughter, so that her sexual precociousness and aggression can be attributed to her treatment at the hands of her father. At this stage, it seems that Ballard is not even sure what precisely 'chancing it' would involve. The dumpkeeper is one of the few people whom Ballard has any contact with, so that his views on women are inevitably influenced by him. The dumpkeeper tells Ballard that he 'ort to be proud [...] that you ain't never married. It is a grief and a heartache and they ain't no reward in it at all' and Ballard seems to agree with this sentiment (111). Ballard's later contact with the girl and the idiot child reinforces the suggestion of cyclical degeneration, as Ballard suggests that the young girl is the mother of the 'drooling cretin', perhaps the product of incest. Here, the cynical and misogynistic narrator, a presence which seems to echo Ballard's own thoughts but who writes as an objective observer or 'voyeur', intervenes when Ballard returns to the house 'wearing his sickish smile'⁴⁰: 'She thought about it before she swung the door back. You could see it in her eyes. But she let him in, more's the fool'(116).

⁴⁰Ballard is variously described as 'smiling tightly' (65) 'smiling woodenly', 'smiling stiffly' and with a 'china smile' (110) and a 'sickish smile'(115), descriptions which combine his attempts to imitate normal facial expressions of pleasure which become increasingly sinister as his role as serial killer and necrophile is revealed.

'He could not swim but how would you drown him' the narrator asks, Gary Ciuba suggests 'in amazement and accusation'. This could also be one more example of the narrator placing the reader in the position of 'accomplice' narrator, asking not simply 'how would *you* drown him' but also '*how* would you drown him'.⁴¹ This is emphasised in the discovery that Ballard is in less than a foot of water, so that the prospect of his death and the suggestion of the reader's involvement in this becomes another narratorial 'tease'. By wanting to drown him, the reader would display the same warped and perverted desire for order 'in men's souls' as Ballard. The suggestion throughout is that the same society that has had a hand in moulding this necrophiliac killer, then hunts him down and wants his blood. John Lang proposes that Ballard's 'tremendous struggle' to move his corpses and possessions to a new location 'is presented in quasi-heroic terms'.⁴² The reader can't help but feel a degree of admiration for Lester's tenacity, especially since McCarthy encourages such a response by authorial intrusion'(93). Ballard escapes 'nearly sobbing with exhaustion', and again, there is a suggestion that Ballard is not wholly either evil or insane: 'Whatever voice spoke him was no demon but some old shed self that came yet from time to time in the name of sanity, a hand to gentle him back from the rim of his disastrous wrath.'(158) When he wakes it is 'to agony' and the onset of frostbite in his feet, which he dips in the creek: 'He sat there soaking his feet and gibbering, a sound not quite crying that echoed from the walls of the grotto like the mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes' (159).

As Andrew Bartlett points out, 'nobody in the sheriff's world gets anywhere near to seeing Ballard as we do, as 'privileged' readers' (6), although more than being 'privileged' the reader is repeatedly asked to be an accomplice. The 'who' that directly acknowledges the reader is reiterated throughout the text. This repetition means that the reader is forced to engage in judgements throughout, although the bleakness of this position is clearly that the reader is also powerless, so that questions of ethical judgment are made spurious. When Ballard visits the house of the girl and

⁴¹ Gary Ciuba, 'McCarthy's *Enfant Terrible*: Mimetic Desire and Sacred Violence in *Child of God*' in *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995) pp. 77-85

⁴² John Lang, 'Lester Ballard: McCarthy's Challenge to the Reader's Compassion' in *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Eds. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995) pp87-94

the idiot child, 'a hugeheaded bald and slobbering primate', he brings a robin and as the bird starts to cross the floor, the narrator continues 'it spied the....what? child? child.', once again drawing attention to the narrative devices at his disposal (he has already described the child, after all) and implicating the reader in the scene. Similarly, when Ballard is described engaging in his first necrophile activity, 'He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman', the narrator then asks 'Who could say she did not hear him?'(88)

The insidious voice of the misogynous narrator whose perspective appears to shift disconcertingly between one shared by his protagonists and one shared with the reader, is evident in the description of Ballard at the fair. 'Young girl's faces floated past, bland and smooth as cream. Some eyed his toys' and then the fireworks start:

[...] you could see among the faces a young girl with candyapple on her lips and her eyes wide. Her pale hair smelled of soap, womanchild from beyond the years, rapt below the sulphur glow and pitchlight of some medieval funfair. A lean skylong candle skewered the black pools in her eyes. Her fingers clutched. In the flood of this breaking brimstone galaxy she saw the man with the bears watching her and she edged closer to the girl by her side and brushed her hair with two fingers quickly. (65)

John Ditsky proposes that this scene 'creates a tension of attraction-repulsion. Evil fascinates with its lurid beauty' and that the girl is 'unwittingly attracted' to Ballard (7).⁴³ However, this would seem to be symptomatic of what Ballard would think, as the narrative here plays with many different points of view. Bartlett proposes that 'the aesthetic power' of *Child of God* derives from 'the play of positions taken by the narrator through whom we see Ballard':

Hunting, tracking, sighting, looking, watching, searching, exploring, examining - such processes dominate the story [...] The text is concerned not with a theological question, as the title might suggest, but with a problem of vision: how does a man such as Lester Ballard see the world? How might we, how ought we to see Lester Ballard? (3)⁴⁴

It is possible that McCarthy's 'theological question' is in fact tied to his 'problem of

⁴³ John Ditsky, 'Further Into Darkness: The Novels of Cormac McCarthy' *Hollins Critic* 18 (April, 1981): 1-11

⁴⁴ Andrew Bartlett, 'From Voyeurism to Archaeology: Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*', *Southern Literary Journal*, 1991, No.24: 3-15.

vision' as the McCarthy 'perhaps' is inevitably loaded with implications of perspective and 'vision'. This can be seen in the above description of the girl at the fair. The narrative point of view circles the girl, closing in on her, as there is a movement from 'you could see' (implicating a parallel between Ballard and the reader) to the noting of the 'smell' of her hair, which is either Ballard's imagination or the narrator giving the reader 'privileged information' and also placing the reader close to the girl, so that when she sees 'the man with the bear watching her', the reader is now 'seeing' from her vantage point. The combination of the firework which 'skewered the black pools in her eyes' and her clutching fingers, suggests a sinister and morbidly humorous combination of Ballard's own fantasy (the 'flood of this breaking brimstone galaxy' being a parody of his climax) and the girl's quite innocent and natural reaction to the explosion of the fireworks.

Bartlett proposes that 'the aesthetic power of *Child of God* results from McCarthy's superb regulation of narrative distance and perspective, his command of four degrees of proximity to Ballard, four kinds of narrative position with differing vision' (4). He labels these narrative positions as 'the voyeuristic', 'the oblivious', the 'blind (blinded by darkness)' and 'the archaeological', the latter being 'the most inventive':

The voyeuristic counts as perhaps the most obvious mode of perspective in *Child of God*: its circumscribed field of vision frames space and focuses on some central object in which the watcher takes a serious, ambiguously perverse, interest. The narrator constantly watches Ballard watching another body oblivious to being watched [...] Ballard himself operates as a perverse conflation of hunter and voyeur. (4)

Bartlett also warns against 'overestimating the force of voyeuristic perspective as a determining factor in the inventiveness of McCarthy's rhetorical strategy' (5), although some elements of the 'archaeological discourse' which Bartlett argues is the most inventive narrative device employed in this novel, seem closer to voyeurism than archaeology. For example, Ballard described crossing the flooded river is 'like some demented hero or bedraggled parody of a patriotic poster come aswamp' and when Greer shoots him, he is ejected backwards like 'some slapstick contrivance of the filmcutter's art' (156, 173). Bartlett suggests that these descriptions which clearly allude to the frozen image can be attributed to 'another technique characteristic' of this archaeological discourse (12). As he also concedes, this discourse 'is just as

obsessed as the voyeuristic with seeing Ballard', although he suggests that the 'allusive metaphoric diction [...] goes beyond the strictly taxonomic and denotative', so that these 'phrasal fragments' that operate 'like a cinematic freeze frame' can be attributed to an archaeological discourse which 'plays against the dominant, "purely" empirical discourse of external focalization' and 'determines the specific aesthetic power' of *Child of God* (12-13). There are many examples of this. Ballard is described as 'A gothic doll in illfit clothes, its carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape' (140), and some of the descriptions of him do, as Bartlett suggests, 'contain' him in an external frame. For example:

Ballard among gothic treeboles, almost jaunty in the outsized clothing he wore, fording drifts of kneedeep snow, going along the south face of a limestone bluff beneath which birds scratching in the bare earth paused to watch. (128)

He looked about the room. Some stainless steel pots on a table. A pitcher of water and a glass. Ballard in a thin white gown in a thin white room, false acolyte or antiseptic felon, a practitioner of ghastriness, a part-time ghoul. (174)

In the first extract, Ballard is described moving 'among gothic treeboles' and then the narrative does 'freeze' as it describes the birds who 'paused to watch'. In the second, the reader first 'sees' the room from Ballard's point of view, and the simple description of the objects therein could be his, and then the reader is pulled back once more to 'see' Ballard the 'part-time ghoul'. The 'whiteness' of both the snow outside and the hospital inside contrast with Ballard's subterranean world. The 'carmine mouth' also contrasts with the 'white landscape', just as the red mud from the cave which he trails in and out of his mausoleum (imaged increasingly as a womb) leaves tracks in the snow. There is therefore a disturbing contrast between the suggested cleanliness and purity of Ballard, the 'antiseptic felon', and the symbols of female sexuality which threaten to violate his world, inverting the violation of which he is guilty. The narration of this novel is intensely voyeuristic, and this strategy appears to mimic the ways in which the medium of film, through the movement between different camera angles, can be used to enforce identification in the spectator. This is particularly true when the debate which has surrounded issues of cinematic spectatorship and identification are considered. A seminal piece of work which was largely responsible for initiating this debate, particularly among feminist film critics and theorists, was Laura Mulvey's famous paper 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative

Cinema', first published in *Screen* in 1975.⁴⁵ Mulvey employed Freud's theory of 'scopophilia', an erotic pleasure gained from looking, and the Lacanian concept of the 'mirror phase' of childhood development, which she proposed develops scopophilia 'through narcissism and the constitution of the ego' to identify with the object (415). She proposed 'two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking' in relation to film:

One implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like. (417-8)

For Mulvey, the binary oppositions active/passive, male/female are not deconstructed 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance', thus 'the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly' (418). As the female icon also represents the threat of castration, Mulvey identifies two mechanisms by which the male is able to overcome his 'castration anxiety'. The first is 'sadistic voyeurism' which 'has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt [...], asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness' (421). The second is 'fetishistic scopophilia' which involves 'complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous' (421-2). Mulvey draws largely on the films of Alfred Hitchcock in order to illustrate her theory, which has been particularly influential in pioneering psychoanalytic discourse on his work. She states that 'the look is central to the plot' in many of Hitchcock's films 'oscillating between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination':

True perversion is barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness [...] Hitchcock's skillful use of identification processes and liberal use of subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze. (424)

However, Mulvey's condemnation of Hitchcock's films as unremittingly misogynistic, produced within a monolithic patriarchal system, has been considered theoretically insufficient in its ability to take into account the mutability of patriarchy,

⁴⁵ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and The Narrative Cinema', in *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Karyn Kay & Gerald Peary, (Dutton: New York, 1977) pp. 417-428

its fragmentations and contradictions. More recent criticism has challenged Mulvey's thesis, and questioned her profoundly troubling assumptions about the role of the female spectator, implicitly either masochistic or non-existent, by illustrating that the 'male gaze' is not exclusive, and by offering different interpretations of subjectivity, identification and sexual difference. For example, Tania Modleski has revised Mulvey's thesis, and argued that most traditional critics 'remain incredibly blind to the relation of voyeurism to questions of sexual difference' and that 'feminist theory must challenge the idea that femininity is a simple matter of (simple) masochism' (14, 5)⁴⁶. Modleski asserts a polemical view, stating that a major emphasis of her book is on 'masculine subjectivity in crisis' and proposing that identification with the feminine continually undermines the efforts of the male protagonists to achieve 'masculine strength and autonomy' (7). Employing a combination of Derridean deconstruction, and Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Modleski asserts that her 'ultimate goal' is to provide a 'deeper understanding of woman's victimization – of the sources of matrophobia and misogyny - and the development of female subjectivity' (7). Modleski reverses Mulvey's theory of the male spectator, by suggesting that his is not necessarily a sadistic impulse, but a masochistic one, resulting from the repression of a preOedipal attachment to the mother. There does seem, at first, to be a fundamental contradiction in her effort to 'decenter directorial authority' by considering Hitchcock's work 'as the expression of cultural attitudes and practices existing to some extent outside his control' while simultaneously consistently referring to Hitchcock the man/director. This is probably because of her assertion about what her analysis will 'reveal': '[...] what I want to argue is neither that Hitchcock is utterly misogynistic nor that he is largely sympathetic to women and their plight in patriarchy, but that his work is characterised by a thoroughgoing ambivalence about femininity' (8).

There also exists in McCarthy's fiction a fundamental and problematic contradiction for the female reader. In examining the use of different narrative voices, this is also effectively 'decentering directorial authority', just as considering the misogynous elements as the 'expression of cultural attitudes and practices existing to some extent outside his control', would appear to ignore the prevalence of such elements. At

⁴⁶ Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (Methuen:

times, it would appear that Woodward's assumption about McCarthy being a 'man's writer' is correct, and that his linguistic excess and semantic pyrotechnics merely deflect attention from this. However, just as Modleski argues that femininity should not automatically connote masochism, as the 'male gaze' is not exclusive, the female reader of *Child of God* is not necessarily forced to take up a masochistic position. It would appear that the men whom Woodward assumes that McCarthy is writing for, are perhaps (as Modleski also suggests about the male spectator of Hitchcock's films) placed in a masochistic position in relation to the text as the sources of matrophobia and misogyny are explored. The many 'points of view' (literally, ways of seeing), from the purely objective, to a disturbing engagement with Ballard's subjectivity and scopophilia, means that the reader moves between different points of identification in McCarthy's fiction. While Mulvey has argued that in Hitchcock's films 'the look is central to the plot', oscillating between sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia, and Modleski revises this to suggest that these films are the expression of a 'thoroughgoing ambivalence about femininity' and ultimately, an expression of male subjectivity in crisis, it is clear that similarly, McCarthy's novels prompt acutely varied responses. However, analysis of his work can provide insight into the representation of women, the role of the maternal and aspects of both male and female subjectivity, particularly through examining the 'directorial authority' of the different narrators.

McCarthy's use of a narrator who revels in the misogynous world of 1950s Sevierville is not always synonymous with Ballard's perspective, and McCarthy makes this clear in the short section when Ballard takes his axe to be sharpened at the smith's shop.(70) The smith tells him to wait , 'I'll show ye how to dress an axe that'll cut two to one against any piece of shit you can buy down here at the hardware store brand new'. The smith proceeds to demonstrate how to do this with detailed instructions as he does so. As he describes the process, he begins to refer to the axe as female:

We take another heat on her only not so high this time [...] Watch her well, he said [...] the proper thing is to fetch her out the minute she shows the color of grace. Now we want a high red. Want a high red. Now she comes [...]

He hammered steadily and effortless, the bit cooling until the light of it faded to a faintly pulsing blood color. Ballard glanced about the shop [...] Now one more heat to make her tough [...] We take a low heat this time, he said [...] Just so ye can see her shine will do. There she is.

Now hammer her down both sides real good. He beat with short strokes [...] See how black she gets, he said. Black and shiny like a nigger's ass. That packs the steel and makes it tough. Now she's ready to harden.

They waited while the axe heated. The smith took a splayed cigarstub from his apron pocket and lit it with a coal from the forge. (70-4)

This is possibly the nearest thing to a description of (simulated) sex that Ballard has heard. It takes four pages, with the smith's verbal and visual demonstration becoming increasingly overt in his analogy with sex, with references to 'heat', 'hardness', 'hammering', 'muscle', 'pulsing blood', 'nigger's ass' etc. The narrator enjoys the joke, even describing the smith's 'post-coital' smoke and the reader understands the analogy not only with sexual activity, but with Ballard's own efforts - the 'red' of the dress and lipstick, his problems with the 'hardness' or 'softness' of his female corpses - and later, the brutality of his intended scalping with the axe. However, there is no misogynistic acknowledgement by Ballard of the smith's analogy, (an ironic and exaggerated form of a more modern association of women with cars perhaps) as he remains oblivious to the sexual connotation of the smith's description, and reveals himself once more as only responsive to the most straightforward expressions of misogyny. The reader, however, is inadvertently made to realise that their response to the brutal language heavily suggestive of sexual imagery has put them in the position of 'voyeur', whereas this time Ballard is 'watching' quite innocently. When the smith tells him 'It's like a lot of things [...] Do the least part of it wrong and ye'd just as well do it all wrong', and asks 'reckon you could do it now from watchin? [...] Do what, said Ballard' (74), revealing how literally he must comprehend the world. While none of these observations excuse, exonerate or make Ballard more appealing, they do suggest the pervasively aggressive forms of misogyny which surround him and with which he is regularly confronted.

Ballard's fear and fascination with sex is described in ironic terms which convey his almost puritanical instinct about lust. As he watches the couple in the truck, he sees 'A pair of white legs sprawled embracing a shade, a dark incubus that humped in a dream of slaverous lust' (20). Clearly, this is not vocabulary that Ballard would use -

he has to read his newspapers out loud - but it succinctly conveys his impression of titillation and danger in his voyeurism, the 'dark incubus' inferring what he perceives to be the sinful nature of sex, made a greater transgression by his mistaken assumption that 'It's a nigger.'

O Bobby, O God, said the girl.

Ballard, unbuttoned, spent himself on the fender.

O shit, said the girl.

On buckling knees the watcher watched. The mocking bird began.(20)

The combination of the repetition in the 'watcher watched' and the reference to the mocking bird is an allusion to both Ballard's voyeurism and masturbation being 'mocked' and Ballard's own 'beginning' as an imitator, just as the mockingbird imitates or 'mocks' the songs of other birds.

Interesting parallels can be drawn between McCarthy's protagonist and the figure of Travis Bickle (Robert de Niro) in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). Both are increasingly isolated from society, although for Bickle it is suggested his psychosis stems from his involvement in what amounted to vigilante activity in Vietnam. Both are rejected by women and witness misogynistic violence (for Bickle, on the streets of New York and in pornographic cinemas, where he takes Betsey on their first 'date' completely unaware of the inappropriate nature of the entertainment). Paul Schrader, who collaborated with Scorsese on other films - *Raging Bull* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* - wrote the screenplay for *Taxi Driver*. Travis Bickle refers to himself as 'God's lonely man' and Thomas Wolfe's quotation from his novel of that title provides an epigraph for the screenplay: 'The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence'. Isolation and loneliness are particularly prominent in McCarthy's later protagonist, Suttree. Scorsese and Schrader have acknowledged their religious differences which have informed these films. As a Catholic, Scorsese wants an element of redemption, absolution and catharsis at the end, whereas Schrader, as a Calvinist, tends towards violent and bloody 'last judgement' scenarios.⁴⁷ Scorsese's films explore the reasons, symptoms

⁴⁷ Schrader's most recent film, *Affliction* (1998) which he directed from the semi-autobiographical novel by Russell Banks, examines the notion of 'regeneration through violence' through the father/son

and often violent results of both psychosis and despair, as they frequently deal with individuals (usually men) in crisis. Lesley Stern has traced the influence of directors such as Bernardo Bertolucci and Alfred Hitchcock on the films of Scorsese.⁴⁸ He also explores the figure of Travis Bickle as a later recasting of the character of Ethan Edwards in John Ford's classic western, *The Searchers* (1956), as a 'filmic exploration of a pathological narrative', an influence which has been acknowledged by Paul Schrader.

The burning question isn't really "What makes a man want to wander?" What burns is the question of what troubles a man. It burns the filmic text – and therefore the spectator too – to such a degree that the wandering becomes obsessive, dangerously restless, pathologically violent. (Stern, 35)

In addition, Stern suggests that in both films 'it is not simply the hero's problematic relation to home that fuels the fire; it is the way in which an oscillation between "home" and "away" is modulated (and the destabilising effect exacerbated) through a dynamic of pursuit-and-salvation. Central to both films is an impulse to rescue, to return "home", a woman who does not want to be saved.'⁴⁹ As Stern points out, Travis Bickle is neurotically concerned with 'putrescence, pollution and the impulse to purification'. In the intricate and uncomfortable intertwining of criminality and the law in both *The Searchers* and *Taxi Driver* 'the vigilante element emerges, slowly, obsessively building, and [...] this is developed through the hero's racial and sexual fixations' (37).

In *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Robert Kolker states that one of the central concerns of his study is 'the problem of point of view.' (163)⁵⁰ He outlines the complexities of Scorsese's films in which point of view is usually switched, almost obsessively, from objective to subjective and back again, permitting the spectator to look both at and

(played by James Coburn and Nick Nolte) relationship and the legacy of an alcoholic, violent and bullying father. Schrader's later film is closer to *Suttree* in its depiction of cyclical degeneration and the perpetuation of violence through an abusive paternal relationship. This was not made in collaboration with Scorsese and there is no suggestion of redemption at the end of the film, as the son kills the father and then sets his body on fire.

⁴⁸ Lesley Stern, *The Scorsese Connection* (Indiana University Press: 1985)

⁴⁹ The attempts of McCarthy's cowboy protagonists to 'save' the females (human and animal) in the *Border Trilogy*, could also be said to conform to this 'dynamic of pursuit and salvation'.

⁵⁰ Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Coppola, Scorsese, Altman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)

with the character. The exception to this is *Taxi Driver*, in which an almost entirely subjective point of view forces the viewer to see continually from the point of view of the main character. This, as Kolker points out, creates 'a mise-en-scène that expresses, above all, the obsessive vision of a madman' (182). Bickle is so isolated that everything he sees becomes a reflection of his own distorted perception, constituting a world which is 'the ultimate *noir* world: closed and dark, a paranoid universe of perversion, obsession and violence' (183). Like Ballard, Bickle's internal life remains inscrutable. As Kolker suggests, and again this is applicable to McCarthy's novel, point of view is heightened in Scorsese's films by the fact that in most of them he 'creates a tension between two opposing cinematic conventions, the documentary and the fictional'.⁵¹ This creates a tension between attraction and repulsion, between proximity and objectivity, keeping the viewers at a distance by alternately withholding information and drawing them in. Like Lester Ballard, Bickle would like to 'see order in men's souls' (Ballard), and feels a sense of injustice 'All my life needed was a sense of some place to go [...] I believe that someone should become a person like other people' (Bickle). Kolker suggests that while the Fordean lineage of Travis Bickle and his 'demonic re-creation of the John Wayne persona in *The Searchers*' has been mentioned frequently 'even stronger and more conclusive is the film's homage to Hitchcock, and to *Psycho* in particular' (204). This is because both *Psycho* and *Taxi Driver* are 'studies of the impenetrability of madness, but where Hitchcock leads the audience by indirection [...] Scorsese concentrates on the central figure, never withholding a concentrating gaze on a disintegrating mind' (205).

Lester Ballard does not resolve or integrate the antitheses of male and female, living and dead, or murderer and victim, as he gradually dresses not only in his victim's clothes, but also fashions a 'frightwig' from the scalp of one of his corpses. Following his mother's abandonment and his father's suicide (also perceivable as abandonment), which explains at least part of Lester's sadistic and misogynistic attitude towards women, he feverishly attempts to appropriate the 'feminine' by combining the notion of sex, love and death in his necrophilia, and by dressing up in women's clothes. Richard Woodward has said of McCarthy that he is a 'man's novelist whose apocalyptic vision rarely focuses on women. McCarthy does not write about sex, love

⁵¹ Paul Schrader has said that his intention was to make the film like 'a cross between Gothic horror

or domestic issues' (30).⁵² However, the 'sex, love [and] domestic issues' which Woodward suggested are of no interest to McCarthy, become an obsession for Ballard, and there is a certain pathos, not to mention humour, in the impossibility of his fantasy. He is evicted from his home, is seen to be compulsive in his attempts to make a dilapidated shack into a habitable environment, and becomes a perverted housewife, with his 'parcels from town tucked tightly in his armpits' (100). There is a certain black irony in the fact that Ballard's devoted attention to his corpses - putting make up on them, brushing their hair and buying them clothes, not to mention his feverish housekeeping - is the only time in McCarthy's novels that a man is seen devoting this much attention to a female, perhaps providing the ultimate image of the [lack of] choice for the females in these novels, either sorrowing or death. Ballard even creates his own bizarre and grotesque scene of 'domestic bliss' with his first corpse:

It was past midnight before she was limber enough to undress. She lay there naked on the mattress with her sallow breasts pooled in the light like wax flowers. Ballard began to dress her in her new clothes.

He sat and brushed her hair [...] he undid the top of the lipstick and screwed it out and began to paint her lips.

He would arrange her in different positions and go out and peer in the window at her. After a while he just sat holding her, his hands feeling her body under the new clothes. He undressed her very slowly, talking to her, then he pulled off her trousers and lay next to her. He spread her loose thighs. You been wantin it, he told her. (102-3)

The movement in the narrative between third person objectivity, 'He sat and brushed her hair' through the ambiguity of phrases which could be attributed to either the narrator or Ballard (for example, the word 'limber') to the direct speech of Ballard in the final sentence, place the reader in position of voyeur. The repetition of 'limber', 'her loose thighs' and 'she was loose and not easy to handle' combines a description of her physical state with Ballard's grotesque *carpe diem* which reveals his impression of all woman being 'loose', 'you been wantin it'. This impression is enforced by his encounters with the dumpkeeper's daughters, the sister/mother of the idiot child whom Ballard sees as sexually available ('all tits and plump young haunch and naked legs', 118), and the drunken 'old whore' he finds on the Frog Mountain turnaround:

and the New York Daily News'.

⁵² Richard B. Woodward, 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction', *New York Times Magazine*, 19th April, 1992: 28-31+

He found a lady sleeping under the trees in a white gown [...] he touched her, taking in her naked body under the flimsy nightdress [...] her eyeballs were gorged with blood [...] a sweet ferment of whiskey and rot coming off her. Her lips drew back in a cat's snarl. What do you want, you son of a bitch? (41)

The movement from 'lady' to 'whore' takes seconds and there is an unsettling sense that all these women are portrayed as sordid, either drunk whores or promiscuous young girls, allowing Ballard to delude himself that they are all 'asking for it'.

Mark Royden Winchell concludes that only *Child of God* 'is likely to outlive' McCarthy (he is writing this before the publication of *The Border Trilogy*), as 'it is the sort of book that astonishes by testing the very limits of nihilism [...] Such books [...] ask us to believe that the alchemy of style can transform patently offensive material into an object of aesthetic contemplation' (309). However, it is possible to say that the 'patently offensive material' is imaged in the figures of the corpses whom Ballard violates, and it is his sickness, and not McCarthy's which in his mind turns these corpses 'into [objects] of aesthetic contemplation'. This is seen most clearly when he constructs his own tableaux of domestic bliss, arranging one corpse beside the fire in different attitudes and then going outside to see how it looks – importantly, how it would look to the community at large. This point is emphasised when some young boys inadvertently interrupt his grim manoeuvrings and after scaring them off, he checks his handiwork. To contend, as Winchell does that McCarthy is 'a master craftsman with the courage of his perversions' is surely to confuse the character of Ballard with the author of his story.

"I've seen the meanness of humans till I don't know why God ain't put out the sun and gone away": 'Death hilarious' in *Outer Dark*

In a recent interview with the novelist Stephen Wright, Thomas Byars professed surprise that Cormac McCarthy was one of Wright's favourite authors.⁵³ The interviewer's surprise is explained when he admits that he has only read one of

⁵³ Thomas Byars, Patrick O'Donnell, Thomas Schaub, 'An Interview With Stephen Wright', *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 39, No.2. (22nd June, 1998): 156-181.

McCarthy's novels, *All The Pretty Horses*. Wright suggested to him, '*All the Pretty Horses* is McCarthy Lite', and indicated a preference for *Blood Meridian*, 'a masterpiece of evil' and for *Outer Dark*, 'the greatest thing I've seen happen in America in my lifetime' (2). While *Outer Dark* is certainly not 'lite' or 'light', there is a humorous sense of absurdity and surrealism in both life and death, and a sadistic and satirical narrator who appears to delight in its exposure.

Outer Dark plunges the reader into a world of gothic nightmare. However, just as in the films of Quentin Tarantino, for example *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), death (particularly violent death), is an inherent part of the comic plot and the spectators disconcertingly find themselves laughing.⁵⁴ The following section will consider why McCarthy is often at his most humorous when describing the moment of greatest horror, the moment of death. While the influence of Melville, Hawthorne and Joyce on McCarthy's narratorial style has been mentioned, Flannery O'Connor's idiosyncratic Southern grotesque will be compared with McCarthy's later postmortem examinations.

McCarthy had two short stories published in the literary supplement to the University of Tennessee magazine, *The Phoenix*, the second of which was entitled 'A Drowning Incident' (March, 1960). In this story, a boy's father drowns his dog's puppies and the boy seeks revenge by putting one of the decomposing corpses from the stream in his baby sibling's crib:

Then with the gentle current drifted from beneath the bridge a small puppy, rolling and bumping along the bottom of the creek, turning weightlessly in the slow water. He watched uncomprehendingly. It spun slowly to stare at him with sightless eyes, turning its white belly to the softly diffused sunlight, its legs stiff and straight in an attitude of perpetual resistance. It drifted on, hid momentarily in a band of shadow, emerged, then slid beneath the hammered silver of the water surface and was gone.⁵⁵

On both a psychological level and in its narrative style, this paragraph contains many elements of McCarthy's later fiction. The oxymoronic 'stare' with 'sightless eyes' and

⁵⁴ This list could also include most of Martin Scorsese's films, particularly *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Goodfellas* (1990), and recent films such as Roddy Doyle's *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1997)

⁵⁵ quoted in 'Introduction: The McCarthy Canon Reconsidered', Rick Wallach, in *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (El Paso, Texas: Texas Western Press, 1995)

the macabre comedy of corpses endowed with a 'lifelike' purpose in the ambiguity of 'hid momentarily in a band of shadow', provide early examples of the many unwittingly humorous corpses which litter McCarthy's fiction. The cruelty of the father and the son's horrified incomprehension foreshadow the father/son relationships of many of McCarthy's characters.

In *Outer Dark*, McCarthy's second novel, there is little in the way of plot. An incestuous relationship between a brother and sister, Culla and Rinthy Holme, results in the birth of a male child. The father attempts to get rid of the child by abandoning it in some woods and tells the mother that it has died. A tinker finds the child, the mother discovers that her brother has lied to her and sets out to find the child, and the father sets out in pursuit of her. Throughout the novel, Culla is haunted by a mysterious trio of men who commit crimes, including murder, for which the communities that Culla encounters hold him responsible. The leader of this 'grim triune' appears to possess chameleon qualities, as he alternately appears as a shadowy, satanic figure and in the guise of a preacher. He is also a skilful rhetorician (although he says very little), with a certain banal charisma who is able to incite others to violence.

While the surrogate father figures of *The Orchard Keeper* provide preferable alternative role models for the young protagonist, in *Outer Dark*, 'paternity' is given its most ferocious treatment (that is, until *Blood Meridian's* judge Holden). In this novel, there is a continuous play on the words 'son/ sun/ Son' which is paralleled by a focus on the figure of the father/ Father. However, while to be a father in McCarthy's world is an unenviable position, to be a son is considerably worse. As both father to an unwanted child and the reluctant surrogate 'son' of the bearded leader of the 'grim triune', Culla's story exemplifies this. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the unappealing figure of Kenneth Rattner is so alienated from society that he is constantly 'seeking [...] that being in the outer dark with whom only he held communion, smiling a little to himself, the onlooker, the stranger' (24). However, in McCarthy's second novel, Culla feels no sense of 'communion' with the 'beings' that confront him in his outer darkness. The sense that the community is seen as a metaphor for collective identity is extended in the parodic families of *Outer Dark*. The bearded leader is the patriarchal father of the three men. Like Culla, he has a nameless and disfigured 'son', and both

'sons' are described as looking with 'malign imbecility'. He tells Culla 'I believe in takin care of my own' (181), and indeed he satisfies the cannibalistic instincts of his 'son' by feeding him the son of Culla, a man who clearly has not 'takin care' of his own. The idea of communion is parodied, both in the Christian sense, in the 'Eucharist' of the nameless meat (the suggestion is that it is human) that he is forced to share with the three men, and in the bonding which the leader seems to assume. This unholy trinity is the first 'community' that wants Culla in their number.

The first sentence of the novel is half a page long, the conjunctions 'and' making the 'progress' of the three men seem at once inevitable and intractable. Their representation moves from shadowy holograph to very real and bestial horror throughout the narrative. They haunt Culla Holme both by their threatening physical presence and by the fact that Culla is punished and hunted down for crimes which these men have committed. They seem to follow, in fact to 'shadow' him as though they are somehow inseparable:

[...] dropping under the crest of the hill into a fold of blue shadow with light touching them about the head in spurious sanctity until they had gone on for such a time as saw the sun down altogether and they moved in shadow altogether which suited them very well.'(3)

The leader of the 'grim triune' is so 'ordinary' in his appearance that his evil is not immediately apparent and it is clear that Culla's guilt has meant that he has, in Vereen Bell's words, 'remade the world in his own blighted image' (39). He is accused of several crimes, including murder, and almost seems to invite accusation just simply by being there:

*In his experience, swift transitions from the relaxed jousting of male country humor to sudden breathtaking violence are normal, as if a separate aspect of his punishment were to live each day an entire spectrum of human existence, like some generic character from *The Divine Comedy*. (Bell, 39)*

Bell writes that, 'Eventually there is hardly any significant difference, ontologically, between his dream life and the real world' (39). It is possible to see the three men as a representation of the ultimate culmination of Culla's persecution and guilt.

The repetition of phrases and adjectives that suggest indeterminacy and depthlessness, makes the three men seem at a far remove from reality. In addition, the frequent allusions to the stage self-consciously draws attention to the characterisation of traditional drama and the success of the many guises of the bearded leader who is, after all, the supreme actor. They also prefigure the many atavistic similes contained in *Suttree*. The tinker is described as being like a 'stage dwarf after the main company has departed' and Culla as an 'amphitheatrical figure' who falls into the forest as though through a 'trap door' and is later towed into the bank by the three men 'like someone on a stage prop being towed from wing to wing' (130,89,169). Similarly, the narrator frequently places the characters within a 'rabid frieze', a 'listless tableau', a 'proletarian mural', captured within 'a pantomime of static violence' or likens them to 'stone figures quarried from the architecture of an older time' (218, 135, 35, 47, 77). There are also numerous allusions to a dreamworld, beginning with Culla's nightmare, the shadows of the tinker and the unidentified woman whose shadows move with 'dreamy disconcert', the inhabitants of the town who move 'like toilers in a dream stunned and without purpose', and the three hanged men who are 'alien and unreal like figures wandered from a dream' (23.135, 146). Culla is described engaged in a series of episodes, from the 'ferry' episode, his encounter with the hogdrovers, and his meetings with the 'grim triune', all of which have the qualities of surrealism and a lack of control of 'the dreamer' (as Culla is identified in the opening passages) associated with nightmare. The final description of the three men is as 'endowed with a dream's redundancy', the end of the novel describes Culla looking over the 'spectral waste' of 'a landscape of the damned', and his encounter with the blind man returns the reader to consider (even if Culla cannot) the description of Culla's nightmare at the beginning (231, 242). *Outer Dark* appears to be engaged in an extended exploration of the dynamic interrelation of imagination and reality, the dream world of the 'outer dark' and the 'real' world of inner darkness. The resulting ontological confusion further obfuscates the boundary which separates life and death.

In a letter to John Ditsky, McCarthy wrote that he did not want to enter into a discussion about 'the confrontation of evil' as he is not 'an essayist', although he also suggested that 'the style comes out of the place, material, characters, etc.' and that 'the free-floating anxiety that provides *ambience* in some of my books is something I

have found in the world and so I put it in'.⁵⁶ While 'anxiety' in itself would hardly begin to describe the feeling experienced by either of the protagonists in this novel, it does accurately portray the pervasive ambience of both the communities and individuals that they encounter.

William C. Spencer suggests that the typography of *Outer Dark*, by setting apart the 'grim triune' in italicised sections, means that 'they are out of bounds of normal humanity' and made to seem 'unreal, surreal or nightmarish' (71).⁵⁷ He points out that they are increasingly brought into the main narrative, so that by the time of their final encounter with Culla, the narrative describing them is not italicised. However, it is when they are in Culla's presence that the italics are no longer used, so that, as Spencer argues, what is also dropped is 'the illusion of the separateness of evil' (71): 'readers are subtly encouraged to see evil as a tendency within human beings, perhaps even as the essence of human beings' (73). When the leader tells Culla that 'if ye cain't name it, ye cain't say what it is', Spencer suggests that 'it is apparently in the interests of evil to foster a lack of communication and understanding', although it is possible to read this as an allusion to the novel itself and the depiction of evil contained within it, as an indeterminate, oblique and malevolent force, 'avenging angels', horsemen of the apocalypse, an unholy trinity, and so on (76). Spencer suggests that 'the most puzzling question of the novel' is why they do not murder Culla, proposing that McCarthy implies their motive is 'professional courtesy, a suggestion of Culla's evil nature' (72), citing Bell's assertion that 'the spectral magi treat Culla as an apprentice member of their group' (Bell, 41). It could be that Culla's punishment is to live, forever alienated and running from hostile communities, pursued by his guilt in the form of the nightmare threesome, or very simply because the men are indeed 'spectral' and, like any nightmare, the dreamer does not dream his own death.

The repression and self-division in this novel are characteristic of a Southern Gothic tradition. The monstrous double appears in the form of the 'grim triune', signifying

⁵⁶ John Ditsky, 'Further into Darkness: The Novels of Cormac McCarthy', *The Hollins Critic*, Vol. XVIII, No.2, (April, 1981): 1-11.

⁵⁷ William C. Spencer, 'Cormac McCarthy's Unholy Trinity: Biblical Parody in *Outer Dark*', *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995) pp.69-76.

duplicity and the evil nature of Culla. The landscapes are gothic in their desolation and sense of menace and the combination of supernatural and natural forces suggests social transgression and spiritual corruption. In *Outer Dark*, the gothic dynamic of ambivalence and the movement between terror and horror, involves the externalisation (in the landscape and the communities Culla encounters) and internalisation (in Culla's nightmares, emotional immobilisation and the 'apparition' of the 'grim triune') of sources of fear and anxiety. McCarthy's representations of cultural, familial and individual dissolution and fragmentation and his continued preoccupation with the boundary between imagination and reality, fascination and horror, social acceptance and self-alienation, owes much to a form of postmodern Gothic. The decay of family, culture and society is imaged in the horrors of individual alienation and the often grotesque hallucinations of his protagonists. As Fred Botting has suggested, the postmodern Gothic, is a 'hybrid mixing of forms and narratives' that has 'uncanny effects' which 'make narrative play and ambivalence another figure of horror, another duplicitous object to be expelled from proper orders of consciousness and representation' (169).⁵⁸ He notes the 'distinctly reflexive form of narrative anxiety' and the emergence of 'a threat of sublime excess, of a new darkness of multiple and labyrinthine narratives, in which human myths again dissolve' (170-1). The 'conventional disingenuity of the 'editor's' preface' to the Gothic story, which claims a distance from the present, as Botting points out (and this could be applied to Suttree's prologue in particular, and many of McCarthy's authorial interjections) 'ironically focuses attention on the relation of history and contemporaneity.' (171)

This is an element of the Gothic fiction that Jerrold E. Hogle considers in his examination of its 'roots in counterfeiting of the past' which enables it to play out processes of abjection, 'whereby the most multifarious, inconsistent and conflicted aspects of our beings in the West are 'thrown off' onto seemingly repulsive monsters or ghosts that both conceal and reveal this 'otherness' from our preferred selves as existing very much *within* ourselves' (295).⁵⁹ Hogle points out the centrality of 'abjection' to the Gothic, as it is defined in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. He contends that the Gothic 'depicts and enacts [the] very processes of abjection', asking

⁵⁸ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁵⁹ Jerrold E. Hogle, 'The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Progress of Abjection', in *A Companion to The Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

why the 'spectres of what is already counterfeit' (the figures of Frankenstein's monster, Dracula etc.) are repeatedly used 'for these kinds of abjective 'otherings'' (296). Hogle considers the layering of the 'counterfeit' in the Gothic which allows these narratives and films to deny or conceal the importance of the past to the present, although Hogle sees this as a particularly middle-class anxiety 'over usurping past aristocratic power- its fear of the 'father' one might say', adding that the gothic 'can simultaneously locate in an archaic 'buried darkness' a possible 'disintegration of the self' from its loss of older pre-definitions, a dissolution that can also be felt as a regression to the 'maternal blackness' – or a desire both to return to and to avoid reabsorption by the mother' (301). This abject fear of the maternal is discussed in the following chapter and is seen to be a fear which haunts all of McCarthy's male protagonists, in particular Culla Holme, Lester Ballard and Suttree.

While Lester Ballard may be McCarthy's protagonist least able to differentiate between life and death, the boundaries between corpses and live humans are in all of his novels 'at best shadowy and vague.' The influence of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Cinema Journal) on the development of *auteur* theory has been noted. The directors singled out by the critics at *Cahiers* were those who rejected Hollywood conventions (Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray, Robert Aldrich, John Huston, Edward Dmytryk and Samuel Fuller were among them) and it was often through the *film noir* genre that these directors gained attention. *Film noir* usually depicts a brutal and hostile world, anti-humanist and immoral, particularly in the frequent use of the subjective point of view of the criminal and/or pathological mind. Chronology is often skewed, so that there is an overall sense of incoherence in the narrative, reflecting the disintegrating mind of the criminal element and creating an atmosphere of anxiety, or even nightmare and terror, emphasised in the use of chiaroscuro lighting techniques.

The narration of *Outer Dark* owes a great deal to the conventions of film noir, moving from menacing understatement to the casual surrealism of the antebellum Southwest tale-teller, who is no longer surprised about either the weirdness or 'meanness' of humans. From the deadpan, laconic humour of Culla's various encounters - his 'meal' with the 'grim triune', his dialogues with the ferryman and the hogdrover, and the old man who regales him with stories of the dead mink trapper and other 'meanness', to the descriptions of their corpses which follow, death is the source of

the grim humour which pervades *Outer Dark*. Life, on the other hand, is not so amusing.

In his essay on *The Orchard Keeper*, David Paul Ragan begins with a statement which applies to all of McCarthy's novels, and which has been at the centre of any debate about his work: 'the crucial challenge in approaching Cormac McCarthy's demanding first novel [...] lies in the reader locating a centre of value, a source of moral authority' (17).⁶⁰ Winchell compares McCarthy with Faulkner and finds the former lacking:

Faulkner was at heart a moralist who believed in an irreducible core of human dignity. His works possess a moral center, either explicit or implicit, that judges the evil and depravity of the world. In McCarthy's universe that center either doesn't exist or cannot hold. (294)

Winchell finally drives his point home by suggesting that 'Had McCarthy written *The Sound and The Fury*, Dilsey would have been gang raped by a bunch of Klansmen on the way home from church' (294-5).⁶¹ Edwin Arnold, on the other hand, does not agree with critics such as Winchell or Vereen Bell's assertion that McCarthy's work is nihilistic and devoid of moral order or meaning:

McCarthy's characters are clearly motivated by those emotions we all share – love, loneliness, guilt, shame, hope, despair [...] here is in each novel a moral gauge by which we, the readers, are able to judge the failure or limited success of McCarthy's characters [...] there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious. (46)⁶²

Tim Parrish, in reading McCarthy with reference to Flannery O'Connor and Harold Bloom, counters Arnold's 'too hopeful claim' by suggesting that 'McCarthy's characters do not live in a moral void [...] rather, their actions express the blood

⁶⁰ David Paul Ragan, 'Values and Structure in *The Orchard Keeper*', *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne T. Luce, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) pp. 17-28.

⁶¹ Mark Royden Winchell, 'Inner Dark: or, The Place of Cormac McCarthy', *Southern Review* 26

⁶² Edwin T. Arnold, 'Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables', *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold & Dianne T. Luce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) pp. 45-71.

wisdom, so to speak, of individuals who have been baptized into the American religion' (34-5).⁶³

In his writing on 'The Human Comedy of Cormac McCarthy', Wade Hall suggests that one thing which distinguishes animals from humans is that 'only humans can be humorous, for only we have the intellectual capacity for choice that makes us accountable for our thoughts and deeds' (59).⁶⁴ In *Outer Dark*, Culla's 'choice' turns out to be tragic rather than humorous. However, as Hall proposes 'Even the bloodbath McCarthy called *Blood Meridian* may properly be called a comedy of life, which means that death, its main subject, is life's ultimate absurdity and hence the ultimate comic character' (59):

Like serious comedians from Aristophanes to Dante to Faulkner, McCarthy records real life in a documentary fashion that only fiction can do so well. Reading one of McCarthy's novels [...] can lead to disgust and denial. But this master of the macabre asks, "You don't believe me? Then look at human history. Better yet: Look inside yourself. Can't you do better? I believe you can". (59)

The assertion that McCarthy is a prescriptive comedian and that his macabre humour is designed to prompt moral self-examination in the reader is questionable. It seems that McCarthy neither believes (nor cares?) that his readers can 'do better' and much of his humour springs from the fact that his characters fail to recognise this also. After all, he told Richard Woodward in his only interview to date, that 'There's no such thing as a life without bloodshed [...] I think that the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea'.⁶⁵

The seemingly irreconcilable differences between these critics and their polarised opinions about the 'moral centre', or lack of one, in McCarthy's work, can be attributed at least in part, to the presence of a sadistic narrator who delights in the absurdity of death. Writing about Flannery O'Connor's work, Claire Kahane has

⁶³ Tim Parrish, 'The Killer Wears The Halo: Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, and the American Religion', *Sacred Violence: The Novels of Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Wade Hall & Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press: 1995) pp. 28-42.

⁶⁴ Wade Hall, 'The Human Comedy of Cormac McCarthy', *Sacred Violence: The Novels of Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Wade Hall & Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995) pp. 49-60.

proposed that an ambivalence about the parent-child relationship is reflected in the presence of a particular narrator:

There is [...] a sadistic quality to the [O'Connor] narrator, who acts as an archaic superego, a primitive internalized image of the parent forcing the characters through the triadic ritual of sin, humiliation and redemption by wit as well as by plot structure. (p.121)⁶⁶

There is a similar narrator at work in McCarthy's fiction, the difference being that more often than not, the 'redemption' element of the 'triadic ritual' is absent. As noted, McCarthy's equivocal endings mean that it seems that it is not a moral centre that is lacking, but a moral ending. Just as O'Connor's work often appears to almost overwhelm its religious intent and moral message, in McCarthy's novels what appears entirely bereft of any morality creates a need for some. O'Connor openly acknowledged the importance of naming evil and making the devil work for her in her fiction, although in McCarthy's world, the confrontation with evil leads not to self-knowledge, as he inverts the whole notion of the Fortunate Fall so appealing to generations of writers. Patricia Smith Yaeger also identifies a 'deeply sadistic' narrator in O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, suggesting that the author 'then invents characters who serve as a foil for this voice – who are always shadows of themselves, corporeal remnant, feminine or masculine others to pillory and punish – characters who must run from the sound of O'Connor's voice, but are always chastened by the force of her prose', which sounds very like McCarthy.⁶⁷ She points to the difficulty of being able to 'sanitize' many of the images O'Connor presents in her writing, for example the description of the infanticide in *Wise Blood*, so that grotesque anecdotes offer 'a clean, pure, uplifting vision of the morality to be attained when reading O'Connor's fiction' (91). O'Connor acknowledged a fascination with death and corpses and

⁶⁵ Richard B. Woodward, 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction', *New York Times Magazine* (April 19th, 1992): 28-30+

⁶⁶ Claire Kahane, 'Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision', *American Literature* 46 (Winter 1974): 54-67.

⁶⁷ Patricia Smith Yaeger, 'The Woman Without Any Bones: Anti-Angel Aggression in *Wise Blood*', *New Essays on Wise Blood*, ed. Michael Kreyling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) pp. 91-116. The example Smith Yaeger uses to illustrate the difficulty of 'sanitizing' many of her images is O'Connor's description of infanticide in *Wise Blood*, a crime which haunts the murderous parents. It is the death of the baby in *Outer Dark* that has caused similar revulsion.

what Smith Yaeger describes as a 'nearly clinical obsession with violence' (103).

O'Connor has written of the need to escape from the pervasive influence of Faulkner on southern writing and criticism, although she is also a writer with whom McCarthy has inevitably been compared. However, while O'Connor admitted to employing a strategy of violence and shock in her 'nine stories of original sin', *A Good Man is Hard To Find*, her intention is finally a corrective one in which the disorientated reader will be forced into a reassessment of values and identity: 'You divert his attention, then you clobber him, and he never knows what hit him'.⁶⁸ The 'grim triune' exemplify McCarthy's use of 'shock tactics' on both his characters and the reader, as it is the structure of the narrative that unsettles and the omniscient and sadistic narrator who recounts their acts of murder, which provides the shock. However, the 'grim triune' do not shock so much as infiltrate and insinuate themselves within Culla's life. Their combination of stealth and brutality deeply embeds them in Culla's narrative and psychology. O'Connor's stories incorporate violence and black humour, grotesque and freakish characters, and are frequently narrated by a fundamentalist Protestant voice, whose vision is undermined by the content. Furthermore, they are deeply embedded in the South. She wrote that 'the only thing that keeps me from being a Catholic writer (in the narrow sense) is being a Southerner', and she articulates the subjectivity of various characters who are often deliberate 'instruments' of 'distortion' and 'exaggeration', and who reflect the social, political and religious consciousness of the South.⁶⁹ She also wrote of James Joyce's Catholicism which he 'can't get rid of [...] no matter what he does', and the same could be said of McCarthy.⁷⁰ At the end of *Outer Dark*, for example, Culla is described as 'gracelorn' and Rinthy as moving in a 'frail agony of grace' (241,52). While O'Connor has written of the need to shock the reader into a reaction by either surprise or repulsion, although usually both, the intention is to exert a corrective

⁶⁸ Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* (The Woman's Press: 1980) Introd. Lisa Alther

⁶⁹ From 'The Catholic Novelist in The Protestant South', cited in *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor*, R.H. Brinkmeyer, (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

⁷⁰ Cited in *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979) p.130.

influence, whereas McCarthy's writing brings about a lingering sense of horror and futility - a combination far from any notions of redemption or 'violent catharsis.' ⁷¹

Wade Hall's suggestion about the absurdity of 'death' in *Blood Meridian* is accurate, although death has been the 'ultimate comic character' in all of McCarthy's previous novels, especially *Outer Dark*. In the March 1961 edition of *Commentary*, Philip Roth proclaimed that the levels of depravity that are encountered daily in real life were in danger of making novelists redundant:

The American writer in the middle of the twentieth-century has his hands full in trying to understand, then describe much of the American reality. It stupifies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelists.

When Truman Capote wrote *In Cold Blood* (1966), which he christened his 'non-fiction novel', about the brutal and seemingly motiveless slaughter of the Clutter family, there was inevitably divided critical response to a form of journalism mutated into fiction. E.L. Doctorow announced in 1975 'There is no more fiction or non-fiction - only narrative', and by the time of Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), an epic account of serial killer Gary Gilmore and his insistence on being executed, Roth's prophecy had been made almost eerily prescient.

In *The Independent* of the 25th March, 1999, Richard Lloyd Parry described his recent experience with a tribe of cannibals in Borneo⁷²:

The heads had been taken just a few hours before and they looked [...] they looked like all the other heads I had seen.

They were a middle-aged couple [...] their ears and lips had been shaved off with machetes, giving them a snarling, sub-human look [...] I find myself at a loss over what to say. The most devastating thing about cannibalism and head hunting is not the fear and the blood, but the terrible, profound banality [...]

⁷¹ Martin Scorsese has also maintained that it is his Catholicism which informs every aspect of his films, including the 'idea of creating a violent catharsis.' He has spoken of the importance of the theme of 'redemption' in his films, and proposes that 'violence is a form of expression [...] It's how people live.' He has been criticised for his deferral of judgement 'when confronted by a sick society', and it has been suggested that 'the impact of his films is emotional, even visceral: the intellect is scarcely engaged.' *Scorsese on Scorsese*, eds. David Thompson & Ian Christie, (London & New York: Faber & Faber, 1979).

⁷² Richard Lloyd Parry, 'Apocalypse Now' in *The Thursday Review*, *The Independent*, 25th March, 1999

But who would do this even to an animal? Decapitation and cannibalism are deeply symbolic practices, the ultimate humiliation of a defeated enemy. Cut someone's head off and you reduce him to a pantomime mask. This is the point about severed heads – they don't look fearful so much as comical, like Halloween pumpkins. (1)⁷³

In *Blood Meridian*, the Comanche raiders are described as 'death hilarious', although the carnage they leave behind is far from amusing. (BM,53) It is immediately following this that the kid meets up with Sproule. They come across several corpses 'in all attitudes of death [...] naked and swollen and strange', many dead animals and 'a bush that was hung with dead babies [...] bald and pale and bloated.' (57, 58) It is at this point that Sproule tells the kid that he has consumption, adding without any apparent irony, 'I come out here for my health.' (58) They enter a town 'in which there was a bazarre in progress [...] a primitive circus', where they come upon Captain White's head in 'a container with hair afloat and eyes turned upward in a pale face': 'The kid looked into the drowned and sightless eyes of his old commander. He looked about at the villagers and at the soldiers, their eyes all upon him, and he spat and wiped his mouth. He aint no kin to me, he said.' (69-70) Shortly after this, the kid comes across 'a boy from Georgia', who articulates an attitude to death invoked by the numerous grotesque descriptions of murder and scalping: 'I was afraid I was goin to die and then I was afraid I wasn't' (70). McCarthy's first amusing corpse seen in close-up is that of Kenneth Rattner in *The Orchard Keeper*. By the time of *Child of God*, several people have died in McCarthy's first two books, and in his third he creates a comedy around the perversions of a necrophiliac, combining corpses and comedy in the most extreme form. Suttree's attempts to help Weird Leonard dispose of his father's body in the river ('They laid him across the seat, one leg already reaching over the side into the river as if the old man couldn't wait', 251), and the drowned man facedown in the river whom the *gitano* describes to Billy in *The*

⁷³ Contained within one recent newspaper (*The Independent on Saturday*, January 30th, 1999), there is a report of a Nigerian man who was arrested 'in possession of roasted human limbs', and an article about the burning of an old lady in Pakistan - 'a witch-hunt, like in Europe centuries ago':

A group of men dragged her to the village square. Her fingers were cut off and her eyes put out, probably with a stick. Two men poured petrol over and lit it. Other villagers than stoked the flames and tyre filled with kerosene were dropped over her. When the police arrived, around noon, Muradam Mai was very dead and a crowd of 70 gloating men stood around her corpse. "She burnt the Koran, so we burnt her", they told officers. (14)

There is nothing funny about this at all. In McCarthy's account, the emphasis would be on the 'probably' (a seemingly banal detail that a stick, as opposed to what?, was used) and on the absurdly tautologous 'very dead'. The point is that these things do happen – seventy men form a lynch mob and torture an old lady to death in the name of their God – and McCarthy does not shrink from this, but at the same time he does not offer resolutions.

Crossing, 'as if he were looking for something on the river's floor' (408), are further examples of how death is indeed 'death hilarious' in McCarthy's world and corpses take on a life of their own.

While all of McCarthy's novels contain many examples of his 'humorous corpses', in *Outer Dark*, they are strung (in most cases, quite literally) throughout the narrative. Citing the example of the end of *Child of God*, when the farmer's plough and his mules are swallowed up into the earth which then reveals Ballard's house of horror, Wade Hall proposes that 'a vital aid in McCarthy's fact-finding literary mission is humour, an ancient present avenue to human truth' (49).⁷⁴ He places McCarthy within the tradition of the Roman poet Juvenal in his attack on human nature with 'bitter, devastating satire' and likens the experience of reading McCarthy to 'reading an Ionesco-like script of a grotesque theatre of the absurd' (49-50). Hall proposes that 'humor rips aside our civilized veneer and shows us how ridiculous and mean and ugly and selfish and violent we are much - if not most - of the time, not honest or heroic or kind, as we would like to think' (50). McCarthy does have obvious roots in the satiric tradition and closely resembles the seventeenth century dramatist Ben Jonson. McCarthy's treatment of death and corpses and of the hypocrisy and corruption of the law brings to mind Jonson's *Volpone*, just as Ballard's grotesque *carpe diem* to his corpses is like Volpone's 'Song to Celia'. Both writers make the point repeatedly that the most subversive, ghastly, final form of humour is to laugh at ourselves at the moment when the illusion has been shattered – the moment of death. As Hall suggests, it is the 'minefield' between the ideal and actuality and façade and substance' which provides 'the fertile ground for humor':

It is McCarthy's killing field which he tills with deadly accuracy. When a novelist writes frankly about the way people look and talk and behave, he produces fiction that is true and humor that is natural and organic. This is the essence of Cormac McCarthy's vocation as a humorist. It is an element as basic to his novels as the air we breathe. (51)

While this is certainly true, it is important to note that his characters are usually unwittingly humorous in these early novels, and it is only in *Suttree* that characters

⁷⁴ Wade Hall, 'The Human Comedy of Cormac McCarthy' in *Sacred Violence* (Texas Western Press, 1995).

are deliberately funny to the extent that there is a sense that their 'wit' becomes an essential part of what holds the 'community of the damned' together. However, Hall's further contention that the reader 'will find few quick laughs in his fiction' is not necessarily the case, although because these 'quick laughs' are centred on the many humorous corpses which litter his prose, they are also very dark.

Just as 'death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape' in *Blood Meridian* (48), it is also the defining feature of the landscape of nightmare that is *Outer Dark*, from the decaying 'seething' crowd in the 'pit of hopeless dark' of the beginning of the novel, to the death of the child at the end. The first death is the squire, who is 'hoisted' by his own brush-hook, an element of ironically apt self-inflicted punishment that occurs in many of the deaths, anticipated in the self-fulfilling prophecies of the narrator. Once more, the narrator has hinted at his demise as he describes the squire watching Culla set off to chop his logs: 'He stood rigid and upright in the coffin-sized doorway' (45). When Culla reaches Cheatham, he is propelled to the front of the angry crowd that surrounds the corpses of the disinterred bodies. In one coffin is a half-naked man:

Someone should have cared more than to leave an old man half-naked in his burial box beneath these eyes and such sun. But that was not all. Across the desiccated chest lay a black arm [...] he could see that the old man shared his resting place with a negro sexton whose head had been cut half off and who clapped him in an embrace of lazarous depravity. (88)

The sense of life in death in the 'embrace of lazarous depravity', and the 'glaring immobility' of the sun overhead evoke a sense of the stasis in motion of death. As Culla runs from the angry mob, he witnesses the youthful ebullience and energy of life as 'on the creek a colony of small boys erupted from a limestone ledge like basking seals', and then there follows the description of the hanging bodies '*of two itinerant millhands*':

They spun slowly in turn from left to right and back again. As if charged with some watch. That and the slight flutter of their hair in the morning wind was all the movement there was about them. (95)

Again, the squire's prophetic words to Culla that 'shiftlessness is a sin' is charged with significance, as the lynch mob are incited by the bearded leader to hang these

'itinerant' workers, echoing the antagonism shown towards Culla as an 'outsider'. An old man tells Culla about the minktrapper who was found having been bitten by a snake in a rigid posture, 'stiff as a locust post', which made him look as though he were praying: 'they said they had to break ever bone in his body to get him laid out in his box. Coroner took a six pound maul to him' (120). The old man keeps insisting that Culla stay, telling him twice 'I wouldn't turn Satan away for a drink'. However, in an unusually prescient moment for Culla, he seems to foresee his own death at the hands of the old man: 'The praying mink trapper materialized for him out of the glare of the sun like some trembling penitent boiling in the heat there, a shimmering image beyond which the shape of the forest rose likewise veered and buckling' (125). The same old man then witnesses his own disembowelment at the hands of the bearded leader in the guise of a minister:

Minister? he said. Minister? His assassin smiled upon him with bright teeth, the faces of the other two peering from either shoulder in consubstantial monstrosity, a grim triune that watched wordless, affable. He looked down at the man's fist cupped against his stomach. The fist rose in an eruption of severed viscera until the blade seized in the junction of his breastbone and he stood disembowelled. He reached to put one hand on the doorjamb. He took a step backwards as if to let them pass. (128)

McCarthy seems to carry over the Southwest tall tale humour, with its tradition of exaggeration and embellishment combined with a degree of macabre gore, to the depiction of actual events. So the old man, who has told of the fate of the mink trapper with relish, has his death narrated in a manner which simultaneously provides the reader with the facts and hints at the way in which it will later be told. The absurdly comic detail of him taking a step backwards 'as if to let them pass' highlights the irony of his desire to be hospitable, 'I wouldn't turn Satan away for a drink'.

The moment when the child is killed is probably, as Mark Roydon Winchell suggests, 'one of the most disgusting and harrowing scenes in contemporary literature' (299):

Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a long cat's eye slant and malevolent and a dark smile erupted on the child's throat and went all broken down the front of it. The child made no sound. It hung there with one eye glazing over like a wet stone and the black blood pumping down its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. He was drooling and making little whimpering noises in his throat. He knelt with his hands outstretched and his nostrils rimpled delicately. The man handed him the child and he

seized it up, looked once at Holme with witless eyes, and buried his moaning face in his throat. (235)

McCarthy's vocabulary, the 'wink' of the blade, the cut like a 'smile' on the child's throat and the repellent, almost refined anticipation of the cannibalistic idiot as 'his nostrils rimples delicately', seems a precursor to the horror scenes of Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of The Lambs* or of the unnamed serial killer of *Seven*. It is made more disgusting by the fact that the reader has been encouraged to find the moment of death humorous and to 'laugh' at corpses.

The tinker's murder is not described, but by the time the reader reaches the narrator's account of him greeting the three men, the outcome is clear and no description is necessary, further than the three simple sentences which follow:

The three men when they came might have risen from the ground. The tinker could not account for them. They gathered about the fire and looked down at him. One had a rifle and was smiling. Howdy, the tinker said. (129)

The description of the tinker's corpse, the final one of many in this novel, occurs between the last descriptions of Rinthy as she sleeps in the glade beside the 'little calcined ribcage' of her child, and Culla, as he shambles along the road to nowhere. This is particularly apt, given that it was the tinker who had not only come between them in the first place by taking the baby, but also the person who had deprived Rinthy of her child when he discovered its parentage. When Rinthy finally finds the tinker and offers to pay him for her son, he articulates an embittered need for the child as recompense for the rejection he has experienced: 'I give a lifetime wanderin in a country where I was despised. Can you give that? I give forty years strapped in front of a cart like a mule till I couldn't stand straight to be hanged' (192). Of course, in the world of *Outer Dark*, the tinker's suggestions that he 'couldn't stand straight to be hanged' and that Rinthy would 'see [him] dead' before she would see her child again are unwittingly prophetic. When he tells her 'I've seen the meanness of humans till I don't know why God ain't put out the sun and gone away', his words echo Culla's nightmare which begins the novel.⁷⁵ He is portrayed as a grotesquely comic character

⁷⁵There is a recurrent play on the words son/sun/Son throughout the novel, combining notions of sight/insight, the association of the sun with phallic masculinity and paternity, and the suggestion of the Son of God.

from his first appearance, 'rattling his cart in drunken charivari' (6), he appears on a bridge 'with a sprightly hop like a stage dwarf after the main company has departed' (20), and later Rinthy watches him drinking whiskey: 'She watched his slack throat pump and his eyes tighten. He lowered the jar again and said Whoof and clapped the lid back on as if something might escape' (188).

Mark Royden Winchell suggests that 'if there is a message' in *The Orchard Keeper*, 'it is profoundly naturalistic' and points to the 'increasing horror of McCarthy's vision, or at least the increasing gothicism of his technique' by comparing the fence which has 'grewed up' through the elmtree in the prologue of the first, with the description of the dead tinker towards the end of *Outer Dark*:⁷⁶

The tinker in his burial tree was a wonder to the birds. The vultures that came by day to nose with their hooked beaks among his buttons and pockets like outrageous pets soon left him naked of his rags and flesh alike. Black mandrake sprang beneath the tree as it will where the seed of the hanged falls and in spring a new branch pierced his breast and flowered in a green boutonniere perennial beneath his yellow grin. (238)

Only in McCarthy's prose could this become, in many ways, the tinker's finest hour. As usual, here McCarthy combines humour, the vultures like 'outrageous pets', the flowering of a 'green boutonniere perennial' and the tinker's 'yellow grin', with the grotesque suggestion that his 'seed' has pollinated the black mandrake which now pierces his chest (perhaps a suggestion also of Christ's stigmata), in a macabre parallel with the theme of incest.

Most of the characters in this novel appear to conform to 'the quintessential state of primordial non-identity', identified by Hogle, which is 'the condition of being [...] half dead and half alive from the start and thus undecidably in motion between logically contradictory states, including life and death' (295).⁷⁷ This is exemplified in the many similes which 'freeze' the narrative, the description of the old man in his 'coffin-sized' doorway, and in the final description of Culla as he reaches a swamp:

⁷⁶ Winchell, Mark Royden, 'Inner Dark: or, The Place of Cormac McCarthy', *The Southern Review* 26, April 1990:293-309

⁷⁷ Jerrold. E. Hogle, 'The Gothic Ghost of The Counterfeit' in *A Companion to the Gothic*, 2000.

And that was all. Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned. A faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth's curve. (242)

Survival is an achievement in itself for most of McCarthy's protagonists. *In Outer Dark*, McCarthy explores the close proximity of life and death and of horror and humour, and in the process, his novel reverberates with gothic comedy in the midst of its desolation.

In this chapter, McCarthy's novels have been examined as they reveal the influence of those writers he admires: the position of the reader as 'spectator' has been analysed by a close reading of the scene in which Kenneth Rattner is killed; the intense voyeurism of *Child of God* has been linked to contemporary film theorists' analysis of cinematic identification and 'scopophilia'; finally, the 'shadowy and vague' boundary which separates life and death has been explored in *Outer Dark*. The figure of the corpse is an integral part of all of these narratives, from the corpse of Rattner which haunts McCarthy's first novel, to the numerous corpses of his later novels. This also highlights the influence of the Gothic narrative tradition, not only in the 'triple linking of death, the female and the aesthetic' which David Punter has identified as taking place 'naturally on the terrain of the Gothic' (a point which is explored in the following chapter), but also as it relates to the 'master narrative of Western culture': 'a narrative of abjection and necrophilia, of the disavowal of the body' (101). In drawing attention to the 'body as a *topos*' within the Gothic, and the repetition and proliferation of images of Gothic pathologies, Punter makes an astute comment on the depiction of the female body in the Gothic narrative and the resulting position of the reader in relation to this, which appropriately leads into the following chapter:

Power, force, violence; passivity, the swoon, sickness unto death: [...] these are the terms which, correctly named and arranged, form the tombstones below which 'Western culture' buries 'its' women and which is now to fall on the heads of the writer as gravedigger, or patriarchy as the Covering Cherub, as the signature of the crypt. We could add to this the whole problematic around these dealings with the female body as both death and exposure, as the consigning of the female body into a space of terminal privacy at the same time as exposing it to the full public gaze of the reader as anatomist's pupil. (103)

Chapter 3

The Representation of the Female in Cormac McCarthy's Novels

**“Not Simply A Battle Over A Whore”: A Problem with Women in
Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction**

In the world of McCarthy’s fiction, women are generally punished for their sexuality, and delineated by their depiction as either ‘angel’ or ‘whore’. The intertextuality of McCarthy’s novels is nowhere more apparent than in the representation of the female. However, to dismiss McCarthy’s female characters as representative of patriarchy’s archetypes, is to ignore their often considerable influence and power in his fiction. While the images are of both suffering and endurance, in the *matres dolorosae*, or of an aberrant, dangerous and deviant sexuality, in the many prostitutes who appear in these novels, the negative portraits of misogyny’s stereotypes expose a vulnerability. The representation of a masculine subjectivity in crisis is considered, although it appears that for McCarthy’s male protagonists, masculinity itself is a crisis, for which femininity is to blame. This will be examined as the result of a pathological fear of the maternal, which is exhibited and disavowed in different ways by all of McCarthy’s protagonists.

In the only interview Cormac McCarthy has given, he told Richard Woodward of the *New York Times* magazine that the novel can ‘encompass all the various disciplines and interests of humanity’¹. Woodward appears to refute this as he places McCarthy as both the ‘rightful heir to the Southern Gothic tradition’ and ‘a man’s novelist whose apocalyptic vision rarely focuses on women’, thereby assuming the exclusion of half of ‘humanity’. However, some of the ‘gothic’ elements of McCarthy’s work can be directly linked to the representation of the female, as Nell Sullivan has pointed out in her essay ‘The Evolution of the Dead Girlfriend Motif in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*.’² Here, Sullivan proposes that Edgar Allan Poe’s Madeline Usher is ‘the model for all McCarthy’s major female characters’ and that in most of McCarthy’s novels, ‘the theme of female sexuality is inextricably bound up with death and,

¹‘Venomous Fiction’, Richard B. Woodward, *New York Times Magazine*, (April 19th, 1992):28-31+

² Nell Sullivan, ‘The Evolution of the Dead Girlfriend Motif in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*’, in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rich Wallach (Manchester University Press: 2000)pp68-78

therefore, posed as a source of masculine dread' (68-9). Furthermore, Woodward states that 'McCarthy doesn't write about sex, love or domestic issues', although he suggests that *All the Pretty Horses*, which was due to be published shortly after this interview, would appeal to a broader audience:

[...] an adventure story about a Texas boy who rides off to Mexico with his buddy, is unusually sweet-tempered for him - like Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer on horseback. The earnest nature of the young characters and the lean, swift story, reminiscent of early Hemingway, should bring McCarthy a wider audience at the same time it secures his masculine mystique. (30)

Woodward's predictions about the success of *All the Pretty Horses* proved to be accurate, as it became the highest selling novel McCarthy has written. However, Woodward's assumption that this novel would secure McCarthy's 'masculine mystique' appears to conflate the reclusive lifestyle of McCarthy which endows him as a writer with the allure of mystery, the gender of both the novel's protagonist and the writer, and the notion of an impenetrable masculinity which is at the core of his work. Although McCarthy's protagonists are predominantly male, McCarthy's '(apocalyptic) vision' frequently 'focuses' on women and, furthermore, he repeatedly writes about 'sex, love or domestic issues', although usually from the perspective of his male protagonists.

Leslie Fiedler has famously written of the dual concepts of love and death as they are contained in the American novel and the displacement of male heterosexual love onto incestuous or 'buddy' relationships.³ While the displacement of male heterosexual relationships means that the female becomes redundant, in McCarthy's case, she is also usually either physically repulsive, an old crone/ witch or prostitute or psychologically flawed, condemned eternally to the status of *mater dolorosa*. Fiedler also outlines the American novel as being about 'adventure and isolation plus an escape at one point or another, a flight from society to an island, a wood, the underworld, a mountain fastness - some place, at least, where mothers do not come' (25). However, in the minds of McCarthy's protagonists, 'mother' is never far away. Perhaps the most astonishing instance of the dual concepts of love and death is found

³ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966) 2nd Edition {1st pub.1960}

in *Child of God*, in which the protagonist Lester Ballard perversely combines love and death in necrophilia, although the 'nativity scenes' in McCarthy's work more closely resemble death and it is a death linked to the horror of creativity, of both paternity and maternity.

Robert Jarrett proposes that a feminist critique of McCarthy's fiction 'would surely note the relative absence of fully imagined female characters and the relegation of important female characters (for example, Rinthy Holme in *Outer Dark*) to the function of maternal object':

[...] the essential patriarchal shape of McCarthy's characterizations, plots, and style can hardly be questioned, although the portrayal of women in the *Border Trilogy* would require a reassessment of feminist critiques, given the crucial role of Alfonsita in *All the Pretty Horses* and the novel's ironizing of Cole's romantic conception of Alejandra as the beloved. (148)⁴

As Jarrett points out, most female figures who are portrayed as sympathetic characters, which generally means in McCarthy's work worthy of male heterosexual desire, are either killed or exiled. Ironically, three out of four of these are in the 'Western' novels, a genre which has traditionally excluded women, except as a token presence to bolster the macho image of the men who defend them, adding to their 'masculine mystique'. Alejandra, the daughter of the owner of the ranch who has a brief affair with John Grady Cole in *All The Pretty Horses*, the young girl who befriends Boyd in *The Crossing* and Magdalena, the epileptic prostitute who John Cole intends to marry in *Cities of the Plain*: none of them survive the course of the novel. In the first, their relationship results in John's imprisonment, in the second novel, following his separation from his brother Billy when he leaves with the girl, Boyd is killed and in the final part of the trilogy, John dies in Billy's arms following his fight with Eduardo, the enraged pimp who had ordered Magdalena's throat to be cut. Ironically, it is in this final novel, in a genre which usually rejects domestic spaces, that John Cole labours to create a home for himself and Magdalena. This is a surprisingly sentimental image for a writer who is, as Terri Witek has suggested 'himself a firm proponent of flight'⁵, and who in previous novels has explored

⁴Robert L Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, (New York: Twayne Publishers) 1997

⁵Terri Witek, 'Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces', *The Southern Review* 30 (January, 1994): 136-42

'without sentimentality' the 'painful dilemma' brought about by the fact that although Americans 'are committed to flight, they remain equally bound to an idea of home':

McCarthy is [...] at his most fierce and convincing when taking on such conventional images of community life as the spaces we choose to call home. From the first, Americans have made metaphors of a collective identity, and dwelling places have always been fashioned as emblems of the family. (136)

Domestic spaces are clearly also emblematic of a 'feminised' sphere, although the relegation and confinement of women within domestic spaces in McCarthy's novels, appears to simultaneously condemn them to the status of *mater dolorosa*. However, McCarthy's male protagonists are seen to suffer as much from their inability to confront their losses, as his writing appears to project a sense of male guilt about abandonment at the same time as a dread of domestic confinement.

Witek suggests: 'When powerful women inhabit Cormac McCarthy's texts, they often act as catalysts for destruction: ensconced at home, they become inadvertent homewreckers. A dark reversal of the Victorian era's Angel in the House [...] One of the reasons men so early and guiltily leave home in McCarthy's books is because of these women's power, derived from a pain so great that it becomes too much for the men who are implicated in their grief' (139). Certainly, for Mildred Rattner (in *The Orchard Keeper*), Mrs Harrogate (mother of Gene in *Suttree*), Mrs. Suttree (both mother and her daughter-in-law), Rinthy Holme (in *Outer Dark*), and a host of other more minor characters, the 'power' *appears* to lie entirely with the abandoning males. However, the powerful effect of female grief which forces men 'to leave so early and guiltily', implies that once again it is the fault of the female, and this is examined in the light of the long-term effect on these men. It is possible to detect in all of McCarthy's fiction an almost pathological fear of not only the 'monstrous-feminine' but also the aggrieved *mater dolorosa*. The association of the female with nature in McCarthy's work highlights not only the ambivalence in McCarthy's representation of female subjectivity, but also the crisis of the male ego when confronted with images of female sexuality, particularly the maternal.

The previous chapter considered the Gothic in McCarthy's narratives. In *Postcolonial Imaginings: Visions of a New World Order*, David Punter draws on his previous work

on Gothic 'pathologies' in fiction to examine the figure of the monster in postcolonial narratives, and the connection between 'making monsters and the exercise of power in society' (110).⁶ He considers the way in which the monster (using Frankenstein's monster as an example) is powerless, and more recently read as feminised and 'as a representation of childhood experience'. He notes that 'animism is ubiquitous within the postcolonial', citing McCarthy's border trilogy as 'one of the most astonishing recent texts that deals in this animistic' which emphasises that the 'apparent donning of power signified' by animism 'is not a putting on of power, it is a doomed attempt at rescue and salvation' (149). Certainly, this is an aspect of McCarthy's melancholic pastoralism that has been noted in the first chapter, although Punter does not expand on his brief mention of praise for McCarthy's animism. However, he does go on to discuss 'becoming animal, becoming woman' and 'the rhetoric of damage and weakness [...] the anxiety of becoming woman precisely coded as the destruction of relations attendant on the masculinist, phallic power of the western imperialist' (150). The 'becoming animal, becoming woman' will be addressed in this chapter with reference to the problematic conflation of animal and female in all of McCarthy's novels, the 'monstrous-feminine' of *Child of God* and the representation of the Native Americans as 'zoological', 'childlike', and feminised as the monstrous 'other' in *Blood Meridian*.

This chapter will address the representation of the female in McCarthy's work chronologically, although discussion of each novel can be usefully applied to his work as a whole. As the following outline suggests, each section builds on aspects addressed in the previous novel(s): a brief preliminary consideration of McCarthy's earliest depiction of animal-as-female in *The Orchard Keeper*; the threatening imaging of the female as both the 'womb' and the 'grave' in *Outer Dark*; the 'vagina dentata' of the 'monstrous-feminine' in *Child of God*; the revenge of the *mater dolorosa* and the relationship between sexuality and economics in *Suttree*; and finally,

⁶ David Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings: Visions of a New World Order*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

the 'erotics of culture' and the threat to both men and women inherent in the homosocial and imperialist world of the western genre.

**The Feline and the Feminine: An Early Depiction of the
Animal-as-Female in *The Orchard Keeper*.**

In *All The Pretty Horses*, during John Grady's conversations with Don Hector, the narrator describes the four cats 'taking the sun' outside, a seemingly unimportant detail. However, when Don Hector asks him why he is there, John Grady 'looked down the table where the shadows of the sunning cats sat in a row like cutout cats all leaning slightly aslant' and replies, 'I just wanted to see the country' (113-4). However, the reader knows that this is not completely true, and after some further questions on horsebreeding which John Grady answers to the satisfaction of his boss, John Grady makes the fatal mistake of lying to Don Hector:

The hacendado leaned back in his chair. One of the cats rose and stretched.
You rode here from Texas.
Yessir.
Just the two of you?
John Grady looked at the table. The paper cat stepped thin and slant among the shapes of cats thereon. He looked up again. Yessir, he said. Just me and him. (116)

This is just one of many examples of the animal-as-female symbolism which pervades McCarthy's novels. The cats signify danger and are also associated with Alejandra (128-9). The association of bats with disease and prostitution, and of hawks with death will be discussed with reference to *Suttree* and *Child of God*. Cats appear in all of the novels, symbolising the supernatural, danger and even death, particularly in their association with the female 'witch' figures. McCarthy's first novel exemplifies what becomes a pervasive element of his later fiction.

Towards the end of *The Orchard Keeper*, Arthur Ownby tells John Wesley that he thinks it was a cat which has attacked the mink caught in the boy's trap:

Cats is smart, allowed the old man. Course it could have been a common everyday housecat [...] Folks think they ain't (smart) on account of you cain't learn em nothin, but what it is is that they won't learn nothin. They too smart. Knowed a man oncet had a cat could talk [...] that's one cat I kept shy of. I knowed what it was. Lots of times that happens, a body dies and their soul takes up in a cat for a spell. Specially somebody drowned or like that where they don't get buried proper. (227)

As Arthur Ownby battles through the storm 'silent and catlike [...] he is down. A clash of shields rings and Valkyrie descend with cat's cries to bear him away' (88). Old Arthur Ownby is the most closely associated with cats, although this is through not only the articulation of his beliefs about reincarnation, but the association of his wife with the panther in the story he tells John and his friends.⁷

Marion Sylder is associated with criminal activity and sexual adventure, frequenting pubs and brothels:

Drinking, courting with ribald humour the country slatterns that hung on the city's perimeter like lost waifs; his favourite the illshapen: Wretha, whitelisle uniform, thighs the dimensions of oiltuns. The too thin. A nameless one, bony rump that cut into his leg. Experimentally he wet a finger and cut a white streak on the grime of her neck. (29)

This could be said to be a typical description of one 'type' of women who inhabit McCarthy's novels and initially, it would seem that the representation of women falls clearly into the division of 'angel' or 'whore'. This is exemplified in the woman whom Sylder marries, nowhere named, but who administers to his wounds with silent recrimination and maternal solicitude when he returns from his accident in the creek with John Wesley. They first go to the Tipton's house where June Tipton's wife is docile, subservient and 'sipping her coffee demurely' (106). Mrs Sylder is described as 'small and blond and very angry-looking', but when Sylder casually asks if breakfast is ready 'She looked like she might be going to cry [...] Damn you, she said. Won't nothin do till you've killed yourself, is they?' (107) She starts to undress

⁷ McCarthy changed his name to Cormac, meaning 'son of Charles' in the 1950s and his novel conflates notions of Hindu philosophy, in particular karma determinism which believes in the reincarnation, often in either human or animal bodies, of individual souls controlled by past actions, and Celtic mythology which is also informed by ideas of 'rebirth' and reincarnation. Ownby seems to combine Emersonian transcendentalism with the belief of the immortality of the soul and metempsychosis, a doctrine taught by Gaulish druids.

Marion: 'He just sat there, quiet and unresisting, as if engaged in some deep speculation. She kept saying Damn you, damn you, in a tone of despair and solicitude at once' (108). He is like a small boy and she the archetypal *mater dolorosa* administering to his wounds. When she sees the bruise on the side of his leg, 'She knelt and touched it, whimpering softly. She went out again and returned with a basin of water and a cloth and bathed it carefully'. Once married, she is more of a mother than a lover and makes this comparison herself when she tells Sylder 'God rest your poor mother. I don't know why she ain't dead puttin up with you long as she did' (108), thereby conflating their roles and proposing that all women become maternal figures once they are married, condemned to domesticity and slavish solicitude. Whichever way this is approached, the blame lies firmly with the mother, who is responsible for the son's desire for her role to be perpetuated. Once again, the description of breakfast at Sylder's house could fairly represent the role of most of the women in McCarthy's fiction:

The woman didn't eat with them. She hovered around the edge of the table resupplying eggs and biscuits to their plates, filling their cups. (111)

Here 'the woman' is described 'hovering', 'kneeling', 'whimpering' and bathing Sylder's wounds, making her the near 'perfect' combination of nurse, mother and angelic presence. However, Kenneth Ratter's abandoned wife, Mildred, is a portrait of endurance, suffering and bleak domesticity, watched over by her husband, frozen in time and memory in his photograph as 'soldier, father, ghost':

Deep hole between her neck-cords, smokeblue. Laddered boneshapes under the paper skin like rows of welts descending into the bosom of her dress. Eyes lowered to her work, blink when she swallows like a toad's. Lids wrinkled like walnut hulls. Her grizzled hair gathered tight, a helmet of zinc wire. Softly rocking, rocking [...] She sat before the barren fireplace [...] (61)

Arthur Ownby, like John Wesley, remembers running away when confronted with female sexuality when he passed a house with some friends inside which there was a woman undressing: 'the others had gone back for a second look but he would not go and they laughed at him' (89). He is haunted by a fear of cats at the beginning of the story: 'Cats troubled the old man's dreams and he did not sleep well any more. He feared them coming in the night to suck his meager breath' (59). This apparently

irrational fear of cats means that he sees them not necessarily as benign recipients of human souls, but predatory creatures who will actually take his life.⁸

In the final part of the novel, the significance of the cat is evident. Immediately after the description of Ownby battling against the winter storm 'he is down. A clash of shield rings and Valkyrie descend with cat's cries to bear him away', there is a description of his leaking outhouse from which 'the cat left through the leaning door to seek new shelter' (172). The cat's struggle through the storm intercuts the narrative throughout the remainder of the novel. The description of the flood, 'Fenceposts like the soldiers of Pharaohs marched from sight into the flooded draws', also alludes to the ancient Egyptian association with cats and the 'Valkyrie' which threaten to bear Ownby away 'descend with cat's cries', thereby once more associating the predatory female with the cat (173). The cat is 'bedraggled and diminutive, a hunted look about her' and is next described in Mrs. Rattner's smokehouse gnawing a side of pork-ribs. When Mrs. Rattner in her 'mule slippers' opens the smokehouse door, the cat loses its grip and 'she saw the cat drop with an anguished squall overhead, land spraddle-legged facing her, and make a wild lunge at her, teeth gleaming in the dimness and eyes incandesced with madness' (174). This image of feline desperation and fury confronts the *mater dolorosa* shuffling in her slippers.

The cat is endowed with the characteristics of pride, endurance and anger of Mrs. Rattner while also representing the pathos of the *mater dolorosa* as she slinks around the countryside scavenging for food and hunting for her kittens, invested with purpose and resilience. In this world of crows, cats, black locust trees and Valkyrie, there is a notion of the feral, black magic and biblical plagues and it is the cat who links Ownby, Mrs. Rattner, Tipton, John (the mink caught in his trap) and finally Mr Eller in her travels.

⁸ W. B. Yeats believed in a form of neoplatonism and the transmigration of an immortal soul. In *A Vision*, he outlined how the twenty-eight phases of the lunar month relate both to historical development and the development of the soul. This could perhaps be an allusion to, or ironic comment on Yeats' theory of history that incorporates the concept of alternate 'gyres', one representing objectivity and the other subjectivity, which complement the lunar phases. McCarthy's use of natural world to provide the iconography of myths, often in sexual terms, is reminiscent of Yeats' 'Leda and the Swan', 'The Second Coming', etc.

Following the arrest of both Ownby and Sylder, the narrative returns to a description of the cat's progress 'Softly and with slow grace her leathered footpads fell, hind tracking fore with a precision profoundly feline [...] Belly swaying slightly too, lean but pendulous' as she picks her way across the fields until she is killed by an owl (216-217).⁹

McCarthy's first novel explores many of the recurrent thematic elements of his work. The figure of the desperate and bedraggled mother cat hunting for her kittens is echoed in Rinthy's quest for her 'chap' in McCarthy's second novel, while the figure of the cat takes on a symbolism in later novels which associates it with the supernatural and with death. As has been noted, in *The Orchard Keeper*, there is a sense of the 'simultaneity' of the 'imagined community' through the different narrative points of view of the protagonists which are frequently 'interrupted' by the other characters: Ownby intermittently hears the sound of Sylder's car; John Wesley is visited by Ownby's hound; Sylder witnesses Ownby shooting at the government tank; both Ownby and Sylder become surrogate father figures for John Wesley. However, McCarthy warns against any real sense of 'community' through two of the most important elements that produce this sense of 'simultaneity'. Firstly, the corpse of Kenneth Rattner symbolises not only his abandonment of his family and the bitter legacy therein but also the criminal proclivities of Marion Sylder and the 'anomic' Arthur Ownby. Secondly, the female cat links all of the characters, suggesting a contrast to the abandoning father as she searches for her kittens, and providing an early representation of the 'animal-as-female' metaphor which pervades McCarthy's fiction. Her imaging as desperate, either bedraggled or furious, is also an early warning about the inherent ambiguity in McCarthy's portrayal of the female.

⁹ Immediately following this, the social worker who 'interviews' Ownby is described moving soundlessly 'with a slender grace of carriage, delicate and feline.' (222)

**"I who first brought death on all, am grac'd the source of life":
American Eve and an Abject Fear of the Maternal in *Outer Dark***

The ambiguity noted in the depiction of the female in McCarthy's first novel can be examined further by considering McCarthy's only extended portrayal of a female character. Although initially the figure of Rinthy Holme appears to suggest nothing more than the 'essence' of the *mater dolorosa* figure, *Outer Dark* involves both a maternal and paternal figure engaged in a quest which sends them almost simultaneously into the gothic wilderness of McCarthy's South. An examination of the male horror of creativity is seen to be linked to the paradoxical notion of the female who is associated with both birth and death.

James Joyce wrote to Stanislaus after the birth of his son, Giorgio: 'I think a child should be allowed to take his father's or mother's name at will on coming of age. Paternity is a legal fiction', displaying a flagrant disregard for the Name and the Law of the Father (L 2:108, September 1905). In another letter to Ettore Schmitz (January 5, 1921), Joyce suggested a mock sub-title to *Ulysses* should be 'His Whore of a Mother'. As Christine Froula has suggested, this is an important joke which 'puts the figure of the wife/mother/whore at center stage to explicate the psychodynamics of masculine culture' (87).¹⁰

Froula argues that 'Joyce's modernist self-portraiture brings the repressed maternal sub-strata of masculine psychohistory to 'the light of day' – to consciousness and conscience – in a way that is nothing short of revolutionary for the culture founded on its repression' (3). Furthermore, she proposes that Joyce presents the suppression of the maternal body as the dialectic origin of masculine culture which can be traced to Genesis and the western creation myth and the expression of masculine anxiety about the maternal body as 'the mother of all living.' She refers to Gustave Courbet's painting, *L'Origine du Monde* (1866), which shows 'a nude female torso in extreme

¹⁰ Christine Froula, *Modernism's Body: Sex, Culture, and Joyce*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)

foreshortening, with thighs splayed open to foreground the genitalia', thereby offering what has been perceived as pornographic (particularly since it has traditionally been veiled by its owners 'in decorative equivalents of the plain brown wrapper'), and particularly to women, as 'dehumanized, violently fragmented, subjected to visual aggression' (6).¹¹ However, Froula suggests that the title endows the realist image of the painting 'with an allusive depth charge', suggesting that it alludes most obviously to Genesis, and more specifically, 'to the Western creation myth as an expression of male anxiety about the maternal body as, precisely, the origin of the world' (6):

If masculine anxiety about the maternal body (to which woman is reduced on entering the scene of Judeo-Christian culture by virtue of Adam's naming her "mother of all living things") is the genesis of Genesis, at once dissimulated and assuaged by the father-creator Yahweh's and Adam's collaborative thinking of Eve from Adam's rib/womb, *L'Origine's* witty combination of the realist image with its allusive title brings the sexual dialectics that generate the myth out from behind the veil of narrative figuration. (6)

Froula points out that there is a difficulty in going beyond the dialectical opposition of masculine rib/ feminine womb of Genesis which posits the masculine as the beginning of all things (including the feminine), as there is a tendency to equate 'symbolic paternal rib/womb' with the maternal womb when they are not the same thing (15). The 'veiling' of *L'Origine* which Froula sees repeated in the work of the male cultural theorists - Freud, Lacan, Derrida - is exposed through Joyce's analyses of masculine subjectivity and culture as a repression not so much of the maternal body as 'the psychodynamics that underlie its projection as "the most agonizing risk of all" in the masculine imagination' (15).¹²

¹¹ Christine Froula points out that one of the owners of *L'Origine du Monde* was the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who continued the tradition of concealing the painting behind a false screen. Froula proposes that 'the painting, along with its reception, resonates with Joyce's project not only because it invokes the same cultural psychodynamics surrounding the maternal body that Joyce explores', but also because Lacan, who 'startlingly acted out a suppression of the maternal body that Joyce presents as the dialectic origin of masculine culture, not only in his influential theories of subjectivity and gender but his curious framing of this painting', also 'diagnosed Joyce as a perverse 'symptom' of his masculine culture.' (4) Froula suggests that 'in returning the maternal body to its 'proper' place as the repressed origin of masculine symbolic creativity (the unconscious), Lacan overrides Courbet's bold realism, his exposure of the sexual dialectics of Genesis.' (9)

¹² 'The most agonizing risk of all' refers to Jacques Derrida's writing on the need to get beyond Genesis, although Froula suggests that 'in doing so, he repeats, in the very act of naming it (the inevitable masculine 'victory'), the symptomatic veiling about the maternal body that Genesis itself performs (Froula, p.14). Jacques Derrida & Christie V. MacDonald, 'Choreographies', *Diacritics* 12 (Summer 1982): 72. p.73

As noted in the previous chapter, *Outer Dark* is heavily indebted to the Gothic narrative, which has been analysed by David Punter and Jerrold E. Hogle as it relates to Julia Kristeva's theory of 'abjection' and a desire to 'throw away' the repugnant threat of the dark (often archaic, maternal) embrace of the monstrous 'other'.¹³ The eclipse of the sun, which begins Culla's nightmare, could symbolise the eclipse of phallic masculinity and Culla's plunge into darkness (5-6). It also associates him, like Milton's Eve, with night, chaos and sin. It is not clear what the seething crowd identify in Culla that causes them to fall upon him and there is no apparent reason for him wanting to be 'cured'. The impression from the onset then, is that for Culla, his incestuous relationship with Rinthy is a form of transgression, which can only result in punishment and horror. However, it is not clear whether it is the incest or simply the fact of his paternity that has prompted his pathological behaviour.

When Rinthy goes into labour 'the spasms in which she writhed put [Culla] more in mind of death. But it wasn't death with which she laboured far into the fading day' (13). Culla then acts as midwife:

He knelt in the bed with one knee, holding her. With his own hand he brought it free, the scrawny body trailing the cord in anneloid writhing down the bloodslimed covers, a beetcolored creature that looked to him like a skinned squirrel. He pinched the mucus from its face with his fingers [...] he took up yank of strange yarn and severed it with the handleless claspknife he carried and tied it off at both ends. A deep gloom had settled in the cabin. His arms were stained with gore to the elbows. (13-14)

This bloodstained nativity and the image of Culla's arms 'stained with gore' are resonant of Macbeth, steeped in guilt and unable to wash his hands of the act of murder. 'Gore' is more usually linked to images of carnage and death (as Culla links the birth in his mind) and foreshadows the death of the child later. While emblematic of McCarthy's repeated investigation of a horror of paternity, even at this early stage, the reader is placed firmly within a postlapsarian world. In a world in which the paradoxical role of the female is as the source of both life and death, an inscrutable and ineffable power resides in the figure of the *mater dolorosa*.

When Culla returns from the store, having told Rinthy that the baby has died, 'she was asleep in her foul bed' (26). He sits by the fire as 'She stirred heavily in her

¹³ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, 1998 & Jerrold E. Hogle, *A Companion to the Gothic*, 2000.

sleep, moaning. He watched her. When he could stay no longer he went out again and walked on the road. He could not decide what to do' (26). It is the grief and pain suffered by Rinthy, and what Culla perceives as her silent accusation, which makes him displace his guilt by seeing her as repulsive and 'foul'. He sleeps on the floor having 'appropriated the quilt from off the bed': 'before he slept he saw again the birth-stunned face, the swamp trees in a dark bower above the pale and naked flesh and the black blood seeping from the navel' (27). The horror of the grotesque nativity scene and his own fear of paternity are played out in his nightmares. He refuses to wash the 'niggardly stain' on the sheets, implying that he has already been emasculated as his role as midwife and shuns domesticity. He is aware that he will never be able to wash away his guilt, which has now become symbolised for him in the 'unclean' figure of Rinthy. The image of the sorrowing mother is emphasised as he notices 'like dark tears two milkstains in the thin cotton cloth', the lactation which symbolises her 'pain' and 'grief' throughout the novel, but also to Rinthy, proof of her child's continued existence. Culla cannot look at her as his 'hands lay palmupward on his thighs and he sat watching them as if they were somehow unaccountable' (30). Her 'mincing shuffle' ('Mend, woman, he said'), her pain and fragility and the natural after-effects of childbirth are a constant reminder to him of both his incest and infanticide (30).

When he removes the child from their house and takes it to a wood, Culla lays the child on the mossy ground of a clearing and then leaves: 'With full dark he was confused in a swamp forest floundering through sucking quagmires and half running' (16-17). There follows a description of him stumbling through trees which 'were beginning to close him in, malign and baleful shapes that reared like enormous androids', a 'cold claw was raking upward through his chest' and then he splashes into the creek 'thigh and crotch' (17). This is an image of the vengeful, threatening maternal embrace, which imitates the breathing movement in the womb as Culla finds himself running 'at a demented pace through brush and swamp growth, falling, rising, going on again' (17). He then crashes 'into the glade [...] and lay there with his cheek to the earth' (16):

And as he lay there a far crack of lightning went bluey down the sky and bequeathed him an embryonic bird's first fissured vision of the world and transpiring instant and

outrageous from dark to dark a final view of the grotto and shapeless white plasm struggling upon the rich and incunabular moss like a lank swamp hare. He would have taken it for some boneless cognate of his heart's dread had the child not cried. It howled execration upon the dim camarine world of its nativity wail on wail while he lay there gibbering with palsied jawhasps, his hands putting back the night like some witless paraclete beleaguered with all limbo's clamor. (17-18)

Both the baby's 'nativity' and the description of Culla as 'embryonic' suggest that the glade has become a symbolic womb. Later, when Culla returns from chopping the wood, 'he and the axe in an assassin's silhouette against the slack gloss of the moon', it is he who is imaged as barren (24). The end of the novel emphasises this state of barrenness, as he surveys the 'spectral waste' that lies before him, while it also hints at the fear of devouring nature, imaged as female: 'He tried his foot in the mire before him and it rose in a vulvate wet claggy and sucking. He stepped back' (242).

Christine Froula has noted that both Jessie Weston and Northrop Frye have identified an association between the Grail, the Eucharist and female sexuality:

As analysed by Weston and Frye, the Grail quest shares many features with male initiation rites that induct the boy into the father's culture by suppressing his early maternal identification and installing in its place an ideal of masculinity that symbolically incorporates female sexual powers. (94)

The maternal 'green world' is replaced by the stony desert through which the quester must travel in order to find the Grail, which is 'a symbolic equivalent of maternal fertility and plenitude' (94). Therefore, it is the loss of the early maternal paradise which initiates the quest and which in turn heals the symbolic wounds of the fisher-king and restores the wasteland.¹⁴

While Rinthy is associated with life, as the 'mother of all things' and with 'light', Culla is the one associated with life and death, as he acts as both midwife and perpetrator of infanticide. More importantly, he perceives both the baby and mother as

¹⁴ Frye also notes the close affinity between the quest-romance as an allegory of an inward journey, with ritual and dream. With regard to the latter, it functions as a form of wish-fulfillment, 'the search of the [...] desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality'. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957) pp193-4

a form of death, ('the spasms in which she writhed put him more in mind of death', 13), in particular Rinthy's womb, which he equates with night, darkness and sorrowing, as he wakes to 'a night more dolorous.' Having aligned the child with death before it is born, thereafter it is associated for Culla with shadow, negation – 'nothin' – and death. The glade as a symbol of the womb once more combines notions of birth and death – the child who is born at the beginning, and who lies in 'the dim camarine world of its nativity', dies at the end in a glade which could perhaps be the same location. It seems that Rinthy returns to the last place that she knew the child had been.

Froula suggests that Joyce's writing engages in a challenge to Oedipal models of masculine psychohistory and anticipates 'certain revisionary models of male development and masculine culture' which argued that Western civilization is predominantly masculine 'because it comes into being as man's symbolic defense against envy of woman and female sexuality, specifically, of the womb, motherhood, and the matriarchy that [was] considered to have preceded patriarchy' (21). Froula points out that the development of Freud's original insights into masculine psychohistory has meant that the stage of differentiation of mother/child is more traumatic for the son:

Having begun by identifying with his mother, the most important and powerful figure in his life, he now finds that he is anatomically as well as ontologically different from her [...] As Nancy Chodorow argues, the son's painful discovery of sexual difference is the site on which culture institutes the barrier of gender. (21)

But the barrier of gender is threatened by the son's over-identification with the mother, as both a desire for his 'originary union' which entails not only a desire to sleep with her (violating the Law of the Father) but also 'a wish to merge with her (in violation of the law of gender)' (21). Therefore, Froula suggests, 'masculine subjectivity is founded not just on anatomical difference but on a profound psychohistorical loss, which issues [...] in a drive towards symbolic compensations, both individual and collective' (22). She cites Eva Feder Kitttray's argument that 'the son suffers a "narcissistic wound" on discovering 'his anatomical limitation in comparison with his mother – "a sense of lost power", which the "cultural forms and material life of society" compensate in various ways', producing a catalogue of ways

in which men 'defend' against male envy of women (22). These include the idealization of the feminine and maternal, which exists simultaneously with the denigration and oppression of actual women, and the 'direct and indirect devaluation of maternity in favor of the "higher" economic and spiritual activities' claimed by men, 'aggression and hostility towards women as imagoes of a forbidden feminine self' and 'symbolic appropriation of female procreativity' found in some male initiation rites and myths (22).¹⁵ Culla acts as midwife and then takes the child to the symbolic womb imaged in the glade. His abandonment of the child results in the removal of the child by the tinker and Rinthy's subsequent departure in search of her son, therefore setting in motion Culla's 'quest'. His quest, however, is the result of the violation of society's laws (in committing incest) and the psychoanalytic laws of gender, as he denies his paternity and attempts not only to disrupt the originary union between mother and son in his abandonment of the child, but also attempts to replace both the maternal and the son by his desire to return to the mother, imaged as both the womb and the grave.¹⁶ While he encounters various men who act out their aggression and hostility towards woman, Culla experiences none of the compensatory ways inherent in 'the cultural forms and material life of society' which Froula suggests are available to men and by which men can defend against male envy of women (22). The presence of the 'grim triune', in offering Culla a grotesque parody of the 'family', who ask him to 'name' his son and claim his part in creativity, is the only alternative available to Culla.

Froula draws analogies between Dorothy Dinnerstein's writing on the psychodynamics of gender and questions of authority in modern Western societies and the writing of Joyce. Dinnerstein suggests that while the mother is the first, intensely personal and 'private' authority for the child, she is replaced following the child's natural rebellion against the 'first tyrant' by a paternal and public authority:

For both Dinnerstein and Joyce, "the hand that rocks the cradle" is "the hand that rules" the world, not because women possess actual political authority but because

¹⁵ The relationship between Billy Parham and the female wolf in *The Crossing* also hints at this.

¹⁶ In *Outer Dark*, Culla is unable to 'name' anything, his son or his sister, and therefore does not even benefit from what Froula describes as 'the Genesis myth's compensatory mirroring of Eve's maternal procreativity in Adam's birth-giving and symbolic creativity (his naming of Eve and the animals)' (9).

the masculine authority of the public sphere imitates and displaces the maternal authority of the private sphere. (141)

Froula also proposes that both 'read the figure of the mother/whore in the cultural imagination as a psychosocial symptom, a symbolic incarnation of the maternal tyrant toppled by masculine culture' (141).¹⁷ In *Outer Dark*, Culla is also engaged in a desire, identification and need to master 'the internalized, now-repudiated mother' in the form of Rinthy. For Culla, however, this psychodynamic is complicated by the fact of their incest, which makes him the lover/father and brother.

The incredible pathos of the description of Culla taking Rinthy to the infant's grave, makes her appear exceptionally naïve, as she 'went happily, flushed, shuffling through the woods and plucking the shy wildflowers': 'With her bouquet clutched in both hands before she finally stepped into the clearing [...] crossing with quiet and guileless rectitude to stand before a patch of black and cloven earth' (32). She begins tearing away at the earth and only discovers tree roots and stones:

His long shadow overrode her but she did not see it. She stood and turned and found herself against his chest. She screamed and fell back, stumbled to the ground crushing the flowers, the blood starting again, warm on her leg. But he was the one: kneeling in the dark earth with his writhen face howling at her, saying Now you done it. Now you really went and done it. And her own face still bland and impervious in such wonder he mistook for accusation, silent and inarguable female invective, until he rose and fled, bearing his clenched hands above him threatful, supplicant, to the mute and windy heavens. (34)

Their incest ironically prevents them from being able to communicate. Culla is described as 'never listening' but here what he interprets as Rinthy's silent accusation, is in fact horror and wonder at the implication of what he is saying. Rinthy's innocence and naivety, combined with her unimaginable horror and despair about what she suspects Culla of having done, make her McCarthy's archetypal mater dolorosa.

She is entirely without guile and her direct pronouncements seem at first to suggest that she is one of McCarthy's least 'evolved' characters. Her pathetic state appeals to

¹⁷ McCarthy's later novel, *Suttree*, engages in an exploration of the repressed unconscious of the masculine public sphere as Cornelius Suttree, like the men in Joyce's *Nighttown*, 'act[s] out [his]

all of these people as non-threatening, in comparison to Culla, who is falsely accused of murder three times, each one being committed by the 'grim triune'. She hides as a horse goes past:

Emaciate and blinking and with the wind among her rags she looked like something repleved by miracle from the ground and sent with tattered windings and halt corporeality into the agony of sunlight. Butterflies attended her and birds dusting in the road did not fly up when she passed. She hummed to herself some child's song from an old dead time. (98)

She is described as so ethereal and insubstantial that birds and butterflies remain undisturbed by her passing, just as when she has to hurriedly leave the next house because the cry of a child makes her breasts lactate 'the spurs of dust from her naked heels drifting arcwise in pale feathers to the road again' (100).

Vereen Bell suggests that one reason that meaning 'does not prevail over narrative and texture' in these novels is because the characters are usually 'solitary and unsocialized' and therefore 'wholly indifferent to discourse and have no interest in how societies are sustained and kept coherent':

[...] they find solitude and isolation the normal conditions [...] they are also rural people who exhibit a characteristic rural fatalism about issues of cause and effect: existence is no more explicable to them than climate, or nature itself, and not a fruitful subject of meditation. (5)¹⁸

This certainly appears to be the case for Rinthy. In the few words that she utters, the repetition of denial both of a sense of provenance and of material or personal possessions further appears to reduce her, like Culla in his encounter with the three men, to 'nothin':

'They ain't a soul in this world but what is a stranger to me' (to Culla, 29)

'They ain't nobody but me. I'm just by myself' (to the first family she meets, 58)

'I ain't even got nowheres to run off from' (to the farmer, 101)

forbidden desire for, identification with, and unending need to master the internalized, now-repudiated mother' (141), as he is described visiting brothels and having a relationship with a prostitute.

¹⁸ Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

'I was always scared, even when they wasn't nobody bein murdered nowheres' (to the old woman in the woods, 116)

'We never had nothin nor nobody [...] I don't live nowheres no more, she said. I never did much. I just go around huntin my chap. That's about all I do anymore'. (to the doctor, 155)

'I just want my chap [...] I'll just do whatever, she said. I ain't got nothin else to do'. (to the tinker, 191)

'I ain't got nothin to say' (to the anonymous farmer she lives with, 210)

However, although Rinthy appears at first to be the least socialized of the two, remaining at home while Culla goes to the local store and being unaware of the existence of the money that Culla takes with him, she shows a growing assertiveness and independence through her determination to find her 'chap', which imbues her quest with a sense of purpose almost completely lacking in Culla's. Although he tells the first people he comes across that he is searching for his sister, thereafter, he is not searching as much as escaping, forced to run and hide repeatedly as he is falsely accused of murder and grave robbing and is hunted by vigilantes. Rinthy, however, is repeatedly described as having an indefinable power, as her pathetic demeanor belies her inner strength, which propels and sustains her throughout her quest. This is hinted at on several occasions, including her encounter with the storekeeper early on, who seems to identify something about Rinthy's demeanor that makes him uneasy (56), and when she later sees the doctor, although she is described as 'ragged, shoeless, deferential and half-deranged, and yet moving in an almost palpable amnion of propriety', 'something half wild in her look stopped him' from denying the possibility that her child is still alive (151-5). Similarly, when the son of the family she hitches a ride with approaches her at night in the yard, she is described as moving 'slowly. Processional, a lone acolyte passing across a barren yard', although she effectively rejects his gauche advances with 'an air of staid and canonical propriety' (64). In fact, he is also affected by an aura which he seems unable to define: '[...] he entered the ring of light with such painful diffidence any watcher would have said he was about something of which he did not approve' (63).

Terri Witek argues that in these novels, there is no refuge in nature or 'mother earth' as the reader is 'reminded that these characters are without the benefit of those

mythologies that describe the earth as a mother' (142).¹⁹ Furthermore, he suggests that McCarthy reverses the whole idea of metaphor as something imposed on humans rather than by them:

In his books the earth is no grieving woman but merely itself, trackless and yet filled with signs that refuse to yield up their significance. [...] Cormac McCarthy does not deny that the spaces we inhabit are metaphors for our collective identity. On the contrary: they match precisely and mercilessly to teach us that no place in the world is home, that everywhere is a potential campsite, that every boy must be the frontiersman of what will turn out to be a grave-sized chunk of earth. Therein lies the ferocious power of McCarthy's treatment of domestic space in his novels. (142)

The murder of Culla and Rinthy's child is perhaps one of McCarthy's most 'ferocious' treatments of the combined horrors of collective identity and domestic spaces. The little glade in which Culla comes across the campsite of the three murderers, by the time Rinthy reaches it, has become quite literally the open grave of the child.²⁰ Witek suggests that while Rinthy Holme appears to reverse the usual scenario by leaving home first, this is 'a narrative sleight-of-hand' because it is Culla's removal of the male child which is the 'true catalyst' for her leaving. Therefore, 'the male child's forced exodus has the same effect on their family as any male's flight: it breaks up the only home they know':

McCarthy leaves *Outer Dark's* mater dolorosa sleeping at a communal site where the major male characters have convened just shortly before. In typical McCarthy fashion, they have gathered, worked out the final consequences of their sins without her, and then vanished. (140)

Robert Jarrett, however, proposes that by the end of the novel, 'Rinthy's consciousness of the distinction between herself and the natural has so nearly disintegrated that it has become absorbed by the natural; here she, dehumanized, is the landscape' (136).²¹ Furthermore, he suggests that the description of Rinthy setting out into the wilderness with the 'small and derelict possessions' tied in a shift, to

¹⁹ Terri Witek, 'Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces', *Southern Review* 30 (January, 1994): 136-42

²⁰ Kenneth Rattner's remains in *The Orchard Keeper* are described as they are discovered seven years after his burial in the spray pit: 'the chalked sticks and shards of bones [...] and the skull worm-riddled, vermiculate with the tracery of them [...] the caried teeth rattling in their sockets (p.234)'. This reduces the man not only physically, to 'chalked sticks and shards of bone' but also in his mythic status as war hero, as the 'plat'num plate' believed to be lodged in his skull is nowhere in evidence. The phrase that is used to describe Culla's 'end' follows this passage: 'That was all'.

²¹ Robert L. Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1997).

search for her child 'transforms her into an allegorical figure of the American Eve/Madonna'. He compares the optimism of her initial departure as she smiles blandly to the sky, with 'the rivetingly pathetic conclusion to her "errand" into the Tennessee wilderness'(135):

Late in the afternoon she entered the glade, coming down a footpath where narrow cart tracks had crushed the weeds and through the wood, half wild and haggard in her shapeless sundrained cerements, yet delicate as any fallow doe, and so into the clearing to stand cradled in a grail of jade and windy light, slender and trembling and pale with wandlike hands. (OD, 237)

Once again, she is described as excruciatingly vulnerable and the 'little sister was sleeping' conjures up an image of 'babes in the wood' pathos, as does her complete unawareness of the presence of evil, either the three men or the tinker, and the reality of the 'little calcined ribcage'. It is also, however, a picture which does suggest the 'final peace' which Edwin Arnold has suggested, as the combination of religious vocabulary in the 'frail agony of grace' and the 'sundrained cerements' is combined with the notion of her being protected, 'cradled' in a 'grail of jade and windy light', and of having, however unwittingly, found her child (52).²² The 'grail' is also, as noted, associated with the womb, for Rinthy a place offering protection, but for Culla a place of horror, where he must confront evil incarnate and witness the death of his son. The pathos of Rinthy's situation, emphasised in the reference to her as 'little sister' by the tinker, the bearded leader and the narrator, lacks the sheer horror of Culla's experience. He is repeatedly associated either with a dark and hostile landscape, or a blazing sun, which stuns entire communities into torpor, or a 'listless tableau'. By the time Rinthy finds the 'little calcined ribcage', this could be an ironic reference to the notion of the American Adam, emphasised by the lines 'she did not know what to make of it' (237).

In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Eve is told of her paradoxical role as responsible for both death and life and 'much-humbled' accepts her punishment for her transgression.²³ McCarthy's novel reverberates with questions that echo Milton's epic poem ('What

²² Edwin Arnold, 'Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables' in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold & Dianne T Luce, (University Press of Mississippi, 1999) pp. 45-70.

²³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Scott Ellidge, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), Bk. XI, L. 181

cause?' and 'Whose fault?') and is replete with images which both allegorise and de-allegorise experience. In *Outer Dark*, landscape and nature are aligned with the female, but also with the male. Angelic messengers are replaced by an unholy trinity who seem to be responsible for unleashing all of those phenomena associated by Milton, and later McCarthy, with the womb. As John Ditsky has suggested, 'it is almost as if these two poor souls [...] had let loose all the demons in the world by the fact of their fornication' (6).²⁴

In *Paradise Lost*, the figure of Eve is linked to the allegorical figure of Chaos through their relation to Nature. Chaos is described as 'The womb of nature and perhaps her grave', just as Eve 'who first brought Death on all, am graced/ The source of life' (Bk. II L911, Bk. XI, L168-9). Therefore, both have a dual role, as both the creative 'womb' and the destructive 'death' (Eve 'eats death' and is 'the source of life'). She is represented as disordered and unruly: 'Disheveled, but in wanton ringlets wav'd/ As the vine curled her tendrils' (Bk IV, L306-7), and is aligned with the 'wanton growth' of nature in Paradise. Nature however, is out of control and this chaos is fertile and generative but also threatening.

In her article 'Fallen Wombs: The Origins of Death in Miltonic Sexuality', Mary Adams suggests that the image of the womb as Milton uses it in *Paradise Lost*, 'seems at first reading to be a little terrifying' as the 'huge void of Night and the noisy infestations of Sin' could lead to charges of misogyny.²⁵ However, Adams proposes that Milton also used the womb as a positive image, and the use of the 'fallen womb' as 'a metaphor and an emblem of fallen sexuality and through it the origin of mortality and of the fallen state itself', was Milton's way of justifying 'created sexuality in the context of ongoing theological debate' (165):

[...] from his first use of the imagery that would come to be associated with the 'fallen' womb, Milton dealt consistently with a 'type' of sexual appetite or libido. While it was created as good, this sexuality became evil as it was perverted from its original use. The womb, then, becomes the metaphor both of this appetite – the state of sin – and its punishment – the state of death. (165)

²⁴ John Ditsky, 'Further Into Darkness: The Novels of Cormac McCarthy, *The Hollins Critic*, Vol. XVIII, No.2, April, 1981

²⁵ Mary Adams, 'Fallen Wombs: The Origins of Death in Miltonic Sexuality' in *Milton Studies*, pp165-179

Similarly, in *Outer Dark*, the grail becomes a metaphor for both the 'appetite' and its 'punishment', symbolised in the corpse of the cannibalised child. Adams examines the 'terrible womb imagery' contained in Milton's portrayal of Sin and of Night, which not only contains created hell but also exhibits 'all the elements of the conditions of sin and of death'. The infernal trinity of Satan, Sin and Death (like *Outer Dark's* unholy trinity) which stands in opposition to the creative powers of the Divine Trinity, can be seen 'as a unit of which the fallen womb is both origin and visible manifestation' (166). Adams draws attention to the linguistic resonance contained in Milton's frequent use of the word *womb* to mean a 'uterus', a 'hollow space or cavity or something conceived as such' and as a 'place or medium of conception and development, as place or point of origin or growth' (163). She also notes that Milton frequently 'characterizes the womb as devouring, and in many instances he uses mouth in a similar way' (168). Death is described as being 'plung'd in the womb/Of unoriginal Night and Chaos wild' (BK X,475-6), and 'eldest Night', Chaos and Nature 'hold/ eternal anarchy' (Bk II).

Eve's association with the earth as fecund mother 'satiated with genial moisture' (Bk III, L282), and with Chaos, Night and Death, is an early example of a literary 'trope' which Annette Kolodny has explored. As Kolodny points out in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, gendering the land as feminine is nothing new.²⁶ She charts the origins in European literary pastoral subsumed into the image of America as Promised Land and examines an abundance of writing which clearly situates nature as female in the documentation of exploration and colonization from 1500-1740, exemplifying 'America's oldest and most cherished fantasy':

[...] a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine – that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total feminine principle of gratification – enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction. (4)²⁷

²⁶ Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of The Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, University of North Carolina Press, 1975

²⁷ For example, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in his *Letters From an American Farmer* explained that the newcomer 'becomes an American by being received into the broad lap of our Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are blended into a new race of men', offering primal harmony and rebirth in the maternal embrace. Similarly, Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* calls the 'Beautiful world' an

When Kolodny suggests that Cooper's Natty Bumppo is typical of the psychological contradiction in America's relationship to nature, she places him in a long line of literary protagonists whom she proposes illustrate that 'the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape' (6). She also points out that the satiated pastoral impulse resulted in the land being imaged as both Virgin and Mother, in other words, both vulnerable to 'rape' and as nurturing entity, 'in fact as well as in metaphor, a womb of generation and a provider of sustenance'(9):

Implicit in the metaphor of land-as-woman was both the regressive pull of maternal containment and the seductive invitation to sexual assertion: if the Mother demands passivity, and threatens regression, the Virgin apparently invites sexual assertion and awaits impregnation. (67)

American man's relationship to nature is one where everywhere Kolodny finds evidence of a filial homage, erotic desire and the possibility of the horror of incest, as the abundance and fecundity of the nurturing maternal image gave way to one of over-abundance and possible suffocation, particularly in the South (13-19). She proposes that 'insofar as the patterns of the male psyche had seized the power and determined the course of history in nineteenth-century America, the pastoral impulse inevitably implied the threat of incest and, with it, the spectre of violation' (73).

Females have also traditionally been identified with 'civilization' from which the American male must escape in order to venture alone into the wilderness to find in isolation a basic truth about their identity and by extension, the society that they have left behind and to which they (may) return. While Rinty's departure first appears to be an exception, this is prompted by the fact that the male child has already left the home. Therefore, it seems that whether the female is identified with civilization or with nature, this involves the perpetual adolescence of the male, and by extension, an inability to confront issues of responsibility, in particular that of fatherhood. That the female has traditionally been associated with both culture and nature, suggests at least

'Emblem of general maternity', suggesting that Out of thy teeming womb thy giant babes in ceaseless/ procession issuing...'(in 'Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood')

a mythic position of some power. However, the fact that these associations are always made in terms of binary oppositions which have traditionally posited the masculine opposite and superior to the feminine, means that the male becomes either the solitary Adamic figure who creates a new Eden against or apart from the 'civilising' influence of the female or, conversely, the civilising force which 'tames' the feminine landscape. Whether the female is left at home, or imaged in nature either as embracing mother or devouring temptress, she is a force to be fought against. It would seem inevitable, therefore, that the multiple models of femininity will give rise to the destabilising of the masculinist underpinnings of the Adamic myth. The precarious nature of the ideologies surrounding the inherent gendering of myths is exemplified, and completely undermined by the equally contradictory notion of the feminine as both the beginning of all life, the 'womb' and the end, the 'grave'.

While *Outer Dark* exemplifies this, it is possible to identify a pathological fear and fascination with the mother in all of McCarthy's novels. From the mother cat in *The Orchard Keeper*, through the many female victims of Lester Ballard (who destroys any possibility of either paternity or maternity) and the grotesque descriptions of any post-adolescent female in all of these novels, it is apparent that McCarthy's male protagonists, however diverse they may appear to be, share an abject fear of the maternal. Any female that reaches an age where maternity, and therefore paternity, is possible, is in danger of either an early death or condemnation as an old crone/ mater dolorosa/ whore in McCarthy's world. In the following section, the fatal maternal embrace of the archaic mother and the horror of the 'monstrous-feminine' will be considered as they are imaged in Lester Ballard's 'house of horrors', his cave of corpses, in *Child of God*.

**“What do you want, you son of a bitch?”: The Horror of the
Monstrous-Feminine in *Child of God*.**

As corpses and stuffed toys become his ‘family’, Lester Ballard is forced to retreat into a cave with a ‘row of dripping limestone teeth’, where he has laid his mattress with his stuffed animals on it, rather as a child would do. This description resonates with images of the ‘vagina dentata’ identified by Joseph Campbell in his book, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*:

[...] there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as ‘the toothed vagina’ - the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called ‘phallic mother’, a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch.²⁸

From the cave, Ballard goes ‘down a narrow passageway’ and through ‘damp stone corridors’ until he reaches ‘the bowels of the mountain [...] where dead people lay like saints’ (135). In this ‘bell-shaped cavern [...] the walls with their softlooking convolutions, slavered over as they were wet with bloodred mud, had an organic look to them, like the innards of some great beast’ (135). Following his escape from the vigilantes who cannot squeeze through the entrance to his subterranean labyrinth, Ballard imagines both his death and his rebirth: ‘He’d cause to wish and he did wish for some brute midwife to spald him from his rocky keep’ (189).

While Ballard imagines his own rebirth, it is an image of expulsion and horror, rather than nurture and maternal embrace, combining yet another rejection (by the mother once again, to add to the interpolated stories of his rejection from the community) with the defining moment in which it is apparent that he is unable to fully appropriate the female. One night Ballard lies awake in the dark of the cave:

[...] he thought he heard a whistling as he used to when he was a boy in his bed in the dark and he’d hear his father on the road coming home whistling, a lonely piper, but the only sound was the stream where it ran down the cavern to empty it may be in unknown seas at the center of the earth. (170)

²⁸Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (New York: Penguin, 1969), p.73

Therefore, although Ballard at first imagines that he hears the whistling that he remembers signalling the return of his father, the 'lonely piper', instead he hears the noise of the stream as it runs deep into 'the center of the earth'. It is a similar gravitational pull and inevitable momentum which he experiences in his dream, and it seems that here he is experiencing the lure of the mother, imaged in the land, and the bliss of the fatal maternal embrace:

He dreamt that night that he rode through woods on a low ridge. Below him he could see deer in a meadow where the sun fell on the grass [...] he could feel the spine of the mule rolling under him [...] Each leaf that brushed his face deepened his sadness and dread. Each leaf he passed he'd never pass again. They rode over his face like veils [...] he resolved himself to ride on for he could not turn back and the world that day was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death. (170-1)

In her writing on the genre of the horror film, 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection', Barbara Creed²⁹ proposes that 'all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject', reading Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* as it relates to the monstrous-feminine in this genre (63).³⁰ Kristeva defines abjection as that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules [that which] disturbs identity, system, order' (4).

In general terms, Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies, as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. (Creed, 64)

Creed outlines the construction of the monstrous in the modern horror film as it relates to the ancient religious and historical notions of abjection, 'particularly in relation to the following religious "abominations": sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest', which constitutes an accurate appraisal of the 'abominations' to be found in *Child of God* (65). As Creed points out, 'the ultimate in

²⁹Barbara Creed, 'Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection', in *Fantasy and the Cinema: A Reader*, ed. James Donald (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), pp. 63-91.

³⁰Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

abjection is the corpse' as it is a body without boundaries, and the reaction to spectacles of mutilated corpses and bodily wastes displays the ambiguity of abjection, which involves an attraction to the undifferentiated and a desire for its expulsion. Creed suggests that the concept of the 'border' is 'central to the construction of the monstrous', so that that which threatens to cross the border is 'abject'. The border may be between 'human and inhuman', 'man and beast', 'normal and abnormal sexual desire' or 'those who take up their proper gender roles [and] those who do not' (67). Again, Lester Ballard can be seen to represent the abject in all of these categories. While his mother is only mentioned once briefly, Ballard in effect images himself as the monstrous-feminine in imitation of his absent mother, feverishly attempting to reverse her abandonment by his domesticity and his attempts to gain back the family home.

Kristeva has written about the construction of the maternal figure as 'abject', as the site of conflict where as the child struggles to break away to become a separate subject and to enter what both Kristeva and Lacan describe as the 'symbolic'. When a woman's body is mutilated this can therefore signify not only her own castrated state, but also, as Creed suggests, 'the possibility of castration for the male [as] he enacts on her body the one act he most fears for himself'. The pre-verbal dimension of language Kristeva terms the 'semiotic', a pre-Oedipal phase in which impulses are directed towards the mother, sexual difference does not exist and it is only entry into the symbolic order, dominated by the Law of the Father, in which the 'semiotic' is repressed, that results in the masculine/feminine dichotomy. Thus, the semiotic stage involves identification with rather than separation from what is other, whereas the symbolic is driven by an urge to control and define the other that is potentially threatening to the self. The figure of Lester Ballard threatens to rupture all boundaries, between social control and disruption, between socially defined gender identities and between the symbolic and the semiotic. He acquires an unstable identity, imaged in his crawling 'slick with red blood down the front of him from going in and out' of the narrow entrance to his cave, his tracks coming from the cave 'bloodred with cavemud', and later, the description of him 'swaddled up in outsize overalls and covered all over with red mud' when he returns to hospital (107, 141, 192). These images represent his position on the border between the semiotic and the symbolic,

and his unstable identity which is 'both threatening and fusional – of the archaic dyad [...] one woven of fright and expulsion'.

Kristeva proposes that universal practices of rituals of defilement can be linked to the mother and that polluting objects are either 'excremental', threatening the body from outside, or 'menstrual', which threatens from within:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (71)

It is on this boundary that Ballard struggles to form an identity. He is associated both with excremental defilement as he is seen urinating, defecating and masturbating and ultimately, in his acts of murder and necrophilia, constituting a threat to society which transgresses all boundaries. He is also seen to be associated with the 'menstrual', in the descriptions of the cave he inhabits, the 'bloodred' mud that not only covers him but which he also trails behind him and his dreams of both death and rebirth, illustrating the internalization of his threatened gender identity. He is seen repeatedly being ejected from the community and is perceived as 'abject', something which must be expelled. He moves between the symbolic, in his desire to make 'order', to the semiotic and is seen to be a perverse example of how society can construct woman as abject. Kristeva argues that it is the function of these defilement rites to point to the 'boundary' between the maternal semiotic authority and the paternal symbolic law. She proposes that historically it has been the function of religion to purify the abject but that now, purification rests with 'that catharsis *par excellence* called art' (17):

In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task - a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct - amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the other, 'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again - inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable, abject. (18)

While Kristeva proposes the rituals of defilement as a purification are to be found in the 'cathartic' properties of art, this is something which McCarthy's work

does not offer, particularly because the 'borders' in his fiction, whether geographical or psychological, are never clearly drawn, so that their complexity denies such catharsis. There are, however, similarities between McCarthy's novel and what Creed identifies as the horror film's project - bringing about a 'confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between the human and the non-human' (72). Therefore, as a 'modern defilement rite' the horror film 'separates out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies [...] separating out the maternal authority from paternal law' (72).³¹ While the mother is not present, she is in effect omnipresent in the imagery of the monstrous-feminine in terms of the maternal figure as perceived within patriarchal ideology. While Ballard makes sure that his victims can never be mothers, thereby denying them any maternal function, his fear of creation is exemplified in this act. For Ballard, sexual intercourse without the possibility of creation is the only option in a world in which the mother is reconstructed and represented as a negative figure, one whose generative powers are frightening and who threatens to re-absorb what she has given birth to. Creed points out the negative image of the archaic mother in the horror film:

What is most interesting about the mythological figure of woman as the source of all life (a role taken over by the male god of monotheistic religions) is that, within patriarchal signifying practices [...] she is reconstructed and represented as a *negative* figure, one associated with the dread of the generative mother seen only as the abyss, the monstrous vagina, the origin of all life threatening to re-absorb what it once birthed. (79)

The idea of parenting is an insidious but strangely ineffable element of all of McCarthy's novels. It is possible that in the narrator's suggestion that Ballard is 'a child of God much like yourself perhaps', he is drawing attention to the question not of paternity, but of maternity.³² The feminine and the maternal are the source of

³¹ Creed suggests that if Kristeva's hypothesis is to be usefully applied to an investigation of the representation of women [in the horror film], then it must be read as 'descriptive' rather than 'prescriptive', particularly as Kristeva does not differentiate between the relation of adult male and female subjects to rituals of defilement, or consider the possibility of intervention in the social construction of woman as abject (72-3).

³² Mark Royden Winchell's suggestion that if Ballard 'has become a mythic figure for his community [...] we must question what it is about that community which causes it to make such myths', should perhaps also include the reverse of this, an examination of the myths surrounding the female, not least

greatest fascination and repulsion for Ballard. The archaic mother is constructed both as the devouring womb, not only for Ballard but also for all of his 'family' of corpses, and as the desire for death. At the end of the novel, when the farmer's 'plow was snatched from his hands' and he sees 'his span of mules disappear into the earth taking the plow with them', it seems that the final image is that of the monstrous-feminine, as 'he crawled with caution to the place where the ground had swallowed them but all was darkness there' (195). As has been noted, death and life are never far apart in McCarthy's fiction and for Ballard they are indistinguishable. Creed describes one representation of the archaic mother as 'the blackness of extinction – death', as the desire for and attraction of death, 'suggests also a desire to return to the state of original oneness with the mother' which is 'primarily a desire for non-differentiation' (81). Creed suggests that because death is always linked to the archaic mother in horror films, 'both signify a monstrous obliteration of the self and both are linked to the demonic':

We can see its ideological projection as an attempt to shore up the symbolic order by constructing the feminine as an imaginary 'other' which must be repressed and controlled in order to secure and protect the social order. (86)

Creed points out that it is not that the feminine is '*per se* a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male desires and fears but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific' (87).

Woman are a source of almost clinical fascination and mystery to Ballard, although the description of his scrutiny of the female corpses and the later dissection of his own corpse, draws parallels between his fear of women as 'other' and society's desire for the Ballards of this world to be 'other' rather than 'much like' ourselves:

He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected [...] his heart was taken out.

His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. (194)

as the mythological figure of 'the source of all life', which paradoxically also threatens 'to re-absorb what it once birthed'.

The 'perhaps' is of course a typical McCarthy disclaimer and the fact that the students are looking at Ballard's entrails, rather than his brain for sign of 'monsters worse to come' and are described as 'haruspices' (ancient Roman priests who practised divination by examining the entrails of animals), implies finally that Ballard's attitude to women is perhaps similar to society's (and, by implication, the reader's) attitude to Ballard, believing there is a way of examining, controlling and finally destroying the 'other'. Gary Ciuba proposes that the equivocal ending of *Child of God* 'recognises that the violence embodied in McCarthy's *enfant terrible* can always erupt in some new Girardian deity run amok', and this idea certainly conforms to the horror genre in both film and literature (85).³³

There has been a great deal of media attention given to the recently published *Hannibal*, Thomas Harris's sequel to *The Silence of the Lambs*, about the cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter. In *Silence*, Lecter was evil personified, telling the investigating officer 'Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling [...] You can't reduce me to a set of influences'. While McCarthy similarly denies a simple explanation for Ballard's behaviour, the reader is made aware of societal influences and he is not portrayed as representing pure evil. It appears that McCarthy is playing on this tradition in the horror genre which always leaves the reader/ spectator with the impression that the serial killer has never finally been either understood or eradicated, and also provides the opportunity for a sequel.³⁴

Creed has suggested in her writing on male masochism in the horror film, 'phantasies of man's masochistic desire to take up a feminine position are one of the central topics the horror film exists to explore' (121).³⁵ She points out that while most articles written on the horror film define the majority of monsters as male and their

³³ Gary Ciuba, 'McCarthy's *Enfant Terrible*: Mimetic Desire and Sacred Violence in *Child of God*', *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* eds. Wade Hall & Rick Wallach, (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995) pp. 77-86

³⁴ Andrew Bartlett, for example, has proposed that 'at one level the story functions as a parody of crime and detective fiction.' (56). 'From Voyeurism to Archaeology: Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*', in *Southern Literary Journal*, 1991, No.24: 3-15.

³⁵ Barbara Creed, 'Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film', in *Screening The Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steven Cohen & Ina Rae Clark (London & New York: Routledge, 1983) pp.118-132.

victims as female, they do not consider how 'in the process of being constructed as monstrous, the male is feminized' (121):

This process is not simply a consequence of placing a male in a masochistic position - although this is crucial to many texts - but rather it stems from the very nature of horror as an encounter with the feminine. (121)

Once again, Creed uses Kristeva's theory of the abject in which she proposes that the body most closely aligned with the abject (with the exception of the corpse) is feminine and maternal, in its corporeal secretions and its ability to change shape and to give birth. Rather than simply repelling however, the ambiguity of the abject means that it also fascinates. Creed suggests that the horror film 'explores the attraction of the abject feminised body through its graphic representation of the body monstrous' (122). Lester Ballard becomes increasingly feminised ('He'd long been wearing the underclothes of his female victims but now he took to appearing in their outerclothes as well', 140) and simultaneously increasingly monstrous ('A gothic doll in illfit clothes', 140), so that by the time he tries to kill Greer, the man who purchased his family home, he is dressed in 'frightwig' (fashioned from the dried scalps of his victims) and 'skirts' (172).³⁶

In Jonathon Demme's film of *The Silence of The Lambs*, a psychotic killer named Buffalo Bill hunts, kills and flays his female victims in order to use their skin to make himself a lifesize female 'suit'. Creed proposes that he 'must wear the skin of a woman not just to experience a physical transformation, but also to acquire the power of transformation associated with the woman's ability to give birth' (127). She links this with Freud's writing on primitive cultures, which suggest that the skin of the 'totem animal' (in the horror film, usually 'feminised') must be worn in order to assume its divine power, thus the monstrous male is feminised. Buffalo Bill's alter ego in this film is Dr. Hannibal Lecter, who eats the internal organs of his victims. In contrast to Buffalo Bill, Lecter is erudite, articulate and cultivated, telling the investigating officer 'Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me'. Throughout the film,

³⁶ Just as Norman Bates appears dressed in his dead mother's clothes and wielding a knife, at the end of *Psycho*, having earlier told his unwitting victim that 'mother [...] is not herself today.'

women are imaged as animals, hence the title and the name of the investigating officer, Clarice Starling.³⁷ Lecter holds a mesmerising power over Clarice Starling, repeatedly proving his power and authority over her, although ultimately, he appears ambivalent towards her. As Creed suggests, 'his amazing skill with words, his superior command of language also points to an obsession with the oral':

In terms of abjection, Kristeva – drawing on Freud – argues that one of the infant's earlier fears is of the incorporating mother [...] The subject who breaks the taboo of cannibalism, signifies his alliance with the abject, his continuing identification with the devouring maternal body as well as his fear of that figure. (128)

Lecter, according to Creed, 'uses his mastery of language and his ability to read human behaviour to get inside the skins of his victims psychically', and a particularly 'sadistic verbal attack' even drives one victim to suicide (128). As Lecter's 'otherself', Buffalo Bill confronts his fear by literally incorporating women by physically getting inside his victims' skin. As Creed points out, both men also inhabit 'an underworld associated with darkness, the earth, womb-like enclosures, death':

The *Silence of The Lambs* creates a world of horror in which the composite male monster confronts his greatest fear, woman, but in doing so is made monstrous through the process of feminisation. (128)

In a similar way, the 'sadistic verbal attacks' and his superior mastery of language means that, as has been noted previously, McCarthy's narrator gets 'inside the skin' of the reader 'psychically'. Therefore, his claim to an ability to read human behaviour, just as Hannibal Lecter does, means that he can sadistically suggest that Ballard may be 'A child of God much like yourself, perhaps', and then continue to insinuate this idea. Lester Ballard, like Buffalo Bill, confronts his fear by physically 'getting inside' his victims, dressing in their clothes and making 'frightwigs' from their scalps. Importantly, Ballard is acting on lessons constructed within a patriarchal discourse, which as Creed suggests 'reveals a great deal about male desires and fears'. In *Child of God* the notion of 'female' desire is entirely subsumed into a sadistic masculine subjectivity, articulated barely, and barely articulated, by Ballard himself: 'You been wantin it.'

³⁷ As noted, a similar association can be seen in McCarthy's work and in *Child of God*, both the 'old whore' and the 'slattern' daughter of the dumpkeeper are imaged as cats.

“Guilty of Being Victims”: The Revenge of the *Mater Dolorosa* in *Suttree*

This section will focus on three areas of particular relevance to the representation of the female, both drawing on the analysis of previous novels and informing the discussion of the relationship between aesthetics, sexuality and economics in the later western novels. There is a discernible movement from depictions of the *matres dolorosae*, ‘guilty of being victims’ in the early part of the novel, through the images of ‘revenge’ by the monstrous-feminine, to a possible realisation of matriarchal power. Firstly, the preceding discussion about the depiction of the ‘vagina dentata’ and the monstrous feminine in *Child of God*, can be extended to include a consideration of *Suttree*, and a potentially ‘spectacular’ revenge. This is complicated, however, by the racialised images of sexual voraciousness. Secondly, the image of the monstrous-feminine is seen not only in the depictions of the many ‘vagina dentata’ of Suttree’s hallucinations, but also in the association of the female with an economic power, which threatens to emasculate men. Finally, the city is increasingly associated with the female, both the matriarch and the *mater dolorosa*, so that the powerful and knowledgeable ‘gaze’ of the male geographer outlined by Gillian Rose in *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, is characterised in Suttree’s tour of Knoxville.¹

McCarthy had been working on his fourth novel, *Suttree*, for twenty years before its publication in 1979. It is his first novel to allow the reader access to the subjectivity of the main protagonist, Cornelius Suttree, an educated and articulate man who has rejected a comfortable home in favour of a houseboat situated on the river in Knoxville, Tennessee and surrounded by a community of derelicts. The reader is not told the reason for Suttree’s incarceration in the workhouse until later in the novel or why he has abandoned his son, who is first mentioned when it is announced that he has died. In this novel, Suttree is both the abandoning father and the rejected son, a position which hints at the self-perpetuating cycle of damaging paternal relationships

¹ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1993)

which perhaps caused Suttree to reject his own family, and to develop relationships with surrogate father and son figures.²

Set in Knoxville in 1951, Suttree recounts the life of its eponymous hero who lives in a houseboat moored underneath the bridge and he is therefore associated with the 'grail of quietude'. He is associated not with the wellbeing of the land as the fisher king of the legend, but with the wellbeing of the city, and in particular the McAnally Flats 'with its complement of pariahs and endless poverty' (296). Like the regulars of the Green Fly Inn of McCarthy's first novel, who enjoy a precarious sense of community, it is suggested (the stream of consciousness of Suttree is more difficult to distinguish from the voice of the narrator in this novel) that 'Even the damned in hell have the community of their suffering' (464).

Towards the end of the novel, and following the death of Suttree's young lover Wanda, he watches a storm passing over the city of Knoxville and wonders 'Am I a monster, are there monsters in me?' (366) The character of Suttree is the most developed of all of McCarthy's protagonists. From the beginning, the reader is aware of his feelings of loneliness and alienation but he is also depicted as possessing a laconic steeliness, reminiscent of the classical western hero, which imbues his character with the attributes of the powerful, seductive and detached observer.³ He is irresistible to both heterosexuals and homosexuals and displays an endearing kindness and concern for both Harrogate and the residents of McAnally.⁴ However, like Lester Ballard, 'all the trouble he was ever in was caused by whisky or women or both' (C of G, 53). Suttree retains the civilised veneer of his upbringing as he is described taking care over his appearance (for example, the lengthy description of his almost ritualistic

² McCarthy has acknowledged that *Suttree* is his most autobiographical novel and spoken of his own experiences in Knoxville in the 50s and 60s, adding that most of the people he knew from those days are now dead and that those who are still alive are simply 'those that quit drinking.' (36) It is a matter of conjecture just how autobiographical it is. It was published three years after his move to El Paso (1976), following his own decision to 'quit' drinking and his divorce from Anne de Lisle. See Richard B. Woodward's 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction' in the *New York Times Magazine*, 19 April 1992: 28-31+

³ For example, he is described in the penitentiary: 'A sad and bitter season. Barrenness of heart and gothic loneliness.' (50) Several hours later, he defends Gene Harrogate from his 'tormentor' Byrd Slusser: 'Suttree could see himself twinned in the cool brown eyes and he didn't like what he saw. He swung at Slusser's face. Immediately a fist crashed against the side of his face' (52).

⁴ Trippin Through The Dew (John) is the last person to see Suttree and his farewell is one of 'genuine solicitude', as he asks Suttree whether he needs money and wishes him the 'best luck in the world

shaving and his desire to buy himself a new wardrobe when he comes into money) and displaying a concern for more traditional burial ceremonies than Weird Leonard⁵ (247-51). However, 'he's hell when he's well', as J-Bone comments in testament to his reputation as a hard drinker (298). The frequent bouts of alcoholic excess suggest a darker side, just as the ensuing amnesia is replicated in the 'missing' narrative, which may or may not explain how and why he is where he is. Following the description of Suttree's ritual shaving, he goes to the market in Knoxville. The alternating pattern of restrained introspection and alcoholic excess is echoed in his relationships with females, as he is pulled towards and rejects those areas of commerce – the bars, brothels and shops of the city – and repelled by self-loathing and excess to return to the river. His alcoholism therefore parallels and is partially responsible for his movement between narcissism and self-loathing.

While the images of the 'vagina dentata' are more explicit than in *Child of God*, with the objectification and deindividualisation of the females appearing to echo the basic operations of pornography, these spectacular and fantasmic images of feminine rage are importantly seen to be conjured up by the 'sick' mind of Suttree. On both of these occasions, however, the 'sickness' is induced either directly or indirectly by a female. The first extended hallucination follows the administering of the 'black witch' Mother She's unidentified 'paste' and the second series of images is described during Suttree's typhoid fever, although the suggestion is that there is a connection between his affair with a prostitute, Joyce, and his contracting the disease. While the significance of those aspects of the narrative, such as point of view, which relate to issues of identification and subjectivity can be seen to be problematic for the female reader and have been discussed previously, it is worth citing Linda Williams' comment about the monster of the horror film as a form of mirror which reflects to woman patriarchal structures of seeing:

.... There is a sense in which the woman's look at the monster is more than simply a punishment for looking, or a narcissistic fascination with the distortion of their own

baby.' (469) Earlier, he (described as a 'black and ageless androgyne in fool's silks') expresses his admiration for Suttree after they are introduced by Oceanfrog Frazer: 'Ooh that's a pretty thing'. (112)
⁵ '...he wore a shirt loosely unbuttoned and he had a towel over one shoulder and he carried small porcelain basin and a leather shaving bag [...] Suttree knelt and lay down his things, hung his small mirror from a nail, set his washbasin under the tap and turned on the water'(64).

image [...] it is also a recognition of their similar status as potent threats to vulnerable male power.⁶

The implications for the woman who looks at the monster in the form of the 'vagina dentata' is therefore potentially empowering. However, in *Suttree*, women are punished not for looking, but for what Laura Mulvey has termed their 'to-be-looked-at-ness', not merely for being old and ugly (a 'sin' for which it appears longevity is the punishment) but also for being young, beautiful and most crucially, able to procreate.⁷ While the intensely voyeuristic nature of *Child of God* has been discussed, *Suttree* could be said to go further in its examination of specular relationships. Once again, psychoanalytic film theory provides a means for analysing the 'vision' of McCarthy's protagonist. It has been noted that Freud accorded great importance to the physical visibility of the penis, the immediate and straightforward realisation of 'lack', and the intimate connection between organs of the eye and the penis within myths and dreams.⁸ In Jacques Lacan's analysis of vision, it is during the 'mirror phase' that a specular relationship is set up, providing a basis for 'primary narcissism'. While there are many incidents which would suggest *Suttree's* experience of the 'mirror phase', it is not until the end of the novel that he achieves even the illusion of a unitary subjectivity, divesting himself not only of all of his material artefacts, but also realising that 'there is one Suttree and one Suttree only' (461). The importance of issues of identification in film theory have centred on the place constructed by the film which will create an illusory identification, which are experienced during the Lacanian Imaginary order and which, according to Claire Johnston, rely on the denial of the film spectator's separateness: 'so denying the return look of the image and the separateness of the viewer in the auditorium, and stitching him or her into the fiction (suture) and into the subject place, which the filmic text constructs.'⁹ While clearly the experience of reading and viewing are separate and different, given that McCarthy's novels are saturated with dreams, visions, nightmares (possibly Culla Holme's entire narrative in *Outer Dark*, for example) and hallucinations, an analysis of specular relationships in McCarthy's

⁶ Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks', p85 in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp & Linda Williams (Frederick, Md: University Publications of America/ The American Film Institute, 1984).

⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', (1975:17)

⁸ Stephen Heath, 'Difference' in *Screen 19* (1978):51-112.

⁹ Claire Johnston, 'Woman's Cinema as Counter-Cinema,' in *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film*, ed. Patricia Erens (New York: Horizon Press, 1979), p.136.

novels reveals the close proximity which has been noted between cinema and the unconscious.¹⁰ However, it is importantly the manipulation of the 'look' which has led to rigorous debate about the resulting position of the female spectator. This has been discussed with reference to *Child of God* and Barbara Creed's writing on the 'monstrous-feminine' which highlights the simultaneous and contradictory attraction/repulsion dynamic. She suggests that one of the main topics of the horror film is 'man's masochistic desire to take up a feminine position' which 'stems from the very nature of horror as an encounter with the feminine' (121).¹¹

In her reading of Brian de Palma's film, *Dressed to Kill* (1980), Annette Kuhn condemns the representation of sexual violence towards women, suggesting that the murder victim (Kate) who is slashed to death with a cut-throat razor, 'is doubly marked as "guilty"':

First in the immediate sense that just before the murder takes place she engages in a sexual liaison with a complete stranger (who, to reinforce the point about the destructiveness of sexuality, is revealed to be a carrier of VD). Furthermore, as it turns out, Kate is also "guilty" of having aroused her (male) psychiatrist, whose transsexual *female alter ego* is responsible for the murder. Not only therefore, are women represented as *guilty of being victims*. It is in effect also a "woman" who is guilty of the crime of murder. (my italics, 127-128)¹²

Kuhn goes on to propose that the women are also marked as victims 'at the level of the specifically cinematic', particularly in the use of 'optical point-of-view shots' on the film's second victim (who is also, as Kuhn points out, a prostitute) without any reverse shots, thereby making the unseen (and unknown) watcher 'highly threatening' (128). While the above description could be applied to a reading of *Child of God*, the implications of the links between female sexuality and both male and female aggression and the manipulation of point of view, are equally applicable to *Suttree*. The association of the prostitute with disease in McCarthy's novel hints at the destructiveness of sexuality (imaged in the *vagina dentata*), making the *mater*

¹⁰ See Jean-Louis Baudry, 'The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' (1970) & 'The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of reality in Cinema' (1975) in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) pp286-98 & pp299-318. Also, Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

¹¹ Barbara Creed, 'Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film' (1982).

¹² Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

dolorosa 'guilty of being victims'. It is also important to note that this is the first McCarthy novel which has extended descriptions of black females, most notably the 'black witch' Mother She and Doll Jones, both of whom are clearly associated with supernatural power and death.

In *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Siobhan Somerville proposes that the parallels which can be drawn between discourses of racial difference and sexuality suggest that 'the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were deeply intertwined' (3).¹³ Somerville argues that the theories of scientific racism, which combined comparative anatomy with psychoanalysis, illustrated the way in which 'the development of new sexual categories was mediated by methodologies and conclusions borrowed from previous studies of racial difference' (10). She notes the 'emphasis on the surveillance of bodies that was embedded in expert discourses such as sexology was part of the profound reorganisation of vision and knowledge in American culture between the 1890s and the 1920s and she links this to the development of American cinema:

Because race and sexuality pose representational problems centered on the possibilities and impossibilities of the physical legibility of gender [there were several] ways in which the emergent film industry in the United States articulated and simultaneously evaded links between racial difference and homosexuality. (10)

In *Suttree*, the depiction of the homosexual community which exists is complicated by the fact that Trippin Through The Dew and others 'of dubious gender' are described in their 'transvestite' clothes, making them more 'feminine' than any female character, as 'their hands hung from the upturned stems of their wrists like broken lilies' (72). It is possible to see the foregrounding of the black homosexual community of the McAnally flats as a means of appropriating the feminine and simultaneously indicating their 'desire' for Suttree. In addition, the prostitutes are also 'masquerading' as exaggerations of femininity, so that the suggestion of female sexuality as excessive, transgressive and threatening not only simultaneously articulates *and* evades links between racial difference and homosexuality, it also

¹³ Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering The Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, (Duke University Press: Durham & London, 2000).

resists *and* reinscribes racialised images of sexuality. The voracious and engulfing 'vagina dentata' of Suttree's nightmares are not only associated with the black female figures of Doll Jones and Mother She, they also conform to the models identified by Somerville of scientific racism in the United States in which nonwhite and nonheterosexual bodies were constructed as pathological (17). In her discussion of sexology and comparative anatomy, Somerville points out that race became 'an explicit, though ambiguous, structural element' in Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, and that a number of medical journals towards the end of the nineteenth century demonstrate that comparative anatomists 'repeatedly located sexual difference through the sexual characteristics of the female body' (26). In order to explore the influence of scientific studies of race on the emerging discourse of sexuality, Somerville looks at an 1867 study of comparative anatomy by W.H. Flower and James Murie, 'Account of the Dissection of a Bushwoman', which followed on from the earlier study of the African woman's body by French naturalist George Cuvier's description of Saartje Baartman, whose 'protruding buttocks' made her famous as the 'Hottentot Venus' (26). As Somerville points out, this tradition of comparative anatomy 'located the boundaries of race through the sexual and reproductive anatomy of the African female body, ignoring altogether the problematic absence of male bodies from these studies.' (26) In Flower and Murie's account, the 'racial difference in the African body [...] was located in its literal excess, a specifically sexual excess [with 'protruding buttocks' and 'the remarkable development of the labia minora'] that placed her body outside the boundaries of the 'normal' female' (26). Somerville notes a similarity in sexological texts:

Although the specific sites of anatomical inspection (hymen, clitoris, labia, vagina) differed in various sexological texts, the underlying theory remained constant: women's genitalia and reproductive anatomy held a valuable and presumably visual key to ranking bodies according to norms of sexuality. (27)

Such characterisations 'literalized the sexual and racial ideologies' of the nineteenth century, 'and the "Cult of True Womanhood," which explicitly privileged white women's sexual "purity" while implicitly suggesting African American women's sexual accessibility' (28). Somerville also notes the influence of eugenics and antimiscegenation legislation and sentiments which influenced the study of sexology and suggests that 'two tabooed types of desire – interracial and homosexual - became

linked in sexological and psychological discourse through the model of 'abnormal' sexual object choice' (34). The 'Cult of True Womanhood' which privileges white woman's sexual 'purity' will also be discussed with reference to the 'problems' of both miscegenation and homosexuality in the western novels.

When Suttree goes to Mother She, she 'anoints' his eyelids with an unidentified paste which induces his hallucinations. She is described as a 'black androgynous silhouette' and when Suttree tells her to look at him, she refuses:

Suddenly he realized that this scene was past and he was looking at its fading reality like a watcher from another room. Then he was watching the watcher.

He felt a laying on of hands, dry claws divesting him. A clammy fear clogged his heart. Unknowing if his eyes saw or not [...] He lay like a moth in a web. Dust fell from her [...] A dried black and hairless figure rose from her fallen rags, the black and shrivelled leather teats like empty purses hanging [...] Black faltress, portress of hellgate. None so ready as she [...] the plaguey mouth upon him [...] Dead reek of aged female flesh, a stale aridity. Dry wattled nether lips hung from out the side of her torn stained drawers [...] Her shrivelled cunt puckered open like a mouth gawping. He flailed bonelessly in the grip of a ghastly black succubus, he screamed a dry and soundless scream [...] and his spine was sucked from this flesh and fell clattering to the floor like a jointed china snake. (426)

Here is combined Suttree's fear of females with his fear of death. Rape by a grotesque old crone is his worst nightmare. At the end of the novel, when admitted to hospital with typhoid, Suttree's fever-induced hallucinations again include images of both the 'vagina dentata' and the monstrous-feminine:

In the long afternoon he fell prey to strange cravings of the flesh. Out of a pinwheel of brown taffy his medusa beckoned. A gross dancer, with a sallow puckered belly, hands cupping a pudendum grown with mossgreen hair, a virid merkin out of which her wet mauve petals smiled and bared from hiding little rows of rubber teeth like serried rows of conch shells. (449)

Suttree groaned in his sleep. He lay in a sexual nightmare, an enormous wattled fundament lowering slowly over his head, in the centre a withered brown pig's eye crusted shut and hung with puffy blue and swollen lobes. (450)

I saw her in an older dream, an older time, moving in an aura of musk, a breath of stale roses, her languid hands swaying like pale birds and her face chalk and lips pink and her nigh-blue hair upbuckled in combs of tortoise, coming down out of her chamber in my unhealed memory clothed in smoke. (450)

He no longer cared that he was dying. He was being voided by an enormous livercolored cunt with prehensile lips that pumped softly like some levantine bivalve. In to a cold dimension without time without space and where all was motion. (452)

Therefore, once more Suttree imagines his rape by a grotesque hybrid of older woman and mythological creature. From the images of the 'vagina dentata' in the first extract, to the hallucination of the engulfing vagina in the last, these descriptions suggest both death and birth. In contrast to the legend of the fisher king, there are no beautiful young girls welcoming him to the other world. The combination of the 'unhealed memory' of the older woman (perhaps his mother or grandmother) and the horrific images of sexually voracious genitalia (only the bodies of these creatures are described) appears to emphasise Suttree's fear of the maternal and in particular of incest, while at the same time the description of the genitalia conform to the racialised images of sexuality outlined by Sommerville.

In his writing on colonialist discourse, Homi Bhabha proposes that it involves processes that mimic the play of absence and presence which underlies the mechanism of fetishization.¹⁴ As Tania Modleski points out, although Bhabha 'utilizes the very concepts originally developed in the theorization of sexual difference' as a means to understanding the psychosocial dynamics of colonialism and racism, he virtually ignores 'the woman question' (120).¹⁵ Modleski cites Bhabha's description of how the black is presented in colonialist discourse:

...both savage [...] and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants; [...] the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces. (179)¹⁶

As Modleski suggests, this description also applies to the representation of woman, 'who in the male Imaginary undergoes a primal splitting into virgin and whore.' (120) In fact, it closely echoes Suttree's memories of his wife, 'her hair in the morning before it was pinned, black, rampant, savage with loveliness' (152). Modleski points out that Bhabha, like Freud, expands on the idea of woman as the 'dark continent': 'Darkness signifies at once both birth and death; it is in all cases a desire to return to

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* 28 (Spring 1984).

¹⁵ Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-84*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen, and Diana Loxley (London: Methuen, 1986), pp.148-72.

the fullness of the mother, a desire for an unbroken and undifferentiated line of vision and origin.’(120) Modleski questions the collapsing of sexual and racial difference into ‘oceanic plenitude’ in the ‘face of male desire’, so that the ‘heart of the matter, the heart of darkness, is after all ‘Mammy’ – she who, absent in her own right, is spoken by a man as guarantor of his origin and identity’ (120). In her writing on ‘Cinema and the Dark Continent’, Modleski analyses how black women have functioned as the site of ‘displacement of white culture’s (including white women’s) fears and anxieties’ (121). In recalling Bhabha’s description of how black skin ‘splits’ into opposing images of the monstrous and bestial on the one hand and the wise and noble on the other, Modleski’s reading of *Gorillas in the Mist*, the story of the anthropologist Diane Fossey’s study of gorillas in Africa, concludes that ‘into the space hollowed out by the film’s fetishistic splittings (of the white female and the black men) steps the white man, equipped with the photographic apparatus which apparently enables him to establish the proper voyeuristic distance from the perversity which surrounds him’ (125). While Suttree is not endowed with the literal ‘photographic apparatus’, the fact that most of the novel is from his point of view (most of *Gorillas in the Mist* is from Diane Fossey’s), with the exception of his engulfment in perverted images throughout his hallucinations and ‘strange cravings of the flesh’, for the most part, he maintains a ‘proper voyeuristic distance from the perversity which surrounds him’, in the form of the ‘queers’ and the ‘whores’. The point is reiterated time and again that they can ‘look’ but they can’t ‘touch’.¹⁷ Modleski questions the ‘blind spot’ which has allowed ‘the female Other, regardless of race, [to be] frequently consigned to categories that put her outside the pale of the fully human’ (126). She contends that, while the white woman has ‘usually served as the signifier of male desire [...] the black woman, when present at all, has served as a signifier of (white) female sexuality or of the maternal (“Mammy”)', thereby often being reduced to being ‘the signifiers of the signifiers’ (129).

In addition, it is worth considering Giles Deleuze’s writing on male masochism in *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*. Deleuze proposes that in the pre-Oedipal phase it is possible that the male subject ‘identifies the law with the

¹⁷ The bars which Suttree frequents are also the second homes to characters such as Jabbo and Bungalow, who are reminiscent of the Shakespearean comic double-act, although with a similar more

image of the mother' (79).¹⁸ The mother becomes the 'master and torturer' rather than the object and she beats out of the son the law of the father, forming an alliance which is crucial in the development of the masochistic personality, thereby reversing typical patriarchal relations. Importantly, however, Deleuze also notes in his writing about the masochistic position, that it is a juridical one that involves the masochist, paradoxically, having the power to 'fashion the woman into a despot' (20):

The weakness of the [masochist's] ego is a strategy by which the masochist manipulates the woman into the ideal state for the performance of the role he has assigned to her. (107)

However, in her writing on male feminism and the war film, Tania Modleski has pointed out the dangers of 'recent theoretical emphasis on the primacy of masochism' as a means by which to identify a crisis of masculine subjectivity, proposing that 'it is crucial to understand that no necessary shift in power dynamics accompanies such a move' (74):

In addition, then to being skeptical of a position that protects male authority, while *appearing* to relinquish it, feminists also, obviously, have much reason to be suspicious of a strategy that uses them to 'trivialize' war (or philosophy, or history, or economics, or anything else). For all the recent male concern to critique war, male sexuality and male aggression, it remains for woman to continue to claim the right to be taken *seriously* as authorities. (74)

Modleski's reading of war films will be considered in the next section. However, the depictions of the barroom brawls in *Suttree* (which are an elaboration on the activity of the Green Fly Inn in the *Orchard Keeper*, and which at times echo rather disturbingly the vigilante activity of *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*),¹⁹ could be examined in the light of Klaus Theweleit's theory about the idea of 'woman' being

serious function of highlighting the discrepancy between Suttree's position and their own: 'Come on, Mr Suttree, please suh, take a little drink with us poor old niggers' (162).

¹⁸ Giles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: George Braziller, 1971).

¹⁹ As a group of a dozen men 'all good hearts from McAnally' find themselves in a fight at the Indian Rock roadhouse, Suttree asks Callahan who they are fighting and is told: 'Who the fuck cares? If he ain't from McAnally bust him' (186). This is followed by a description of them 'whelmed in dark riot, the smoking hall a no man's land filled with lethal looking drunks reeling about with bleeding eyes and reeking of homemade whisky' (186).

merged with representations of violence that stems from 'a fear of dissolution through union with a woman' that propels him into homosocial relations with other men.²⁰

Suttree displays tendencies (as do McCarthy's later cowboy protagonists) which appear to conform to Deleuze's description of the masochistic position which 'manipulates the woman into the ideal state for performance of the role he has assigned her.' When he is told of his son's death, he takes an overnight train and remembers the nightmares that he, a 'child of darkness and familiar of small dooms,' used to have:

[He] used to wake in terror to find whole congregations of the uninvited attending his bed, protean figures slouched among the room's dark corners in all multiplicity of shapes, gibbons and gargoyles, arachnoids of outrageous size, a batshaped creature hung by some cunning in a high corner from whence clicked and winked like bone chimes its incandescent teeth. (149)

Therefore, even his childhood terrors include images of supernatural creatures and predatory bats, which are later hideously sexualised. Immediately after this, Suttree wonders about the reception he will receive from his wife and her parents. Their reaction indicates that he did more than simply abandon his wife and child:

They watched him from the porch, gathered like a sitting from some old sepia tintype, the mother's hand on the seated patriarch's shoulder. Watched him coming up the walk with his empty hands and burntlooking eyes. Suttree's abandoned wife.

She came down the steps slowly, madonna bereaved, so griefstunned and wooden pieta of perpetual dawn, the birds were hushed in the presence of this gravity and the derelict that she had taken for the son of light himself was consumed in flame like a torch. She touched him as a blind person might. Deep in the floor of her welling eyes dead leaves scudding. Please go away, she said [...]

[The mother] was dressed in black and closed upon them soundless as a plague, her bitter twisted face looming, axemark for a mouth and eyes crazed with hatred. She tried to speak but only a half strangled scream came out, the girl was thrown aside and this demented harridan was at him clawing, kicking, gurgling with rage. (150-1)

The mother gnaws on Suttree's finger 'like a famished ghoul', the father hits him with his shoe and the girl screams at them to stop, 'but [the mother] was hanging onto his leg and gibbering the while. You ghastly bitch, he said, and fetched her a kick in the side of the head which stretched her out. With this the girl fell upon him in much the

²⁰ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Vol.1: *Floods, Bodies, History*, Trans. Stephen Conway, in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

same manner' (151). As the father approaches him with a loaded shotgun, Suttree runs off. The description of the mother as a ghastly witch and her rabid hysteria, appears to represent what happens to all women and the suggestion is made, once more, that the daughter who attacks 'in the same manner' is destined to become just like her mother. Although it seems that Suttree has done something reprehensible, the reader does not know exactly what this is and the description of the 'screaming harridan' is so grotesque as to encourage sympathy with Suttree. As he watches his son's funeral 'choked with a sorrow he had never known', the mother cries out and is helped away: 'Stabat Mater Dolorosa'. It is here that he remembers 'her hair in the morning before it was pinned, black, rampant, savage with loveliness' (152).

After he is told to leave by the sheriff, Suttree is again described as a *pater dolorosa* figure, consumed with remorse and woe for his dead son (159). The emotive and sentimental description of the weeping adult male provides a striking contrast to the depiction of the *mater dolorosa*. The combination of the nihilism which Suttree frequently appears to embrace - 'there are no absolutes in human misery and things can always get worse' (372) - and the sorrow he displays, makes him perhaps McCarthy's most empathetic character to date. Suttree weeps more than any other McCarthy protagonist. Sometimes, it is not clear precisely why he is so sorrowful and he seems simply overwhelmed with grief, as he does when he returns from the mountains and re-enters the community: 'Suttree suddenly began to cry. He didn't know that he was going to and he was ashamed [...] In the street the cold wind on his wet face brought back such old winter griefs that he began to cry still harder. Walking along the mean little streets in his rags convulsed with sobs, half blind with a sorrow for which there was neither name nor help' (294).

In *Feminism Without Women*, Tania Modleski argues that an analysis of male power and hegemony must consider 'the effects of this power *on the female subject* and with an awareness of how frequently male subjectivity works to appropriate 'femininity' while oppressing women' (7):

... however much male subjectivity may currently be 'in crisis', as certain optimistic feminists are now declaring, we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it. (7)

Modleski takes issue with the approach adopted by some 'male feminists'. She cites Stanley Cavell's analysis of the 1937 film *Stella Dallas*, in which, according to Modleski he appropriates the 'muteness' of the unknown female of the melodrama:

In poetically invoking the male philosopher's "melancholy inexpressiveness," Cavell solicits our recognition of the male as the superior candidate for our feeling of pathos, the melodramatic sentiment par excellence. (9)

It is possible to see a similar appropriation taking place in the narrative of *Suttree*. As Modleski notes, Juliana Schiesari's analysis of the gendering of melancholia demonstrates how the 'melancholy inexpressiveness' suggested by Cavell, can be seen to be a masquerade:

[The] ideology of melancholia appropriates from women's subjectivities their 'real' sense of loss [say, *Stella Dallas*'s unbearably painful loss of her child; of the feminist sense of a voice appropriated or denied] and, in Lacanian terms, recuperates that loss [...] as a privileged form of male expression. (9)

The troubling question is whether McCarthy's 'misogynist narratives', as Nell Sullivan has referred to them, are successful in depicting this transformation as the universal dread of every man, which is a manifestation of a male Oedipal crisis.²¹ While the representation of the monstrous-feminine in *Child of God* is more oblique, here the reader is forced to identify with Suttree's vision and his point of view, so that the motif of the 'dead girlfriend' which Sullivan has identified in McCarthy's work, is here extended to include their 'revenge', or perhaps the revenge of the dead girlfriends' mothers. Suttree is knocked unconscious during a drunken barroom brawl:

He distinctly heard his mother say his name [...] What waited was not the black of nothing but a foul hag with naked gums smiling and there was no madonna of desire or mother of eternal attendance beyond the dark rain with lamps against the night, the softly cloven powdered breasts and the fragile clavicle bones alabastrine above the rich velvet of her gown. The old crone swayed as if to mock him. What man is such a coward he would not rather fall once than remain forever tottering? (187)²²

²¹ Nell Sullivan, *Myth, Legend, Dust*, (2000)

²² The reference to the man (here, Suttree) 'falling' is reiterated in the description of Doll Jones as the 'stone-age matriarch' responsible for the 'fall' of her husband/ all men 'in the streets'(108).

The image of revenge is clearly the most troubling for a female reader and what makes the (enforced) identification with the male protagonists, in this case Suttree, a disingenuous and problematic narrative sleight of hand. The *matres dolorosae* are identified as 'guilty' of being victims, of being sexually voracious, and perhaps even of being black. The replacement of the 'wooden pieta', the perfectly composed virgin or Madonna figure with a lascivious and vengeful crone in so many of Suttree's visions, suggests that not only do the *mater dolorosa* 'act as catalysts for destruction' through a power 'derived from a pain so great that it becomes too much for the men who are implicated in their grief', as Terri Witek has proposed, they are also capable of transformation.²³ However, the nature of that transformation, to the 'vagina dentata' of the monstrous-feminine, has the effect of not only providing the 'master and torturer' figure so necessary as part of male masochistic subjectivity, but also provides time and again, a reason for the 'melancholy inexpressiveness' so often displayed by Suttree. Therefore, the females are ultimately providing their own means of destruction.

By the time Suttree meets the Reese family, the reader has become accustomed to the repeated descriptions of any post-adolescent female as a 'slattern', unattractive and usually overweight, so the depiction of Mrs Reese comes as no surprise and repeats many of the narrator's favourite epithets. She talks in a 'muffled snarl' to her husband and is 'peering down at him, a stonejawed and apparently gravid slattern resting her belly on the rim of the washtub and regarding him through clotted rags of hair' (307). By contrast, her eldest daughter, Wanda, 'was extraordinarily well put together with great dark eyes and hair' (313). Each mention of Mrs Reese, from the 'two dry flat birdnotes' of her calling her husband to 'the old woman's long white goat's udders [which] hung half above the tub', provide a fuller picture of the nagging and unattractive wife (317). It is as though her husband's intolerance and laziness is vindicated purely on the basis of this picture of what all women become. By contrast, following the emphasis that is placed on her young age and her virginity (she is described as 'childlike' and when Suttree kisses her, she has 'child's breath, an odor of raw milk'), Wanda's encounters with Suttree are described in oblique terms as 'she slumped against him' and 'seemed barely conscious' (350-2):

²³ Terri Witek, 'Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces', *The Southern Review* 30 (January, 1994): 136-42.

She was warm and wet and softly furred [...] He felt giddy. An obscene delight not untouched by just a little sorrow as he pulled down her drawers. Her thighs were slathered with mucus [...]

She always found him. She'd come pale and naked from the trees into the water like some dream old prisoners harbour or sailors at sea. (352)

In spite of the many reminders of how young she is, Wanda is also depicted as a seductress. Physically beautiful, with 'her perfect teeth, her skin completely flawless', she is also willing participant: 'her smooth thighs, her childlike shamelessness, her little hands dug into his buttocks. Her whimpering like a puppy' (352).

As the family and Suttree are confined to camp for a fortnight because of torrential rain, they 'watched the river bloat and swell until it was screaming through the trees below the bluff':

At night she watched him with eyes full of questions. All were brought into such close and constant communion by the rain that the configuration of the family seemed to alter. A frailly structured matriarchy showed itself these latter days, and Suttree reckoned it had always been so. Crouched there under the ledge [...] all around and ceaseless fell the rain in the forest they could have been some band of stone age folk washed up out of an atavistic dream. (357-8)

While Suttree appears to acknowledge some 'frail' matriarchal system, there remains the contradiction between the matriarchy and the *mater dolorosa*. In the world of McCarthy's novels, maternity is a condition which empowers, disappoints and eventually destroys the female (or at the very least, reduces her to a ghastly harridan), who before childbirth is more desirable and independent. The battle, compromise and imbalance of power in marriage is always evident. The female bears not only children but also more responsibility, while the men act like boys and treat their wives as mothers, and in McCarthy's world 'mothers' are a source of abject horror. There is no sexual energy described between any married couple. It is immediately after Suttree has told Wanda that they must stop their relationship because of the danger of pregnancy (although he has been unable to resist going to her once again and 'with his ear to the womb of this child he could hear the hiss of meteorites'), that the family are visited by the sinister twin possum hunters, Vernon and Fernon (358). The talk of 'hounds coursing on the ridge behind them' and the description of the twins squatting 'on their haunches side by side like buzzards', together with the narrator's warning that this is 'their last week on the river', combine with the Jeremiad implications of

the flood (which has occurred in all of the previous novels) to warn of impending doom (358). The twins have made Suttree uncomfortable (perhaps because they are a reminder of his own dead twin) and he goes to sleep on his own, to be woken by the noise of the wall of slate above the camp falling:

There was no light. He stumbled on a clutch of figures on the ground. A sobbing in the dark. The rain was falling on them [...] In a raw pool of lightning an image of baroque pieta, the woman gibbering and kneeling in the rain clutching at sheared limbs and rags of meat among the slabs of rock. (362)

Therefore, immediately following the suggestion that this 'child' has a womb which is capable of giving birth, she is reduced to 'sheared limbs and rags of meat' and her 'broken' body becomes reminiscent of the figure of Christ, cradled in the arms of the 'baroque pieta'. However, Wanda dies to absolve the sins and the suffering of men, not man.

Michael Kimmel, in *Manhood in America*, considers another way in which men have been under threat from the female.²⁴ He proposes that the quest for manhood – 'the effort to achieve, to demonstrate, to prove our masculinity – has been one of the formative and persistent experiences of men's lives', and that the 'Self-Made Man of American mythology was born anxious and insecure' at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the resultant emphasis on economic prosperity (4).²⁵ However, the 'ideal type' or the dominant ideal of manhood appears to have been, from the beginning, under threat from the mother. As Kimmel points out, Andrew Jackson's warning about the institutions that threatened economic democracy were imaged in terms of the 'devouring mother'. The "mother Bank" was a "monster hydra", a "hydra of corruption" which represented centralised power and monopolisation and therefore would overwhelm and engulf the still-adolescent republic. Jackson's 'flight from feminizing influences illustrates a psychodynamic element in the historical construction of American manhood. Having killed the tyrannical father, American men feared being swallowed whole by an infantilizing and insatiable mother – voluptuous, voracious, and terrifyingly alluring'

²⁴ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (United States: Free Press, 1995).

²⁵ Kimmel elsewhere points out that Clay's phrase was coined in a speech to the U.S. Senate in 1832 (26).

(36). The interrelation of economics and sexuality, which Kimmel argues influenced the changing concept of 'manhood in America', can also be identified in *Suttree*.

The reader learns early in the novel that Suttree's family have suffered as a result of his father having married 'beneath him', as Suttree explains to his mother's brother:

When a man marries beneath him his children are beneath him. [...] If you weren't a drunk he might see me with different eyes. As it is, my case was always doubtful. I was expected to turn out badly. My grandfather used to say blood will tell [...] I'm saying my father is contemptuous of me because I'm related to you [...] You think my father and his kind are a race apart. You can laugh at their pretensions, but you never question their right to the way of life they maintain [...] What do you suppose he thinks of his wife? [...] John, she's a housekeeper. He has no real belief in her goodness. Can't you guess that he sees in her traces of the same sorriness he sees in you? An innocent gesture can call you to mind [...] He probably believes that only his own benevolent guidance kept her out of the whorehouse. (19-20)

This exchange between Suttree and his alcoholic and embittered uncle hints at Suttree's troubled relationship with his family, which appears to be linked to his stillborn twin, although Suttree denies any notion of his identity being influenced by family provenance: 'I'm not like you. I'm not like him. I'm not like Carl (his brother). I'm like me' (18). However, this attempt at self-assertion is undermined throughout the novel, as Suttree repeatedly contemplates the 'sins of the father', although he clearly identifies a link between his father's attitude to him and his brother dying in the womb, thereby hinting at the sins of the mother, whose provenance brings her under suspicion. When John accuses Suttree of being a 'nasty, vicious person', Suttree suggests to him that perhaps 'it's like colorblindness [...] The women are just carriers' (20). The notion that both 'blood will out' and that women are associated with disease, is carried throughout the novel.

When his mother comes to visit him at Christmas in the penitentiary, she is described sitting 'quietly in her good clothes' and, like most of McCarthy's *mater dolorosa* 'she was looking down.':

...she looked up at him. She looked old. He could not remember her looking so. Her slack and pleated throat, the flesh beneath her jaws. Her eyes paler.
Hello mother, he said.
Her lower chin began to dimple and quiver. Buddy, she said, Buddy

But the son she addressed was hardly there at all. Numbly he watched himself fold his hands on the table. He heard his voice, remote, adrift. Please don't start crying, he said.

See the hand that nursed the serpent. The fine hasped pipes of her fingerbones. The skin bewenned and speckled. The veins are milblue and bulby. A thin gold ring set with diamonds that raised the one child's heart of her to agonies of passion before I was. Hers is the anguish of mortality. Hope wrecked, love sundered. See the mother sorrowing. How everything that I was warned of's come to pass. (60)

Suttree starts to cry and replies to the entreaties of his mother simply: 'I can't, he said. Hot salt strangled him. He wheeled away' (61). However, later in the novel, the fact that Suttree crumples and discards his mother's letter, but is willing to accept the cheque that she encloses for him from the estate of his dead uncle, exemplifies what becomes a subtle motif in the novel. Suttree relishes his new-found wealth, buying himself a new wardrobe, including 'a yellow gabardine shirt with handstitched collar and pockets', and lying in 'deep euphoria' in the barber's chair (300-1). The description of him at the barber's emphasises the extremity of the dramatic change in his fortunes (which are Harrogate's fantasies of wealth come to life, although Harrogate will never benefit from wealthy relations dying) and the deference and respect that money can buy. However, this feeling of affluent wellbeing is punctured by the recognition that, for Suttree and his friends, after the new wardrobe, the shave and the sizzling steaks, another commodity to be enjoyed are the prostitutes at the Carnival Club. Once more, the journey is from the sublime to the ridiculous and the pathetic nadir of the hangover:

He woke in Woodlawn among the menhirs of the dead [...] He staggered to his feet, brushing at himself. His trousers were caked with great patches of mud at the knees and he was damp and cold [...] His eyes wandered in his head as he grappled with the murky history of the prior night. Dim memories. A maudlin madman [...] he pulled from his watchpocket a small wet folded paper. It was one of the hundred dollar bills somehow put by. (302)²⁶

Therefore, Suttree appears to reject his father's advice to take responsibility for the running of the world: 'if it is life that you feel you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the

²⁶ Between the descriptions of the beleaguered Mrs Reese and his sexual encounters with Wanda, Mr Reese and Suttree go to Newport to sell the pearls and visit the Green Room brothel. Once again, Suttree changes from distanced observer of the 'sloe-eyed young whores in stage make-up and incredible costumes' to the amnesia and pain of the hangover as he awakes in a field (338-341).

streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent' (13-14).²⁷

The whores provide the backdrop to the sordid low life of McAnally and it seems they are a permanent fixture wherever there are men and alcohol, among the 'fugitives and mistried felons' (384). The descriptions of whores are seemingly endless, so that the 'emaciated whore' who eyes Suttree, 'a stringy sloe-eyed cunt with false teeth and a razorous pelvis beneath the thin dress she wore', becomes one of the multitude who litter McCarthy's prose (384). Suttree's liaison with Joyce, the self-proclaimed 'hustler' is therefore doomed from the start. After their first night together, he wakes beside her and wonders 'Is she gross? Is she horrid? Is she old?' (389) They embark on a relationship which threatens to emasculate Suttree, as Joyce, with her 'sprawl of cosmetics' contrasted to the elemental and natural qualities of Wanda, becomes increasingly 'maternal' towards him, telling him he looks 'like a little boy' and shopping for his new wardrobe. Of course, Suttree begins to think that 'there was altogether too much of her [...] the broad expanse of thigh cradled in the insubstantial stocking and the garters with the pale flesh pulsed and her full breasts' (393). He finds himself 'gradually going awash in the sheer outrageous sentience of her' and he finds himself showered with 'powders and colognes and lotions', sitting in the back of a cab 'half buried in dresses and boxes' (395-6). Joyce is very 'businesslike', negotiating with hotel owners and cab drivers, while Suttree becomes a 'kept' man and increasingly isolated from his former friends. Once again, there is something disingenuous in the description of Suttree not being 'sure what she was talking about' when Joyce tells him that she will send him money from her earnings in Athens, and looking at the proceeds which duly arrive in the form of five dollar bills 'without really understanding them at all' (398). He is a man of the world, fully familiar with the business of prostitution, and not some sort of Forrest Gump ingenue, so that it seems that the narrator is letting the fisher king off the hook, once again.

²⁷ Early in the novel, there is a description of Suttree going to sell his fish: 'Market Street on Monday morning, Knoxville Tennessee. In this year nineteen fifty-one.' It sounds, however, like a much earlier era. In the 'atmosphere rank with country commerce', there are 'pariahs [...] blind singers and organists and psalmists [...] Mute and roosting pedlars [...] and flower ladies in their bonnets like cowed gnomes.' Suttree is described going 'among vendors and beggars and wild street preachers' and the 'rows of faded farmers hunched at the lunchcounters': 'This lazaret of comestibles and flora and

Joyce's curlers, make-up, douche bag and increasing size repulse Suttree. Their relationship breaks down as he is 'consumed in womby lassitude', her posture is increasingly described as 'obscene', and Suttree thinks of her initially as his 'lover', and then his 'trollop', his 'soiled dove' and finally, his 'whore'. The fact that she tells Suttree of her bisexuality hints at a further threat to his masculinity. A dominant feature of the many anecdotal tales of marriage-misery which circulate among the male society of McAnally is the fury of the woman scorned and, as if to conform entirely, Joyce also becomes 'hysterical'. She tries to grab the gear stick as they are driving and then kicks the windshield in. They are later going out to Cumberland when Joyce begins to tear up the money:

She was sitting there ripping it up and crying and saying that this money would never do anybody any good [...] Suttree was out gathering up pieces of tens and twenties from the paving. She had climbed from the car and stood with her hair disarranged, swaying slightly, smiling [As Suttree leaves] she was shouting at him some half drunken imprecations, all he could make out was his name. He seemed to have heard it all before and he kept going. (411)

Therefore, Joyce is reduced to yet another screaming, hysterical harridan. It is Joyce, however, who has recognised, albeit belatedly, that it is the money that has hastened the perhaps inevitable demise of their relationship. While Suttree tells John at the beginning that his own father never saw his mother as anything other than a whore, he himself embarks on a relationship which eventually finds him disparaging Joyce for the same reasons.

When the rabies scare in Knoxville prompts one of Gene's money-making schemes as he attempts to amass bat corpses in order to claim a reward, he enjoys a 'bat harvest' of sorts. Having asked Suttree to procure some strychnine for him, he successfully manages to kill 'half a boatload' and as the policeman stops him and peers in to the sack of bats, he sees 'a prefiguration of the pit': 'Vouchsafed a crokersack vision of hell's floor deep with the hairy damned screaming mute and toothy toward the far and heedless city of God' (215). Many of Harrogate's plans to gain entrepreneurial success are imaged in forms which are closely associated with female sexuality or the abject (killing, selling and eating diseased pigeons and slaughtering pigs) in this

maimed humanity. Every other face goitered, twisted, tubered with some excrescence. Teeth black with rot, eyes rheumed and vacuous'(66-7).

novel. While his 'fantasies of plenitude' and deluded notions of self-aggrandisement are comical and appealing, his unsuccessful attempts to become a 'self-made man' are contrasted with Suttree's rejection of such capitalist aspirations.²⁸ Here, the bats and disease have already been associated with the female (Suttree's wife is 'blind' and her mother 'soundless as the plague').

In her essay 'The Woman of the Ballyhoura Hills: James Joyces and the Politics of Creativity', Marian Eide proposes that in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 'Joyce addresses the nationalist personification of Ireland as either an idealized woman [...] or a degraded seductress [...] by creating his own, resistant personification of Ireland in the woman of the Ballyhoura hills' (377).²⁹ Noting Joyce's expression of concern over the sexual repression in Irish culture, Eide suggests that 'Esthetics, national politics, and sexuality are for Joyce mutually informing forces that Irish national literature must address' (378). Therefore, in *Portrait*, Stephen links his sexual creativity, his potential for parenting, with his artistic creativity. As he feels 'the thoughts and desire of the race to which he belonged flitting like bats', he recalls Davin's story of his encounter with the pregnant peasant woman who 'all but wooed him to her bed' (*Portrait*, 183). As Eide suggests, the peasant woman emerges as 'a fantasized projection that reveals more about Davin and Stephen than about the woman herself' (384). Early legends had imaged Ireland as a betraying woman under English rule, although Eide proposes that Joyce consistently 'debunks this misogynist explanation of Ireland's colonization' (385). When Stephen returns to the image, once again he describes the peasant woman as 'a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness and, through the eyes and voice and gesture of a woman without guile, calling the stranger to her bed' (*Portrait*, 183). As Eide notes, Vincent Cheng has explored the bat metaphor in Joyce by drawing on its implications of prostitution.³⁰ Eide suggests that 'the element of prostitution in national and sexual politics is a

²⁸ Harrogate dreams of 'a penthouse among the arches and spans of the bridge [...] a retractable ropeladder, his boat at anchor by a stanchion, the consternation of marvelling citizenry.' (211) Later, he fantasises about 'himself ascending the stairs at Comer's in pressed gabardines and zipper shoes, a slender cigar in his mouth, an italian switchblade knife silverbound [...] greeted by all.'

²⁹ Marian Eide, 'The Woman of the Ballyhoura Hills: James Joyce and the Politics of Creativity', in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Spring 1999.

³⁰ Vincent J. Cheng, 'The Bawk of Bats' in Joyce's Belfry: The Flitter in the Feminine' in *Joycean Occasions: Essays from the Milwaukee James Joyce Conference*, Ed. Janet E. Dunleavy, Melvin J. Friedman, and Michael Patrick Gillespie. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991) pp125-37.

strong part of the material with which Stephen struggles [his] metaphor questions whether Ireland prostitutes herself or expresses desire' (387). In McCarthy's novel, Suttree's typhoid fever occurs shortly after he has left his prostitute lover and culminates in his 'rebirth', as described below. This suggests the bats-disease-prostitute connection, so that McCarthy is in a different way also drawing an analogy between the process of the coming into consciousness of his male protagonist and the artistic endeavour through the metaphor provided by birth.³¹ The birthing metaphor is also evident in one of the few passages in *Child of God* in which Lester Ballard is endowed with some degree of self-examination. It occurs after the description of his cave as womb-like and his own gradual transformation to 'a gothic doll in ill-fit clothes' as 'he'd long been wearing the underclothes of his female victims but now he took to appearing in their outerwear as well':

His own tracks came from the cave bloodred with cave mud [...] With the advent of [false spring] bats began to stir from somewhere deep in the cave. Ballard lying on his pallet by the fire one evening saw them come from the dark of the tunnel and ascend through the hole overhead fluttering wildly in the ash and smoke like souls rising from Hades. When they were gone he watched the hordes of cold stars sprawled across the smokehole and wondered what stuff they were made of, or himself. (C of G, 141)³²

Harrogate is eventually caught and arrested when his operation to steal money from public telephones is discovered, although not before his failed 'capitalist' venture to try to gain entry into the bank vaults of the city through the sewer system, an experience which echoes that of Lester Ballard. There are detailed descriptions of the sewage 'percolating down' and the bats which 'hung in clusters like bunches of dark and furry fruit' (262):

...Harrogate began to tunnel towards the vaults underground where the city's wealth was kept. By day in the dark of dripping caverns, stone bowels whereon was founded the city itself, holding his lantern before him, a blood coloured troglodyte stooped and muttered down foul corridors. [...] (259)

³¹*Cities of The Plain*, John's desire to save Magdalena from life as a prostitute is seen to be in many ways naive, misguided and certainly dangerous, and their 'role' as white knight and prostitute are explicitly tied to their different nationalities in this novel. This is considered in the following section.

³²At the beginning of *Blood Meridian*, 'the kid' sets out on a boat to Texas: 'His origins are become as remote as his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another type of clay (p.4).' The image of the man of clay is developed as a source image implicit in McCarthy's creationist/evolutionist dialectic, although as Danae Phillips says of *Blood Meridian* 'the novel soon makes it clear that creation cannot be shaped to man's will' (439), the same could be said of McCarthy's earlier novels.

Gene continues to struggle with his farcical attempts to map a course, a 'demon cartographer [...] charting the progress of the souls below', although Suttree cannot resist his enthusiasm for the project and helps: 'describing angles, formulas, the small face of the apprentice felon nodding at his elbow' (260):

In the damp and alveolar deeps beneath the city he probed with a torch he'd stolen, sighting courses from stone to stone to reckon by and charting with his crazed compass a fix of compounded errors. [...] Everywhere a liquid dripping, something gone awry in the earth's organs to which this measured bleeding clocked a constantly eluded gloom (260-21)

Harrogate cannot get his bearings, however, and 'he began to suspect some dimensional displacement in these descents to the underworld, some disparity unaccountable between the above and below. He destroyed his charts and began again' (262). Suttree once more plays the 'fisher of men' as he quite literally fishes Harrogate out of the sewage after his unsuccessful attempt to dynamite his way into the bank vaults. As Suttree searches 'his light ran over the ceilings, the carinated domes, stone scallopings and random hanging spires':

The ribbed palate of a stone monster comatose, a great uvula dripping rust [...] Suttree pressed on, down the carious undersides of the city, through black and slaverous cavities where foul liquors seeped. He had not known how hollow the city was. (275-6)

In *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, Gillian Rose writes of the "hegemonic geographical imagination" and the "masculinist gaze" of the geographer in a discipline that has traditionally excluded women.³³ In a chapter titled "Looking at Landscape: The Uneasy Pleasures of Power", Rose aims to show that the 'compelling figure of Woman both haunts a masculinist spectator of landscape and constitutes him' and that 'the structure of aesthetic masculinity which studies landscape is inherently unstable, subverted by its own desire for the pleasures that it fears' (88-9). While she focuses on the conflation of 'nature' and 'woman' in the geographical imagination, she also proposes that the city can be characterized as feminine (69). She points out that a form of 'tough heroism' associated with and

³³ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1993).

legitimated by geographers has established fieldwork 'as a particular kind of masculine endeavour' (70).

The description of Harrogate as the 'demon cartographer', and also as the 'apprentice felon' to Suttree's superior mapping skills, 'probing' the city's internal organs and attempting to chart a course, conforms to what Gillian Rose has described as the 'aesthetic masculinity' and the 'phallogentrism of the gaze' in geography. Rose's writing on the implications of the metaphor landscape-as-woman and the inherent phallogentrism of cartography is discussed in greater depth in the following section. She contends that 'the intersections of voyeurism and narcissism [...] structure geography's gaze at landscape', so that fieldworkers 'correspond to the coherent, active subjects that we (mis)recognize in the mirror' and see themselves as 'the ego-ideal hero in a landscape' (108). She also proposes that certain 'contradictions' are inherent in the gaze and these 'intersect with the tension that geographers themselves recognize between pleasure and knowledge' (108). The reader of *Suttree* is similarly encouraged to identify with the eponymous hero as 'the ego-ideal hero in the landscape', as he strolls through the streets and marketplace and past the shops, bars and slums of Knoxville.

The narrator describes Suttree watching Ab Jones' wife, Doll, who 'wore an agate taw in one eyesocket', as she falls asleep:

...the blind eye half open like a drowsing cat's, her mouth agape. Toes peered from the mules like little clusters of dark mice. On her broad face two intersecting circles, fairy ring or hagstrack, the crescent welts of flesh like a sacerdotal brand on some stone age matriarch. Annular treponema. Read here why he falls in the streets. Another Jena, another time. (108)³⁴

Doll's tribal scarring illustrates the angel/whore, 'fair/ hag', dichotomy of McCarthy's females. Like most of McCarthy's older generation of females, she is 'shuffling' and yet dangerous. The ambiguity is sustained in the hint that she is the reason that Ab and perhaps all men 'fall in the streets'. The notion that the 'stone age matriarchs' are the reason for the misfortune of all men is found in all of the novels. Earlier, Suttree

³⁴ Jena is a University town in Thuringia, central Germany on the River Saale. It produces chemicals and optical instruments, thereby alluding arcanelly to Dol's 'annular treponema' or her ring-shaped surgery.

had noted the 'frailly structured matriarchy' which had established itself among the Reese family and wondered if it had 'always been so' (357).³⁵

However, towards the end of *Suttree*, the narrative voice, the examination of community and nation and the representation of the female, coalesce to hint at another possibility. Following a description of Suttree reduced to a wretched, emaciated figure and emasculated, not only by his 'nightie' but also by his parodic performance of a romantic encounter with a nurse who has presumably had to prop him up,³⁶ his subsequent dreams appear to suggest a quite different form of the matriarchal:

His dreams were of houses, their cellars and attics. Ultimately of this city in the sea. Some eastern sea that lay heavily in the dawn. There stood on its further rim a spire of smoke attended and crowned by a plutonic light where the waters have broken open. Erupting hot gouts of lava and great upended slabs of earth and a rain of small stones that hissed for miles in the sea. As we watched, there reared out of the smoking brine a city of old bone coughed up from the sea's floor, pale attic bone delicate as shell and half melting, a chalken shambles coralgrown that slewed into shape of temple, column, plinth and cornice, and across the whole frieze of archer and warrior and marblebreasted maid all listing west and moving slowly their stone limbs. As these figures began to cool and take on life Suttree said among the watchers that this time there are witnesses, for life does not come slowly. It rises in one massive mutation and all is changed utterly and forever. We have witnessed this thing today which prefigures for all time the way in which historic orders proceed. And some said that the girl who bathed her swollen belly in the stone pool in the garden last evening was the author of this wonder they attended. And a maid bearing water in a marble jar came down from the living frieze toward the dreamer with eyes restored black of core and iris brightly painted attic blue and she moved toward him with a smile. (459-60)

Suttree has earlier contemplated the 'detritus' which had 'slid from the city on the hill', the remains of 'some ancient city', suggesting a reference to the Puritan belief in American exceptionalism and also the notion of omniscience of the observer (411). Here, the creation of the city resonates both with biblical and mythological references, while it also alludes to Yeats' Ireland 'changed utterly and forever' and the 'swollen belly' of the girl contrasts with Suttree's 'shrunken gut' of the previous paragraphs. The suggestion here is that the girl, like the one in Wallace Steven's 'The Idea of Order at Key West' is somehow the 'author' of this creation, or the 'mother' who

³⁵ In McCarthy's unpublished screenplay, *Whales and Men*, there is a reference to 'a matrix, a motherfield, existing outside of time.'(58) Cited in Dianne C. Luce, 'The Road and the Matrix': The World as Tale in *The Crossing* in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin t. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, (University Press of Mississippi: Southern Quarterly Series, 1999), p207

³⁶ He tells her 'I know all souls are one and all souls lonely.'(459)

gives birth to the city.³⁷ The city arises fully formed from nature, so that all of the descriptions of the 'optical democracy' of the urban and the natural are combined in this description, as the city has not evolved as the result of man but 'rises in one massive mutation'. The repetition of the atavistic 'archers and warriors' and the ancient tableaux of 'friezes' which depict the 'marblebreasted maid' and the 'stone limbs' of all those moving west, reiterates the depiction of 'optical democracy' elsewhere, as no one thing takes precedence, whether it is man, city or nature. They recall Andrew Bartlett's proposal about the 'archaeological vision' of *Child Of God* which frequently acts as a form of 'freeze-frame', a vision which has also been consistent throughout *Suttree*, in the descriptions of the 'wooden pieta', 'baroque pieta', 'stone-age matriarch', and particularly in descriptions of the city vaults as 'stone bowels' and the 'ribbed palate of a stone monster comatose' (150, 357, 108, 259, 275).³⁸ The 'maid bearing water' appears to be a reference to Wanda Reese or perhaps the water boy at the end, and the 'eyes restored black of core and iris brightly painted attic blue', could allude to Joyce and her 'alchemical rituals', although now there is a sense of resolution and acceptance as 'she moved toward him with a smile'. The repetition in this section of 'watching' and 'witnessing' and the emphasis on the 'eyes restored' also combines all the previous descriptions of females (Mother She, Doll Jones and others) and in particular the 'eye' of the female genitalia of *Suttree's* nightmares. Following this depiction of the ultimate female matriarch, who gives birth to the nation, *Suttree* recovers from his fever and appears to undergo a further 'birth':

When he woke there were footsteps in the room. Shapes crossed between the light and his thin eyelids. He was going again in a corridor through rooms that never ceased, by formless walls unordered and unadorned and slightly moist and warm through soft doors with valved and dripping architraves and regions wet and bluish like the inward parts of some enormous living thing. A small soul's going. By floodlight through the universe's renal regions. Pale phagocytes drifting over, shadows and shapes through the tubes like the miscellany in a water drip. The eye at the end of the glass would be God's. (461)

³⁷ 'She was the single artificer of the world/ In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea, /Whatever self it had, became the self/ That was her song, for she was the maker' (137-40) in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems* (Faber & Faber: London, 1965, 1st pub. 1953), p. 66

³⁸ Andrew Bartlett, 'From Voyeurism to Archaeology: Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*', *Southern Literary Journal*, 1991, No. 24: 3-15.

These are not the violent and repulsive hallucinations of previous passages describing the fear of absorption by the 'vagina dentata', but an altogether more pleasant birth scene. After he has inhabited the womb once more, the 'eye' at the end of the glass which he supposes to be God's could perhaps ironically allude to the doctor as he returns to consciousness. Therefore, he has witnessed the birth of the city and experienced his own rebirth, both of which place the female at the centre of the process.

The combination of the old and the new, birth and death, is resonant in the final description of Knoxville:

Behind him the city lay smoking, the sad purlieus of the dead immured with the bones of friends and forbears. Off to the right side the white concrete of the expressway gleamed in the sun where the ramp curved out into the empty air and hung truncate with iron rods bristling among the vectors of nowhere. (471)

The fact that Suttree is closely tied to the wellbeing of the McAnally Flats and its citizens complicates the association of the female with the city. As a novel of extremes and oscillations, the attraction/ repulsion and desire/ fear dynamic of both Suttree's dreamworld and his real world, the movement between nihilistic despair and cautious optimism, is encapsulated in the metaphor of city-as-female, although this implies that, once more, the female is responsible for both its birth and its death. The suggestion that Suttree 'knew another McAnally, good to last a thousand years' and his departure at the end, hint at a rejection of the mother once more. While the images of the 'vagina dentata' are reflected in the descriptions of the 'inner organs' of the city – 'dripping', 'bleeding', 'slavorous' and 'seeping'- these are images of the abject and polluted. By contrast, all of the descriptions of the 'frailly structured matriarchy' identified by Suttree earlier reflect the physical materials used in the construction of the city, the 'pietas' and matriarchs are made of wood and stone, and the suggestion is finally that they too can be destroyed by 'gnostic workmen' who raze the slums of McAnally, leaving only 'cutaway elevations, little cubicles giving onto space, an iron bedstead, a freestanding stairwell to nowhere' (464). Therefore the matriarch is reduced to nothing more than an atavistic version of one of Lester Ballard's 'wooden'

corpses. However, the archaic mother could once again be seen to be reconstructed as 'the origin of all life threatening to re-absorb what it once birthed.'³⁹

Therefore, in McCarthy's southern novels, the female is associated with the supernatural (cats, bats, witches, hawks) and death (the 'vagina dentata', the monstrous-feminine and the corpse). While the first chapter considered the importance of 'regionalism' in McCarthy's depiction of the relationship between man, society and the landscape, in this chapter it can be seen that his narratives conform to and expand on what Richard Gray has identified as a particularly Southern representation of the female.⁴⁰ Using Julia Kristeva's argument that women occupy a place on the borderlines of a (male) culture, Gray comments on a 'peculiarly Southern' variation on the notion that those women understood to be within the border are seen as 'precious guardians of the law' and those outwith the boundaries are 'creatures of turbulence and darkness' (25):

The peculiarly Southern variation on all this is to translate white women into "marble" guardians or totems and to leave black women to take care of chaos. (25)

Gray also notes that the female corpses, the "marble" bodies in their "white robes" are "obsessively marked by blood", suggesting not only disease and death but also the repression of "corporeal and sexual life" with the transformation into Southern "ladies" (25-6). *Suttree* appears closest to Gray's description, in its almost obsessive depiction of women as either the 'marble' *mater dolorosa*, an image replicated in the city, or the monstrous-feminine who is 'obsessively marked by blood'. However, *Outer Dark* has also been seen to conflate these two, making the border indistinct. Furthermore, this novel exemplifies the 'peculiarly intense linking of sex, death, and the family' identified by Gray in many Southern texts. He attributes this to repression of the miscegenation myth and cites Richard H. King's observation that 'The Southern family romance was the South's dream [...] The region was conceived of as a vast metaphorical family'.⁴¹ As Gray notes, 'in the terms of this collective myth,

³⁹ Barbara Creed, 'Horror and The Monstrous-Feminine' (p79)

⁴⁰ Richard Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 2000.

⁴¹ Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York, 1980), pp26-7. Gray also notes the larger implications of the Freudian link between incest and a desire to return to the womb, suggesting a tendency to 'resist change and growth' (30). Incest is also linked to narcissism: 'as an increasingly closed society, preoccupied with idealised self-

every young white woman became a “sister”, a member of the clan, whose purity and honor had to be protected’ (29). As has been noted, Rinthy Holme is described repeatedly as ‘little sister’, although it is *Suttree* which appears to conform to the further racist trope which ‘assigns the sexual function, mythically. To black women’, in order to avoid the threat of incest inherent in the Southern family romance (29). However, the ethereal presence of the “bodiless” dead white women who are ‘marked by blood’, continues to haunt McCarthy’s western fiction, as the dead/ absent figures of John Grady Cole’s mother (*Pretty Horses*), Billy Parham’s sister (*The Crossing*), and Mac McGovern’s niece (*Cities*), are also elusive and represented within the narrative only in ‘marginalized and shadowy or slippery form – as an obscure object of desire’, just as their ‘sisters’ in the South had been (26).

“They’re always more trouble than what they are worth”: Penetration, Intervention and the Erotics of Culture in Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels

The by now familiar litany of female stereotypes reappear in McCarthy’s westerns. Once again, the adolescent ‘madonna’ figure can be recognised by her long dark hair, ‘so black’, her skin ‘so pale’ and her sorrowful posture. The older females are bitter, vengeful and maimed. Dueña Alfonsa in *All The Pretty Horses* is missing her wedding-ring finger and the one-eyed *criada* in *Cities of the Plain*, bears a remarkable similarity to the ‘black witch’ Mother She and Doll Jones in *Suttree*. In addition, there are descriptions of the mother-housekeepers who hover angelically around the male protagonists, providing food, warmth and a slavish maternal devotion that can be traced back to Marion Sylder’s wife in *The Orchard Keeper*. At the beginning of *All The Pretty Horses*, John’s mother may have abandoned him, but Luisa the Mexican cook is there to administer to his every need and at the end of *Cities Of The Plain*, Billy is seen being nursed by the devoted maternal warmth of Betty.

images, particularly of its own past, the Old South certainly leaned towards narcissism, receding from the rest of the nation – first in intellectual and imaginative terms, and then politically’ (30).

These novels have been examined in the first chapter with reference to their depiction and critique of American exceptionalism and the violence of imperialism as they are related to the landscape and topography of the Southwest. Given that all of the females allowed any narrative power are Mexican, issues of politics and in particular the ideology of Manifest Destiny, are clearly also relevant here. In addition, it was suggested that the narrative voice of the westerns simultaneously foregrounds landscape while questioning the 'cartographic impulse', through a movement from the 'optical democracy' to be found in *Blood Meridian*, to the interior landscapes of the mind of the border cowboys. The layering of metaphors was also seen to be a problematic narrative device, in danger of obscuring any meaning, and here, the metaphor of 'animal-as-female' is seen to be similarly ambivalent.

The association of the female with nature has been examined with reference to McCarthy's earlier work. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the predatory female sexuality represented by the feral cat is associated with the absent (perhaps dead) wife of Old Arthur Ownby, and her desperate search for her kittens prefigures the cunning and wild desperation of the pregnant wolf in *The Crossing*. In *Outer Dark*, the figure of Rinthy combines perhaps McCarthy's most poignant portrait of the *mater dolorosa*, as a female aligned with nature in a similarly ambiguous sense to that of Milton's Eve: 'I who first brought death on all, / Am grac'd the source of life'. In *Child of God*, of course, most of the females are corpses. The association of nature with the female, in the womb-like subterranean cave/ grave in which the murderous necrophiliac Lester Ballard resides with his corpses and stuffed toys, has been examined in relation to both Barbara Creed's writing on the "monstrous-feminine" in the horror film and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as Ballard represents all that is 'abject', polluted and that must be expelled from society. In *Suttree*, the spectacular revenge of the *mater dolorosa*, the relationship between economics and sexuality and the possibility of a 'frailly structured matriarchy' are considered. In addition, the dangers inherent in the ability of the adolescent female madonna/ whore figure to procreate were noted.

In her essay on Jean Stafford's western, *The Mountain Lion* (1947), Susan Rosowski asks 'what of women and the western?':

As characters, we are told, they are scarce, appearing (when they do) as children (Warshow), symbols of civilization (Cawelti), or superegos that disrupt the relationship between hero and savage (Fiedler). As readers, they are sorely underrepresented among the critics, for with the welcome exception of Jane Tompkins, this is territory claimed by men. (157-8)¹

Rosowski proposes that Stafford's novel about the life (and death) of a young female protagonist, Molly Fawcett, as she is initiated into (or rather, excluded from) the ways of the west on her uncle's Colorado ranch, reveals the 'sources of psychosexual violence so thinly veiled in formula western fiction.': 'The cattle ranch is a breeding business, at the heart of male bonding is sexual anxiety, and the hunt represents undisguised aggression against women' (158). These formulae will be considered in relation to McCarthy's novels, as it is by examining the ongoing representation of women throughout McCarthy's novels that a fuller picture begins to take shape. It is not always a pretty picture.

Robert Jarrett has proposed that the portrayal of women in the *Border Trilogy* would 'require a reassessment of feminist critiques', particularly 'given the crucial role of Alfonsita in *All The Pretty Horses* and the novel's ironizing of Cole's romantic conceptions of Alejandra as the beloved' (148).² This section will consider whether McCarthy is indeed being 'ironic' about his protagonists' conception of females as 'beloved' or whether these novels critique Lacey Rawlins' suggestion in *All The Pretty Horses* that 'they are always more trouble than they are worth', only to then reinscribe it.³ Given the settings of these novels, the notion of 'worth' becomes a crucial concern in the depiction of the political and economic relationship between America and Mexico. The ambivalence which adheres to McCarthy's depiction of the 'romantic' encounters of his protagonists will be discussed with reference to José Limón's writing on the historical and contemporary 'erotics of culture' which exists

¹ Susan J. Rosowski, 'Molly's Truth-telling, or, Jean Stafford Rewrites the Western' in *Reading The West: New Essays on the Literature of The American West*, Ed. Michael Kowalewski (Cambridge Uni. Press, 1996), pp157-177.

² Robert L. Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997).

³ McCarthy's ironising of his protagonist is hinted at in the description of John Grady's last sighting of Alejandra, riding 'erect and stately' through the rain, lightning and 'black clouds': 'real horse, real rider, real land and sky and yet a dream withal' (ATPH, 132-3). However, the description of her figure being 'shrouded [...] in that wild summer landscape', also suggests the association of the female with death and the conflation of female/ animal and landscape.

between America and Greater Mexico.⁴ Limón proposes that this is exemplified in the 'degeneration' of the Mexican male and the sexualised figure of the Mexican woman, which contributed to the conflation by Anglo-Americans of sexual repression with capitalist expansion. However, McCarthy's representation of both Indians and Mexicans has come under scrutiny. Blake Allmendinger, for example, proposes that McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* 'romanticised violence and stereotyped Mexicans, and [I] groaned when I learned it was the first instalment of a grandiose trilogy' (1).⁵

Susan Rosowski has written that 'Reading the West means acknowledging the formula western. It is indisputably the cultural form with which the region is most identified and arguably the one that bears its most elevated claims' (157).⁶ She cites Robert Warshow, who looks to the western for its 'serious orientation to the problem of violence which can be found almost nowhere else in our culture', and John Cawelti in *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (1976), who reads it as the product of an 'epic moment' in America's history. There has been considerable debate about whether McCarthy glamorises and romanticises the cult of violence and the notion of heroism attached to it, or whether he offers a critique of the sources of violence in America's history. Jane Tompkins turns to the western 'in an attempt to understand why men act the way they do and to come to terms with it emotionally', suggesting that it is a genre 'thriving on physical sensation, wedded to violence, dominated by the need for domination':

⁴ Jose E. Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, The United States, And The Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon press) 1998. Limón points out that his use of the term 'Greater Mexico' is borrowed from Américo Paredes, who coined the term to refer to 'all the areas inhabited by people of a Mexican culture – not only within the present limits of the culture of Mexico but in the United States as well – in a cultural rather than a political sense.' *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1976), xiv. Limón argues in his introduction that the South 'served as a midwife – and not a gentle one - at the birth of greater Mexico' and that 'the relationship between the two is somewhat paradoxical because great Mexico and the South have had much in common historically.' (9) He compares the efforts of the Southern Agrarian writers to 'search for a pure and primal imagined community' as a reaction against 'Northern' capitalist modernity with 'parallel efforts' made by Greater Mexico at the same time. (20)

⁵ Blake Allmendinger, Introduction to *Over The Edge: Remapping the American West*, eds. Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger, (California: University of California Press, 1999), pp1-14.

⁶ Susan. J. Rosowski, 'Molly's Truthtelling, or Jean Stafford Rewrites the Western' in *Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West*, Ed. Michael Kowalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), pp.157-77

To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything is to die [...] Death is everywhere in this genre [...] most compellingly in the desert landscape in which the bodies of the gunned-down eventually emerge. (24)⁷

Rosowski asks, 'What is the formula about which such claims are made?' For Cawelti 'the symbolic landscape of the western formula is a field of action that centers upon the point of encounter between civilization and wilderness, East and West, settled society and lawless openness', while for Warshow, the point of the western is 'a certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence', and Tompkins writes that it 'is obsessed by death, and worships the phallus' (Rosowski, 158). The common ground in all of these analyses is not only that the history of the west is death-ridden but that death is unremittingly violent. Tompkins also adds that the female characters in the Western serve as 'extensions of the men they are paired with [...] masking the fact that what they are really interested in is one another' (25). The depiction of the homosocial world of the Western and the influence of the female (through both her presence and her absence) will also be examined. The articulation of the inherent violence and imperialism of manifest destiny is a prevalent theme of all of McCarthy's western novels, from the direct pronouncements of characters such as Captain White and John Joel Glanton in *Blood Meridian*, to the more oblique form of this ideology which influences McCarthy's later 'cowboy' protagonists. It is the absence of female figures, either through abandonment (the mother) or imprisonment (the prostitute), which is seen to act as a catalyst in the expression of an aggressive masculinity.

While Anglo-American women played an acknowledged and in fact vital role in the migration westwards during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their involvement in combat of any form, and in particular the war with Mexico, was minimal. The Mexican population on the other hand, both men and women, were directly affected by American imperialist ideology. In the absence of Anglo-American females, the violence meted out to both Mexican and Indian women and men appears to have been a displacement of the violence men feel towards women/ other, cloaked in the guise of Manifest Destiny. Therefore, the absence of females, in this case Anglo-Americans, creates a pressure which results in catastrophic violence. The second source of pressure encountered and covertly displaced by the actions and

⁷ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: OUP, 1992).

behaviour of the male figures takes the form of excessively aggressive displays of masculinity as a compensation against the threat of the recognition of homosocial relationships. As Jane Marie Gaines and Charlotte Herzog suggest in their article on 'The Fantasy of Authenticity in Western Costume', the western is the 'homosocial scene par excellence' and that 'the corollary to this homoerotica is an auto-eroticism of the self-sufficient loner. The elusive westerner needs and wants no man, preferring the company of his horse' (180).⁸ However, while the "buddy" relationships will be examined, there is also a suggestion that McCarthy's protagonists have some difficulty in differentiating between animals and females. John Grady Cole embarks on a passionate love affair with the daughter of a wealthy Mexican ranch-owner in *All The Pretty Horses*, but he is more loquacious and overtly sexual in his very suggestive 'horse whispering'. In *Cities of The Plain*, although Billy tells John Grady Cole 'I ain't jealous', when John tells him that he wishes to marry the Mexican prostitute Magdalena, there is evidence to suggest otherwise.

Sacvan Bercovitch has traced the ideology of Manifest Destiny to its Puritan roots and suggests that it is an almost exclusively masculine one: 'By and large it was a metaphysics for men.' (37).⁹ However, in her article 'Manifest Domesticity', Amy Kaplan points out that while the concept of Manifest Destiny has always been the subject of contradictory political and historical interpretations, what has seldom changed is that it has traditionally been accepted that it has been men who have been actively engaged in the fulfilment of America's destiny and the women who have passively supported them in their endeavours.¹⁰ She examines standard definitions of the domestic novel in nineteenth-century America and proposes that the gendered connotations surrounding the term 'domesticity' were connected implicitly to another meaning – 'the fraught and contingent nature of the boundary between the domestic and the foreign, a boundary that breaks down around questions of the racial identity of the nation as home' (585). Therefore, Kaplan appears to invert Bercovitch's

⁸ Jane Marie Gaines & Charlotte Cornelia Herzog, "The Fantasy of Authenticity in Western Costume", in *Back In the Saddle Again: New essays on the Western*, eds. Edward Buscombe & Roberta E. Pearson (London: British Film Institute Pub., 1998).

⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch, 'The Rites of Assent: Rhetoric, Ritual, and the Ideology of American Consensus' in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology and Popular Culture*, ed. Sam B. Grigus (University of New Mexico Press, 1981).

¹⁰ Amy Kaplan, 'Manifest Domesticity' in *American Literature*, Volume 70, Number 3 (September 1998): 581-606.

suggestion that the 'self-made' man of 1850s America was the result of a 'metaphysics for men' encapsulated by the ideology of Manifest Destiny, and instead she proposes that the 'boundary' between the domestic sphere and the broader political concept of Manifest Destiny is broken down and even reversed as it in turn becomes, in Paul Giles' words, 'the rationale and justification for sentimental invocations of family space' and a form of 'imperial domesticity' (586).¹¹

While *Blood Meridian* is hardly replete with 'sentimental invocations of family space', it is possible to detect a similar breaking of boundaries between the domestic sphere and the larger identification of the nation as 'home' which parallels the fading voice of Manifest Destiny's rhetoric in McCarthy's western novels. As *Blood Meridian* evokes the true power and horror of American exceptionalist rhetoric at a time when the concept of Manifest Destiny reached new heights, throughout the later *Border Trilogy*, the 'fraught and contingent nature of the boundary between the domestic and the foreign' is fully explored. While the protagonists of these novels appear to reject domestic spaces in favour of the limitless environs of the campfire, there is a gradual embracing of the domestic (seen most clearly in John Grady Cole's almost obsessive desire to build a home for himself and Magdalena) which appears to have an almost sinister correlation with the gradual erosion of the articulation of the rhetoric of manifest destiny within the novels. Or, conversely, is this a sign of the incorporation of the 'rationale and justification for sentimental invocations of family space' and a form of 'imperial domesticity'?

Perhaps the efforts of McCarthy's 'cowboy' protagonists on behalf of their females in distress - whether it is to 'free' a wealthy Mexican ranch owner's daughter from the constrictions of matriachal confinement (*All The Pretty Horses*), to return a pregnant wolf to the mountains of Mexico, to save a Mexican girl from possible rape (*The Crossing*) or to rescue a Mexican prostitute from her pimp (*Cities of The Plain*) - could be seen as a naïve and misplaced form of heroism which is directly borne of an implicit acceptance of the ideology of manifest destiny. It is not clear that any of these females actually want to be 'saved'.

¹¹ Paul Giles, 'European American Studies and American American Studies', *European Journal of American Studies*, Vol.19, No.1, 1999: 12-16.

**“Don’t let on like you aint no seasoned indian killer”: Violence,
Vietnam and Vanishing Indians in *Blood Meridian*
& *The Border Trilogy***

In *The Modern American Novel of Violence*, Patrick Shaw compares *Blood Meridian* with Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove*, which is also set in Texas and Mexico in the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹² Published in the same year, it won the Pulitzer prize, sold millions of copies and was made into a television series, while *Blood Meridian* has remained in relative obscurity. Shaw proposes that one of the main differences between these novels is that ‘McMurtry capitalizes on the trends of the day by depicting numerous female characters’, from ‘the clichéd good-hearted whore (Lorena Wood) to the tough, smart dominant wife, nurse, lover and business woman (Clara Allen)’ (143). McMurtry addresses the mythology surrounding the West in novels such as *Lonesome Dove* (1985), *Anything for Billy* (1988), *Buffalo Girls* (1990) and *The Streets of Laredo* (1993), in which the ironic destruction of the wilderness by the very men who were drawn to it, is given a self-consciously romanticised treatment. In his novels, the Indians are seen to be demoralised, the historical figures are diminished figures and heroism an outmoded exercise in nostalgia. Both McMurtry and more recently, Annie Proulx in her *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, (1999) use the rodeo as a symbol of both the appeal and the disappointment of the mythology surrounding the West, exploring the nostalgia for the heroic vision and the pathetic desperation in its lack of reality.¹³ Shaw suggests that in the sequel to McMurtry’s novel, *The Streets of Laredo*, he ‘exaggerates this female dominance till the men are little more than knavish fools, severely punished with psychological and physical dismemberment’ (143). In fact, McCarthy has also frequently presented women as stereotypes, illustrated in the repeated imaging of females as a *mater*

¹² Patrick Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence* (New York: Whitston Publishing Co., 2000).

¹³ Annie Proulx, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 1999). Proulx’s short stories also address the homosocial bonds and taboo homosexual relationships between men in

dolorosa (embodied in the figure of Magdalena, the Mexican epileptic prostitute of McCarthy's latest novel, whose only lines in English are "Yes, I marry you" to John Grady). Shaw notes, for example, that in *Blood Meridian* 'the Virgin Mary is, ironically, the only major feminine presence, implied in town names, churches and topographical features. All other females are whores, victims of the rampant violence, or helpless onlookers' (143). The female characters remain nameless, with the exception of Sarah Borginnis, the woman who washes the excrement from the idiot boy (256).

It could be said that, in contrast to Shaw's reading of McMurtry's novel, McCarthy 'exaggerates' female *absence* and it is this absence which could be seen as the cause of the barbarism of the men, who are also, after all, 'severely punished with psychological and physical dismemberment'. However, it is possible to go further than this suggestion, to propose a disturbing similarity in McCarthy's Western novels between women and American Indians. In *Blood Meridian*, between the prostitutes and the Comanche raiders, and as the voice of Manifest Destiny gradually fades in the *Border Trilogy*, there is a movement from the analogy between the American Indians imaged as animals (even wearing animal skins) to the conflation of animal and female. However, there is a sense that *Blood Meridian* in its violence and bloodlust, its iconic, dangerous landscapes, its universality and ahistorical sense of war and its portrayal of a masculinity under threat, also hints at the precarious nature of the mythic status of the cowboy. These include an interrogation of the dangers inherent in homosocial bonding, one of which is the displacement of homoeroticism onto the 'other' who is feminised (in this case the Indians) and punished.

Shaw has analysed three 'revelatory elements' of *Blood Meridian* which include McCarthy's 'ironic use of history to substantiate his philosophy of violence' and 'the specific, deadly relationship' between the kid and Judge Holden. It is possible to suggest that rather than an 'ironic use of history' substantiating the author's 'philosophy of violence' that the facts of history have substantiated McCarthy's ironic philosophy about and attitude towards violence. However, the 'specific, deadly relationship' between the kid and the Judge is a relationship, like all of those in the

'Brokeback Mountain', the final story about two latter day 'cowboys' who find themselves spending the summer on a deserted mountainside herding sheep. pp. 283-318

book, predicated on violence. Shaw cites Robert Wright's article about the biology of violence in *The New Yorker* in which he states that 'the leading cause of violence is maleness' (72). He expands on this assumption:

Evolutionary biology encourages male violence, crime statistics substantiate it, and scientific studies of violence presume it. Violent females are the rare aberration, not the norm. The point is that McCarthy advantages this unique male characteristic. He takes the one undeniable male prerogative and enforces its edicts so emphatically on the text that no one can challenge it. Thus, in the 1980s, when male chauvinism had become a curse word and the term "dominant male" was safely used only in studies of wolves, McCarthy champions dominant and chauvinistic males by exaggerating violence to the point of incredulity. (143)

After the kid is injured during the Yuma attack on Glanton's gang at the ferry crossing, he is visited in jail in San Diego by the Judge, who accuses him of being responsible for the massacre:

But you were witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. 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. [...] If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay [...] Only each was called upon to empty out his heart into the common and one did not. (307)

The Judge repeats this accusation at the end of the novel, although in both situations, the Judge is seen as a sexual predator. Here he approaches the kid telling him 'Don't you know that I'd have loved you like a son?' and reaching through the bars of the prison saying 'Let me touch you'. At the end of the novel, the kid comes across the judge sitting in the 'jakes': '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' (333).

Shaw proposes that, despite most critics presuming that the Judge murders the kid at the end, the real issue at stake is 'that the judge's essential motivation is to assault the kid sexually' (148). Certainly, it is strange that in a novel replete with detailed accounts of savage murders that this one should be ignored, and Shaw's reading of the 'psychoerotic motifs' in the narrative suggest important contributory factors to the violence which courses through *Blood Meridian*. As Shaw points out, the representation of masculinity in this novel 'was not only an attitude but a geopolitical and demographic reality' (148). He cites Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The*

American West as Symbol and Myth as evidence that beyond the first agricultural line of settlement, the only females present were prostitutes. Shaw also notes that the sources which McCarthy has used, including Chamberlain's *My Confession* (1860, pub.1956) and James O. Pattie's *The Personal Narrative* (1831), 'glorify masculine camaraderie and adventure'. Blake Allmendinger has also written at length about the image of the cowboy as sexual predator of women ironically because of the very absence of women or female influence.¹⁴ Shaw argues that 'simply murdering the kid is not the judge's intent' (148). He proposes that although the judge has several opportunities to kill the kid, he 'discerns that killing the kid is no routine matter' because the kid has proved (in his fight with Toadvine, his survival on the Texas frontier for thirty years and in his killing of Elrod at the end) that he is 'still alert, quick and adept at self-preserving homicide' (149). In addition, Shaw suggests that the Judge's desire is for 'humiliation', in itself a 'particular form of violence' (149).

Steven Shaviro has also suggested that it is the kid's 'utter unreflectiveness' and his 'eerie affectless' that results in a 'blankness', which is 'what makes the kid into an object of desire for other characters in the book. They lust after him to the precise measure of his own indifference' (151-2).¹⁵ This can be seen in the advances of the old hermit at the beginning of the novel and the homosexual bartender's at the end, plus, of course, the judge's interest in him. While Shaw admits that the evidence is 'circumstantial' that supports the idea that the encounter between the judge and the kid in the Griffin jakes is sexual, he points out that not only does the horrified response of the witness - 'Good God Almighty' - suggest something 'other' and worse than a mere corpse, but that there are substantial hints throughout the novel about the judge's sexual attraction towards the kid. It is possible also to draw a comparison between what these men witness in the jakes and the sergeant's equally horrified "Good God" as he witnesses the devastation and sexual butchery of the gang by the Comanches (54). The judge is associated with paedophilia and child killing. It is implied that he kills the naked boy who the scalphunters find in the ruined *presidio* at Santa Rida del Cobre, and the following description of the judge striding naked,

¹⁴ Blake Allmendinger, *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American World Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Steven Shaviro, ' "The Very Life Of Darkness": A Reading of *Blood Meridian* ', in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold & Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), pp.145-159.

'immense and pale', on top of the walls foreshadows the description of his celebratory dance in the brothel following his encounter with the kid at the end (117-9). In a later scene, he 'dandles' the young Apache boy on his knee and then scalps him (164), and his relationship with the idiot boy James Robert is clearly one of abuse (275). While Chamberlain's *My Confession* states that Holden's 'desires was (sic) blood and women' and that he was suspected of having 'fouly violated and murdered' a girl of ten (271), Shaw proposes that in making the judge's victims male, this provides 'compelling evidence that McCarthy intends to stress the male-to-male nature of the judge's sexuality, to inculcate it into his personality, and to announce it as a key to other textual cruxes' (153).

On several occasions, both the kid and the judge have ample opportunity to kill each other. During the incident in the San Diego jail, when the kid is expecting to be hanged for his scalphunting activities, Holden is armed with a 'small silver-mounted derringer', although the kid tells him 'I ain't afraid of you' (305,307).¹⁶ This appears to be the defining element of the personality of the kid, who lives his life as though the prospect of death – and the judge is its most significant representation – is hardly more than a fact of life, which the judge is both fascinated and threatened by. There are several descriptions of the judge watching the kid as the band of men sit around their campfires, although the kid does not respond to his scrutiny. As the judge repeatedly articulates his desire to be 'suzerain' this aspect of the kid's character is one which threatens this position.

When the judge wants to 'touch' the kid, he refuses, although this could possibly save his life. Pat Shaw suggests that 'true to the unshakeable code of masculinity, he had rather hang than submit to what the judge is suggesting' (153). After the kid escapes from jail, a homosexual barroom patron mistakes the kid 'for a male whore' and the kid viciously attacks him (311). Shaw proposes that 'with his strong heterosexual ethic and defenses, the kid embodies the intense androcentric code that dictates his environment (and, we might add, that McCarthy at least in part endorses)' (153):

¹⁶ This seems to prefigure John Grady Cole's knife fights in the Saltillo prison in *All The Pretty Horses* and with Eduardo in *Cities*.

When the judge assaults the kid in the Griffin jakes, therefore, he betrays a complex of psychological, historical, and sexual values of which the kid has no conscious awareness but which are distinctly conveyed to the reader. Ultimately, however, it is the kid's personal humiliation which impacts the reader most tellingly. In the virile warrior culture which dominates the text and to which the reader has become acclimated, seduction into public homoeroticism is a dreadful fate. (160)

If, however, as Shaw proposes, the ultimate humiliation for the kid is the disclosure of "sissy" behaviour so repugnant to the western male, why does the obvious exhibition of homoeroticism by the judge go unpunished? It seems that a further consequence of the absence of females is not only that this creates a pressure which leads to catastrophic violence, but that a second source of pressure is encountered and covertly displayed by the actions and behaviour of the male figures in *Blood Meridian*, is compensation against the threat of recognition of homosocial relationships through an excessively aggressive form of masculinity. Just before this, the 'man' goes upstairs with a 'dark little dwarf of a whore' who tells him (their sexual encounter is not described) that she has to go and that he needs to get a drink, adding 'You'll be all right', with the implication being that his transition to a 'man' has not been entirely successful (332). It is possible that the manner of the kid's death in the jakes is one of the most 'revisionary' aspects of McCarthy's western novel.

The threat of homosocial communities, the homoerotic motif of the hunt and the depiction of sexual assault (on both men and women) are considered later with reference to McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*. However, it is worth considering the absence of the female in *Blood Meridian* as a precursor to the representation of the female in the later westerns, particularly in McCarthy's use of an animal-as-female metaphor, for although there are few females in *Blood Meridian*, there are many thousands of Indians. The indigenous population of the Southwest is imaged in excess, both in terms of numbers (which provides 'employment' for the scalp hunters), and in the descriptions of them as exceeding 'human' boundaries. For example, the Yuma tribe are described as Glanton passes through their campsite:

The men wore their hair hacked to length with knives or plastered up in wigs of mud and they shambled about with heavy clubs dangling in their hands. Both they and the women were tattooed of face and the women were naked save for skirts of willowbark woven into string and many of them were lovely and many of them bore the marks of syphilis. (253)

The incursion of the Gothic in McCarthy's earlier southern novels has been discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, the abjective 'othering' of the monsters of Gothic narratives, and the endless 'counterfeiting' and 'simulations of simulations' that Jerrold E. Hogle identifies as an inherent part of the Gothic narrative's ability to disguise, deny and ultimately to abject and sequester the horror invoked by the monster, can be seen to occur most vividly in *Blood Meridian*.¹⁷ The descriptions of the filibusters and scalp hunters, and also the party of Comanche raiders, appears to conform to the reader's desire to abject all that is 'monstrous' not only about our history but also about the present:

The seemingly intensified threats of mixed races, classes, genders and sexual orientations are bound up with the fear of people being 'bled' by simulations of simulations of them to a point where all simulations are like each other – and thus exchangeable for one another, thereby interpenetrating one another – in being only signs of signs of signs, the harbingers of a technological process that is both promising and horrifying, especially when these very simulations of them give way to different versions of them on film. (303)

In his discussion about how the text, the body and the law are related to Gothic pathologies, David Punter considers the law 'as physical and discursive limit' of the text, so that textualisation becomes 'a process of contamination' (44)¹⁸:

What the law cannot permit is the exceptional body; before the law, therefore, there cannot be monsters. [...] the existence of the monster therefore poses the utmost threat to the law; and our readerly pleasure in the situation of the monster has its origins [...] in our apprehension of the dismantling, if only for a certain time, of the discourse of the law. [...] As spectators in this scenario we are split, and the two sides of this divide stand in a relation of fascination to one another....(45)

Punter adds that this relation of fascination, which alternates between a feeling of exemption from the law and 'the residual feeling of potential victimisation' (like the 'terrified peasant' in *Frankenstein*), is further contorted; 'for to be the monster, is also to be the monster's victim, to be the monster as victim':

Gothic [...] enacts those complicated, often confused moments in which the rhetoric and practice of power seem for a moment to shimmer before our eyes, when the uncanny seeps in and the boundaries which had once seemed stable appear permeable. (45)

¹⁷ Jerrold E. Hogle, 'The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Progress of Abjection', *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) pp. 293-303.

¹⁸ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, The Body and The Law* (London: Macmillan press, 1998).

In *Blood Meridian*, the first band of warriors encountered by the Glanton gang after they leave Janos are the Apache warriors. The narrator describes Glanton looking at the view of the newly risen sun against the backdrop of the mountains, which 'in their blue islands stood footless in the void like floating temples.[...] Toadvine and the kid sat their horses and gazed upon that desolation with the others. Out on the playa a cold sea broke and water gone these thousand years lay riffled silver in the morning wind' (108). Shortly after this, the Apaches attack from the east, first 'beginning to appear out of the lake bed, a thin frieze of mounted archers that trembled and veered in the rising heat' (109). These figures 'vanish' and 'reappear' like 'burnt phantoms' and they 'shimmered and slurred together and separated again and they augmented by planes in lurid atavars and began to coalesce' and as they gather momentum they utter 'high wild cries' that are described as being like the 'the cries of souls broke through some misweave in the weft of things into the world below' (109). Like the other 'sinister' and 'evil' characters of McCarthy's prose (judge Holden and the 'grim triune' of *Outer Dark*), the Indians – Comanches and Apaches – are notable for their lack of definition and their apparent ability to distort and obfuscate both the vision and comprehension of their victims, a chameleon quality which takes on epic and horrific proportions in the Comanche raid scene (52-53). It is worth noting Parrish and Spiller's point about the attack on Captain White's men, and his own death:

In destroying White, the victorious Indians effectively dismantle the notion of a stable American identity. In this respect, the Saxons die not as a result of the Indian's weapons but because of the message they bring. That is, White's men die because they cannot withstand the recognition of their own reflection, or, in Rodriguez's terms, their absorption into their own vision of the other. (472)

Parrish and Spiller's suggestion that the kid 'predates history', and that McCarthy 'creates a perspective that absorbs both parties', is made more difficult to sustain when the intertextuality of the westerns is considered, for by the time of the twentieth-century *Border Trilogy*, the Indians have indeed been 'absorbed'.

Steve Neale has questioned the interpretation of the post-war 'pro-Indian' films of the 1950s and 60s as 'coded commentaries on America's involvement in the Vietnam

War, and hence on Euro-American militarism, racism and imperialism' (8).¹⁹ Neale is concerned with the ideological impact and significance of a particular cycle of films. He makes some interesting points with regard to the difficulties of interpretation of both the films as allegorical, being about contemporary racial issues while being set in the past, and Indians as allegorical figures, as 'stand-ins' for African-Americans (8-9). While Neale does acknowledge both the potential of allegory and for 'stand-ins', his complaint is specific: 'For several centuries, Indians have been constructed, represented and imagined as 'vanishing Americans', as on the point of final disappearance as a 'race', as a culture, or as a people' (9). He notes that Native Americans have often functioned, in films and in film criticism as 'empty signifiers' or stand-ins. While it is possible to see *Blood Meridian* as a 'revisionary' western in its interrogation of the ethnocentric and racist tropes of the traditional Western, it could also be seen to fall into the category of even the most recent 'pro-Indian' films identified by Neale, which 'continue to testify, as far as the Western in general is concerned, Native Americans are still poignantly but relentlessly vanishing before our very eyes' (21). Shortly after the Comanche raid, Grannyrat, the veteran filibuster, tells Toadvine and the kid about other atrocities committed by the Comanches. However, he also tells them about Mexicans stealing Indian bodies from a Lipan burial site and then the Americans scalping the same corpses and attempting to sell the scalps in Durango, suggesting that all sides are culpable. The bodies had disintegrated after their removal and whether the scalps were successfully sold the veteran does not know: 'I expect some of them injins had been dead a hundred year' (77-8). Towards the end of the novel, following his horrific experience with gangs of filibusters and scalphunters, the 'kid' is wandering in the desert clutching a Bible 'that he'd found at the mining camps' although 'no word of which he could read' when he comes across a 'company of penitents' who have been 'hacked and butchered among the stones' by Indians (315). At this point, both the kid and reader have become accustomed to such scenes of carnage, but in a moment closer to 'epiphany' than any other in *Blood Meridian*, the kid sees an old woman who appears to be kneeling in prayer:

¹⁹ Steve Neale, 'Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretation and Context of Post-war 'Pro-Indian' Westerns', in *Back In The Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*, eds. Edward Buscombe & Roberta E. Pearson (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1988) pp. 8-28.

He made his way among the corpses and stood before her. She was very old and her face was grey and leathery and sand had collected in the folds of her clothing [...] He spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had travelled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place [...] He reached into the little cove and touched her arm. She moved slightly, her whole body, light and rigid. She weighed nothing. She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years. (315)

This scene incorporates the brutality and violence of the novel in the headless corpses which 'lay about the fallen cross', the inversion of the Adamic hero who is orphaned and repeatedly exposed to similar scenes in his 'errand into the wilderness' and the kid's uncharacteristic display of emotion which implies a glimmer of recognition of the inherent barbarism which fuels the ideology of Manifest Destiny. The mummified corpse of the woman, the 'dried shell' who had been 'dead in that place for years', is representative of the plight of many of McCarthy's female characters. In addition, as Pat Shaw points out, it is immediately following this scene that there is a seventeen-year period 'during which the kid is absent and the narrator is struck dumb' (156).²⁰ When we next see the kid, he is referred to as 'the man' and as he travels across the north Texas plains, he encounters an old buffalo hunter who describes to him the slaughter of the buffalo: 'We ransacked the country [...] they're gone. Ever one of them that God ever made is gone as if they'd never been at all' (317). The intervening years between the kid's encounter with the 'dried shell' of the praying woman (1861) and his meeting with the buffalo hunter (1878) and later Elrod the 'bone-picker', had witnessed many of the atrocities which could be attributed to the ideology of Manifest Destiny. McCarthy's narrator is rarely 'struck dumb' and this excision appears to recognise the sinister combination of rhetoric and silence which underpins an ideology which supports mass slaughter and violence on a grand scale.

As violence has been repeatedly linked to the male and seen to be embodied in a distinctly masculine code, it is no surprise to learn that females are particularly under-represented in *Blood Meridian*. This is McCarthy's description of the 'fabled horde' as they descend upon Captain White and his band of filibusters:

²⁰ Pat Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence* (New York: Whitston Pub. Co., 2000).

...A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of some fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners [...] one has a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained wedding veil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a spanish conquistador [...] many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly coloured cloth and one whose horses' whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from hell [...] some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandylegged trot [...] and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by their hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, head, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. And now the horses of the dead came pounding out of the smoke and dust and circled with flapping leather and wild manes and eyes whited with fear [...] and some were feathered with arrows and some lanced through and stumbling and vomiting blood....(52-54)

This long extract is remarkably similar to the many passages describing the 'whores' in the Western novels, and in particular those described in the final pages of *Blood Meridian*, significantly following the narrative silence outlined above and the 'vanishing' of the Indians:

Females of domestic reputation lounged upon the balconies they passed with faces gotten up in indigo and almagre gaudy as the rumps of apes and they peered from behind their fans with a kind of lurid coyness like transvestites in a madhouse. (BM, 200)

Whole squadrons of whores were working the floor. In their stained peignoirs, in their green stockings and melon-colored drawers they drifted through the smoky oil light like makebelieve wantons, at once childlike and lewd. (BM, 332)

An enormous whore stood clapping her hands at the bandstand and calling drunkenly for the music. She wore nothing but a pair of men's drawers and some of her sisters were likewise clad in what appeared to be trophies – hats or pantaloons or blue twill cavalry jackets. (BM, 334)

He dreamt that night of things he'd heard [...] In the wings (of the stage) the alcahuete stood smoking and behind him milled a great confusion of obscene carnival folk, painted whores with their breasts exposed, a fat woman in black leather with a whip [...] A priest, a procuress, a goat with gilded horns and hooves who wore a ruffle of purple crepe [...] A trio of women holding hands, gaunt and thin as the

inmates of a spitalhouse and attired the three alike in the same cheap finery, their faces daubed in fard and pale as death. (COTP, 104)

The 'trophies' which adorn these women, draw a parallel between their sexual conquest of the soldiers and the 'trophies' held aloft by both Captain White's filibusters and Glanton's gang of scalphunters. As the judge tells Toadvine, 'Everything's for sale' (282). The trophies of the scalphunters are importantly also a symbol of the emasculation of their victims and this is made clear in several passages describing in sordid detail the sexual implications of scalping. It also emphasises the sexual nature of violence, in the 'bloodstained wedding veil', the 'bloody wigs', the castration and the sodomy. Later, the gang come across the corpses of a group of Indians with 'strange menstrual wounds' and their 'genitals stuffed into their mouths' (153). It is of the Comache raid passage cited above that John Beck recently asked the provocative question "What if the text means what it says?" (and this met with some hostility), pointing out that it appears 'deliberately inscrutable' and asking what function the indeterminacy of the language has.²¹ He suggested that it is fundamentalist, a sort of – 'Rambo in ermine', making a threatening display of past conquests, conflating not only martial and marital imagery, but also horses and humans, and evoking disgust in the image of a 'gleaming bricolage of difference' driving furiously towards the filibusters (6). Furthermore, he proposed that it articulates a 'horror of inversion' in the gaudy, grotesque and childlike portrayal of Indians and a racist 'horror' of the 'zoological' the 'abject' and the 'polluted'. He concluded that *Blood Meridian's* 'conservatism' lies in its 'righteousness of power'. Therefore, he proposes that the question of whether *Blood Meridian* 'is a celebration of America's imperial adventure in national consolidation and ethnic cleansing' is necessary in order to confront the 'radically conservative undertow of the novel' and the 'seriousness of the unpleasant truths so manifest in McCarthy's text' (3). The same could be said of McCarthy's representation of women. While there is evidence throughout the *Border Trilogy* to support Beck's proposal that McCarthy could be

²¹ John Beck, 'Filibusters and Fundamentalists: *Blood Meridian* and the New Right'. This was a paper delivered at the 2nd European Cormac McCarthy Conference, June 2000. Quotations are from the unpublished transcript. Beck makes the point that McCarthy's novel was published in the same year (1985) that *Rambo* was released, a film admired by Ronald Reagan, who 'regarded the Contra rebels as 'the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers''(1): 'Like the Reagan administration, it might be said to be strong on rhetoric but weak on substance, for while the prose fairly prickles with millennial anticipation and righteous fury, the text harbours a nostalgia for the manly construction of identity

'blind to his own chauvinism' and 'unironic', there is also evidence to support his assertion, made elsewhere, that 'conventional relationships between observation and cognition' do not always apply to McCarthy's narrative, so that the possibility of sacrificial substitution provides an alternative reading (211).²²

René Girard's writing has been used by several critics in their reading of McCarthy's work, in particular his earlier novels.²³ Girard writes about societies in which sacrifice is practised and notes how the animal society parallels and is structured in the same way as human society (3).²⁴ While there is a link in most of McCarthy's novels between women and animals, in *Blood Meridian* the substitution basis for the practise of sacrifice which Girard argues is an inherent part of the ritual, takes the form of the substitution of Indians for women. Girard notes that, from the story of Jacob, there has been a suggestion of the conferring of a blessing on those who wear the skins of sacrificed animals. Girard suggests, furthermore, that the ritual of sacrifice conceals the displacement on which the rite is based, as it serves as an 'insulation' between father and son. In discussing the Old Testament story of Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Girard suggests that there is reason to believe that the narrative touches on the mythic origins of the sacrificial system' (5):

The narrative does not refer directly to the strange deception underlying the sacrificial substitution, nor does it allow the deception to pass entirely unnoticed. Rather, it mixes the act of substitution with another act of substitution, permitting us a fleeting, sidelong glimpse of the process. The narrative itself, then, might be said to partake of a sacrificial quality; it claims to reveal one act of substitution while employing the first substitution to half-conceal another. (6)

Therefore the descriptions of the filibusters as prehistoric ('ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland', 172) and dressed in the skins of animals ('ornamented with human parts like cannibals', 189), could be

through barbarism which can only be partially accommodated within the academic technology of liberal pluralistic criticism' (2).

²² John Beck, 'A Certain but Fugitive Testimony': Witnessing the Light of Time in Cormac McCarthy's Southwestern fiction' in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp209-217.

²³ This is reflected in the title *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995). In particular 'The Killer Wears the Halo: Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, and the American Religion', Tim Parrish (pp.25-41), 'McCarthy's *Enfant Terrible*: Mimetic Desire and Sacred Violence in *Child of God*', Gary M. Ciuba (pp.77-87).

²⁴ René Girard, *Violence and The Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). {1st pub. Paris, 1972}

said to be an example of the 'narrative itself [...] claiming to reveal one act of substitution' - of scalphunters for Indians - 'while employing the first substitution to half-conceal another' - the substitution of Indians for females.²⁵ Girard proposes that the act of violence inflicted on a surrogate victim is a 'deliberate act of collective substitution' which will absorb all internal conflicts, feuds etc. Furthermore, the misunderstanding is crucial, so that the celebrants must not comprehend their true role and the 'theological basis' of the practise of sacrifice plays a vital role in fostering this misunderstanding (7). However, if God is replaced by another deity or invoked as part of a mission, errand or Manifest Destiny, then the cloak of Manifest Destiny could conceal the true role of the surrogate victim. As Girard suggests, 'men can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least infraction calls down terrible punishment' (14). For example, if the men are to be told, as Captain White does in McCarthy's novel, that there is no God in Mexico and that they are to be 'the agents of liberation in a dark and troubled land.' (34) Furthermore, Girard states that 'in a general study of sacrifice there is little reason to differentiate between human and animal victims [...] thus it is hardly surprising that in some societies whole categories of human beings are systematically reserved for sacrificial purposes in order to protect other categories' (10).

Therefore, 'violence is the secret heart and soul of the sacred', although Girard proposes that 'impurity and contagion' are concepts which can 'provide a sort of camouflage' (28,31). Many of these 'ritual impurities' are related to sexuality. As he points out, in many societies menstrual bleeding is regarded as the 'most impure of impurities':

²⁵ In addition, as John Beck suggests, although Glanton's gang is no less 'ragtag' or 'savage' than the Comanche warriors, 'this transformation of the American military into a ragged guerrilla force is precisely what happens to the army in various Vietnam films of the 1980s, most notable, again, in *Rambo*. It is hard not to hear in Captain's White's bitterness the Reaganite spin that Vietnam was lost because the noble U.S. soldiers had been sold out by the liberal politicians in Washington: 'We fought for it. Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didn't give it back' (BM, 33). 'Filibusters and Fundamentalist', p9. In fact, this element of polyglot diversity and bestial savagery is exaggerated to a point that denies these men any agency, not only by scattering them in the deserts of the Southwest, but also by their almost infinite appellations, which has the effect of dispersing any sense of guilt or blame. See Kyle Kirves, *Index of Character Names in the Novels, Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 200) pp303-386. While the Comanche, Apache and Yuma warriors are described alternatively only as 'savages' (with the exception of the long description of the Comanche raiders), Kirves notes 22 different appellations

Sexuality is one of those primary forces whose sovereignty over man is assured by man's firm belief in his sovereignty over it. The most extreme forms of violence can never be directly sexual because they are collective in nature. The group is quite capable of perpetrating a single, coherent act of violence, whose force is increased with the addition of each individual quotient of violence; but sexuality is never truly collective. That fact alone explains why sexual interpenetrations of the sacred invariably ignore or play down the role of violence, whereas an interpenetration based on violence readily grants sexuality the prominent place it occupies in all primitive religions. We are tempted to conclude that violence is impure because of its relation to sexuality. Yet only the reverse proposition can withstand close scrutiny. Sexuality is impure because it has to do with violence. (34)

Girard contends that like violence, 'sexual desire tends to fasten upon surrogate objects if the object to which it was originally attracted remains inaccessible; it willingly accepts substitutes. And again like violence, repressed sexual desire accumulates energy that sooner or later bursts forth, causing tremendous havoc' (35). While it is not necessary to agree with Girard's statement that 'thwarted sexuality leads naturally to violence', it is certainly possible to identify in both the bloody battle scenes depicted by McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* and the incidents of combat between individuals in the later novels, clear evidence of the sexual nature of violence.

While there 'is nothing incomprehensible about the viewpoint that sees menstrual blood as a physical representation of sexual violence', it is necessary to also ask 'whether this process of symbolization does not respond to some half-suppressed desire to place the blame for all forms of violence on women. By means of this taboo a transfer of violence has been effected and a monopoly established that is clearly detrimental to the female sex.' (36) Girard's contention that the paradoxical nature of violence is contained in the notion essential to sacrificial rites, that it is only the letting of blood, the blood 'of sacrificial victims' which can accomplish the desired purification, appears to echo McCarthy's own thoughts on the nature of bloodshed, alluded to briefly in his interview with Richard Woodward and illustrated in the Paul Valéry epigraph to his novel – 'You fear blood more and more. Blood and time' (36). The 'cartographic impulse' of McCarthy's westerns was discussed in the first chapter, although it is worth noting here what Brian Jarvis has called 'oppressive geographies

for the Glanton gang, including 'the killers' (79), 'the partisans' (84), 'fine caballeros' (103), 'haggard butchers' (161), 'tattered campaigners' (166), 'mercenaries' (167), 'ordained agents' (172).

of abjection' (194).²⁶ He proposes that Julia Kristeva's comments on the dynamics of abjection, suggests that abjection functions not only on the corporeal and psychological level, but also at the 'sociospatial' (192). While Jarvis sees a potential for a 'geography of identity' which is able to recognise 'the structural inseparability of the core (dominant cultures) and their abjected periphery (devalorised objects, bodies, territories)' and can then dismantle 'the boundaries of alienation and oppression', McCarthy's narratives appear to conform to a less progressive form of geography of abjection identified by Jarvis, which foregrounds 'the neurotic expulsion of waste' (192).

Girard suggests that 'like the animal and the infant, but to a lesser degree, the woman qualifies for sacrificial status by reason of her weakness and relatively marginal social status. That is why she can be viewed as a quasi-sacred figure, both desired and disdained, alternately elevated and abused' (141-2). McCarthy's imaging of the female as war conflates the 'violent' and the 'sacred' aspects of her 'marginal' position. Following the Comanche raid in *Blood Meridian*, the kid escapes 'from among the new slain dead':

The ground where he'd lain was soaked with blood and with urine from the voided bladders of the animals and he went forth stained and stinking like some reeking issue of the incarnate dam of war herself. (BM, 54)

In *Cities of The Plain*, John Grady Cole asks Mr Johnson whether he 'fought in the revolution', prompting the old man's memories:

He talked for a long time. He named the towns and villages. The mud pueblos. The executions against the mud walls sprayed with new blood over the dried black of old [...] and the endless riding of horses to their deaths bearing flags or banner or the tentlike tapestries painted with portraits of the Virgin carried on poles into battle as if the mother of God herself were authoress of all that calamity and mayhem and madness. (COTP,64-5)

The substitution of Indians for females is further complicated when the suggestion that the 'feminisation' of the Indian is considered in the light of a possible further displacement, most notably the use of the Western to justify American military policy

²⁶ Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

and its interventionist politics.²⁷ Westerns, particularly those of the 1960s and 70s, have depicted the massacres of Indians and drawn analogies between an older systematic genocide and the intervention of American in Vietnam under the guise of democratic politics. Many cultural theorists, including those cited in previous sections – Tania Modleski, Michael Kimmel, Virginia Wright Wexman and Gillian Rose – have considered the relationship between sexual domination and wartime aggression as it is outlined in Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*.²⁸ Although he is writing about the men in Germany's Freikorps, in *Blood Meridian*, there is a similar merging of the 'idea of 'woman' with representations of violence' which stems from a 'fear of dissolution through union with a woman' and propels men into homosocial relations. (45) In her discussion of homosocial male bonding, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out that although these bonds are formed in opposition to women, women also function as objects of exchange and desire.²⁹ In her reading of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, Tania Modleski proposes that the final scene in which the marines find themselves up against a lone female Vietnamese sniper, 'shows that an important objective of war is to subjugate femininity and keep it at a distance' (62). She suggests that the film is both 'critical' of and 'complicit' with male sexual attitudes in war and that the ending 'corroborates Theweleit's finding that the war fantasies he studies invariably build to a climax in which the woman/enemy is rendered a bloody mass' (62). Therefore, given the commodification of both the feminised Indian and the whores, both having a 'value' as part of an economic 'system' which puts a price on their heads, when Toadvine tells the kid at the beginning of novel, 'don't let on like you aint no seasoned indian killer cause I claimed we was three of the best', he could therefore be said to be invoking the threat of the accusation of homosexuality (79). The kid's reluctance to 'open his heart into the common' that the judge accuses

²⁷ John Emil Sepich has noted the nineteenth-century scalps of war have been translated in the twentieth-century to the body count and that 'the tradition of "trophies and verifications" continues'. (139) He cites Richard Drinnon: 'Once bagged, [the Viet Cong] were statistics fed into Westmoreland's computer, with their severed ears on occasion tied to the antenna of a troop carrier as trophies and verification of the body count.' (451) Richard Drinnon, *The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) Sepich adds that 'the literature of "atrocities" in Vietnam seems consistent, in its language, with that of Glanton's "atrocities."' (140) John Emil Sepich, "'What kind of indians was them?": Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*', *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold & Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, *Southern Quarterly Series*, 1999).

²⁸ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Vol.1: *Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway, in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

²⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

him of in the final pages takes on a more sinister meaning, appearing to suggest the importance of the homosocial bond of war and even how homophobia and misogyny are the consequences as well as the causes of these bonds.

In *Savage Cinema*, Stephen Prince explores the representation of violence in the films of Sam Peckinpah.³⁰ He argues that the aesthetic structures of cinematography that Peckinpah utilised in representing screen violence provoked 'disturbingly ambivalent responses' in viewers (XIX).³¹ He considers the 'dangers' inherent in a montage aesthetic which ultimately serves to glorify rather than condemn violence. Prince also claims, however, that in showing the 'emotional pain' that was the consequence of violence, Peckinpah was 'rigorous and systematic in excoriating violence', displaying an awareness of 'the need to control and contextualize the explosive effects of violence' (XIX). Prince argues that although Peckinpah was often belligerent, he was also a 'co-conspirator in the media's construction of him as "Bloody Sam"', and that he 'seized the violence theme' because it had 'been placed on the national agenda' by America's involvement in Vietnam, so that the 1960s gave the director 'the social validation, the external confirmation, and the supportive sociopolitical justification for his visions of chaos, tragedy, and destruction by confirming through social turbulence his sense of their essential validity' (44). He cites David Steigerwald's *The Sixties and the End of Modern America*:

It was a liberal war fought in an age of high liberal expectations, and yet to its critics it signalled the persistence of imperialism, racism and arrogance among leaders who were otherwise enlightened people. It combined the rational efficiency of bureaucracy, technology, and intellect, yet put it to use in a war that was rationally indefensible. (95)³²

Similar criticisms of the problem of any intended moral commentary being subsumed in stylistic extravagance have been levelled at *Blood Meridian*. Joan Mellen's statement that Peckinpah's films are 'hymns to male violence' and 'neofascist' are echoed in some critics' reaction to McCarthy's westerns.³³ In an interview with

³⁰ Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (London: The Athlone Press, 1998).

³¹ Prince cites one reviewer who found himself laughing at the 'virtuosity of gore' in *The Wild Bunch*. (98)

³² David Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (New York: St. Martin's Press) 1995

³³ Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), pp. 270, 302. Steven Shaviro, for example, makes similar claims about McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* in

Playboy magazine, Peckinpah said of *Straw Dogs*, perhaps his most violent film, that it is about 'what can happen when you deny your basic instincts and drives', professing to believe that 'it's wrong- and dangerous – to refuse to acknowledge the animal nature of man.'³⁴ Prince proposes that the 'melancholia' which accompanies Peckinpah's representation of screen violence not only 'inheres in the genre of the Western' but that Peckinpah's heroes 'are defeated by the accumulated weight of their own wrong choices', making them sound very like McCarthy's western heroes:

Peckinpah's Westerns are studies in diminishment and defeat, and they move us because of the enormous empathy he feels for these compromised, doomed characters, whose sometimes tawdry examples are so much better than the venal, corrupt, and savage world that surrounds them. (120)

Prince's association between Peckinpah's representation of screen violence and the contemporary political climate of America, in particular intervention in the Vietnam war, makes John Beck's description of the Comanche raid passage in *Blood Meridian* as a 'sort of *Rambo* in ermine' seem particularly appropriate. Tania Modleski has examined the significance of Vietnam to representations of violence and masculinity in a variety of genres, including war films such as *Rambo* (in a chapter entitled 'Do we get to lose this time?'), westerns and science fiction. She also identifies a melancholia which adheres to Vietnam³⁵:

The war itself seemed to many Americans to have had the wrong ending, and rather than mourning its loss, they have fallen victim to a widespread melancholia, in which they cling to the lost object instead of letting it go. (146-7)³⁶

While critics such as Roger Horrocks propose that the loneliness of the hero endemic to the western is a powerful image of male alienation and masculine subjectivity in crisis, Modleski criticises just such a reading.³⁷ For example, she questions Pat Aufderheide's review of Brian de Palma's *Casualties of War*, and in particular the

"The very life of the darkness": A reading of *Blood Meridian*, *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, *Southern Quarterly Series*, 1999), pp145-158

³⁴ Quoted in *Savage Cinema*, p104.

³⁵ Tania Modleski, *Old Wives' Tales: Feminist Re-Visions of Film and Other Fictions* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999). The chapter title refers to Sylvester Stallone's/ *Rambo*'s question in *Rambo II*: 'Do we get to win this time?'

³⁶ Modleski suggests that Oliver Stone exhibits signs of being an 'inconsolable melancholic' in his repeated return to Vietnam in his films. (147)

³⁷ Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan Publishing, 1995).

scene in which a group of American soldiers rape and murder a Vietnamese peasant girl, which he contends signifies 'the collapse of a moral framework for the men who killed her. The spectacular agony of her death is intended to stir not the audience's righteous anger at the grunts [...] but empathy for the ordinary fighting men who have been turned into beasts by their tour of duty.'³⁸ Modleski argues that such films and interpretations make it clear that 'historical trauma does not necessarily result in progressive politics – libidinal or otherwise', so that all this feeling sorry for men forced into barbaric acts of mutilation, rape and torture by the machine of war results in the pathos and isolation of the returning veteran.³⁹ She notes the constant motif of 'return' in Vietnam films, exemplified in Rambo's return to Vietnam, so that he can 'win the war this time'. McCarthy's heroes also insist on returning. However, Modleski points to a more disturbing element of this particular motif:

The notion of return is also present in the constant process of "metaphorization" that occurs in these films, which [...] make everything and everyone (raped women, murdered babies, etc.) refer back to and stand in for the American soldier (or veteran) and his plight. (132)

Modleski also draws attention to the often-ignored fact that many soldiers who fought in Vietnam were, like McCarthy's cowboy protagonists, 'just boys out of high school'. The assumption of most Hollywood films is that they must relinquish any female or domestic ties in favour of male bonding in order to survive and yet this is precisely what threatens their survival.

Christian Kiefer proposes that Billy's attempt to join the army in *The Crossing* is 'sort of suicide, since he will essentially have to give up his self-produced moral code for a code prescribed by the war machine'(16).⁴⁰ He attempts repeatedly to join up at different places ('I don't have any place to go, I think I need to be in the army', 341), but fails because of a heart defect. He is criticised for his lack of uniform by a soldier and a bartender (347-9). By the time of *Cities*, the army is threatening his way of life and he tells Travis that nothing has been the same since the war. In *All The Pretty*

³⁸ Quoted in Modleski, p130

³⁹ It is possible that the *Border Trilogy* and *Blood Meridian* can be perceived as a tetralogy in that the *Trilogy* could be seen as an extended romantic consideration of the aftereffects of war, starting with John's father, veteran of WWII and ending with Billy.

⁴⁰ Christian Kiefer, 'The Morality of Blood: Examining the Moral Code of *The Crossing*', in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol.1, Issue 1 (Miami: Cormac McCarthy Society, 2000): 17-21.

Horses, John Grady's father is a broken man as a result of his experiences in WWII. Given that *All The Pretty Horses* is set after *The Crossing*, the broken father figure could be said to be replaced by Billy in *Cities*. While Billy contends in *Cities* that 'you wind up just tryin to minimize the pain', this appears to be as a direct consequence of the war as he tells John 'this country aint the same [...] The war changed everything. I don't think people even know it yet' (78), a sentiment that echoes John's father in the first novel, a soldier who had been missing in action, when he explains why he is no longer with his mother:

Last conversation we had was in San Diego California in nineteen forty-two. It aint her fault. I aint the same as I was. I'd like to think I am. But I aint. (12)

His father rode [...] So thin and frail, lost in his clothes. Looking over the country with those sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he'd seen of it elsewhere. As if he might never see it again right. Or worse did see it right at last. (23)

The last thing his father said was that the country would never be the same. People don't feel safe no more, he said. We're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We don't know what's goin to showup here come daylight. We don't even know what color they'll be. (26)⁴¹

In his article, 'The Professional Western: South of the Border', Noel Carroll argues that Will Wright's structural study of Westerns does not differentiate between those Westerns set South of the border in which Mexican society 'is the locus of social value' and furthermore, that this society is closely associated with revolution.⁴² While he contends that in the films he studies, including Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, (1969) there is a 'clear cut association of the professionals in these films to the military' that 'they express a wish that [...] while America may appear mercenary, driven by commercial interest, [...] it finally turns out that they are freedom fighters allied to indigenous, authentic social revolutions' (96). Furthermore, he proposes that they reveal something about American attitudes to intervention and issues of foreign policy: 'Americans want to believe that intervention is justified in support of social justice. They are predisposed emotionally to respond favourably to situations depicted

⁴¹ The difference between contemporary westerns can be seen in the way that they revise this association, so that in *Hi-Lo Country* (1998), Jimmy asks Big Boy "What did they do to you in the army [...] take the cowboy right out of you?" and complains that soon he will be "squatting to take a piss".

⁴² Noel Carroll, 'The Professional Western: South of the Border' in *Back In The Saddle Again: New Essays on the Westerns*, eds. Edward Buscombe & Roberta E. Pearson (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1998) pp46-62.

in this light. [...] it is also a perennial disposition that can be readily exploited for ideological purposes' (60). It could be said that McCarthy draws attention to precisely this emotional predisposition in his depiction of the failed intervention of Billy on more than one occasion. Many critics have pointed out that both Billy and John Grady are repeatedly unsuccessful in their 'penetration' and colonisation of Mexico. Molly McBride suggests that this is indicative of another shared theme of *Blood Meridian* and *All The Pretty Horses*, that 'attempts at conquest, both of man and nature, are from the beginning futile or at least illusory in their success' (283).⁴³ In all three novels of the *Border Trilogy*, the young protagonists' fate is tied to the army. From Captain White's filibusters and John Joel Glanton's scalphunters of *Blood Meridian*, to the failed attempts of Billy Parham to join the army, and the lingering presence of the army in *Cities of the Plain*, the military is seen as the epitome of nationalist and imperialist ideals which supports legally sanctioned cultural domination, a form of escape from the reality of the west for these now reluctant cowboys, and exemplifies the paradox and ambiguity of the notion of 'freedom fighters.'

**“ Like flowers that feed on flesh”: The ‘Animal-as-Female’ Metaphor
in The *Border Trilogy***

Virginia Wright Wexman has noted the 'horror of miscegenation' predominant in the Western, pointing out that historians of colonization have frequently noted that 'two of the fates most common to groups who become objects of colonialist domination are subordination or extermination' (101).⁴⁴ During the colonization of the West, generally speaking, Mexicans suffered the former and Indians the latter. Wright Wexman proposes that Western films 'respond to this difference in their

⁴³ Molly McBride, 'From Mutilations to Penetration: Cycles of Conquest in *Blood Meridian* and *All The Pretty Horses*', *Southwestern American Literature*, Vol.25 No.1 (Fall 1999): 24-34.

⁴⁴ Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating The Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

representations of various aspects of these two groups, especially with respect to their sexuality':

Although the 'primitivism' of both is seen in terms of unrestrained libidinous activity, Indians typically manifest this type of behaviour as aggression, whereas the lack of restraint that characterizes Mexicans is often seen in specifically sexual terms. Thus, Indians are portrayed as people who stridently provoke their own destruction whereas Mexicans (particularly Mexican women) are seen as courting their subordination by making themselves into sexual victims. (101)

In this section, José Limón's writing on the 'erotics of culture' which exists as part of the encounter between America and Greater Mexico, will be considered as an alternative reading. Certainly, the examination of 'surrogacy', 'empty signifiers' and the possibility of the Indians in *Blood Meridian* as 'stand-ins' for the female, points to both the complex nature of metaphor and anticipates the further metaphor animal-as-female in the *Border Trilogy*. In her paper 'Paradox and Difficulty in the Border Trilogy's Mexico', Christine Collier suggests that the 'institutionalised' and 'ossified [...] boudoir of the brothel' provides the metaphor of Mexico as encapsulating a theatrical scene. The whores 'stand for a country which has sold its soul to the devil.'⁴⁵ She contends that the representation of Mexico is typically anglicised as one of intense superstition in a 'universe of theatricality'. Certainly, the figure of the actress (historically identified with the prostitute) is a significant one in the *Trilogy*. Beginning with John Cole's mother, who sells the family ranch and goes to San Antonio to become an actress, the implication is not only that John Cole cannot understand his mother, but that she is also less than respectable (21-2). Similarly, in *The Crossing* the moment when Billy watches the diva from the touring operatic company bathing naked in the river, is one which changes his life in a way he cannot articulate. Alejandra is described as 'strange and theatrical' in *All The Pretty Horses* and in *Cities*, the prostitute takes centre stage (ATPH, 140). However, it is also the 'performance' of the cowboy which adheres to the western myth. *Blood Meridian's* closing scenes take place in a brothel in which, following his assault on the 'man', the judge, who has been associated throughout the novel with evil and the satanic and the embodiment of American imperialism, exemplifies Collier's suggestion of 'a country which has sold its soul to the devil' as he is described 'dancing and fiddling at once

⁴⁵ 'Paradox and Difficulty in the *Border Trilogy's* Mexico', Christine Collier, 2nd European McCarthy Conference, June 2000, Manchester. The quotations here are extracted from my notes.

[...] He is a great favorite [...] He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die' (335).

The notion of the 'sacrificial victim' is also developed in a quite different way in the response of some male critics to the representation of the female. Patrick Shaw, for example, has noted the collective identity of McCarthy's females in the *Border Trilogy*, often indistinguishable, and guilty of being 'sexual victims'. As he notes 'the girls and women do not emerge from the androcentric narratives with attributes enough to define them as distinct personae' (258).⁴⁶ Shaw points out that McCarthy's differs from most trilogies, as there are two separate sets of characters in the first two novels and they take place in reverse chronological order.⁴⁷ It is also worth noting that the screenplay for *Cities of The Plain* was written before the trilogy was started. This takes on a particular significance when some of the differences between the original screenplay and the final novel are examined. One important change occurs at the end of the novel, as Billy carries John's wounded and bleeding body through the streets of Juarez. As Edwin Arnold has pointed out, in the original screenplay, Billy cries 'Goddamned whores. Goddamned fucking whores' (Screenplay, 156). This then, is how the screenplay ends, with the blame placed firmly on the 'whores'.⁴⁹ It is also, as Arnold points out 'the ending towards which all else is aimed', and although he is referring to the narrative structure of the *Trilogy* as a whole, it could also refer to a central motif which positions the female as the source of these beleaguered cowboys' problems.⁵⁰

Many critics have pointed out the repetition of plot between the first two novels. Shaw calls it 'exaggerated simplicity' and 'intentional artlessness' and suggests that

⁴⁶ Patrick Shaw, 'Female Presence, Male Violence and the Art of Artlessness in the *Border Trilogy*' in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp256-269.

⁴⁷ *All The Pretty Horses* takes place between 1949-51 and *The Crossing* in the early 1940s.

⁴⁹ Importantly, there is no extended epilogue which depicts Billy as an old man at the end of the novel in which he indulges in a dialogue about death and dreams with a stranger and the homely Betty comforts him as he is dying.

⁵⁰ Edwin Arnold, 'The Last of The Trilogy: First thoughts on *Cities of The Plain*' in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), pp221-249. Arnold also notes here that in his April 1992 interview with Richard Woodward, McCarthy told him that the screenplay had existed for 10 years and that although he and the film director Richard Pearce had been working on making the film, potential producers always

we can see the author's objective by 'noting a metaphor' common to the first two novels (258). He proposes that, when John Grady Cole comes upon the 'anachronistic indians' at the end of *All The Pretty Horses*, who watched him 'vanish upon that landscape' (ATPH, 301), this idea is reiterated in the old heretic's tale in *The Crossing*, who tells Billy that creation 'flowed out of nothing' and 'vanished into nothing once again' and 'rightly heard all tales are one' (TC 149,143). Shaw suggests this 'vanishing' or 'from nothing to nothing' metaphor can be interpreted 'as a metafictional key to the texts at hand. Fiction is created out of nothing and ultimately vanishes into nothing again. What it may mean is revealed only by the traces left in that vanishing' (258).⁵¹ He considers that the most promising of these 'traces' in the first two novels appear 'in the form of numerous motifs' that become less pronounced in *Cities*. Two of the motifs he analyses are 'feminine presence' and 'masculine violence'.

As Shaw points out, 'one hesitates to use the term 'female characters' because McCarthy paints no portrait of a lady' (258). They are all one dimensional, many with no names, and those who are named (and this is pronounced in *Cities* in the figure of Magdalena) are invested with meaning which almost damns them from the start. However, Shaw proposes that 'when seen as examples of differential relationships, the collective feminine presence causes the three narratives to resonate at frequencies no one of the females could cause individually' (258). Shaw makes many prescient and pertinent points about the stereotyping of these female characters (although they are more like holographs or female essences than characters), the 'theatrical quality' which surrounds them, and the fact that even female figures who appear to have a significant part to play in the narrative, are reduced to nothing more than cyphers.

became nervous about the plot's central relationship between John Grady Cole and a young Mexican prostitute.(222)

⁵¹ While Shaw suggests that this 'vanishing' is a 'metaphorical key to the texts', in the light of Neale's comments, this can be considered in a quite different way. McCarthy does emphasise John Grady's naivety concerning his 'vision' of the Indians at the beginning of *All The Pretty Horses* as he rides down the 'old Comanche road' 'where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north [...] nation and ghost of a nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives.' (5) However, while it could be suggested this vision of the 'vanishing' Indians is reversed at the end as they watch John Grady 'vanish', the phrase 'at that time' to describe the Indians who were 'still camped on the western plains', does suggest that they have 'vanished', just as the final paragraph immediately following this one, describes John Grady riding through the desert and while he 'passed and paled into the darkening land', his future is assured in 'the world to come.'(302)

Dueña Alfonsa, as Shaw notes, is ultimately 'subservient to the masculine forces of war [...] and revolution and to the text itself in her role as a subplot narrator' (259).⁵²

In a telling point, which Shaw does not expand upon, he notes that 'the horses in [*All The Pretty Horses*] emerge with more narrative distinction than the girl and motivate the males more profoundly' (260).

Shaw, however, takes the most extraordinary turn by suggesting that the 'resultant irony of this narrative technique' of developing 'the perplexing amorphous quality of the female characters' is that 'this collective feminine presence proves more subtle of intellect and manifestly more clever than the males who are distinctly characterised by traditional narrative techniques':

Whereas the male characters are literally the fighters – fighting, riding, killing, dying – the passive women regulate those actions through a keen sensitivity to the male ego and to the female's covert powers in an overtly patriarchal society. (262)

Importantly, Shaw sees this as a conscious manipulation on McCarthy's part as a 'more important artistic goal', although it seems questionable how powerful the 'perplexing amorphous' female presence can be, unless their powers are so covert that they are unrecognisable? Shaw sees Alejandra's affair with John Grady as not only satisfying her 'own sexual passions' but also as an act of revenge against her mother and aunt and suggests that in telling her father, she ensures her revenge works and the

⁵² It has been noted by many critics of McCarthy's work that there is an absence of female protagonists with any real narrative function. Dueña Alfonsa is presented as a pivotal character in the narrative, both by her place literally at the centre of the novel and her role in influencing the life of the novel's male protagonist. However, she is telling the story of male heroism and brutality, at the same time as she explains her own mutilation (her missing finger) and her movement from idealism inspired by her revolutionary lover to a nihilistic bitterness provoked by his violent death and her own incarceration as nominal matriarch. John Wegner's proposal that Cole's 'experiences supplement and authorize Dueña Alfonsa's story. She gives Cole, and the reader, the history of the loser. Madero lost and the people of Mexico lost', seems to dismiss the fact that the money which at once buys his freedom and reduces Cole to the status of criminal, has come from the Dueña herself. (107) Furthermore, Wegner sees the Dueña as spokesperson for an entire nation when he writes that when the people of Mexico lost power 'they lost control of the flow of information. They could not tell their story. Dueña Alfonsa does and gives a capable, intelligent story of Francisco Madero.' (107) However, the Dueña's story is clearly informed more by her own sense of loss than that of the nation, and her rejection of Cole reveals her own preoccupation with status, wealth and power. While it could be said, as Wegner does, that 'Cole's encounters and experience invigorate her narrative' this is not 'because we see, in the Mexican characters, the effects of Madero's failure', but because the reader sees the effects of Madero's failure on a more personal level, in that the Dueña's embittered machinations ensure that both Cole and Alejandro experience the same sense of loss (romantic, idealistic or otherwise) as she has.

John Wegner, 'Whose Story is it?: History and Fiction in Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses*', *Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No.2, Winter 1998:103-110

affair terminates. Shaw also proposes that Alfonsita's power over John Cole 'somehow compensates' for her disfigurement and lack of men, and even more astonishingly (his point about Alejandra could be supported), that 'even Magdalena, though abused and eventually brutally murdered, *has her posthumous revenge* when John Grady and her pimp kill each other in a bloody knife fight that occurs because of her *subtle manipulation of both men* and that ironically duplicates plot and action from *All The Pretty Horses*' (262, my italics). If, as Shaw suggests, this juxtaposition of the 'intellectual obtuseness' of the male characters with the 'subtlety and cleverness of the collective feminine intelligence' is intentional on the part of the author, it implies something even more disturbing about the portrayal of women in the *Border Trilogy*. Taken further, the 'amorphous' quality and interchangeability of the stereotyped female characters in all of McCarthy's work would suggest that the 'monstrous-feminine' is writ large in all of these characterisations, so that Mrs Rattner in *The Orchard Keeper*, and even the female victims of Lester Ballard in *Child of God* could be said to have their 'posthumous revenge.'⁵³

The answer, according to Shaw, lies in understanding the violence 'that marks the masculine personality' (263). Shaw comes close to identifying the root of the problem but his essentialist rhetoric prevents him from seeing that although it is possible to agree that the violence often emanates 'from the irrational actions' of male protagonists and that there is still no 'evidence of behaviour modification' and 'cognitive thinking does not seem to be part of masculine psychology', he is merely reversing the usual binary oppositions of passion/ reason when he suggests that 'the female perceives, reflects, then acts' (264). Importantly, this 'logic' and rational thought only appears to be achievable as a collective presence, implying therefore that the female characters cannot think for themselves, undermining any suggestion of either power or control. However, Shaw goes further to suggest that the male characters may indeed have their cake and eat it, as he does note that the 'second ramification of the male-female contrast argues less negatively for the male and for humankind generally', as the 'signs of [a] frustrated compassion appear in the protagonists' relationship with animals [...] marked by cajoling, patience and caressing' (266). However, Shaw fails to see the implications for women in this, as

⁵³Added to this list, of course, could be Wanita Tipton of *The Orchard Keeper*, Rinthy Holme of *Outer Dark* and Wanda Reese from *Suttree*.

discussed below. He suggests that there is some compassion demonstrated in the relationships between the males, but that it is usually camouflaged to an extent and occurs in association with violence, or its aftermath. He contends that the violence may be 'disquieting' because it 'places the reader in an unfamiliar zone of emotional involvement' and 'emphasizes the ambiguity of our emotional response to violence' which 'emanates not from some exotic villain but from the irrational actions of the male protagonists', so that 'subconsciously we realize the fault is our own' (264). However, following the 'logic' of Shaw's theory, it becomes clear that the 'we' refers to a male readership. This is made clear in Shaw's suggestion that although 'the reader is left with little cause to sympathize with the male protagonist', there may be a way out of the (male?) reader's troubling identification and empathy with violence. The 'psychobiological origins of aggression' show, according to Shaw, that 'since the majority of his actions are violent, we can safely postulate that [the male's] instinct is energized by violence' and that 'McCarthy's violence is neither goal-oriented nor self-serving [...] it leaves [the male protagonists] hungry, poorly clothed, unsheltered, wounded, and without a mate' (265). Therefore, 'we can only conclude that instinctive violence is not in the best interest of the male' (265). He does add that the treatment of women 'by such reckless male behaviour' would suggest that male violence is 'detrimental to the species' (265).

In his conclusion Shaw appears to be guilty of the 'appropriation' of the 'melancholy inexpressiveness' that Tania Modleski warns against in her writing on 'male feminists' (discussed in the previous section with reference to *Suttree*) which 'solicits our recognition of the male as the superior candidate for our feeling of pathos, the melodramatic sentiment par excellence' (9).⁵⁵ Shaw asks whether we 'should blame the paucity of reason and logical actions' of McCarthy's protagonists 'on culture':

Is lifelong submersion in a violent, androcentric society the culprit? If so, the males (as cultural masters) must be blamed for fathering an endless chain of intellectual obtuseness that no female could ever breach. Such thinking in turn leads to the supposition that males and females are so essentially dissimilar that despite biological compatibility, they remain psychologically antagonistic. This sobering dichotomy in turn leads to questions about most of our cultural icons. Why do we marry? Why do we choose to have children [...]? To explain how these cruel uncertainties come

⁵⁵ Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

about, we must either embrace evolutionary absurdity or yield control to some Jester God [...](267)

Shaw proposes that interrelationships between the rational collective female presence and the instinctively violent male protagonists 'are central and intentional rather than subsequent and subordinate' in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* (267). While there is much evidence to support Shaw's proposition that McCarthy may indeed be commenting on the sources of male violence, it has also been argued previously that he could be accused of re-inscribing the very violence which he critiques. In addition, there is a great deal of evidence which invokes the further binary opposition of nature/culture. If the men are acting instinctively, they are reacting to a 'culture', which is represented in the *Border Trilogy* by both the absence of the Anglo-American female and the presence of the Mexican female. Once again, it is somehow the fault of the females who, unable to breach the 'intellectual obtuseness' of their 'cultural masters', seek their revenge (posthumous or otherwise).⁵⁶ It must be considered also that if there is a correlation between female presence and male violence, why is *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's most violent novel, as Shaw writes elsewhere 'it is the alpha and omega of the novel of violence', also notable for its absence of females?⁵⁷ Perhaps because the Indians are indeed 'feminised', representing, as Beck has

⁵⁶ A similar interpretation can be seen in Roger Horrocks' *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture*, in which he suggests that the Western is a 'masculine genre par excellence.' (56) Horrocks proposes that the equation of the female with the values of community, bourgeois culture and relationships (in particular, marriage) is not evidence of 'a male supremacist tone' and instead 'these themes [...] express a male sense of hurt and solitariness. Nobody wants *him*. He is required for certain functions in society, but his deeper self can only be found in solitude, with his male companion, or in communion with nature.' (68) Writing of the 'doomed feel about Shane' in George Stevens' 1953 classic, he suggests that 'in the male psyche there is a terrible wound here, a split between action and community, power and the ability to relate.' (69) He writes of the 'mutilation' that is revealed in Clint Eastwood's Westerns (in particular *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider*), which indicates that 'ultimately western masculinity is suicidal.' (76-7) In his discussion about the nature of male masochism, Horrocks suggests that an often missed interpretation is that 'the image of the tortured male represents the damage done to men by patriarchy [...] a genuine male suffering is represented. Furthermore, this portrayal is fraught with tension in Hollywood westerns, since it infringes the orthodoxy, that women are suffering (and erotic) victims, men are supreme (non-erotic) heroes.' (78-9) Therefore, Horrocks' 'prosaic' interpretation of male masochism is that it 'speaks of a real pain in men, a real destruction and dereliction.' (80) Finally, Horrocks proclaims a desire to 'reclaim the western from those, such as Ronald Reagan, who want to reduce it to a simplistic conservative formula: American white might is right.' He acknowledges his personal response: 'As I grew older I became both fascinated and horrified by the western, because I saw in them too much of the stoicism that I had painfully learned to wean myself from. The western presents a stunted world for men, and for women, a world that is utterly one-dimensional', adding, 'yet there is so much beauty and visual poetry in it, and a great yearning for an impossible paradise.' (81-2). Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan Publishing, 1995).

⁵⁷ Patrick Shaw, *The Modern American Novel of Violence* (New York: Whitston Publishing Co., 2000), pp132.

suggested 'the abject', the 'polluted' and the 'zoological', in fact, the 'monstrous-feminine' that has been examined previously. As they are seen to 'vanish', the 'real' females take over as the enemy of the 'cultural masters'.

Patrick Shaw's criticism does, however, point to some crucial aspects of the relationship between the reader and the text. His point about the enforced identification with the male protagonists during the frequent incursions of violence, becomes particularly problematic when this 'identification' is considered in the depiction of their encounters with the female. He mentions briefly that 'the horses [in *All The Pretty Horses*] emerge with more narrative distinction than the girl and motivate the males more profoundly' and that 'signs of a frustrated compassion appear in the protagonists' relationship with animals (in both the first and second books) marked by cajoling, patience and caressing' (260,266). This hints at an important and revelatory motif in the representation of the female and a further metaphor at work in the *Trilogy*, that of 'animal-as-female'.

The notion of property is everywhere in the trilogy and involves a complex interchange and interchangeability between men, women and animals. As noted, John Grady's mother sells the family ranch and his girlfriend leaves him for an older boy with a car in the first novel. Dueña Alfonsa offers John Grady a horse in exchange for not pursuing Alejandra, although Don Hector appears to believe that John Grady is not worthy of his daughter. John Grady asks Luis if it because he is 'poor' or because he is American, to which the response is 'Una llave de oro abre cualquier puerta' – 'A Key of gold opens any door' (147). This suggestion is then reiterated in his experience in the Saltillo prison, which is like a 'marketplace' and 'within it occurred a constant seethe of barter and exchange' and he is told 'without money you can do nothing' (183). When the captain releases him he gives him an envelope containing money from the Dueña and tells him 'this is you' (207). However, he insists on going back 'for the girl and the horses', seeing them as equally compelling reasons (211). Similarly, Blevins is accused of killing a Mexican who has stolen his (perhaps already stolen) horse and the end of the novel sees John Grady attempting to return the stolen horses to Texas. Similarly, in *The Crossing*, Billy trades his rifle for the wolf carcass, having been told that he would have to pay a *partazgo* and his second border crossing in order to retrieve stolen horses results in his brother's death. In *Cities*, John Grady is

told that Magdalena requires certain 'documents' to enable her to cross the border and he sells his horse and pawns his grandfather's gun and holster in order to raise the money to 'buy' her.

The conflation of women and animals, in particular horses, is nothing new in the Western film. In *Buchanan Rides Alone* (1958), the raped sister of Juan Pedro is overtly represented by his horse, which becomes in turn subjugated by the Anglo cowboy hero Buchanan and presented to him by Juan Pedro as a token of thanks as he rides off into the sunset at the end of the film. In Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), the men who disfigure the prostitute, Delilah, present the brothel owner with three horses by way of recompense for his loss of earnings and in Stephen Frear's recent film *Hi-Lo Country* (1999), Big Boy (Woody Harrelson) announces to his friends in the saloon that 'A good woman is like a good horse', almost echoing Lacey Rawlins observation that 'A goodlookin horse is like a goodlookin woman [...] They're always more trouble than what they're worth' (89).⁵⁸ In *Cities of The Plain*, when John Grady sells his horse and pawns his grandfather's gun and holster in order to buy Magdalena, the conflation of woman and animal is apparently complete.

While this may suggest nothing more dangerous than cliché, it is worth noting the importance of horses to the Western. John Cawelti has identified horses as 'the symbol of a traditional unity between man and the world', potentially holding the 'hope for man's redemption' in an industrial age.⁵⁹ Similarly, Stephen Tatum sees the horse as potentially redemptive and takes issue with Jane Tompkins' question about

⁵⁸ In *Westerns: Making The Man in Fiction and Film*, Lee Clark Mitchell examines forms of masculine self-reconstruction in the novels of Fenimore Cooper, Owen Wister and Zane Grey, analysing the genre's 'admiration for the male body' and 'why so many Westerns punish men as a pretext to allow them to recover, restoring them once more to manhood.' (10) In his analysis of *Unforgiven*, Mitchell proposes that Eastwood (Munny's) recovery 'predictably ensues with the help of the disfigured whore Delilah Fitzgerald (Anna Thomson), who represents an overtly scarred double of himself ("we both got scars").' (262) While Mitchell does propose that 'the film traces an untroubled transition from pacifism to brutal intervention and then delights in the conventional violence that Munny is obliged to perform', he also suggests that 'Among the film's elaborate scenes of violence, that is the one *innovation*: to allow the woman to be slashed.' (263,262, my italics) In 'allowing' the woman to be slashed, the narrative provides Munny and the other men with their 'reason' to ride out, their reward being legitimated by the fact that they are avenging a helpless female. Munny will recover, transform and regain his 'masculinity', but the film makes it clear that the scarred female will not regain this sense of wholeness. Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁵⁹ John Cawelti, 'Cormac McCarthy: Restless Seekers', *Southern Writers at Century's End*, eds. Jeffrey Folks & James A Perkins (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1997) pp.164-76

what horses are 'doing' in westerns, her suggestion that they become a 'benign substitute for culture and society' and, furthermore, that their treatment in Westerns reflects either a relationship of mutual dependance or a 'somasochistic impulse central to Westerns'(97, 107).⁶⁰ Tatum considers that Tompkins 'conflates discipline with punishment' so that any different animal/human relationship is not considered. He proposes that what she ignores is 'what is at stake in the genre's extended scenes of horsebreaking, scenes whose pacing, imagery, and commentary stress humans talking to and touching horses in a manner that invariably troubles the distinctions we might want to draw between scenes of instruction and scenes of seduction' (139). If 'seduction' and 'instruction' are so almost indivisible, as 'discipline' and 'punishment' appear to be, is it not reasonable to suggest that the horse does 'stand' for something else other than a horse in such scenes?

By contrast, Sara Spurgeon has proposed that 'Horses are inextricably linked to the mythic cowboy within the national symbolic':

[...] the horse defines the cowboy's status as sacred, special, uniquely American [...] if the mounted cowboy signifies the will of the American people in action taming the wild West and conquering the wilderness, the horse symbolizes the cowboy's connection with that wilderness. Within the national symbolic, the cowboy's horse signifies both the mythic West and all the national fantasies that have become attached to it. (36)⁶²

She points out that the image of 'wild horses thundering across some dramatic western landscape [is not only a] primary mythic signifier by which we refer to wild and untamed nature' but also contains its own tension:

The process of breaking the wild horse, branding it, claiming it and utilizing it in the further subduing of nature through fences, cattle, roads, for instance, follows unseen, behind the image of the wild herd. It is a complex and powerful message of desire and domination, of colonialist nostalgia and Manifest Destiny. (36)

There are many occasions when the 'souls' of horses are considered throughout the Trilogy and several 'horse-whispering' scenes with John Grady Cole. In *All The*

⁶⁰ Stephen Tatum, 'The Solace of Animal Faces', *Arizona Quarterly*, Issue 50: 1994, pp133-56
Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York, OUP: 1992).

⁶² Sara Spurgeon, "'Pledged In Blood": Truth and Redemption in Cormac McCarthy's *All The Pretty Horses*', *Western American Literature*, 43:3, 1999: 24-44.

Pretty Horses the stablehand, Luis, tells John that horses share a common soul but 'among men there was no such communion' (11). John's first act at the Hacienda is 'to break the communion among the wild herd, to force them 'to reckon slowly with the remorselessness of this rendering of their fluid and collective selves into that condition of separate and helpless paralysis'. When he has succeeded, they become still 'with the voice of the breaker still running in their brains like the voice of some god come to inhabit them' (105).⁶³ Later, he dreams of 'horses still wild on the mesa who'd never seen a man afoot and who know nothing of him or his life yet in whose souls he would come to reside forever' (117-8). Although Cawelti suggests that this indicates that horses may hold the 'hope for man's redemption' it would also appear to be a striking articulation of desire to dominate and control, which is precisely what John does later when he breaks in the horses, having announced to the stallion he is riding: 'Soy commandante de las yeguas [...] yo y yo sólo. Sin la caridad de estas manos no tengas nada' (128): I am commander of the mares [...] I and I alone. Without the charity of these hands, you have nothing'. Dianne C. Luce suggests that McCarthy repeatedly 'undercuts John Grady's romantic heroism', from his identification with the 'picturebook horses' in his grandfather's painting at the beginning of the novel, to 'the young and ardent mares that John Grady promises to the stallion with whom he so grandiosely identifies' (Luce, 156-7).⁶⁴ However, John Grady's inability to judge situations and people, his 'sleepwalking through Mexico' as Luce puts it (159), may highlight his idealism and innocent sentimentality, but it also suggests his descent into a mythological landscape, which moves between the dream world of the hacienda to the nightmare of the Saltillo prison. The landscape and topographical features of Mexico become the focus (although there is not always clarity) of the 'melancholic gaze', identified by George Guillemin as an integral part of McCarthy's 'ecopastoralism' and 'allegorical discourse', which reconnects the trilogy with the 'pastoral melancholia of *The Orchard Keeper* and to its mythic animism', and a return to a consideration of the association of women and horses.⁶⁵

⁶³ This 'breaking up' takes on an even more sinister note when the 'collective' identity of McCarthy's females is taken into account.

⁶⁴ Dianne C. Luce, ' "When you Wake": John Grady Cole's Heroism in *All The Pretty Horses*', *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, Eds. Wade Hall & Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995) pp155-168.

⁶⁵ George Guillemin, ' "As of some site where life had not succeeded": Sorrow, Allegory and Pastoralism in Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*', *The Southern Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVIII, No.3 (Spring, 2000): 72-99.

Julia Emberly has noted the metaphorical parallels between woman/ body, and landscape:

In its metaphorical expression this trope figures the Woman/ body as a landscape of natural desire, the shape of imperial expansion; metonymically, the Woman/Body, in its most fractured and reified form, [...] reproduc(es) an originary fantasy of the virginal site that entices imperial penetration and conquest. (95)⁶⁶

Annette Kolodny likewise has noted in her discussion of the metaphor 'land-as-woman' how bound 'we still are by the vocabulary of a feminine landscape and the psychological patterns of regression and violation that it implies'. While she notes the 'tantalizing possibility that metaphor, or symbolizing in general [...] helps us explore the possibilities of experience', she also warns that 'we can no longer keep turning "America the Beautiful" into "America the Raped"' (146-7). This point can be extended to include Mexico. However, McCarthy's Western novels go further than this in that the representation of females, notable by their absence, involves a complex layering of such metaphors, so that the land-as-woman and animal-as-woman cohere to an extent which threatens to make the line between the revisionist and the reactionary very thin indeed. It is not the metaphorical expression of 'land-as-woman' but that of animal-as-woman which 'entices imperial penetration and conquest'. In *Blood Meridian*, the 'optical democracy' of the hard, austere desert landscape suggests a non-gendered landscape, while at other times, nature appears distinctly 'masculine'.⁶⁷ However, in the *Border Trilogy*, nature is represented by wild animals, either wolves or horses. In considering both Emberley and Kolodny's articulation of the problems of the metaphor land/nature-as-woman and the propensity for 'rape', Tom Pilkington's suggestion that 'McCarthy's horses [...] represent the vital life force of the universe. They stand for what *is*, pristine and unfallen nature in its most elemental form' (319), seems imbued with a sense of foreboding.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Julia Emberly, 'Gender, History and Imperialism', *Feminism/Postmodernism/ Development*, eds. Marianne H. Marchand and Jane L. Parpart (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁶⁷ In *Blood Meridian*: 'They rode on...where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them' (44-5).

⁶⁸ Tom Pilkinton, 'Fate and Free Will on The American Frontier: Cormac McCarthy's Western Fiction', *Western American Literature*, 27:1993: 311-22.

In their introduction to *Writing Worlds*, Trevor J. Barnes and James S. Duncan suggest that 'one form in which discourses can be presented, shaped and gain authority is as metaphors' (9).⁶⁹ While they point out that once metaphors have become used habitually, they are 'dead metaphors', becoming 'equivalent to the literal' although 'not equivalent so some outside real world':

They are socially and culturally constructed entities that emerged in an earlier process of metaphorical redescription. As such, metaphors relate to other metaphors and, as in the case of texts, not to some pre-linguistic brute reality. (11)

They suggest that metaphor as a trope 'works precisely by appealing to our desire to reduce the unfamiliar to the familiar; in other words, metaphors persuade us by saying that things that we thought were outside our ken (and thereby disconcerting) are really a lot like other things that we know very well' (11). This suggestion has some disconcerting implications for readers of McCarthy, if one considers the abundant use of metaphor animal-as-female.

Molly McBride has proposed that *Blood Meridian* and *All The Pretty Horses* 'serve together as a unified representation of the historical movement from colonial conquest (in BM) to neo-colonialism or cultural imperialism (in ATPH) by the USA from 1849 into the mid-20th century' (25).⁷⁰ This could obviously be extended to include *Cities of The Plain* and the latter half of the twentieth century. She suggests that 'these texts neither legitimize imperialist ideologies nor explicitly repudiate the processes of colonialism and imperialism' and instead 'critique fictions about the West, in particular, fictions which glorify – hence perpetuate and validate – the expansionist period in American history'. She notes Edwin Arnold's suggestion that the kid and John could be considered 'twins':

⁶⁹'Introduction', *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in The Representation of Landscape*, eds. Trevor J. Barnes & James S. Duncan, (London & New York: Routledge, 1992) pp1-17. It is also worth noting their warning that 'we must pay attention to rhetoric', as 'with the recent assault on objectivism, there is growing recognition that, far from being merely decorative, rhetorical devices are central to conveying meaning. They are the means by which we persuade our audience that we really did mean the things we say.' (3) Therefore, when John Beck asks whether McCarthy's description of the 'zoological' and 'abject' Comanche raiders (in *Blood Meridian*, 52-4) really does 'mean what it says', he is only partly inverting this premise and drawing attention to an alarming possibility. (Filibusters and Fundamentalists: *Blood Meridian* and the New Right', 2000).

⁷⁰ Molly McBride, 'From Mutilations to Penetration: Cycles of Conquest in *Blood Meridian* and *All The Pretty Horses*', *Southwestern American Literature*, Vol.25 No.1 Fall 1999: 24-34.

[...] if one can affiliate the innocent or heroic John Grady with the evil or anti-heroic kid, then a multitude of possible meanings can be opened up within each text. John Grady's journey to Mexico for example, might be seen not as the innocent adventuring of an adolescent boy but as calculated attempt at conquest, one that is motivated by an imperialist agenda. (26)

In *All The Pretty Horses*, Lacey Rawlins and John Grady are described as 'thieves newly loosed into that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing' (30) which implies that they can, like colonisers proper, choose what they want. At the point at which they first penetrate the border, they are 'lined out behind one another and making for the alien shore like a party of marauders' (45). This idea is expanded when they study their maps. Rawlins suggests 'it aint ever been mapped' (34) and concludes 'there's shit down there' (34). They find Mexico 'an alien world', 'wild and strange' (62,174), a place where America 'was little more than a rumor'(95)⁷¹ and in *The Crossing*, Billy's maps are also blank (185,324,406), there appears to be no law and papers have no value (247, 248, 265). In Chapter 1, the difficulty inherent in the metaphor landscape-as-text was considered, and the gradual conflation of landscape/text and story in the trilogy. However, it is also important to note another element of the 'blankness' which invites inscription. As McBride suggests: 'This blank map early on in the novel becomes a metaphor for the boys' illusion that Mexico is unclaimed territory [...] they encounter a blank space onto which they can inscribe their masculine desire as well as their cultural ideologies', so that the cultural vision and cartographic impulse is seriously impaired by the presence of the female (27).

Something more sinister is also implied in the 'choosing' which takes place at the beginning of *Cities of The Plain* when the 'cowboys' urge each other to 'pick out' one of the whores. The 'whited areas', the blank spaces to be colonised and 'onto which they can inscribe their masculine desire', are now imaged in the 'White lake' brothel. In *The Crossing*, the novel most obviously imbued with the aftermath of the Revolution, Billy meets an old woman who tells him that 'the Revolution had killed off all the real men and left only tontos (idiots)' (86). The loss of men, both fathers and sons, and the resulting difficulties for the female population is reiterated

⁷¹ Christine Collier points this out in her paper 'Exposure and Double Exposure in Cormac McCarthy's Baroque Trilogy', in *Proceedings of the First European Conference on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. David Holloway (Miami: The Cormac McCarthy Society, 1999), pp49-57

throughout *The Crossing* and in *Cities* (90, 243). This implies not only the 'availability' of the grieving widows and daughters, but also their need to be 'saved'. Similarly, the motivation for both John and Billy's border crossing is to retrieve stolen horses. In *All The Pretty Horses*, the boys are incarcerated because they are accused of stealing 'Mexican' horses and they do not have 'papers' or 'documents' to prove that they are American, just as Eduardo the pimp tells John Grady in *Cities* that Magdalena cannot leave Juarez because she does not possess the necessary 'documents'.

McBride points out that 'John Grady's sexual conquest of Alejandra in *All The Pretty Horses* can be viewed as analogous to his penetration of Mexico. Furthermore, when one considers that 'conquest' has both political and sexual connotations, then these parallel penetrations take on even more significance' (28). Their sexual union is described by McCarthy's narrator as 'sweeter for the larceny of time and flesh, sweeter for the betrayal' (141), suggesting once again the notion of 'theft'. Another element of 'invasion' or 'penetration' associated with John is his role as horse breeder. There are several descriptions of him mating stallions and mares, which are juxtaposed in both *All The Pretty Horses* and *Cities* with scenes of either sexual liaison with Alejandra or brutal scenes of near-rape in the brothel. This is McCarthy at his least subtle, as he describes John's meeting with Alejandra immediately after the stallion he is riding has been put to stud:

By now he'd taken to riding the stallion bareback, kicking off his boots and swinging up while Antonio still stood holding the trembling mare by the twitch, the mare standing with her legs spread and her head down and the breath rifling in and out of her. Coming out of the barn with his bare heels under the horse's barrel and the horse lathered and dripping and half crazed and pounding up the cienaga road [...] and the sweat of the horse and the smell of the mare on him and the veins pulsing under the wet hide and him leaning low along the horse's neck talking to him softly and obscenely. It was in this condition that all unexpectedly one evening he came upon her returning on the black Arabian down the cienaga road. (129)

Later, John Grady and Alejandra escape on horseback into the mountains at night and swim in the lake:

The water was black and warm and he turned in the lake and spread his arms in the water and the water was so dark and so silky and he watched across the still black surface to where she stood on the shore with the horse and he watched where she

stepped from her pooled clothing so pale, so pale, like a chrysalis emerging, and walked in to the water [...] She was so pale in the lake she seemed to be burning. Like foxfire in a darkened wood. That burned cold. Like the moon that burned cold.(141)

The repetition of 'watched' and the description of his lover as 'so pale', combine his voyeurism with a barely disguised sense of Alejandra as 'other' (the 'blackness' of the water, 'so dark and so silky' suggest her status as Mexican), but also her skin colour as connoting her class, 'so pale'. Breeding is important to John Grady (indicated in his discussion about horses with Alejandra's father) and, as many critics have pointed out, he appears to be driven as much by a desire to regain his own status as landowner (denied him by his mother selling the family ranch) as youthful lust. His conflation of Alejandra with nature is clear in his apparent struggle to define her in contradictory elemental symbols. When Rawlins asks him why he is returning to the hacienda, suggesting that it is 'On account of the girl', John Grady's reply displays his own conflation of both female and land (this time, her inheritance) and nature, as he tells Rawlins 'The girl and the horses' (211).⁷²

As Wade Hall has pointed out, in *The Crossing* 'for every man who takes fiendish delight in wanton torture there is a woman who brings him (Billy) food' (193).⁷³ The same could be said of McCarthy's other protagonists, although this is particularly true of Billy Parham's experience. In many ways, Billy is one of McCarthy's most complex and interesting characters. The character of Billy, as many have noted, seems to change quite dramatically between *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*. This can be partially explained by the fact that McCarthy started work on the screen play for *Cities* before he embarked on the *Border Trilogy*. The first section of the novel describes Billy Parham's experiences of first attempting to trap a female wolf and then 'rescuing' it and returning it to the mountains of Mexico.⁷⁴ In his article "The trapper Mystic: Werewolves in *The Crossing*", S.K. Robisch cites John Sepich's

⁷² This scene prefigures the death of Magdalena in *Cities of The Plain*. She is found 'in the shallows under the shore willows with the mist rising off the river. Her hair damp and matted. So black [...] Her face so pale. The severed throat gaping bloodlessly' (229).

⁷³ Wade Hall, 'The Hero and Philosopher as Survivor: An Afterword on *The Stonemason* and *The Crossing*', in *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (Miami: Texas Western Press, 1995) pp. 189-194

⁷⁴ An excerpt from this novel was published in *Esquire* in July 1993 with the title 'The Wolf Trapper'. In the introduction, McCarthy is referred to as 'a literary lone wolf who is rarely seen beyond his natural habitat of El Paso'.

Blood Notes, in which he states that the outlaw wolf 'may be emblematic' of both a 'kind of man' and of 'a non-moral rapacity' (145). While in *Blood Meridian* the lone wolf is equated with the outlaw, Robisch proposes that in McCarthy's later novel, 'the wolf is less emblematic but still connected to an archetype – the trapper' (50).⁷⁵ However, the wolf is also, without exaggeration, the only female 'love' interest which Billy experiences throughout both this novel and its sequel. When Billy watches the wolves hunting antelope, he wonders about 'the world it smelled or what it tasted' and later, when he is riding out to bury the wolf 'he could feel the blood of the wolf against his thigh [...] and he put his hand to his leg and tasted the blood which tasted no different to his own' (125). The *hacendado* tells Billy of the *portazgo* which means that the town will accept the wolf in exchange for cash, Billy replies that he did not realize that he would have to pay to pass through the country: 'the hacendado said that then he was in much the same situation as the wolf' (119). As Robisch points out, McCarthy authenticates his story by describing 'in detail the preparation, scenting, setting and anchoring of traps', and including references to W.C. Echols, who was a wolf trapper of some renown in the early part of the twentieth-century.

Billy's father tells him that he identified the wolf as female by her faeces. In Echol's cabin, where they go to find bait and traps, they find 'a collection of fruit jars and bottles with ground glass stoppers and old apothecary jars [...] In the jars dark liquids. Dried viscera. Liver, gall, kidneys [...] dedicated to a practice as soon to be extinct among the trades of men as the beast to whom it owed its being' (17). His father opens one of the vials and smells it: 'Good god, he whispered', again reiterating the horror of both the men who (perhaps) find the abused and mutilated body of the kid in the jakes, and the sergeant's horrified response to the sight of the Comanche raiders in *Blood Meridian* (334,54). When Billy asks if he can smell it, his father refuses and puts the vial into his pocket. The suggestion is here that the mixture, or 'matrix', contains what another wolf trapper, Don Arnulfo, tells Billy is the only effective ingredient: 'only shewolves in their season were a proper source' (45). While McCarthy laments the extinction of the wolves at the hands of man, 'A God insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood' (17) and describes the traps in a manner which reflects the men who use them ('with their jaws agape like steel

⁷⁵ S.K. Robisch, 'The Trapper Mystic: Werewolves in *The Crossing*', in *Southwestern American Literature*, Vol.25. No.1, Fall 1999: 50-54.

trolls silent and mindless and blind' (36)), the relationship which develops between the female wolf and Billy is more than merely an exercise in environmental nostalgia. The description is, after all, also reminiscent of the many images of the 'vagina dentata' in McCarthy's earlier novels.

Christian Kiefer's article 'The Morality of Blood: Examining The Moral Code of *The Crossing*' examines McCarthy's depiction of the failure of the traditional 'moral code' which glorifies the myth of the Western and suggests that the character of Billy Parham, 'essentially a complete loser', does not even come close to the concept of the Western hero (12).⁷⁶ He points to the end of the novel when Billy is calling for the dog that he had hurled stones at: 'After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept' (TC, 426). Like Robisch, he proposes that McCarthy's revisionary Western which repeatedly recounts Billy's failed heroic acts, images Billy as an 'environmentalist' whose 'code of the wild' is seen to be fundamentally flawed and naïve. Kiefer links the opening pages of *All The Pretty Horses* and John Grady imagining 'the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation [...] with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children [...] all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only' (ATPH, 5) with Billy's first sight of the wolves:

Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their noses in the snow [...] He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air. They bunched and nuzzled and licked one another. (4)

Kiefer proposes that Billy associates both the wolf and the Indian (who it appears later kills his parents) with 'wildness' and the first part of the novel is 'quintessentially environmental', although it also implies that 'a code of the wild is not always the best path' (14-15). However, while Kiefer points out that the brothers' rescue of the

⁷⁶ Christian Kiefer, 'The Morality of Blood: Examining the Moral Code of *The Crossing*', in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol.1, Issue 1, (Miami: Cormac McCarthy Society, 2000): 17-21.

William C. Spencer has also addressed the role of the hero in *The Crossing*, suggesting that although it is not easy to prove that McCarthy wants the reader to recognize Billy as heroic as 'the author takes some pains to characterize his protagonist as a three-time loser and a consistent failure', nevertheless he does successfully meet the challenge 'of portraying a hero in the midst of failure.' (335) William C. Spencer, 'The Western Hero Unmasked in *The Crossing*.' in *Proceedings of the 2nd Annual*

Mexican girl from 'an implied threat of rape' in a 'pulp-like action scene' is 'particularly noteworthy because it is a successful act, an entirely rare event in the course of the novel', this also hints at a further flaw in Billy's moral code (15). For if, as Kiefer also suggests, 'the wolf is his symbolic mother as he is born into his own life of the wild', his treatment of her combines reverential wonder and fear, an acknowledgement of her terrible physical strength and fierceness intermingled with a desire to master her in order to 'save' her.⁷⁷ As he tries to restrain her, her savage attack and his equally brutal reaction are described in a way which is echoed later in the treatment of Magdalena during her epileptic fits in *Cities*:

He pulled the rope tighter [...] He pulled until he'd shut off her air and then he jammed the stick between her teeth [...] He hauled at the rope and stretched her out wild and gagging and forced her lower jaw to the ground with the stick and stepped on the rope again with his boot not a foot from those teeth. Then he put the pigginstring from his mouth and dropped the loop of it over her muzzle and jerked it tight and seized [...] and fell upon her, kneeling with the living wolf gasping between his legs and sucking air and her tongue working within the teeth all stuck with dirt and debris. (55)

The description of his struggle to 'tame' her continues for several pages, interrupted only by the incredulous farmer. Although initially he talks to her and strokes her head 'she only winced and shivered' and his attempts to restrain and 'break' her become increasingly violent, until he is dragging her mangled body at the end of a length of rope: 'He spoke to her and tried to calm her but there seemed no point in it so he just hauled her up and halfhitched the rope with her standing upright and half garrotted and her head almost touching the limb overhead' (55,57,81). These descriptions also echo the horse breaking scenes in *All The Pretty Horses* and *Cities*, and the violence of the dog hunt in the latter. The wolf, like Magdalena is tied up 'for her own good.'

International Conference on the Emerging Literature of the Southwest Culture, Sep. 13-15, 1996 (El Paso: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp333-340

⁷⁷ In his book, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac Mac Airt* (one of the mythological great kings of Tara), Tomas O Cathasaigh concentrates on the Old Irish version of Cormac's birth-tale. There are many variations of the tale, but one 'basic pattern is beyond dispute [...] the destiny of young Cormac mac Airt is inextricably linked with wolves' (35), as the baby is suckled by a female wolf before being brought up by a foster father, Lugna, and in some versions is said to have been fathered by an animal. There are elements of the tale which can be found to inform *The Crossing*. O Cathasaigh writes that in the anthropomorphic representation of the canine and lupine figures in the tale: 'there is an Olympian capriciousness about the variation between benignity and malignity which underlines the sacrality of animal personages. The vacillation in aspect of these personages is homologous with the duplex character of the Irish Otherworld: it is now benevolent, now malevolent' (.37-8) In McCarthy's novel, the 'otherworld' is Mexico.

The scenes depicting the dog fights which eventually kill the wolf are no more horrific (115-123). In the end, Billy has to shoot the wolf to put her out of her misery : 'He took up her stiff head and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh' (127).

"Where's the all-American cowboy at?" asks Billy in *Cities*.⁽³⁾ By the time of McCarthy's most recent novel and the last of the *Border Trilogy*, the filibustering and scalphunting of *Blood Meridian* may be long gone, and the voice of Manifest Destiny may be fading, but the iconic and mythical status of the cowboy is still riddled with ambiguity. In *All The Pretty Horses*, John Grady and his 'buddies' think of themselves as 'vaqueros' and 'bandaleros', and by the time of *Cities of The Plain*, Billy and John still refer to each other somewhat insistently if ironically as 'cowboy', but Eduardo the Mexican pimp during a knife fight with John Grady in which they kill each other, suggests his diminished status by addressing him as 'farmboy':

[you] drift down out of your leprous paradise seeking a thing now extinct among them. A thing for which perhaps they no longer even have a name. Being farmboys of course the first place they think to look is in a whorehouse [...] The simplest truths are obscured. They cannot seem to see that the most elementary fact concerning whores [...] Is that they are whores. (249)

Therefore, Eduardo's threat that 'we will devour you, my friend. You and all your pale empire', as John Wegner has suggested 'elevates this fight to something beyond simply a battle over a whore'.⁷⁸ Wegner argues that 'the thematic centrality of the whorehouses of Juarez to the conclusion of the *Border Trilogy* reflects the economic and nationistic foci of the Revolution [and that] Eduardo is the creation of American farmboys coming to Mexico – the product of American intervention in Mexican affairs':

Cole might be a sympathetic character because of this love for a Mexican whore, but the fact remains that he goes to a whorehouse with his friends prepared to buy Mexican flesh. His attempt to buy Magdalena from Eduardo does more than warn him that she considers leaving. Cole's actions, no matter how noble they appear, involve buying and selling a woman for two thousand dollars. In the larger scheme of

⁷⁸ John Wegner, ' "Mexico para los Mexicanos": Revolution, Mexico, and McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*'. *Southwestern American Literature*, Vol.25. No.1 1999: 67-74.

things, El Paso buys and Juarez sells; their relationship continues Mexico's economic dependence on America.(71)

As noted, Tom Pilkington has suggested that 'McCarthy's horses [...] stand for what *is*, pristine and unfallen nature in its most elemental form' (319). Certainly, McCarthy seduces his readers with this sense of their 'elemental', 'pristine' naturalness and beauty, like the landscape over which they roam wild. But they are also more than a little 'like' the Madonnas, whores and *mater dolorosa* – the stereotyped females – of McCarthy's Western novels and as such, although McCarthy appears to recognise the 'tantalising possibilities of metaphor' identified by Annette Kolodny, his 'animal-as-woman' metaphor displays many of the same problems inherent to the 'land-as-woman' metaphor. The 'psychological patterns of regression and violation' that are implied are equally disturbing when they surface in a 'animal-as-woman' metaphor. The ideological concerns which can be illuminated by considering this use of metaphor, suggests, among other things that John Grady's role as 'horse breeder' - buying, selling and mating - is simply a legitimate form of Eduardo's commercial enterprise South of the border, and therefore exacerbates the diminished status of the 'cowboy'. The problem with horses (and wolves) in these novels then becomes the same as the problem with women. Is McCarthy guilty of a form of metaphorical abuse outlined by Kolodny, by turning 'Mexico the Beautiful' into 'Mexico the Raped', or is he exposing the processes of colonialism through a subtle critique about fictions of the West which conflate 'goodlookin' women and 'goodlookin' horses? Although Rawlins comments to John Grady about Mary Catherine's rejection in the opening pages of *All The Pretty Horses*, 'She ain't worth it. None of em are', as the trilogy progresses, there is a suggestion that John Grady's romantic encounters are the source of barely disguised jealousy on the part of his 'buddies' (10).

**“Something evoked wholly out of nothing and wholly unaccountable”: Homoeroticism and the Motif of the Hunt
in the *Border Trilogy***

Virginia Wright Wexman suggests that in the male groups of the Western 'glamorous masculine adventure takes precedence over quotidien domesticity' which not only

enforces their reluctance to be confined, civilised and domesticated by the 'feminised' sphere of the city, but also 'the idealization of male friendships arises from agrarian nostalgia, for opportunities to cultivate male intimacy declined following the industrial revolution, which turned male labor into a competitive market economy' (85).⁷⁹ The 'homosociality' of these male groups constitutes a bond formed in opposition to women, although importantly, women also function as objects of exchange and desire. The western often articulates this desire and exchange in the struggle between two heroes over the same woman, which ultimately serves to prove to the men that their 'homosocial' bonds are indeed stronger than their desire.⁸⁰ As Wright Wexman notes, the 'preoccupation with testing the bonds of friendship through trials and danger [...] often makes the relationships between men stronger than those between men and women' (86).

While there is evidence of a humorous fear or dread of the homoerotic in many Westerns, Wright Wexman asks 'what use is it put in the genre's larger narrative and thematic patterns?' (87) She cites Howard Hawk's 1943 production of *The Outlaw*, as 'one of the most explicit examples in the generic corpus of the powerful pull of homosexual attraction':

In *The Outlaw*, Thomas Mitchell as Pat Garrett shoots down his friend Doc Holliday (Walter Huston), because Holliday has abandoned him for the younger and handsomer Billy The Kid (Jack Beutel) after complaining that Garrett is growing fat. (87)

The film ends with a shot of Beutel and Jane Russell riding off into the sunset together, suggesting that the homoerotic subtext and the issue of homosexual desire are part of a larger narrative drive towards heterosexual communion. Wright Wexman suggests, therefore, that the more 'fundamental significance' of the depictions of a 'homoerotic component in the phenomenon of male bonding' is to 'position homosexuality as a contrasting tendency that can be used to highlight the sexual propriety associated with the Western's valorization of dynastic marriage' (88). She points out that the pairing of the 'green kid' with the (often garrulous) experienced

⁷⁹ Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating The Couple* (1993).

⁸⁰ Wright Wrexham cites many examples of these plots, which include *Western Union* (1941), *The Desperadoes* (1943), *The Big Sky* (1952), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Silverado* (1985). Stephen Frear's 1999 film *Hi-Lo Country* could be added to this list.

and hardened older cowboy, is a further manifestation of the 'buddy' relationships between adolescent males so famously outlined by Leslie Fiedler as being endemic throughout American literature. Charles Bailey has suggested that McCarthy's depiction of the 'buddy' relationships reaches the last stage of its evolution in *Cities* and that by the end of *Cities*, both John Grady and Billy have become anti-heroes 'futilely acting in a degraded world':

Therein lies the deconstruction of the entire trilogy. Heroism, no matter its form, is irrelevant in a world immersed in materialism and in the instruments of its own destruction. (300)⁸¹

Bailey proposes that the end of *Cities* suggests that not only has 'the tragic hero become pathetic' and the 'romantic hero has passed', but the final dedication implies the desire for new heroes. He also suggests that the 'symbiotic relationship' between John Grady and Billy, their 'fusion into one hero', is anticipated in the previous two novels (299). In contrast to Billy's experience with the wild and savage female wolf, he is seen cruelly lashing out at a dog at the end of *The Crossing* and by the end of *Cities*, he ends up with the wild puppy which can, as Bailey points out, 'be easily domesticated, unlike a wolf, to a pet' which he inherits from John Grady (300). The puppy is the runt of the litter that they 'save' from the den of the wild dog that they have killed, so that, once more, this act of kindness indicates a misplaced sense of heroism, resulting as it does from the cruelty and violence of the dog hunt. Bailey notes that during the hunt, Billy and John Grady exchange horses on the climb to the mesa 'thus blurring their separate identities' and when they rope 'the repugnant yellow dog, they do it in simultaneous, unspoken concert. They are the same cowboy' (300). When they ride out to the mesa and camp, Billy tells John Grady: 'I'm glad you ain't forgot all of your raising' in his pursuit of Magdalena:

I ain't jealous you know.
I never said you were.
I know. You might have thought it. Truth is, I wouldn't put your boots on at gunpoint.
I know.

⁸¹ Charles Bailey, 'The Last Stage of the Hero's Evolution: Cormac McCarthy's *Cities of the Plain*' in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 293-302.

Billy lit a cigarette with a brand from the fire and laid the brand back. He smoked. It looks a lot better from up here than it does down there, don't it? (156)

After brutally killing several dogs, although Billy says sarcastically 'Dogropers [...] I knew it would come to this', he and John Grady set off in pursuit of the 'big yellow son of a bitch' and the others that survived the first hunt (163-5). It is at this point that they exchange horses because Billy is not able to get his horse to go up the narrow trail. When they reach the dogs, Billy manages to rope the yellow one:

The yellow dog rolled and bounced and got up again and continued running with the noose about its neck. John Grady came riding up behind Billy and swung his rope and heeled the yellow dog and quirted the horse on with the doubled rope end and then dallied. The slack of Billy's catchrope hissed along the ground and stopped and the big yellow dog rose suddenly from the ground in headlong flight taut between the two ropes and the ropes resonated in a single brief dull note and then the dog exploded.

The sun was not up an hour and in the flat traverse of the light on the mesa the blood that burst in the air before them was as bright and unexpected as an apparition. Something evoked wholly out of nothing and wholly unaccountable. The dog's head went cartwheeling, the ropes recoiled in the air, the dog's body slammed to the ground with a dull thud.

Goddamn, said Billy. (167)

Susan Rosowski contends that the traditional western 'works by disguising fantasies of sex and violence in a formulaic chase or hunt', a further example of the anxiety over an articulation of masculinity (164-5). Here, these scenes also seem to suggest a 'humorous fear or dread of the homoerotic' although this is followed by brutal aggression.⁸² Immediately following Billy's claim that he is not 'jealous' of Magdalena, he and John Grady take part in a violent hunt in which not only is their manhood tested in the austere landscape, but which climaxes with their brutal garrotting of their prey. Immediately following their retrieval of the wild puppy, John Grady is described cleaning out the little cabin that he envisages sharing with Magdalena. Fittingly, given Magdalena's association with the Madonna, he paints the window sashes blue and the 'adobe brick walls had been whitewashed and the inside of the little house was bright and monastically severe' (179). Billy asks him if he plans to get a 'santo', seemingly in recognition of the air of sanctity which pervades it. As Edwin Arnold has noted, the 'moral and sexual topography of the novel distinguishes between two lands', the 'monastic' environment of McGovern's ranch

⁸² In *The Crossing*, before Billy 'saves' the wolf, he stalks it and hunts it down, eventually capturing it in a steel trap.

north of the border, 'a rural world of men and nature', and El Paso and Juarez which are 'imaged largely in terms of the White Lake and other bordellos' (235).⁸³ It seems that John Grady is attempting to recreate the 'monastic' air of the ranch in his cabin, even telling Billy that 'Mac says [Magdalena] can come down and work with Socorro whenever she wants' (180). Arnold suggests that the 'primary love stories in these books are between men and men' or 'men and nature – John Grady and horses, Billy and the wolf', he sees the trilogy as 'primarily a story of male friendship', noting that 'McCarthy does address the sexual ambivalence' that is part of the relationship between Billy and John Grady in *Cities* (341):

Nevertheless, the forthright presentation of friendship and affection between heterosexual men is surely one of the reasons McCarthy has earned such a readership for his more recent books. [...] a work that presents an essentially un-ironic view of masculinity is uncommon enough today to seem quite original. (237)

However, as Arnold also points out, the savage description of the dog hunt in *Cities* 'stands as the central and highly problematic action of the novel' and the 'unconscious brutality of the novel' has certain characteristics in common with *Blood Meridian*, a novel in which 'women exist primarily to be raped and/or butchered' (226). This seems to suggest exactly the sort of psychosexual motif of the hunt outlined above, a motif which courses through all of McCarthy's westerns. If, as John Beck suggested, McCarthy might be being 'un-ironic' in his depiction of the Comanches, it seems that McCarthy's sense of irony, where the implications of speech and actions are understood by the audience/ reader but not by the characters, is both too subtle in *Blood Meridian* and too overt in the trilogy. The language of both the 'hunt' and the 'choosing' of whores betrays a machismo which disavows the suggestion of homoeroticism.

Women's presence remains structurally peripheral to the homosocial bonds between men and the shared border between the homosocial and homoerotic is illustrated by the mirroring of couples. The ambivalent nature of the relationships between men, though disavowed through either repeated expressions of mutual hostility (Billy and Tiburcio, John and Eduardo) or aggressive displays of *machismo*, exhibited in the

⁸³ Edwin T. Arnold, 'The Last of The Trilogy: First Thought on *Cities of The Plain*', *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, *Southern Quarterly Series*, 1999) pp221-248.

psychosexual motif of the hunt and/or the 'picking out' of prostitutes in the brothels, is ultimately expressed in their language and physical closeness. From Mrs Rattner's desire for John Wesley to 'hunt' his father's killer in *The Orchard Keeper* and the boys delight in finding the pamphlet entitled 'Trapping The Fur Bearers of North America', the vigilantism in *Outer Dark*, the persecution of Ab Jones in *Suttree*, and the depiction of Lester Ballard as a 'perverse conflation of hunter and voyeur', McCarthy's novels have examined the motif of the hunt. In the westerns, the homosocial environment and an underlying fear of homoeroticism, foregrounds the psychosexual motif inherent in the hunt. The notion of the vigilante reaches its apotheosis in *Blood Meridian*, as the Indians and Mexicans are hunted down for their scalps. In the *Border Trilogy*, the 'hunters' are reduced to 'shopping for whores' and engaging in the massacre of wild dogs (the point is made that there are no more lions, wolves or bears in *Cities of The Plain*), so that Richard Woodward's contention that McCarthy's novels retain a 'masculine mystique' could be contradicted by considering Betty Frieden's prescient point (made in 1963) that men were 'suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no more bears to kill.'⁸⁴

**“I got an uneasy feelin about that little son of a bitch”: Penetration
and Politics in the *Border Trilogy***

It is not only the female characters who are under the threat of sexual assault. The sexual advances (and perhaps final assault) by the judge on the 'man' (importantly, he is no longer a victim of the judge's paedophilia as the previous description 'kid' would imply) in *Blood Meridian*, has been discussed. However, throughout the *Border Trilogy*, both the threat of sexual abuse and implied rape, suggests the dangers inherent in homosocial societies, when the absence of the female results in an aggressive desire for dominance. It has been suggested that depictions of the animal-as-female metaphor imply that 'Mexico the Beautiful' becomes 'Mexico the Raped'.

⁸⁴ Betty Frieden, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1983) p.386. Citation from the epilogue, published in 1973. {1st pub. 1963}

However, these incidents involve the threat or implication of the rape of the Anglo-American cowboy by a Mexican, implying perhaps that 'Mexico the Raped' has turned into 'Mexico the Rapist'.

Jane Tompkin's has examined the representation of the male body in the Western and its manifestation in the taciturn nature of the western hero:

The male – by remaining 'hermetic' and 'closed up' – maintains the integrity of the boundary that divides him from the world [...] To speak is literally to open the body to penetration by opening an orifice; it is also to mingle the body's substance with the substance of what is outside itself. Finally, it suggests a certain incompleteness, a need to be in relation. (97)

Molly McBride also suggests that there is a difference between the violence experienced by the 'kid' which is dominated 'by images of mutilation' and that experienced by John Grady which is 'characterized by penetration.' She compares the scalphunting in the borderlands in *Blood Meridian*, replete with incidents of 'mass-destruction and mutilation' with John Grady's knife fight in the Saltillo prison.⁸⁵ The emphasis on individuality in the trilogy also means that whereas the sexual element of violence in *Blood Meridian* is part of a collective act of mutilation, the penetration in the trilogy has homoerotic undertones and parallels the 'penetration' of both Alejandra and Magdalena. On a larger scale, it echoes the different ways in which the expansionist ideal of Manifest Destiny was carried out, in the latter part of the nineteenth century by the mutilation of entire populations and by the twentieth century in the more individual and personal 'penetration' of borders, whether imaged as potential territory/ property (Alejandra and the aptly named the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción) or whores and pimps to be colonised, 'cleaned up' and saved.⁸⁶

José Limón has examined representations of both 'masculinist heroism' and 'ethnic stereotype' in *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, The United States and the*

⁸⁵ Molly McBride, 'From Mutilations to penetration: Cycles of Conquest in *Blood Meridian* and *All The Pretty Horses*', *Southwestern American Literature*, Vol. 25 No.1, Fall 1999: 24-34.

⁸⁶ As Robert Jarrett also notes, John Grady has 'not recovered or reopened the frontier but merely [...] crossed into another 'closed' landscape, possessed by an aristocratic culture impervious to the cowboy myth.' (101) in *Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997).

⁸⁷ Jay Ellis, "The Rape of Rawlins: A Note on *All The Pretty Horses*", in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol.1, no.1, 2000: 31-2.

Erotics of Culture.⁸⁸ Limón's examination and interpretation of 'imagined communities' is quite different from Benedict Anderson's. He links Greater Mexico and the American South in their experience of Northern capitalist domination, 'a domination always and deeply inflected with and complicated by racism and expressed in symbolic language and imagery that involved the eroticization of self, society and culture' (18). He writes about the construction of both the South and greater Mexico by 'Northerners' as 'libidinous or sexually debauched', a construction which can be seen in a resistive song tradition, the 'eroticised' and 'masculinised' *corrido* (19). He argues for a more optimistic, 'if perhaps Utopian' reading of 'the encounters and performances' between the United States and Greater Mexico, departing from the tendency in cultural studies to see this relationship as one of 'domination and resistance' (94). Limón places the erotics of culture within the context of political economy, so that his examination of the imaging of the Mexican male, particularly of the lower-class, is interpreted within the context of the state of the US-Mexico political economy (74). He criticises the writing of both Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz for their formulations about the inferiority complex of the Mexican working-class male and cites Paz's description: 'the essential attributes of the *macho* – power – almost always reveals itself as a capacity for wounding, humiliating, annihilating.'⁸⁹ He suggests that, rather than dismissing entire groups of society as 'obscene, incestuous, misogynist', the 'manifest sexual and scatological imagery' associated with this group can be understood as 'revelatory of repressed concerns', and that these concerns with 'sexual violation' can be seen as 'projections of the vulnerability of the body (politic) that these men experience in their dismissed status, rather than as a simple expression of Oedipal wishes' (95). He examines the theme 'of sexualized desire within domination' as it is projected in three popular 'expressive events' of that period, the films *High Noon* and *Giant* and the country-western ballad 'El Paso', by Marty Robbins (103). Firstly, Limón notes the importance of the place of the *corrido* in Anglo-Mexican relations and 'of the political erotics of an Anglo song tradition' that emerged. He considers the 'epic themes' of the *corrido* and the centrality of the notion of hero of the *corrido*

⁸⁸ José Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, The United States, and the Erotics of Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

⁸⁹ Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad/ The Labyrinth of Solitude*, (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p.82 {1st pub. Mexico, DF.: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1951}

defending himself and his community from the oppression, both political and civil, from Anglo-American society. Limón proposes that while some *corridos* were also about confrontation with other Mexicans, these 'epic-heroic folk ballads' had one thing in common:

[...] whether its protagonists are Anglos or Mexicans, at the heart of the *corrido* is an aestheticized and eroticized figure of strong, attractive masculinity confronting other men with the phallic power of the pistol in his hand. (105)⁹⁰

Limón points out that there also emerged a tradition of cowboy folk ballads, a sort of '*gringo corrido*' (he suggests this 'tongue-in-cheek'), and that a comparison between these displays the different ways that 'colonizer and colonized experienced their encounter' (107-8). For, whereas the Mexican *corrido* usually involved a violent encounter between Mexican male and Anglo male 'other', Limón proposes that 'the sexualized encounter between the Anglo cowboy and the Mexican female 'other' is a central theme defining [...] the *gringo corrido*' (109). He points out that while some of these ballads were explicit about the taboo surrounding such an encounter, others exalted the 'religious, virtuous, faithful, and hard-working' Anglo female figure, implicitly suggesting the need to return 'his own racial-cultural kind', in this case, his 'Susie' (108-9).⁹¹ McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* begins with a reference to a nursery rhyme in the title of *All The Pretty Horses*, continues with a story about Boyd Parham (in *The Crossing*) who is subsumed into Mexican resistive culture by shooting one of W.R. Hearst's Guardia Blanca of La Babicora (the White Guard) and becomes part of a *corrido*, and concludes with a poetic dedication at the end of *Cities*.⁹² Throughout the novels, there are references to both John Grady and Billy singing *corridos* and ballads that they have been taught as children by their Mexican servants.⁹³

⁹⁰ Limón quotes one famous example: 'How beautiful are men/ Killing each other face to face/ Each with his pistol/ Defending his right', in Américo Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois press, 1976), p78.

⁹¹ Limón cites an example of both types of cowboy ballad. 1) 'Never seen her since that night/ I cain't cross the line you know./ She was Mex and I was white./ Like as not it's better so.' 2) 'I'm free to think of Susie./ Fairer than the stars above./ She is the waitress at the station/ And she is my turtle dove..' in John A. Lomax, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1919), 67-68.

⁹² For a discussion of the representation of the Revolution in the Trilogy, see John Wegner's 'Mexico para los Mexicanos': Revolution, Mexico and McCarthy's Border Trilogy' in *Myth Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp249-256.

⁹³ John Grady tells Billy towards the end of *Cities* that he does not 'know what Mexico is': 'I think its in your head, Mexico. I rode a lot of ground down there. The first ranchera you hear sung you

Limón cites Homi Bhabha's work on the relationship between discourse and politics as one of 'ambivalence', to suggest a way of rethinking the relationship between the American cowboy, the Mexican female as 'a figure of forbidden sexuality' and the 'prim and proper' figure of the Anglo woman as a 'scenario of ambivalence played out in partial and unconscious challenge to the cultural ruling order' (110-112). Significantly, in this scenario, Limón sees the cowboy as the central figure of ambivalence, 'a figure on the lower rungs of American capitalism at its most expansive moment in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries':

While the figure of the cowboy has always represented a complicated ambivalent resistance to this expansive culture, the critical possibilities are enhanced if we give full valence to the object of his persistent desire for the sexualized figure of the Mexican woman. In the figure of the desiring cowboy we see, indeed, the colonizing agent – a tall, strong, white gunfighter – but we can also detect a fissure in the colonial enterprise, a break with the sexual repression concomitant with that ruling order. (111)

As Limón points out, in most cases, the Anglo male does not remain in ambivalence, and returns to 'Susie' after his 'transgressive experimentation at the border' (112).⁹⁴ This resolution of ambivalence in favour of the 'dominant, hegemonic culture [...] is often combined with nostalgia':

Her eyes were brown – a deep, deep brown;
Her hair was darker than her eyes;
And something in her smile and frown,
Curled crimson lip and instep high,
Showed that there ran in each blue vein,
Mixed with milder Aztec strain,

understand the whole country. By the time you've heard a hundred you don't know nothin. You never will' (218). See also *The Crossing*, p375.

⁹⁴ In both of McCarthy's earliest short stories, the central figure is an Anglo 'Susie'. In 'A Drowning Incident', the female dog whose pups are drowned is named Suzy, described 'looking thin and wagging her tail, her dugs no longer dragging to the ground.' (3) The boy avoids Suzy following his discovery of her drowned puppy, returns to his mother's room 'the odor of the blankets, sensuously fetid and intimate' and lays the dead puppy in the crib beside the baby. (4) Perhaps McCarthy's earliest depiction of the *mater dolorosa*, fear of the maternal and conflation of animal and female. In 'Wake for Susan', 'she was blue-eyed and yellow-haired, soft and bright in her homespun dress' (4), the conflation of the female with death is evident. Wes imagines his dead 'lover' who 'swells with womanly pride' at the sight of her brothers eating her 'fragrant' dishes, she 'kept busy with endless household chores and minded them not in the least.' (4) Wes invents a fantasy life with this paragon of domesticity and weeps 'for lost Susan, for all the lost Susans', although like McCarthy's later protagonists, he leaves her and walks home, 'towering even among the lean trees.' (6) 'A Drowning Incident', *The Phoenix*, March 1960: 3-4 & 'Wake For Susan', *The Phoenix*, October 1959: 3-6.

The vigorous vintage of Old Spain [...] ⁹⁵

Limón contrasts these songs with the Mexican *corrido*, suggesting that ‘the Anglo performances offer not the assertive heroic male figure [...] but rather an Anglo figure whose ambivalence toward his own capitalist and colonialist culture is articulated to and through the ‘other’ as a lament, a longing to fill a certain emptiness’ (113). However, his claim that these laments ‘bring into question, at the most basic level, the full psychic and cultural legitimacy of Anglo-American domination of the Southwest’, is perhaps an optimistic note too far, particularly in his assertion that those ‘performances’ of *High Noon*, *Giant* and ‘El Paso’, ‘lent less ambivalent and more affirmative cultural ideological support and empowerment to the growing Mexican-American consciousness’ of the 1950s ‘through a distinctive employment of the idiom of racialized sexuality’ (115):

Greater Mexico and the United States have inherited a potent and enduring American cultural iconography of Anglo-American/ Mexican relations in which sexuality is at the heart of an iconic relationship between certain figurations of the Mexican woman, the Anglo man, and the Anglo woman. (135)

While this may be seen as in some way progressive in the 1950s, to attempt to apply it to ‘performances’ of the 1990s and later, would appear to be stretching Limón’s theory too far. It is possible to suggest that McCarthy also articulates ‘the desiring ambivalence experienced by the colonizing protagonist [within which] lies a subversive rupture in the otherwise pervasive dominance of Anglo culture’ (128).

The Crossing has practically no feminine presence, with the exception of the figure of Billy’s dead twin sister, Margarita Evelyn Parham, who as Shaw suggests ‘haunts the narrative and subsumes all other females’ (260). The only other females are the nameless Mexican girl who runs off with Boyd, the diva from the opera company and the wife who tells the tale of the blind revolutionary. As Shaw notes, the parallels between the tales of the Revolution told by these female figures, means that they all act as narrative facilitators, from the girl who ‘instigates and broadcasts the ballads’ that transform Boyd from ‘gullible boy to folk hero’, to the wife of the blind revolutionary who tells a story similar to that of Dueña Alfonsa. The intertextual effect of this female presence is that the girl of *The Crossing* and Alejandra of *All The*

⁹⁵ John A. Lomax, *Songs of The Cattle Trail*, p24-26

Pretty Horses, 'ultimately merge into the demure, 'schoolgirl' whore Magdalena'.⁹⁶ The repetition of the female experience of the revolution, is the story of women who are 'wounded, mangled, and scarred by men who soon die 'on that senseless plain' of the revolutions' (261):

The girl-dueña cognate reconfigures again when we consider that the blind man's wife also tells a story that carries the same message as those tales of the girl and the grand aunt. In short, the plots of these three interpolated stories merge and blur much the same way as the matrix plots of *All The Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*. In so doing, the subplots fuse the individuality of the various females into an amorphous presence that assumes an identity separate from and larger than its components. (261)

In *Cities*, it is the figure of another Margaret, the dead niece of Mr. Johnson and wife to Mac McGovern, who haunts the narrative, as Billy says of Mac 'You don't get over a woman like that [...] not now, not soon, not never' (12). However, Billy's sister also makes a reappearance (of sorts): 'I had a younger sister died when I was seven but I remember her just as plain [...] I always liked that name for a girl. If I ever had a girl that's what I'd name her' (419). Therefore, the dead Anglo-American females in *Cities* provide an amorphous essence of 'purity' which frames the narrative about the 'goddamned whore.' In addition, the Mexican men who died on 'that senseless plain' of the Revolution, makes the pairing of the Anglo-American male and the Mexican female appear inevitable.

However, while McCarthy, as Limón suggests, could be considered to 'make [the reader] explicitly conscious of the subordinated presence of Mexicans in the Southwest', this is largely through the racialized sexuality and diminished figure of the Mexican male (128). As Limón points out, in taking 'his' woman, 'the Anglo colonizer further diminished the Mexican male beyond the degrading, desexualising images [...], even as the Anglo male sexual body was approvingly affirmed' (131). The Anglo male not only extracted 'economic surplus' from the Mexican male, but also relegated him to an inferior status sexually. The origins of the iconographic images of the Mexican male, Limón attributes partly to the Anglo cowboy folk song, and to the traditions of the dime novels and travel literature of the West (135). In a chapter entitled 'Tex-Sex-Mex: Dirty Mexican Men, Aztec Gods, Good Ole Boys,

⁹⁶ Added to this list, of course, could be Wanita Tipton of *The Orchard Keeper*, Rinthy Holme of *Outer Dark* and Wanda Reese from *Suttree*.

and New Texas Women', Limón considers the place of the 'clearly despised Mexican male' in this 'iconographic triad', a figure who 'with none of the exotic sexuality, the freer play of the erotic given the figure of the Mexican woman [importantly, he sees this as indicative of this figure's potential to have 'critical meanings and possibilities beyond the mere stereotype'], he is a rhetorical construction that exemplifies the term 'stereotype' in its most negative sense':

Given the largely male authorship of these constructions, we see here a reading of men by other men that is a discursive *mano a mano*. We can also readily see this rhetorical denigration as an articulation of colonialism directed specifically at the Mexican male body, which offered the greatest opposition of the colonial project [...] However, in the context of the Anglo males' symbolic desire for the Mexican woman, we can now see between these two men a psychological relationship of difference but also of identity, aggression, and mutual narcissism. (136)

Limón does point out in an endnote that the Mexican male's 'traditional response has been to cast the Anglo male in denigrating effeminate terms' (133). He suggests that as both men desire the Mexican female, the Mexican having a 'cultural advantage to offset the Anglo's dominant social status', the only possible outcome is 'absolute denigration and denial' of the 'other', citing Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* as an example of the entirely unambivalent 'Anglo male construction of Mexican men' (137).

In his reading of *All The Pretty Horses*, Limón praises McCarthy's 'careful, almost loving research on Texas and northern Mexico' and his use of Spanish without 'Bourgeois courteous' translation (in particular John Grady's fluency), proposing that his novel is 'not really a western', partly because of the ambivalence which suggests that he 'is playing with the genre' (197-9). He acknowledges that McCarthy is in danger at times 'of being appropriated by the genre and all it stands for ideologically', but 'though it moves between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, it nonetheless makes a powerful social critique of the prevailing social order with regard to Mexico and the United states at its narrative moment and now' (199). He argues that the relationship between John Grady, his *abuela* and Luisa contribute to the ambivalent nature of his character. He notes that a 'key scene' at the beginning of the book describes Luisa devotedly and affectionately (maternally) cooking and serving sweetrolls to John Grady, and the closing scenes take place during the burial of

Luisa's mother and the former housekeeper, referred to as Abuela. Therefore, Limón sees a depiction of the Mexican community in Texas that embraces 'the ultimate play with and radical revision of the hegemonic western genre' (202-4). For Limón, the decision made by Alejandra 'to return to her culture rather than the cowboy abandoning her for a prim and proper girl back home', is a critique of 'an always youthfully willful and aggressive capitalist imperial ethos' (200). Similarly, the depiction of Don Hector and his material wealth enables the reader to 'see the more international and cosmopolitan workings of the Mexican political economy' and contrasts with John Grady's situation as a 'mojado-reverso' (a 'reverse wetback') as he crosses the border into Mexico to look for work. Therefore, Mexico is not 'some wholly mythicised place', so that the reader sees the 'specific articulation of the workings and power relationships of the post-Revolutionary Mexican state' (200). He does, however, note that a further aspect of 'power' in Mexico can be seen in the description of the boys' incarceration in the Saltillo prison, and it is here, as Limón proposes 'McCarthy is at his greatest risk in his game [as he] comes perilously close to a restatement of the Mexican degenerate male culture and the cowboy hero's ability to overcome it' (201). Limón defends McCarthy by suggesting that he shows that 'the sources of degeneracy lie in the state and the nonmaintenance of its prisons and in its neglect of all its people', so that it is finally 'the corrupt authorities that Cole confronts and not some bunch of generalized Mexicans, as in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*' (201).⁹⁷ However, there is much in the description of the Saltillo prison and its inhabitants that appears to contradict Limón's optimism and his proposition that his reading of *All The Pretty Horses* offers 'a glimpse of the future in hopeful and utopian terms':

The erstwhile Anglo cowboy, ambivalent agent of a dominating imperialism against the Indian and Greater Mexico but also himself as a capitalist subject, is utterly and erotically transformed at the end of McCarthy's novel, and we leave him in longing for a symbolic-affective Greater Mexican community, for a lost *abuela*-grandmother, a longing that stands in critique of capitalist dominance on both sides of the border. (212)

The Saltillo prison, as McCarthy's narrator describes it, can be seen as a microcosm of the political economy and the 'erotics of culture' in Mexican society:

⁹⁷ There are some descriptions which do appear to 'generalize' or stereotype Mexicans. For example, pp61 &73 of *All The Pretty Horses*.

The prison was no more than a small walled village and within it occurred a constant seethe of barter and exchange in everything from radios and blankets down to matches and buttons and shoenails and within this bartering ran a constant struggle for status and position. Underpinning all of it like the fiscal standard in commercial societies lay a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill. (182)

Immediately before they arrive at Saltillo, there is a suggestion that Lacey Rawlins is raped by the captain and both John Grady and Rawlins witness the shooting of Blevins, in a land described as 'strange' to them (177). Once inside the prison, the *papazote*, a man named Emilio Pérez, sends for the boys and warns them that they will need to be prepared to fight and that 'without money you can do nothing' (186-7). The prison is feminised in Pérez' description of it as a 'salon de belleza' ('a beauty parlour') (192). Rawlins is attacked by a 'man he'd never seen before' with 'an italian switchblade knife with black horn handles and nickle bolsters and he held it at waist level and passed it three times across Rawlins' shirt' (189). Later, John Grady is attacked in the canteen and his opponent's knife is described 'like a cold steel newt seeking out the warmth within him' (199). By the time of the knife fight in *Cities*, the description of the almost exquisitely choreographed movements of Eduardo and John Grady, echoes the aestheticised violence of Peckinpah's cinematographic techniques, describing the enemies (Mexico and America) as they appear to be engaged in a dance of death and a highly eroticised and almost ritualistic slaughter (248-255).

In *All The Pretty Horses*, the Mexican workmen offer to buy Blevins, who is only half dressed, following his panic during the lightning storm: 'Blevins sat with his bare legs stretched out before him but they looked so white and exposed lying there on the ground that he seemed ashamed and he tried to tuck them under him and to cover his knees with the tails of the borrowed shirt he wore' (74). After Rawlins and Cole are arrested, there is a strong suggestion that Rawlins is raped during his interrogation by the captain, as Jay Ellis has pointed out.⁹⁸ Just as the instances (outlined above) which provide thinly veiled evidence that the judge in *Blood Meridian* is a paedophile, McCarthy describes the effect of (sexual) violence without providing an account of the moment of violation. As Ellis suggests, what happens 'offstage' to Lacey Rawlins

⁹⁸ Jay Ellis, "The Rape of Rawlins: A Note on All The Pretty Horses" , in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol.1, no.1, 2000: 31-2.

'should add to discussions of Lacey in particular, and to considerations of masculinist heroism, ethnic stereotype, homoeroticism, and even McCarthy's reception as he began to obscure the violence in his novels' (31).

The guards are described returning Rawlins to his cell after his 'interview' with the captain:

They let Rawlins go [...] and he slid to the floor and sat for a moment and then bent slowly forward and to one side and lay holding himself. (165)

The captain is described in his 'uniform', accessorised with 'a scarf of yellow silk' and smoking, 'his arm upright and the burning cigarette a few inches from his ear in a posture that seemed alien to him' (166). The pencil which lies on the desk 'which had been sharpened with a knife [...] He'd taken [...] from the desk and was tapping his lower teeth with it' (166). Although Jay Ellis states that 'it may be a stretch to argue that McCarthy is in the habit of making evil stereotypically queer', there is much to suggest that this is the case.⁹⁹ Ellis also points out the 'cognitive' gaps which occur between characters, for example when John Grady is surprised by the captain's statement that Blevins 'don't have no feathers', responding by telling the captain 'He what? [...] I wouldn't know about that. It don't interest me' (167). Similarly, when the captain tells Rawlins to 'put down' his 'pants', Rawlins replies 'What the hell for?' (162). While the captain believes that Rawlins may be 'the criminal Smith' and want to see whether the wallet with the bullet hole that Rawlins has been carrying has left a scar, Rawlins clearly misinterprets, or fails to realise, the captain's supposed motivation. Ellis suggests that the gap between the two possible meanings of this scene 'enacts a *textual* violence on the page suggestive of the *sexual* violence that – implicitly – follows' (32). The suggestion in what Ellis points to as the gaps in the narrative, is one of a predatory sexuality which threatens to emasculate and corrupt these young men. As he points out, 'Rawlins loses either way: either he is the 'criminal Smith' or he is in danger from a man unaccountably examining his 'feathers' in a situation of extreme vulnerability':

⁹⁹ The judge in *Blood Meridian*, for example, is described with his parasol in the desert and when the men visit the baths in Chihuahua, he tests the water with 'one toe, surprisingly petite.' (167) His hairless state contrasts with the savage and unkempt wildness of the 'men' and his desire to collate information in order to control his environment, also suggests the effete nature of his pursuits, drawing and stalking 'tiptoe the mountain butterflies.' (198)

Subsequent details of the captain during the interview with John Grady suggest that Rawlins was in danger both ways. Rawlins' wallet is thus a synecdoche for Rawlins, and more might be made of the fact that the suspicious hole in the wallet was created by young Blevins on a dare. As Blevins's bullet kills off the image of heterosexual longing in the image of 'Betty Ward right between the eyes' (ATPH, 55), so too this bullet renders Rawlins vulnerable to having his pants taken down on a reasonable suspicion: if Rawlins bears a scar, the captain has less reason to suspect him of a crime. (32)

Later, Rawlins asks John Grady 'You didn't get to go to the shower room? [...] He keeps a white coat back there on a hook. He takes it down and puts it on and ties it around his waist with a string' (169). This description implies not only torture, as Ellis suggests 'the white coat is a stereotypical detail from torture scenes', but also rape. Both the affectation of the cigarette smoking and 'scarf of yellow silk' (157) prefigure the descriptions of Eduardo and Tiburcio in *Cities of The Plain*. Eduardo is first described smoking 'a cigarette in a silver holder and [wearing] a black silk shirt' and later, when Magdalena has returned in her 'stenciled shift' like a 'penitent' to the brothel (a description which is reminiscent of Rinthy Holme in *Outer Dark*) his suit 'was of light gray silk shantung and he wore a silk tie of the same color. His shirt was a pale lemon yellow and he wore a yellow silk handkerchief in the breastpocket' (212). He is repeatedly imaged both as evil and as 'stereotypically queer', as he smokes his 'slender black cigars', wears 'polished lizardskin boots' and the way in which he smokes is reminiscent of the 'queers' in *Suttree* (130):

He took a long slow pull on the cigar. He made a strange and graceful gesture with the hand that held it, turning it in an arc and holding it palm up. As if it cupped something unseen. Or were accustomed to holding something now absent. (COTP, 131)

When he interrupts the *criada*'s attempts to calm Magdalena's epileptic fit by tying her to the bed forcing a length of broom stick between her teeth, he cuts away the restraints with 'an italian switchblade knife with black onyx handles and silver bolsters' and he is later described smoking 'his hands clasped behind him at the small of his back in a stance he had perhaps admired or read of but a stance native to some other country, not his' (69,73, 79). It is also a knife that will later be used to kill John Grady: 'The pimp stood in the alleyway. His shirt open at the neck. His sleek oiled head blue in the light. Holding the thin switchblade knife loosely in one hand' (248).

As John Grady dies he has 'the yellow silk of his enemy's shirt wrapped about him like a ceremonial sash gone dark with blood' (256). The 'doubling' of John Grady and Eduardo can be seen in the depiction of John Grady breeding the stallion and the mare immediately after the description of Magdalena's first epileptic fit, combining the image of both the *criada* (the mare has only one eye) and the virgin whore, whose epilepsy is associated with diabolic possession, and a reminder of Collier's proposal of the brothel indicating that Mexico 'had sold her soul to the devil':

The mare bucked and kicked one leg. On the third try the stallion mounted her, clambering, stamping his hindlegs, the great thighs quivering and the veins standing. John Grady stood holding all of this before him on a twisted tether like a child holding by a string some struggling and gasping chimera invoked by sorcery out of the void into the astonished day world. He held the twitchrope in one hand and laid his face against the sweating neck. (75)¹⁰⁰

Tiburcio also conforms to the stereotypical Mexican pimp, with his 'thin moustache' and 'black greased hair' and the 'musky spice of his cologne' which hangs in the air, although he is also associated with evil, appearing out of nowhere at Billy's elbow 'like Lucifer' (79, 130, 128).¹⁰¹ In contrast to Eduardo covering Magdalena with the bedclothes during her fit, Tiburcio, after he has 'seized the girl's jaw and forced the leather between her teeth', strips away the bedclothes:

He bent over her slightly in his black silk. The soft whisper of it. A morbid voyeur, a mortician. An incubus of uncertain proclivity or perhaps just a dark dandy happened in from off the neon streets who aped imperfectly with his pale and tapered hands

¹⁰⁰ There are similarities between John Grady's many instances of close communion with horses and the descriptions of Magdalena's epileptic fit when she is with a client: 'By the time he'd slid into the bed beside her she'd cried out and gone rigid and her eyes white. In the muted light he could not see her but he placed his hand on her body and felt her bowed and trembling under his palm and taut as a snaredrum. He felt the tremor of her like the hum of a current running in her bones' (183).

¹⁰¹ Although many critics have identified a possible affiliation between the kid and John Grady, Billy's rage at the homosexual Tiburcio seems to echo the kid's response to the homosexual bartender, and his desperation to join the army in *The Crossing* seems borne out of a similar lack of alternative to the orphaned kid. In addition, both Billy and the kid are only ever seen indulging in heterosexual relationships with prostitutes and even these are either somewhat oblique (in the case of Billy) or unsuccessful. In *The Crossing*, having goaded Boyd with the suggestion that he might be 'scared of girls', when Billy comes across the naked diva from the opera company bathing in the river, his response suggests, once again, that for McCarthy's protagonists, the mature female figure inspires both awe and fear: 'Her hair down and it was wet and clinging to her back and it reached to the water. He stood frozen [...] He watched and as he watched he saw that the world which had always even before him everywhere had been veiled from his sight [...] the sun rose and the river ran as before but nothing was the same nor did he think it ever would be.' (220) This recalls Old Arthur Ownby's memories of his first 'voyeuristic' experience in *The Orchard Keeper*. Also, see *Blood Meridian*, p.332, in which the kid's encounter with the dwarf whore seems particularly unsuccessful.

those ministrations of the healing arts [...] What are you? He said. You are nothing.(183)

As Ellis points out, in *All The Pretty Horses*, a great deal 'more' may be made of the fact that the bullet hole in Rawlins' wallet was made by young Blevins. Rawlins tells John Grady that they should get rid of Blevins: 'I got a uneasy feeling about that little son of a bitch' (43). Later, he correctly blames their incarceration on John's involvement with Alejandra, although there is a strong sense that for him it is neither the horses nor the girl, but John Grady, that has kept him from returning home. Similarly, in *Cities*, although Billy helps to 'buy' Magdalena, he tries to dissuade John Grady from his endeavour, appearing finally to agree with Eduardo's loathing and incredulity that John Grady would be willing to die 'for a whore' (253). This is a further instance of the 'blurring' of these characters, as Billy speaks to Eduardo not only on John's behalf, but also 'as' John, allowing the pimp to believe that it is Billy who wishes to marry Magdalena. Finally, Billy's accusation about 'goddamned fucking whores' echoes Tiburcio's articulation of his jealousy of Magdalena: 'You are nothing.'

Many critics have noted the significance of the climactic shoot-out to the Western. Roger Horrocks, for example, suggests that not only does the shoot-out provide the climax for the film in narrative terms, but that it also implies a 'homoerotic fascination between the two men', particularly in the films of Peckinpah and Leone where the use of montage, slow motion and stirring soundtrack, suggests 'a panegyric to male orgasm' (78). Furthermore, he proposes that death is 'connected with male love' in the western: 'They do not exchange tender embraces, they do not exchange orgasms, in fact they do not refer to love at all. In the western the only thing that one man can give another – apart from water, tobacco, a horse maybe – is death' (80). He suggests that the 'strange intimacy' which death brings about in the western means that 'the individual man who seeks death or dispenses death becomes mythic [...] He is Death', and asks:

But why are these strange myths needed by men and not women? There is something quite disturbing and sinister about this. It suggests that men yearn for death. And they yearn for it in each others' arms, finally babbling of their forbidden love for each other. (81)

Therefore, Horrocks contends that 'ultimately western masculinity is suicidal' (77). Stephen Neale, in response to Laura Mulvey's seminal writing on the 'male gaze', has suggested that the Western's male bonding is evidence of a homoerotic subtext and that at the point of the shoot-out, it is implied that the hero and villain 'come' together. Jane Tompkins contends that 'the apocalyptic moment of the shoot-out' is 'the sacrament the Western substitutes for marriage' (35).¹⁰² The fact that hero and villain are often coded as doubles of one another imbues the dynamics of their relationship with the suggestion of a fragmented self-image, something which Neale emphasised in his reading of the processes of narcissism and narcissistic identification which take place in the Western and 'involve phantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery and control' (23).¹⁰³ Neale proposes that the absence of and reticence with language so pronounced in the genre, can be 'linked to narcissism and the construction of an ideal ego', a process which itself involves 'profound contradictions':

While the ideal ego may be a 'model' with which the subject identifies and to which it aspires, it may also be a source of further images and feelings of castration, inasmuch as that ideal is something to which the subject is never adequate. (23)

Following on from Mulvey's discussion about the narcissistic function represented by John Wayne in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Neale proposes that there are several 'nostalgic westerns' which engage in the 'theme of lost or doomed male narcissism', including Peckinpah's *Guns in The Afternoon*, *The Wild Bunch* and *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid*:

These films are shot through with nostalgia, with an obsession with images and definitions of masculinity and masculine codes of behaviour, and with images of male narcissism and the threats posed to it by women, society and the Law. (25)

Neale also suggests that 'the threat of castration is figured in the wounds and injuries' suffered by the men and that Peckinpah's 'famous slow-motion violence, bodies

¹⁰²Jane Tompkins, *West Of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: OUP, 1992) Tompkins proposes that the 'deauthorization of women' occurred as a result of 'the violence of women toward men, in whatever suppression of male desire and devaluation of male experience followed from women's occupying the moral high ground of American culture for most of the previous century.' (42)

¹⁰³ Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle' *Screen XXIV*, 6 (Winter 1983) Reprod. In *Introduction to Film Studies*, Centre for Research into Film Faculty of Arts, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, pp22-27.

splintered and torn apart, can be viewed at one level at least as the image of narcissism in its moment of disintegration and destruction' (25). Similarly, McCarthy's depiction of the bloody violence of homosocial communities in *Blood Meridian*, becomes in the *Border Trilogy* an exploration of the threat of emasculation through male rape (hinted at in *Blood Meridian*), the psychosexual motif of the hunt, and the highly eroticised knife fights. All of this, because of either the absence or presence of the female, so that, once again, the females are either guilty of being victims (even of the Revolution, as this attributes the blame ultimately to America's intervention in Mexico) or responsible for the obvious but disavowed homoeroticism of the knife fights. John Grady's first fight is, after all, a direct result of his fatal attraction to Alejandra. There are several Mexican females who have an important narrative function in foregrounding the history and consequences of Mexico's revolution and the processes of colonisation. As has been discussed in Chapter 1, McCarthy does probe the forces behind American exceptionalism and the ideology of Manifest Destiny. The Mexican captain in *All The Pretty Horses* who is represented as corrupt and 'stereotypically queer', is counterbalanced by the captain at the end of *Cities*, who tells Billy that eleven males members of his family had been killed in defense of the republic: 'They are my Mexico and I pray to them and I answer to them and to them alone [...] I do not answer to pimps' (243).

José Limón notes in his conclusion that *All The Pretty Horses* 'is in a different moral and political place in McCarthy's work' and that the Mexicans in *The Crossing* appear to have passed and 'entered the world of the fallen' (206). It would certainly be interesting to see what Limón's reaction to the final part of the *Trilogy* was, particularly given the stereotyping of the 'fallen', not only the sexualised racial other in the form of the Mexican prostitute (and there is little to suggest potential ambivalence here) but also the 'stereotypically queer', corrupt and thoroughly degenerate Mexican pimp. The final novel opens in a brothel, although back at the ranch, the figure of the housekeeper Socorro suggests that John Grady has indeed found a replacement 'abuela-grandmother'.

Therefore, the early depiction of animal-as-female in *The Orchard Keeper* prefigures an animal symbolism throughout these novels, which associates the female with both the supernatural and death. The character of Rinthy Holme in McCarthy's second

novel encapsulates the figure of the mater *dolorosa* and simultaneously, in her ability to create life, she is also perceived as a figure of death. In *Child of God*, Lester Ballard ensures that both paternity and maternity are impossible, and an abject fear of the maternal is imaged in the cave/ grave, the 'birthing' scenes and the monstrous-feminine. In *Suttree*, the dangers of being an adolescent female capable of procreation are evident in Wanda Reese's violent and early death, while the association of the whore/ mother in the prostitute Joyce and Suttree's mother, suggests a prevalent and dangerous (for the females, that is) conflation which filters into all of McCarthy's work. In addition, the relationship between economics and sexuality, which becomes more pronounced in the westerns, results in misery for both Suttree's mother and his prostitute girlfriend. In spite of a desire to escape from the mother (indicated as early as *The Orchard Keeper*, when John Wesley moves his bed outside), McCarthy's protagonists never successfully relinquish the threat of the maternal. The westerns include elements of all of these earlier representations, while also exploring the consequences of the most masculine, homosocial and imperialist of genres. The females are aligned with horses in the metaphorical trope of the animal-as-female, and also in the cats, bats and hawks which prowl and hunt through the narratives. Once again, McCarthy's westerns continue to provide a rich field for the mining of female stereotypes, and there is either a disturbing conflation of madonna/whore (Alejandra, Magdalena), actress/ prostitute (John Grady's mother, the diva in *The Crossing*), or ghastly old crones and embittered matriarchs (Alfonsita in *All The Pretty Horses*, the one-eyed criada in *Cities* who is the mother of Tiburcio, the 'incubus of uncertain proclivity', 183). Even the 'Anglo Susies' (Billy's sister and Mac's niece) only remain sanctified by death, so that John Grady's response to Billy's question at the end of *Cities of the Plain* (217) about whether he ever writes to his mother, unwittingly speaks volumes: 'What's my mother got to do with anything?'

Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis, it was suggested that the preceding three chapters could most usefully be considered as they interrelate. It was emphasised that McCarthy depicts a crossing and re-crossing of both literal and metaphorical borders, which results in a strong sense of liminality. Therefore, the discussion of geopolitical and psychological borders in the first chapter, is followed by an examination of the boundary 'both shadowy and vague' which separates life from death in McCarthy's fiction. The heretic's gnomic utterance in *The Crossing* that 'all tales are one', is particularly true of the story of the females in McCarthy's novels (143). The final chapter interrogates the representation of the female as she is confined within patriarchal notions of her role, stereotyped as the *mater dolorosa* who resides within her domestic environs, or the old crone/ whore who threatens the dissolution of those seemingly unassailable parameters.

In the first chapter, the depiction of landscape, society and the individual in McCarthy's earliest novel was found to echo elements of Southern agrarian pastoralism which laments increased capitalism and industrialisation, while questioning the efficacy of the democratic idealism which adheres to Emersonian transcendentalism. The depiction of communities in his Southern novels is seen to increasingly question the notion of nationalism as it is outlined in Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities', as the sense of 'deep horizontal comradeship' is born out of adversity. Therefore, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God* and *Suttree* emphasise the disempowered communities of the South, reflecting on a wider level, the argument proposed by those cultural theorists who disagree with Anderson's depiction of nationalism. The discrepancy between 'regionalism' (particularly of the South) and the political ideology which underpins the imperialism of his western novels (many of which are set in the same period), exemplifies the difference between 'regionalism' and 'nationalism'. The 'optical democracy' of the landscape in *Blood Meridian* describes the relationship between man and nature at the same time as it draws attention to the importance of 'vision' in McCarthy's narratives, as he highlights the politics which adhere to landscape through his depiction of the optical, in particular the interaction between illusion and reality, seeing and understanding. The

cartographic impulse has been found to change from one of overt imperialism fuelled by the ideology of Manifest Destiny in *Blood Meridian*, to a focus on the interior mapping of the 'landscapes of the mind' in the *Border Trilogy*, a change reflected in the move from the 'optical democracy' of the landscape, to the conflation of landscape, map and text in the later novels.

In addition, McCarthy's 'backward glance' was seen to contain both a nostalgic lyricism, in Arthur Ownby's 'bee-loud glade', and a fearful desire to escape the influence of the father, however impossible that is seen to be. In *The Gardener's Son*, Robert McEvoy repeatedly tells those he encounters that he is 'huntin' his father (the gardener of the title) and the 'backward glance' reveals that, as Papaw tells his grandson Ben in McCarthy's drama, *The Stonemason*: 'it take a pretty sorry daddy to be worse than no daddy at all' (27). In McCarthy's early novels, the fathers are all 'pretty sorry', so that the protagonists' deracination is prompted by a desire to escape the influence of the father. Escape also provides the motivation for the later 'cowboy' protagonists. However, while the romantic and naïve notions which these 'vaqueros' have about Old Mexico are soon shattered, there is little evidence that they have a greater sense of place by the end of the trilogy, as both Billy Parham and John Grady Cole articulate lingering feelings of displacement in their admissions about not knowing 'what country is'.

It was noted that death is everywhere in McCarthy's novels. An old anchorite tells Billy in *The Crossing*, 'the task of the narrator is not an easy one', although there is a narrative voice in McCarthy's novels that appears to delight in the grotesque, the gothic and in death itself (TC, 155). Therefore, the corpse becomes the focus of attention for this narrator, who employs anamorphosis and a cinematographic proliferation of points of view, to examine the uncomfortable proximity between life and death and horror and humour. The incursion of the Gothic in McCarthy's fiction, a narrative tradition which has been seen to trouble boundaries in its depiction of the abjection of the 'other' in the form of the monster, has been considered as it relates to all of McCarthy's novels. After all, *The Orchard Keeper* is not the only novel to begin and end in a graveyard. *All The Pretty Horses* describes the corpse and funeral of John Grady's grandfather in the opening pages and ends with him standing at the graveside of his 'abuela-grandmother'. The use of several narrative voices, including third

person narration and frequent interpolated stories, means that not only is the perspective of McCarthy's protagonists repeatedly obfuscated, the position of the reader in relation to both the characters and their position in the narrative, is always changing. However, it was also noted that the authority figure of the father/ Father is always present in McCarthy's narratives, and is found in a particular narrative voice which verges on a misanthropy that repeatedly undermines the inherent romanticism of the lyrical descriptions of landscape. At such times, the relationship between author and reader threatens to become closer to the 'embrace of lazarous depravity' (the description of a corpse in *Outer Dark*, 88) than the 'fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader' described by William Carlos Williams.¹

Of course, the 'fraternal' also implies a male readership and the potentially problematic identification between the female reader of McCarthy and the representation of the female in his misogynist narratives has also been seen to be discomfoting. The power and appeal of McCarthy's novels, the movement between opaque and transparent language and the abundant use of metaphor means that his novels work on several different levels. It is as impossible to ignore the representation of the female in his work, as it is to disregard the depiction of the 'politics of landscape' or the numerous corpses. Therefore, the association of the female with the supernatural and death has been considered, together with the stereotypical images of the *mater dolorosa* and the prostitute. It has been noted that the play on absence and presence and the use of the metaphor animal-as-female has allowed McCarthy's novels to veil the representation of the female as the 'other' through a series of disavowals. However, an abject fear of the maternal can be seen in the numerous depictions of the monstrous-feminine, the 'vagina dentata' and the conflation of birth and death which displays a horror of both maternity and paternity. It was noted that McCarthy had written the screenplay for *Cities of the Plain* before completing the trilogy. Therefore, while there are some changes to the final novel, in effect, *The Crossing* is McCarthy's most recent work. Towards the end of this novel, Billy comes across a man who tells him that Boyd's 'novia' (the unnamed Mexican girl who runs away with Boyd) is dead. The rumours surrounding this 'bandida' recounted to Billy earlier, exemplify the limited and stereotyped representations available to the female

¹ William Carlos Williams, *A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. J. Hillis-Miller (1966).

in McCarthy's narratives: 'some believed that the girl made gifts of silver and jewels to the poor and others believed that she was a witch or demon. It was also possible that the girl was dead' (373). The traveller tells Billy that he can read men's thoughts and that he knows that 'their thoughts were one and the same':

Then he said he harbored no grudge toward any man over a woman for they were only property afoot to be confiscated and that it was no more than a game and not be taken seriously by real men. He said that he had not very high opinion of men who killed over whores. In any case, he said, the bitch was dead, the world rolled on. (380)

In the final pages, Billy comes across a 'very beautiful' young girl singing a *corrido*, and an 'old woman of Mexico' with 'crone's hands': 'her sons long dead in that blood and violence which her prayers and her prostrations seemed powerless to appease' (381, 390). He also meets a rider who tells him that he has been 'sidetracked by them señoritas [...] I like it when they don't speak no english', to whom he relates his own family history, finishing with a lament for his dead sister, Margaret (417- 419). Therefore, in only a few pages, the full complement of female stereotypes is represented, from the old 'crone' to the white 'sister' whose grave Billy has been unable to locate, all of whom are associated with death. Indeed, Billy does echo the traveller's thoughts at the end of *Cities of The Plain*, when he denounces the 'Goddamn whore' who has been responsible for the death of his 'buddy' (261). While McCarthy's male protagonists cast a 'backward glance' towards their 'pretty sorry' fathers, their real sense of dread is reserved for the mother, 'the bitch' who has a habit of returning from the dead to haunt them. This fear is articulated by Cornelius Suttree, McCarthy's protagonist most haunted by the revenge of the *mater dolorosa*: 'How surely are the dead beyond death. Death is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of a bitter memory' (*Suttree*, 153).

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