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Inherent Brutality of Man and the Conquering of  
People and Land in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood  
Meridian*

Bachelor's thesis in Engelsk Bachelor

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Language and Literature





## Abstract

Is war and violence a never-ending part of being human? The late Cormac McCarthy ponders this question in his book *Blood Meridian* with explicit depictions of violence and war in the American West in the 1800s. At first glance, many readers find the violence and setting repulsive if not exaggerated, and refuse to read any further. But McCarthy based the book on historical accounts as well as real-life people. It is not exaggerated it is the reality. The reality of the story of how America was built on a heap of dead Native Americans, is thanks to among others the main characters of *Blood Meridian*. The story follows a gang of different people who all share the same joy for causing trouble. The "causing trouble" in question is brutally murdering everyone in their path, as well as selling native American scalps for money. The gang mirrors the colonizing mindset that once inhabited America and how men used violence to dehumanize and take whatever and whomever they pleased for financial and personal gain. McCarthy questions if this is a core part of what being human means, or if there is hope on the horizon.

## Sammendrag

Er krig og vold en evig del av det å være menneske? Cormac McCarthy tar for seg dette spørsmålet i sin bok *Blodmeridianen* gjennom eksplisitte skildringer av vold og krig i det amerikanske vesten på 1800-tallet. Ved første øyekast finner mange lesere volden og landskapet frastøtende, om ikke overdrevet, og nekter å lese videre. Virkeligheten er at Amerika ble bygget på en haug av døde ur amerikanere, noe som blant annet skyldes hovedpersonene i *Blodmeridianen*. Historien følger en gjeng av mordere som alle deler den samme gleden av å forårsake trøbbel. "Å forårsake trøbbel" i dette tilfellet betyr å brutalt myrde alle som kommer i deres vei, samt å selge ur amerikanske hodebunner for penger. Gjengen speiler den koloniserende tankegangen som en gang preget Amerika og hvordan menn brukte vold for å dehumanisere og ta det og dem de ønsket for økonomiske og personlige grunner. McCarthy stiller spørsmål ved om dette virkelig er en uunngåelig del av hva det betyr å være menneske, eller om det finnes håp om endring i horisonten.

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Hanna Musiol: My supervisor and Professor of Modern & Contemporary Literature in English

NTNU (Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet)

My mother and my father who gave me the book that this thesis is about, and helped me with insightful input

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*Blood Meridian* or *The Evening Redness in the West* first published in 1985 and written by Cormac McCarthy is a violent and harsh book that takes the reader on a trip throughout the unforgiving American West in the years 1849 and 1850. *Blood Meridian* emerged in later years as McCarthy's masterpiece, but this was not the case when it first came out. The book got mixed reactions at first as many struggled to get through it because of the violence, one New York Times reviewer wrote: "(...) while Cormac McCarthy's fifth novel is hard to get through, it is harder to ignore" (James). McCarthy's writing style does not help, as he rarely uses punctuation and loves to have long descriptions. McCarthy himself said in an interview with Oprah that "(..) there is no reason to block the page with weird little marks if you write properly, you shouldn't have to punctuate (..)" (McCarthy). This factor as well as the descriptive violence are both reasons why people struggled to get through the book, but McCarthy undoubtedly used these as literary tools to get his point across to the reader. Cormac McCarthy has no shortage of violence in his books, but *Blood Meridian* takes it one step. America has a brutal history of conquering people and land, and McCarthy uses the characters and their actions to emphasize this throughout the novel. This project is important in addressing the limit of brutality, violence, and what extreme things humans are capable of. It is highly relevant in 2024 even though it often feels distant that humans can be so violent against other humans, but there is in fact no limit to what horrible things humans can do to each other when they have a colonizing mindset. The conquering of people and land is as relevant in 2024 as ever, as, for example, thousands of people are dying because of land disputes in the Middle East every day. *Blood Meridian* has descriptions of massacred babies and children, which seems farfetched for people in safe countries like ours. But what seems far-fetched for some is the reality of many others. This thesis is going to explore why it is important to understand the brutality that man can do when the fire of war and conquest burns in their heart. This thesis will consider how Cormac McCarthy

communicates themes of the inherent brutality of man and the conquering of people and land in *Blood Meridian* through his use of characters, descriptive violence, and setting.

*Blood Meridian* takes the reader through the dead and lawless landscape of the American west. The main character has no name and is referred to as The Kid, this is because he is very much just that, a kid. The kid escapes from home at fourteen and it is said that he has “a taste for mindless violence (McCarthy, BM 3)” ever since he killed his mom on his way out of the womb. The kid, with no true purpose or goal, travels America on his misused mule while getting in drunk fistfights, sleeping on the road, and having as little respect for his own life as he has for others. After a while of roaming around the kid joins an army that is marching towards Mexico. The entire army aside from a few survivors gets brutally murdered by Indians on their way through the desert and even though the kid survives, he gets captured by Mexicans as soon as he makes it to the nearest town. While the kid is captured, the notorious Glanton gang rides through town looking for recruits. Toadvine, a previous acquaintance of the kid, is stuck in the same situation as he manages to strike a deal that lets them join the gang. The Glanton gang is in a risky business and is constantly losing members, they are continually looking for nobodies to join their cause. The gang has a contract with the governor in which they are paid for every Native American scalp that they bring back to him. This is a perfect opportunity for someone like the kid who has no purpose. The kid then travels the American West with the Glanton gang, killing and scalping Native Americans and traveling from town to town and collecting the payment. The Glanton gang is a bouquet of lowlifes and murderers, people of all races and backgrounds. The gang is mostly white Americans but also consists of some Delawares, some Mexicans, and a black man. John Joel Glanton is the leader of the gang and is described as a small dark-haired man. He left his wife and kid for a life of misery and torment. His life on the road is the only place he found pleasure in. The most notable member of the gang is a man named

Judge Holden, often referred to as The Judge. The Judge is a huge man, towering over everyone at a staggering 7 ft (2.13m) tall. He is described as a giant baby with small hands and feet, completely hairless and incredibly pale. Everyone in the gang claims to have seen the judge at a prior point to him joining the gang, and everywhere they go with the judge, small children go missing. Most of the novel consists of them getting into a town to collect the payment of the scalps and then destroying the town while using up all their money on booze and women. After they've used up all their money, they head out to collect more scalps. The violence is always described in intricate detail, as well as the unsettling things they see on the road, other things seem less important. The violence is interspersed with long, lyrical passages describing the landscape they are moving through. One of the most interesting parts of the novel is the dynamic between the kid and the judge. Their philosophies seem to always collide, and the kid's brutal mentality seems like a cakewalk compared to the judge's. After a while, the gang gets a little too comfortable and starts massacring Mexican civilians for their scalps, because no one can see the difference. They eventually get caught doing it and get wanted by the Mexican government, which leads to them being unable to sell Indian scalps. With no true purpose, the gang then finds a riverboat which they decide to overthrow and use to rob people who come to cross. They once again get too comfortable and start building a fort around the riverboat, keeping Mexican and Indian migrants as slaves. This is eventually revealed to be where the Glanton gang meets their demise as they are attacked by the Yuma tribe. The Riverboat becomes a slaughterhouse as the entirety of the Glanton Gang is massacred. The kid, an ex-priest named Tobin, a few others, and the monster of a man named the judge are the only ones from the gang to survive. The judge hunts Tobin and the kid for a while but eventually loses their tracks. A few years later, the kid becomes the Man and seeks out the Judge in a bar.

# I

Michael Crewes writes in his text *Cormac McCarthy is no Nihilist* that “McCarthy’s depictions of darkness are never devoid of light, however tragic or precarious its place in the narratives” (Crewes). However small it might be, the kid represents that light in *Blood Meridian*. The Kid is the main character in *Blood Meridian*; however, we learn surprisingly little about him as a character. The story is seen through his eyes, but how he feels about certain situations or characters is rarely stated. Isaiah Mark Nichols talks about the story as well as his interpretation of *Blood Meridian* in his video essay (Nichols). Nichols suggests that one of the reasons why *Blood Meridian* is viewed as an “unfilmable” book is not because of the extreme violence, but rather because of the kid's morality. The kid is no good guy as he kills and beats up people just because he has no better to do, but still shows acts of mercy and compassion on several occasions. Through the descriptive scenes of the gang scalping indigenous people and Mexicans the same, the kid is never explicitly mentioned to take part in it. There are long segments in the story where the kid is never mentioned or is described in actively participating in the gang’s actions. This leads to the interpretation that the kid's morality could be subjective to the reader as Nichols points out (Nichols). It is up to the reader's imagination if the kid participates in the scalping and slaughtering of humans or if he holds a moral high ground in the gang. It could be argued for the latter based on the numerous scenes where he shows compassion. The kid has some morally good actions throughout the book but often these get instantly shut down, for example when he tries to help McGill after he has been pierced by a lance: after the brutal slaughter of the town of Gileños, a Mexican man who is part of the gang named McGill is found pierced by a lance through the stomach but is still alive. This moment is sort of a relief for the reader in the grand scheme of the brutality that has endured up to this point.

*The kid waded out of the water and approached him and the Mexican sat down carefully in the sand. Get away from him, said Glanton. McGill turned to look at Glanton and as he did so Glanton leveled his pistol and shot him right through the head. (p,157)*

It is not implied what the kid was going to do with McGill but as stated earlier with his subjective morality and his other “good” acts, one could interpret this as him going over to help him or comfort him. However, Glanton instantly stops the kid and shoots McGill, without even going off his horse. The gang also scalps McGill to sell it because he is Mexican, which emphasizes the dehumanization of the gang as well as their selfishness. This moment humanizes the kid in contrast to the rest of the gang: This small act that should just be seen as basic human kindness stands out as a pivotal moment. Which underlines just how far gone the world of the American West is at this point. The kid's “good” act raises the question of how McCarthy wants us to understand morality, whether morality is inherent, a social construct, and whether morality persists even in the harshest environments. Another similar scene is when the kid is randomly chosen to stay back and kill the wounded while the gang is being chased by the army. One of the wounded men is a man named Shelby, Shelby shattered his hip and can't ride. The kid decides to not kill Shelby and gives him his water before trying to catch up with the gang. On his way, he meets Tate, another member of the gang, whose horse is injured. The kid offers to share his horse so they both can catch up, and Tate answers with “You might just keep ridin’”. Tate is asking why the kid wants to help because it is not common in their world. The Kid continues to do decent actions throughout these chapters and even though they are small, they are significant. As the kid tries to catch up with the gang, he and Tate get split up after an ambush. As it begins to snow the kid makes his way through the cold with just his revolver and shabby clothes. Out of nowhere, the kid sees a burning tree:

*It was a lone burning tree on the desert. A heraldic tree that the passing storm had left afire. The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had travelled far to be here and he knelt in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day,*

*small owls that crouched silently and stood from foot to foot and tarantulas and solpugas and vinegarroons and the vicious mygale spiders and beaded lizards with mouths black as chewdogs, deadly to man, (...)(McCarthy, BM 215)*

The tree is strikingly like the burning bush that Moses speaks with God through in the Book of Exodus 3:1-17 (Uris, L. 1997). Here God tells Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, but the kid meets no god and instead silently falls asleep next to the hot flames. This passage could be a reference to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche as the parallel with his famous saying that “god is dead” (Nietzsche). Nichols suggests that the burning tree can be seen as a moment of pause for the kid, a moment of reflection, and an opportunity to confront the path he has taken (Nichols). He can return to the gang, or choose his path and stop being influenced by the world around him. The kid could represent the little amount of innocence humanity has left in this world; he is after all just 14 years old. It is said that he has a taste for mindless violence, but he is only a product of the world he lives in, and he tries to do good even though it is in small portions. The kid decides that he wants to go back to the gang, and because of that, his fate is sealed.

The Judge is introduced in one of the first pages of the book when a reverend points to him and says “This is him. The devil. Here he stands” (McCarthy, BM 7). He says this because the judge convinces a crowd of people that the reverend is a child predator, which makes them shoot him. The judge later reveals that he made it up on the spot. He figuratively and literary stands out from the rest of the characters and is as repulsive as he is intriguing. The Judge or Judge Holden is presented in many ways as an immortal and all-knowing being but is based on a real-life person that was described in *My Confessions* by Samuel Chamberlain: *The second in command, now left in charge of the camp, was a man of gigantic size called “Judge” Holden of Texas. Who or what he was no one knew but a cooler blooded villain never went unhung* (Chamberlain, 1956, 271). The Kid is loosely based on Samuel Chamberlain himself, and Chamberlain had a restrained relationship with Holden as mentioned in *My Confessions: I hated him at first sight, and he knew it, yet nothing could be more gentle and kind than his deportment towards me; he*

would often seek conversation with me and speak of Massachusetts and to my astonishment I found he knew more about Boston than I did (Chamberlain, 1956, 272). This relationship could also help explain the relationship between The Kid and The Judge in *Blood Meridian*. The Judge is highlighted throughout the novel because of his philosophy on violence and war. He sees violence as something natural and necessary, and his mindset is shown in the following scene when the gang discusses war around the campfire:

*It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way.*

The judge sees war as an inevitable part of human existence and compares it to stone, stone will always be there and so will war. He suggests that violence and war are not just things humans invented but an inherent part of humanity that we never will escape and that will always endure. The Judge talks about how violence has existed for a long time and waited for its ultimate practitioner which turned out to be humans. He also implies how he is the physical embodiment of war and violence, as he mentions the ultimate practitioner, and it becomes apparent through the novel that he could very well be just that. He travels around with journals to document everything they encounter on their path, whether it is languages, species of animals, or plants. The Judge heavily symbolizes humanities desire to know everything about everything and famously says:

*Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent (McCarthy, BM 198).*

The Judge sees it as an insult that things exist without him knowing and is almost in a desperate quest to know everything. He also says that every bird they encounter that is not in a cage is an insult to him free without his consent. Everything should be captured and be under his control or die, this is a striking mirroring of humans' desire to conquer and control everything they encounter and their inability to stop before they have destroyed everything in their path.

His desire to control and conquer people is shown through his relationship with the kid and also through his relationship with 'the Idiot'. The man referred to as the idiot is a mentally ill and deranged individual whom the gang meets in one of the villages. The idiot's brother sells him to The Judge and after that, they develop a strange bond. The idiot is almost like an animal, he is mentally handicapped, walks on all fours, and is for the most part naked. What the idiot symbolizes is the subject of many online discussions as it is one of the weirdest additions to the book. One user writes on Reddit in a thread about the meaning of the idiot: *"I always took it as the Fool is the ultimate ideal of what the Judge is trying to perform on the men. (...) After that he is basically his dog, unquestioning (not that he was really questioning before obviously) and wholly nakedly subservient and completely given himself over to the Judge."* The Reddit user references a scene where the Judge runs out in the water to save the idiot who is drowning (McCarthy, BM 258). The Judge seems to care about the idiot, and he keeps him at a leash. It is heavily implied that the idiot is the judge's sex slave, as they are seen naked in a room along with an underage girl. As the Reddit user writes, the judge cares about the idiot because he fits perfectly along with his philosophies, as the judge wants humanity to be "an animal on a leash" that is entirely under his control. The idiot can be viewed as a symbol of primal innocence without the influence of societal contexts. His obsession with the idiot is mirrored by his fascination with innocence and purity and how you can control it. The same obsession is also shown through his relationship with children as it is hinted throughout the novel that the judge is a child predator. McCarthy uses The Judge as a symbol of man's ability for violence and will to conquer other people but also humanity's destructive power against innocence and purity, how the 'pure' is always under threat, and that it can be exploited.



## II

Violence is a big part of *Blood Meridian*, and the main characters in the novel make unspeakable acts to almost everyone in their path. The descriptive violence is consistent throughout the entirety of the book and starts as early as the second page when the kid gets shot in the back of a riverboat. As he turns, he gets shot again right beneath the heart (McCarthy, BM 4). After that, the violence is included in every section of the book, and skyrockets after the kid joins the Glanton gang. *Blood Meridian* takes place in the no man's land between Mexico and America in the years 1849 and 1850. This is based on the historical Mexican-American war where there were numerous conflicts, battles, and raids between the Mexican army, the American army, indigenous Americans, bandits and scalp hunters. Delay explains how the Indians severely weakened the Mexican government: "Indian men raided Mexican ranches, haciendas, killing or capturing the people they found there, and stealing or destroying animals and other property. When able, Mexicans responded by attacking with comparable cruelty and avarice. Raids expanded, breeding reprisals and deepening enmities, until the searing violence touched all or parts of nine states" (Delay). Natives were a big problem for the Mexican government, and this weakened them in the ongoing war with America. This led to the government offering money for every native scalp brought to them. The Glanton gang is based on a real gang named the same that was hired scalp hunters by the Mexican government. *My Confessions* is a memoir where Chamberlain writes and draws about his experiences in the Mexican-American war and later his time with the notorious Glanton Gang. McCarthy's version of John Joel Glanton and Judge Holden are directly inspired by the descriptions Chamberlain gives in his memoir. This includes the gang's role in massacring native Americans for their scalps and trading them for profit. Chamberlain does however not portray the members of the gang as purely villainous, despite their deeds. In contrast to McCarthy, who portrays them as more greedy, emotionless, and criminal, this

could be because it is easier to convey his ideas about their heartless brutality. McCarthy takes inspiration from real-life narratives to deepen his exploration of the American West and the Glanton gang.

McCarthy's choice is to not simply create a fictional West in his novel but to take inspiration from the hard reality of real historical events. The depiction of the Glanton gang as heartless scalp-hunters is a direct reflection of the dehumanization and brutality that occurred.

McCarthy's writing style plays a big part in the characters' dehumanization, as Dana Phillips points out. Phillips bases her argument on the philosopher György Lukács, who writes about description compared to narration. Phillips argues that McCarthy's descriptive writing style is more impactful than a narrative writing style would be. Lukács criticizes the "descriptive novel," which he sees as a form that abandons the exploration of human values and the active human relationship with the world. *Blood Meridian* is more focused on portraying and describing the harsh, brutal realities of the world and the characters instead of offering a clear moral commentary on the same events. An example of the literary style is a scene after the gang finds out that the Mexican government doesn't see the difference between Mexican scalps and Indian scalps, and they start massacring small Mexican towns full of civilians:

*They entered the city haggard and filthy and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted. The scalps of the slain villagers were strung from the windows of the governor's house and the partisans were paid out of the all but exhausted coffers and the Sociedad was disbanded and the bounty rescinded. Within a week of their quitting the city there would be a price of eight thousand pesos posted for Glanton's head. (McCarthy, BM 185)*

This is the first time the Glanton gang faces repercussions for their brutality, and it is precisely shown where the Mexican government draws the line between and how they view Mexican and Indian lives. McCarthy uses this descriptive passage of them being "...haggard and filthy and reeking.." as a way to force the reader to create a visceral image and to acknowledge the extreme violence the characters have done to others. The gang being dirty and horrible smelling is a direct consequence of the horrible things they have done to others and the reader must face and come to terms with what they have done. In *Blood*

*Meridian* violence is not only seen as an act of aggression or necessity in war but also as something that can be bought, sold, and used for economic gain. Violence as something transactional is shown in this passage: “The scalps of the slain villagers were strung from the windows of the governor’s house and the partisans were paid out of the all but exhausted coffers (...)” The governor hangs the scalps of his fellow Mexicans in his windows as trophies before he knows they are from Mexicans. The indistinguishable value between Mexican and Indian scalps underlines the critique of historical policies and racial dehumanization. The irony of the Mexicans being unable to see the difference between the scalps before it is told to them could be McCarthy’s way of saying that race is a construct. And how they only use race to take advantage of people as well as gain profit from them. Douglass Rushkoff refers to philosopher John Locke in his book *The Survival of the Riches* (2022) in the context of the American West and Native Americans. He writes that “The Native American was to be understood as a part of that landscape (...) And therefore must be destroyed as a lion or tiger. (Rushkoff)” This explains the way Native Americans are viewed, not as humans but as a part of the landscape. This is a common trait in the conquest of people: dehumanizing them to the point of no return. Even though no one saw the difference between the scalps, a difference was deliberately made as an excuse to slaughter. Even though the village struggles immensely with poverty, they pay the mercenaries all the same, even if they must use their last money.

Violence against the Indians is seen as noble and more important to spend the money on than other necessities. And on the other hand, the attitude towards the gang shifts after they are caught massacring Mexicans. And what was once rewarded and often praised is now unjustifiable because it happens to the wrong race. This bizarre situation goes to show just how incredibly hypocritical the Mexicans are, and how backward and selfish the land is. While this scene is descriptive and short, it aligns with the socio-economic and political realities of the period. The theme of dehumanization is fundamental in the context of the American West, as it was used to excuse their actions. This passage shows how economic gain and violence are closely related to colonizing.

The ones doing the violence hold power over others. Rushkoff refers to historian Rian Eisler who calls this phenomenon the “dominator model”. She suggests that “Men with the power to destroy – the psychically strongest, most insensitive, most brutal – rise to the top, as everywhere the social structure becomes more hierarchic and authoritarian”. (Rushkoff) The Glanton gang practices this theory to the maximum as shown in the following scene. This passage also explores descriptive versus narrative storytelling and could be one of the most violent scenes in *Blood Meridian*. It takes place when the gang does what they know best, brutally murdering innocents for their scalps. The following scene is one of the first massacres the kid “participates” in.

*When Glanton and his chiefs swung back through the village people were running out under the horses' hooves and the horses were plunging and some of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those that knelt for mercy. There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in Spanish and were brained or shot one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives and a young woman ran up and embraced the bloodied forefeet of Glanton's warhorse. (McCarthy, BM 156)*

This scene is severely descriptive and the brutality of the Glanton gang is shown through the visceral specifics. The brutal descriptions such as: “(...) the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew (...)” go to show the chaotic and primal violence that is displayed throughout the novel. These descriptions and scenes evoke a reaction that simultaneously repels and intrigues the reader. McCarthy's lack of punctuation and long sentences add to the unflinching description of the heinous crimes against humans the Glanton gang performs. The men are walking between the huts with torches and dragging out victims, slaughtering everyone, even those begging for mercy, and smashing infants'

heads against rocks. According to Lukaics, literature should narrate and connect the individual experiences to larger social and historical contexts. McCarthy defies this way of thinking but still manages to have the same result. The descriptive way McCarthy writes serves as an efficient writing tool as he connects it to an almost physical experience of violence. There is no need to show what the characters think or feel because you can feel the brutality of humanity through the pages. One of the Delawares emerges with "...a naked infant dangling in each hand.." and then proceeds to smash them on rocks. This passage is strikingly like Psalm 137:9 which reads: "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks". This psalm was written after Babylon attacked Israel and can be viewed as the oppressed ill thoughts on the oppressors. Killing infants is essentially killing the bloodline, as that is what the gang is doing to the native Americans.

The gang undoubtedly lands in a dominant position after this massacre because of their insensitive nature and the unlimited amounts of violence they can do to other humans, drawing on Eisler's theory. The gang is mechanical in their ways and has no form of remorse. If they do have some type of remorse, it is never stated. The Native Americans are severely dehumanized and seen as merely objects up for taking and selling. The same could be said of the gang as they seem to have no humanity left in them, shown through the emotionless way they are slaughtering innocents. The villagers are helpless and merely bystanders, unable to do anything against the cruelty of the gang. The entire scene depicts a group of people being dominated by another group to the point of extinction, mirroring real-life historical colonization: those who are willing to be the most brutal will rise to the top. Colonization is exercised merely for the benefit of the colonizers and the gang utilizes the life of the indigenous primarily for financial gain. The power dynamics between the natives and the gang are obvious and there is a clear winner and loser from the start of the fight. McCarthy's choice of keeping this scene descriptive and not focusing on human feelings and thoughts, as Lukaics writes, is more significant, creating a distinct sense of historical accuracy/being present. Historical accounts are not known to describe people's emotions, as they are irrelevant to the grand scheme of history. McCarthy uses this to make a distinction between

realism and fiction, as this scene could be right out of a documentary. This scene shows how the strongest and most violent triumph over those that are weaker and more innocent.

In *Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy questions human morality and whether violence is an inevitable part of being human. *Blood Meridian* implies that violence is deeply embedded in human existence and will always be. Human morality in *Blood Meridian* is not two-sided, as there are no morally good people in the book. The morality of the humans in *Blood Meridian* is exclusively shaped by self-interest and survival instinct. At first glance, some would say that McCarthy offers a nihilistic view of the world and suggests that nothing matters. The characters have nearly no consequences for their brutality throughout the book and no matter what they do, it seems insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Nihilism is defined as “a belief that all political and religious organizations are bad, or a system of thought that says that there are no principles or beliefs that have any meaning or can be true” (Cambridge University, 2024) Nihilism suggests that nothing has meaning and aligns with many of the ongoing themes in *Blood Meridian*. Alan Pratt writes in his text about nihilism that “A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy.” (Pratt) This could be a direct description of every member of the Glanton gang, as they all lack purpose and goals and are on a never-ending crusade of destruction. In a world where everyone “believes in nothing” and has “no loyalties” relationships often become purely transactional, and everyone uses each other for personal gain. This is the case in the Glanton gang, as everyone is constantly suspicious of each other and there is always competition. They also waste no time in killing the wounded gang members instead of helping them. An example of the group's competitive nature is shown through “white Jackson” and “black Jackson”, two men in the Glanton gang both named John Jackson but of different races. Because they have the same name, Black Jackson cuts off white Jackson’s head while the whole gang sits around the campfire:

*(...) bearing the bowieknife in both hands like some instrument of ceremony(...)and with a single stroke swapt off his head(...) [blood rose from the] stump of his neck and arched hissing into the fire. The head rolled to the left and came to rest at the ex-priest's feet where it lay with eyes aghast.... The fire steamed*

*and blackened and a gray cloud of smoke rose(....)He was sat as before save headless(...)leaning toward the dark and smoking grotto in the flames where his life had gone. (McCarthy, BM 107)*

No gang member bats an eye when this happens because it's just another day for them, even though they might have known Jackson for years. Even though these scenes may appear nihilistic, arguments could be made against *Blood Meridian* being a nihilistic book. One of these arguments is the small amount of hope shown throughout the book. This small amount of hope is easily overlooked, but no doubt apparent.

Michael Crewes writes that "McCarthy's novels face that evil in an unflinching fashion, which is why he is so often mischaracterized as nihilistic" (Crewes). While the picture McCarthy writes of the American West is brutal and the severe absence of morality might appear nihilistic, they are McCarthy's way of confronting the harsh realities of human nature and historical violence without sugarcoating it. It is also important to remember that there is a line between nihilism and realism, as McCarthy draws heavily on realistic elements. McCarthy confronts the reader with the brutal realities of human history, and if it comes off as a nihilistic world for some readers, McCarthy has done a good job of getting his themes across. Although *Blood Meridian* features seemingly nihilistic violence and amorality, suggesting a world where traditional moral judgments are absent. McCarthy's intent is not to endorse nihilism but to confront readers with American history. McCarthy critiques rather than excuses the moral injustices and brutality done by the characters in the book. Friedrich Nietzsche is one of the most famous frontrunners of Nihilism and wrote, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (Nietzsche). In the world of *Blood Meridian*, the term "god is dead" could be interpreted as traditional moralities other decencies have ceased to exist. But one of the reasons why *Blood Meridian* is not viewed as a nihilistic book is because it makes a distinction between what matters and not. Nihilism suggests that nothing matters but on the other hand, the judge suggests that war is the only thing that matters. *War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. Brown studied the judge. You're crazy Holden. Crazy at last. The judge smiled. (McCarthy, BM 249 – 250)*

### I I I

The judge's philosophy is only challenged by the kid. The kid and the judge have an interesting relationship throughout *Blood Meridian*. The judge seems to constantly try to convert people to his philosophy and the kid hesitates throughout the book. As Nichols states (Nichols), The Kid's morality could be subjective for the reader, but some dialogues suggest that the kid in fact has good intentions. One of these scenes is when the judge comes to visit the kid after he has been imprisoned:

*You come forward, he said, to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise.* (McCarthy, BM 307)

The Judge is implying that it is the kid's fault that the gang is eventually murdered because he didn't fully embrace the mindset and philosophy that he should have. The Judge is referring to the kid's acts of mercy towards the other gang members and his "absence" in the many slaughterings throughout the novel.

William Dean Clement argues that "*the reason the judge concentrates on the kid with such unflinching intensity is because the kid threatens the judge.*" Clement points out that the judge bows to no one and rarely interacts with them unless their interests align, and that is where the kid comes in. The kid refuses to accept the mindset that the judge thinks he should. Edwin T. Arnold reacts to the readings of Cormac McCarthy in his book *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, as well as *Blood Meridian*. Arnold also offers his perspective on the relationship between the judge and the kid and suggests that "Most opposed to the judge is Tobin" (Arnold). Arnold is referring to a scene after the gang has been massacred, the judge (with the idiot), the kid, Tobin the ex-priest, and Toadvine is all gathered around a well. The others suspect the



judge of being the one responsible for the Yuma attack, among other things. Tobin the ex-priest urges the kid to shoot the judge as the kid is the only one with a gun: *"You'll get no second chance lad. Do it. He is naked. He is unarmed. God's blood, do you think you'll best him any other way? Do it, lad. Do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit. (P 285)"* Arnold argues that based on this scene Tobin is the only one who stands up to the judge, while the kid refuses. One could say that the kid refuses to succumb to the philosophies of the judge, he does not see violence as the answer to the problem at hand. In contrast, Tobin, a previous man of God, wants to shoot an unarmed man. This is what Clements means when he argues that the kid threatens the judge. The kid is a threat to the judge because he symbolizes a slight slimmer of hope and morality left in humanity as Crewes mentioned, "McCarthy's depictions of darkness are never devoid of light" (Crewes). That slight spark of morality and decency never catches aflame though, as the kid never manages to carry out his good morals. "The kid's namelessness, overall silence, and confounding nature makes it difficult for Holden to render him in the controlling mechanism of his ledger (Clement, p 43)". The judge wants to control everything, as he does through his journals, the idiot, and everyone else with his terrifying being. But as Clements points out; the kid is a wildcard, unreadable by the judge.

At the end of the novel, the kid becomes the man and travels around the American West without any true purpose. He carries around a bible, even though he can't read. Manuel Broncano points out that the bible is insignificant to him, and he carries it around as a token of hope of salvation (Broncano). Even though he is never granted it. This is further emphasized by a scene with a woman the kid tries to save on the road. He comes across a place with several murdered people lying across the ground and spots an old woman kneeling among the corpses (McCarthy, BM 315). He tells her that he can take her to a safe place, and the kid shows signs of kindness once again. However, this time he is too late: "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 (McCarthy, BM 315)" What starts as an intimate and heartfelt moment stands as a striking contrast to the brutal past of the novel. But the

interaction ends in heartbreak as the kid realizes that she has been dead for years. Reverend Barkley Thomson writes in his Christian blog about kindness that the woman symbolizes the kid's life "For the Kid, it is too late. The book of his life has been written. The Kid has been formed unwittingly into a certain kind of person, and here, near the end, his late and feeble attempt at kindness meets only a hollow shell, (...) (Thomson)" The kid desperately seeks redemption to some extent, but he does not know how to get it. McCarthy tries to convey the idea that kindness and humanity are too far gone and that the judge, violence, and war have succeeded. This is further emphasized by the end of the novel when the kid meets the judge for the last time. The kid probably realizes that he is too late for salvation and that there is no place for kindness in this world, which leads him to seek out the judge.

### I I I I

The landscape in *Blood Meridian* can be viewed as a separate character because of its importance in the story. Although you could argue that the setting is just a backdrop to the violence committed by the protagonists, it is also an active participant in it. The land in *Blood Meridian* lacks law and order, which the gang fully utilizes. The Glanton gang is in no way the only participant in this as they constantly come across heinous scenes in which they had no role. The land is caught in an everlasting war about whom it belongs to is a nightmare. No dreams have bushes like the kid sees that are "hung with dead babies (McCarthy, BM 57)" How humans view the landscape is established very early in the book as it is written "(...) 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 kind of clay (McCarthy, BM 4-5)". This speaks to the will in which humans want to conquer the land of the American frontier, no matter how "wild and barbarous" it may be. It has nothing to say how untamed the country is; it is in the very nature of the human species to dominate it. This mirrors the judge's philosophy where he

views everything that he doesn't know about to "(...) exist without my consent". The land is so brutal and unforgiving that it is implied that "in all the world's turning" will there ever be or have been such a violent and harsh environment. Jay Ellis writes about the country in *Blood Meridian* and suggests that the meaning of "meridian" in the title, refers to: "the line in history before which the problem of the human heart's will was tried in the fire of pure war (Jay Ellis. 2006)". What he means by this is that there exists a metaphorical line in history where the violence and conquering of man were without moral guidelines. Ellis further connects what the judge says to the kid towards the end of the novel "If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay (McCarthy, BM 307)" to the earlier passage about man's heart being made from clay. Mills writes: "Possibilities of the heart are indeed become molded like clay, fired in killing, and now cracked in guilt." Ellis suggests that the colonial and violent past of how the country was made is now tearing on humans' consciousness, which could be argued that is what McCarthy is trying to convey. The comparison of humans being like clay is highly relevant regards to this topic. The landscape described in *Blood Meridian* is in many ways a literal hell, burning and shaping the human clay to fit its own regime. A blazing fire shapes each and everyone into violent and heartless individuals. The Judge could be seen as a type of coal that keeps hell afire while spreading it around. While the landscape does its part against the humans, the humans also do their part against the landscape. David Milch, the creator of the western *Deadwood* talks in an interview about the expansion of the west and says: "It had to do with the very fundamental quality of their behavior, they were raping the land." (Milch) Humans' purpose wasn't to live in harmony with nature or to build something new, but taking everything for themselves, land, people and resources. Milch also decides to use the word "raping" which is a destructive and disrespectful way of doing something and is used in the context of exploiting someone. The land was, in every sense of the word, abused.

The urge that men must own and dominate is mirrored in the judge's saying, "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent". This mindset permeated the American West and made it transform from its lawless and violent past, to what it is now. Douglas Rushkoff quotes historian Riane

Eisler in *Survival of the Richest*: “The power to dominate and destroy through the sharp blade gradually supplants the view of power as the capacity to support and nurture life. (Rushkoff)” Power resides in the ones that use violence to dominate others. McCarthy shows that this was the reality in the American west, in contrast to a more life-nurturing power. McCarthy wants to show the difference between the inherent aspects of man, whether it is life-giving or life-taking - the question is who triumphs. The kid and the judge meet in a bar at the novel's end, and the judge says, “This night thy soul may be required of thee (McCarthy, BM 327)”. They converse about “dancing”, the judge loves to dance and encourages the kid to do so, he says “there is room on the stage for one beast and one alone. All others are destined for a night that is eternal and without name. “ (McCarthy, BM 321) Emphasizing the power of violence to dominate others, the judge is encouraging the kid to do the same and welcome his philosophy, encouraging the kid to “dance”. At the bar, there is a dancing bear, a wild but domesticized, animal dancing for the naked and drunk people. The bear could symbolize how civilized the West has become, the dance of civilization. The bear ends up getting shot by a bystander and all this is happening while the judge and the kid are talking. The kid hesitates at the idea of dancing and walks away. The “dance” is never spelled out with a specific meaning, but many have different theories: John Emil Sepich writes: “He stands both as judge of the dance that was the scalp hunters' war and as a personification of those universal energies, both super rational and mad folly, that are war itself. (Sepich 24)”. The dance is the everlasting brutality of man, the war and domination that has always endured and will always endure. The kid refuses to dance and goes to use the outhouse, waiting for him inside is the judge, naked and smiling. What happens with the kid is never mentioned, however a bystander says, “Good God almighty ” (McCarthy BM 334)” indicating that something awful has happened. The judge most likely kills the kid, consumes him, and takes his soul. The judge heads back to the bar and continues to dance in the last scene of the novel: “His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favourite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die (McCarthy, BM 335).” McCarthy suggests that violence and war triumph over humanity, or rather change the definition of humanity to something horrific. It is dancing continuously and forever, suggesting that this

reign of terror will never end. That violence is an inherent part of being human as well as the spirit of dominating land and people. It is stated that “he is a great favourite” and that “he is dancing”, but it is never stated that he will never die. The judge insists upon it himself, “*he says* he will never die”. It is himself who says it, in contrast to the other things about him in this passage that are stated as fact. Of course, the judge wants to believe that his ways will forever be true and the only way. He is the judge, he wants people to believe that he can’t die, but that does not make it the truth, circling back to Michal Crews who wrote “McCarthy’s depictions of darkness are never devoid of light, however tragic or precarious its place in the narratives”. Even after the one hope of innocence left in humanity is brutally murdered, McCarthy hides away a slight slimmer of hope in what seems like an endless nightmare.

*Blood Meridian* is about how violence is a tool in dominating land and people. Cormac McCarthy conveys these ideas through his descriptive violence, landscape, and characters. McCarthy tries to tell the reader that this is based on real-life events and characters, and it is not exaggerated. The landscape and land are so dead and empty one can only wonder why these people are fighting over it in the first place. It only brings pain and misery. McCarthy changes the definition of humanity to the degree that the kid's good actions seem so alien in the broader context of the books. In this world, violence is not punished but rather rewarded and those willing to do everything to dominate others get out on top. These ideas are what America is built upon. No life-nurturing beliefs will get you very far, as it will only hinder you in getting to the top. Most notable is the judge, who is in many ways the very embodiment of these beliefs. McCarthy conveys these ideas good and leaves the reader with a feeling of hopelessness. The kid, which is the small driving force that is opposing these beliefs eventually fails to prevail. And the driving, destructive, and inhumane force of humans wins. At least it says it wins, bullying itself in at the top. But the kid shows that there is something left that one could define as humanity, even if it's hidden away for away under the bloodred sun.

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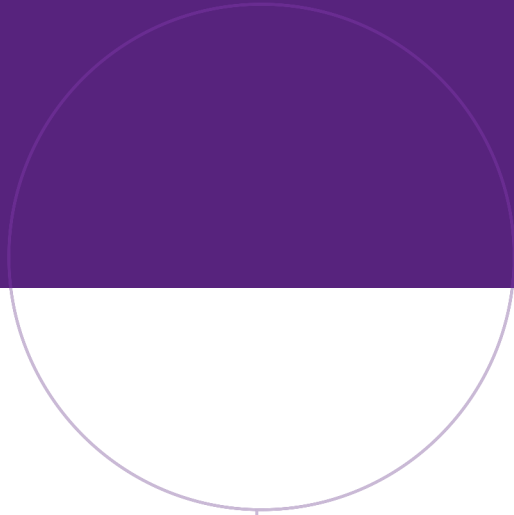
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