



## PORTRAYAL OF HISTORICAL VIOLENCE AND SELF IDENTITY IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BLOOD MERIDIAN

D.Dhurubathanan\* Dr.V.Malarkodi\*\*

\*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University.

\*\*Assistant Professor, Department of English, English Wing, DDE Annamalai University.

“There is no such thing as life Without Bloodshed” Cormac McCarthy

In 1976, Cormac McCarthy officially moved from Knoxville, Tennessee, to El Paso, Texas, to work on his fifth novel, an apocalyptic Western set in Texas and Mexico during the 1840s and based on actual historical events. McCarthy did an extensive amount of research for this novel. Nine years later, *Blood Meridian, Or The Evening Redness in the West* was published. Since its publication in 1985, critical response has been divided over the meaning and effect of *Blood Meridian's* extreme violence and its revisionist take on the myth of the Old West. Bearing a distinct similarity to *Moby Dick*, *Blood Meridian* follows a character called “the kid” who becomes a member of the Glanton gang, a violent community of outlaws that collected scalps along the Texas-Mexico border in the late 1840s. The driving force behind this band of scalp-hunters is Judge Holden, an enormous, hairless savant whose florid speeches are not unlike Captain Ahab's. Upon its publication, *Blood Meridian's* regular and often senseless violence against Hispanic and Indian groups alienated critics and horrified readers. Cormac McCarthy is one of America's most accomplished fiction writers in twentieth century. Presently eighty three years of age, he lives close Tesuque, New Mexico. He is also an American screenwriter, and his books grasp the Southern Gothic, Western, and post-apocalyptic catastrophic classes. Cormac McCarthy's life and career can be partitioned into three distinct periods East Tennessee, American Southwest and New Mexico.

*Blood Meridian*, declared by *Time Magazine* as one of the most important novels of the 20th century, is on its surface a revisionist Western. This novel portrayed the period after the Mexican-American War, when vigilante, mercenary gangs patrolled the Mexican/American border in pursuit of dangerous Apache Indians whose existence threatened the new civilization that was growing there. Even theorist Harold Bloom, one of its most devoted champions, admits its difficulty. However, today, the novel is considered McCarthy's defining work and, according to *Time Magazine*, one of the most important novels of the century. Bloom calls the book "the greatest single book since Faulkner's 'As I Lay Dying'". Others compare Judge Holden with Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*, which was supposedly one of McCarthy's great influences when writing *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy rarely grants interviews on his work, and has granted none on the topic of *Blood Meridian*, leaving much of the critical theory to be based on personal interpretations. It is widely accepted that the sections about the Glanton gang are based on the memoir of Samuel Chamberlain, who rode with the real John Joel Glanton from 1849 to 1850. Judge Holden appears in that account as well.

McCarthy's novel looks in backward, recognizing the depravity and blood-lust of American development. While the violence of *Blood Meridian* considers Manifest Destiny, the ideological justification of the latter falls short -in any event in the minds of its characters. The child, Toadvine, John Joel Glanton, and organization are outlaws. They occupy spaces outside the domain of society. They are portable, survivalists and men of the outskirts. They hold fast to exceptionally ambiguous, moral goals in this extremely nerve racking depiction of how the West was inevitably won at the cost of Indian expulsion in the Southwest soon after the Mexican-American War. In any case, their status as criminals stays indistinct in light of the fact that they are inspired into the ranks of soldiers, showing a will towards, and capacity for, violence that displays their convenience in the national battle of butcher and genocide. So, they are displaying an incomprehensible relationship between their resistance to, and ensuing conscription by, a society and greater authority structure they both reject and serve. This study focuses McCarthy's novel is a nervy proclamation on the American tendency towards violence, and a much all the more disturbing propensity of the contemporary person who experiences historical and cultural amnesia when it comes to addressing or confronting that violence, and *Blood Meridian's* historical message.

Critics and historians who examine Westerns frequently have depicted *Blood Meridian* as revisionist, and in some sense it may be. There is no evidence to propose, that McCarthy's politics and revisionist tries in this novel compare to the majority of the inhabitants of what generally is depicted as revisionist. *Blood Meridian* eventually delineates violence in terms that divests it of all justification and purpose. Conflict is systemic, and any kind of portrayal of violence just mirrors the ideology placed by the witness; through this expository and ontological model, savagery is a condition of being and not a regenerative stage in either the improvement of a country or a individual. The Western, being an already established form, provides a



template upon which McCarthy can transpose this specific conception of violence. As Phillips has argued, McCarthy's narrative takes its bearings from natural history and a geological timescale: "The present world as McCarthy describes it is an ancient world not of myth but of rock and stone and those life forms that can endure the daily cataclysms of heat and cold and hunger, that can weather the everyday round of random, chaotic violence" (452).

While the characters in *Blood Meridian* are cowboys and Indians, and there is a running critique upon Western and American history, the portrayal and exploration of brutality is the middle around which every single other themes and revisions resolve. Obviously, simply addressing violence does not separate *Blood Meridian* from a more typical Western. Fittingly, the criticism surrounding *Blood Meridian* additionally focuses upon the examination of violence. This paper explores portrayal of Violence, in his work, and about each full length work that comments upon McCarthy's Western fiction deals in some profundity with this aspects of his fiction.

In his full-length work on McCarthy, Robert L. Jarrett notes that in *Blood Meridian* McCarthy establishes his connection with the male tradition of novelistic violence both by choice of subject and style. In the novel, as Jarrett explains, "the dynamics of cultural exchange are primarily controlled not by language but by violence. . . in the discourse of violence, a primitive and finally uncontrollable dynamic exchange of violence causes individuals to lose their former cultural and social identity, forming a new communal ethos of violence" (87). Jarrett also notes that the most disturbing aspect of the style of *Blood Meridian* is the aesthetic elegance describing such a gruesome subject (88). Most readers of McCarthy's work acknowledge his talent as a novelist, and Harold Bloom even claims that *Blood Meridian* is ". . . clearly the major aesthetic achievement of any living American writer" (88). The difficulty, however, in interpreting McCarthy's work, especially *Blood Meridian*, comes in deciding whether or not these elegiac depictions of violence are justified in their purpose, or whether they are gratuitous.

These characters at the centre point of this novel, including the Kid, Judge Holden, and Glanton, seem to flourish in the midst of violence; engaging in the murderous plunder of violence those they consider the "other," both Mexicans and tribal Indians. Through their challenging travels westward amid the mid-nineteenth century, this periphery staying pack of men shows a natural violence that is calculated and raw, "McCarthy's portrayal of American brutality rips the lid of sentimental understandings of the past; page after page, as bodies pile up readers marvel at McCarthy' ability to imagine new means of describing human atrocity" (563). Completely, they are a band of scalp-hunters drove by Glanton, but the men beyond their contracts a long ways past their agreement to incorporate nearby political figureheads. They execute in defence and they kill the innocent. They strategize and act in a confused ensemble of attack and destruction. Such cruelty and by and large violence are sufficient to empower the reader to submit to a bogus perusing of the novel, disavowing the complex dynamic between the Kid and the Judge, and also slighting the clarification for such unstable demonstrations of violence. As discussed about in the preceding chapters, violence for characters, for example, those in the Glanton gang, is a unique communicative device. It is a way for living and talking without customary discourse, delivered similarly as the characters in the novel.

Every one of the member in the Glanton gang, including the Kid and the Judge, have a common thread of origin. They attempt a mission for scalp hunting as a start into an existence they would, pretty much, lead generally. Indeed, even before joining Glanton and his men, the Kid was a runaway voyaging alone on his mule, until participating in a bar fight that demonstrated him enough of an aggressor to join an ill-fitted pseudo-army under the leadership of Captain White. After the Comanche tribe slaughters White and a few of the other men, the Kid and one of his fellow prisoners, Toadvine, are imprisoned and released on the grounds they will demonstrate protective scalp-hunters for the state, "His name is Glanton, said Toadvine. He's got a contract with Tries. They're to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gómez's head. I told him there were three of us. Gentlemen's, we're getting out of this shithole" (79). In this way, the Kid's falling into Captain White's illegal detachment and, eventually, that of the Glanton gang is even more a survival tactic than anything. While a long way from ensuring his life and security through his participation in both groups, he discovers opportunities in them for both relationship among the men and different violent conquests.

Although Glanton does not play a major role in the central relationship between the Judge and the Kid, his role as leader of the 'Glanton gang' is integral to an understanding of the group's undertaking a scalp-hunting mission, and also the contribution and seriousness of the violence committed by the men. Regarding Glanton's gang being comprised of individual outcasts, Glanton acts as a scaffold between standard society and the outcasts. We know little about his character, however it is revealed he has left behind a wife and child in his Texas homeland, and that he is a former member of the United States Army.



From what McCarthy reveals about each of the men, Glanton may well be the one and only in the gang with descendants. Thus, his status is somewhat different from the others, who appear to lack a familial history, are orphaned, or have run away from home for fear of being arrested, captured, caught, and so on. Therefore, there are minutes in which Glanton's thoughts demonstrate intelligent of an existence lived completely:

“All about him his men were sleeping but much was changed...He would live to look upon the western sea and he was equal to whatever might follow for he was complete at every hour...He'd long foresworn all weighing of consequence and allowing as he did that men's destinies are given yet he usurped to contain within him all that he would ever be in the world and all that the world would be to him” (243)

Whether Glanton had, until the time he started shaping his group, abandoned the life he was leading, is unclear. What is known is that he left a family, a criminal past, and another life, behind. Glanton's mercilessness gives off an impression of being a result of a life in which a man always has to look out for himself. His relationship with, and leadership of, the gang has little to do with his inclination dependable to the other men; rather his experience in strategy and criminal activity. The men he is associated with act as his employees, and his disturbing demands and actions speak to his corrupt agency, “‘Hair, boys,’ he urges his men as they descend to killing helpless villagers” (97). His keeping to the contract and his recovery of the scalps of both the Indians and Mexicans demonstrates his consideration that his actions are a “job” of sorts. Certainly, Glanton runs rampant at several moments in the novel, with his “eyes in their dark sockets...burning centroids of murder,” when he encourages the killing, pillaging, and raping of various victims (218). Still, his intimidation to take control of the ship close Yuma displays his ruthless and vital personality frame as a businessman, “Glanton took charge of the operation of the ferry...He had enslaved a number of Sonorans and he kept crews of them working at the fortification of the hill” (262-263). Glanton's acting as pioneer of the gang managed him the duty of procuring assets all together for the gathering to proceed on, combined with his propensity to conquer any obstacles in his path.

After obtaining a comprehension of the part of the mainstays in the Glanton gang, and how they utilize violence as a means for business and dominancy, it gets to be clearer why the characters legitimize, in their own privilege, their need to participate in such acts of extreme brutality. There is absolutely prove that apparently negates the contention that McCarthy uses violence as an interpretive tool.

This contradiction is detailed by terminology describing the violence as ‘mindless’ and ‘endless,’ “In *Blood Meridian*, the representation of violence threatens to undermine the critical sensibilities of the novel” (Kollin 563). The acts of violence do take centre stage at various points in the novel, to the point where it is difficult to understand where the characters find motive in their acts:

“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” (156).

One can't read the preceding extract without flinching, and such a scene is unnecessary to gaining an understanding of the extreme marginality of the characters, however it serves to exhibit the courses in which the men challenge the limits of their contract to scalp-hunt. While the terms of their agreement are surely brutally and ruthless, the gang extends the terms of its consent to the furthest reaches of no return, to the limit of no return, killing innocent bystanders including women and children. In doing as such, they offer a study of the original contract, however strange and extreme it may have been in its unique frame. They decline to be bound by any limitations, ensuring their marginality through an attack on anyone they come across. They relish in extending their brutality to anybody and everybody and, in turn, become examples of an extreme form of individualism. They not just decline to hold fast to conventional social norms, also those standards and agreements set out for social outliers and vagabonds.

McCarthy ends the novel with the solitary survivors of the Glanton gang, the Kid now alluded to as the Man and the Judge, meeting each other in what is by all accounts similar setup of a bar and jakes we initially observe the Kid substantiate himself fit for his part as a recruit. What's significant about the scene is divided up into a heap of little moments, of which the Judge utilizes as a chance to challenge and scrutinize the Kid's commitment to war and the Glanton gang:

“Any man who could discover his own fate and elect therefore some opposite course could only come at last to that selfsame reckoning at the same appointed time, for each man's destiny is as



large as the world he inhabits and contains within it all opposites as well” (330).

The Judge's discourse is reminiscent of his visit to the Kid in prison, one in which he communicates his failure in the Kid's determinism to be not the same as him, intuitively frustrated at his inability to manipulate the Kid into a prodigy of the Judge's own self. The Judge insists the Kid, or Man, has it wrong, “As war becomes dishonoured and its nobility called into question those honourable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right” (331). The Judge denounces the Kid as a person who disrespects the sanctity of war, and perspectives him as once holding the possibility to proceed with the move of fight, to participate in a type of triumph and fighting in which everybody is a potential adversary. With the Kid's unwillingness to stick to the Judge's philosophy, “Even a dumb animal can dance,” the Judge feels he has no choice but to end the Kid's life, ridding the world of another man who refuses to adopt his attitude (331). He murdered the Kid in one final exercise of condemnation, only to continue on into the saloon to dance, “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” (325). In one way, the Judge demonstrates triumphant in his capacity to survive amidst extreme odds, retaining a heightened sense of individual conviction and philosophy, and controlling circumstances to work in his favour.

#### Works Cited

1. Phillips, Dana. “History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.” *American Literature* 68 (1996): 433–60. Print.
2. Powers, Donald. “Violent Histories: J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.” *Safundi* 14:1 (2013): 59-76. Print.
3. Kollin, Susan. “Genre and Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western.” *Contemporary Literature* 42.3 (2001): 557-588. Print.
4. Jarrett, Robert L. *Cormac McCarthy*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997. 87. Print.
5. McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian*. New York: Vintage, 1985. Print.