

WILDERNESS AND NETS OF CIVILIZATION IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BLOOD MERIDIAN

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Abstract: Cormac McCarthy's most acclaimed novel, Blood Meridian, tries to identify the limits of history and literature, the connection between them, and the role of myth in shaping a nation. Our paper presents a brief history of the major myths and concepts around which the American identity was forged: the myth of the Frontier, American Exceptionalism, and Manifest Destiny, and it analyzes the manner in which McCarthy makes use of traditional Western elements. On the one hand, we also focus on the characters of these novels, characters which are typical for a common Western, but which are present in this novel only to show the illusions of the American myths. They go against the tradition in which the new Adam has the right to claim the new land, to see himself superior in front of other races, and to believe that he is the hero of this new land.

Keywords: wilderness, civilization, American myths, Western

"It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it."
(Mark Twain)

How can one define the United States of America? What is representative for this civilization? What are its roots that define its identity?

From its very beginning, America has been seen as an exceptional country, where people can regain their lost paradise. Christopher Columbus is the first man who "describes the Americas in a language of wonder and awe, conjuring up biblical images of the Garden of Eden" (Heike Paul, 2014: 46). At the same time, in the same letter in which he describes the new land, he also uses a language of "profit and gain" for the new people that will inhabit this country.

The traditional myth constructed around America promises to the European who came here an earthly paradise, a wild space that needs to be conquered and tamed by the new Adam, representative for the new chosen people. Coming here, the chosen ones created a new nation, different from the European ancestry that they were leaving behind. According to Benjamin Franklin, in his *Autobiography*, to be an American means "a commitment to the ideal of freedom" (Deborah L. Madsen, 1998: Web), and in "Information to Those who Would Remove to America" (1784), he insists on "hard-work, industry, thrift, common sense, altruism, moral integrity and fair-mindedness – these are the qualities that will guarantee success in America." (qtd. in Deborah L. Madsen, 1998: Web)

The beginning, the evolution and the ideology of America gravitate around the Manifest Destiny, the American Frontier, and American Exceptionalism, concepts which are

used by McCarthy in his novels only to be debunked with the help of the historical sources that he uses. One of the most important book used by the writer is Samuel Chamerlain's *My Confession: Recollection of a Rogue* (1987) – Chamerlain was a member of the Glanton Gang and he recounts in his memoirs characters and events which are used by McCarthy in his reconstruction of that period.

1.1. The Myth of the Frontier and American Exceptionalism

*“So shall our nation, formed on Virtue's plan,
Remain the guardian of the Rights of Man,
A vast republic, famed through every clime,
Without a king, to see the end of time.”*

Philip Freneau's poem, 'On Mr Paine's Rights of Man' (1795)

America would not have been the same without the frontier myth. What does it mean and what was the role that it played in forging the American identity? In an annual meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Frederick Jackson Turner presented “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1894), a paper which put the basis of one of the most known and at the same time criticized myth from the history of the United States. The frontier means annexation, conquest of the Wild West, a *process* which molded the American mind, identity and destiny. According to Frederic Paxton, in *When the West is Gone* (1930), “there have been many Wests”¹, and as the American society evolved and extended itself, “there has been a different West at which Americans have gazed, and from which they have derived more than a fair share of all of their problems.” (1930:16)

The myth of the frontier emphasizes more the frontier as a process and less the image of the frontier seen as space. It is strongly connected with the Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism.

[...] the American West is often viewed not so much as a region or an area than as a space of transition that does not necessarily have a precise geographical location, but rather changes with Euro-American settlement expanding westward. (Heike Paul, 2014: 312)

For Turner, the frontier is not a region, nor a fixed point on the map, although he identifies the 98th meridian as the boundary between frontier and wilderness, but a process of becoming American, the “line of most rapid and effective Americanization” (Turner, 1921, Web):

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. [...] Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [...]. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. (Turner, 1921: Web)

To become American means to move across the border, to depart from the European frontier – which was set across the Atlantic coast – to the American one, to move westward, into the

¹ The history of the frontier began with the first European settlers who came in America in the 16th century and founded Jamestown, Virginia, and continued with the arriving of the Pilgrims and Puritans in the first half of the 17th century. Elliot West, in *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and The Rush to Colorado*, identifies three frontiers: “the first one corresponds to the Spanish intrusion (from South-West to North-East); the second was that of the French and British (from East and North-East to South-West) and the third, the officially-acknowledged and the most debated one, from East to West, over the Appalachians in the 1780s.” (1998:46-47)

wilderness. The frontier as a process is responsible with changing a European man into an American. The frontier, according to Turner, is responsible with the decrease of the dependence on England, it is the one that “promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people”, it developed American commerce and merchandise, and most importantly, it “has been in the promotion of democracy here and in Europe”, and because of its emphasis on freedom, it is “productive of individualism” (Turner, 1921, Web).

The process of self-transformation from corrupted European to perfected American has been central to New World mythology since the seventeenth century, as has the idea of discovering perfection through a return to primitive simplicity. Turner's thesis offers historical justification for a concept of the West that is informed by the imperialist assumptions of the ideology of Manifest Destiny. (Deborah L. Madsen, 1998: Web)

It was their destiny and their mission to expand, to dispatch the Indians from their way and to declare war to Mexico. The term “Manifest Destiny” was first used by John L. O'Sullivan, strong advocator of Texas annexation, in his article “The Great Nation of Futurity” (1839), in *The United States Democratic Review* volume. Manifest Destiny becomes thus tightly bound to the Frontier myth. But what unites these two is American exceptionalism, a concept which “is used frequently to describe the development of American cultural identity from Puritan origins to the present.” (Deborah L. Madsen, 1998: Web) Puritans and Pilgrims wanted to start anew, and the idea of an exceptional destiny – the new chosen people, appeared from the very beginning, in the sermon given by John Winthrop on the board of *Arabella*:

And as for ourselves here, the people of New England, we should in a special manner labor to shine forth in holiness above other people; we have that plenty and abundance of ordinances and means of grace, as few people enjoy the like. We are as *a city set upon an hill*, in the open view of all the earth; the eyes of the world are upon us because we profess ourselves to be a people in covenant with God [...] (qtd in Deborah L. Madsen, 1998: Web, my emphasis)

The term, American exceptionalism, was coined by the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America* (1835): “the position of America was quite exceptional”. However, he did not refer to the exceptional culture, destiny or people of its country, but to the “uniqueness of the American political system” (Heike Paul, 2014, 12):

Tocqueville saw the democratic system that he studied in the United States as God-willed and thought it was only a matter of time before it would spread to other countries; he felt that in the US this system had taken root in ‘exceptional’ ways only in so far that it had been able to do so in the absence of feudal structures and aristocratic opposition.” (Heike Paul, 2014: 12)

Moreover, political scientist Byron E. Shafer defines American exceptionalism as “the notion that the United States was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be *understood* differently – essentially on its own terms within its own context.” (qtd. in Heike Paul, 12)

However, the term was understood and used differently, in three main areas: religion, politics and economy. It extended to the American uniqueness, it legitimized American hegemony outside the United States, and it shaped its predestination to a great destiny. To give one example from a religious perspective, at the beginning of America, the new people has been compared with the children of Israel by Thomas Hooker, who “faced many afflictions and humiliations in the wilderness before they could come into the promised land of prosperity and plenty.” (Deborah L. Madsen, 1998: Web)

But there has always been a discrepancy between the doctrinaire belief and the harsh realities of the new land, discrepancies which were explored by film directors, scholars and writers in the 20th century. In the 19th century, however, the concept of American exceptionalism was used to shape the ideology which surrounded the concept of Manifest

Destiny. America is not only a model for other countries of the world, but it has to take control of the lands of the inferior peoples, i.e. Mexicans, Native Americans, so it can be their guardian, their salvation.

1.2. Westerns and *Blood Meridian*

The frontier mythology has found its full expression in the western novels and films. Cormac McCarthy's western contains most of the ingredients of the western formula, frontiersmen and lawmen, cruel wilderness which has to be tamed by the hero, guns, horses and Indians, and it is located on the Texas-Mexico frontier. Fred MacDonald, in *Who Shot the Sheriff? The Rise and Fall of the Television Western* (1987), gives a traditional formula of Westerns, which can also be applied to Western novels:

The western possesses a classic formulation recognizable to all audiences. Here is the cowboy, frontiersman, or lawman operating on or near the furthest reaches of civilized life. Here is the cruel wilderness in which incipient American society struggles against adversity to survive and even flourish. The classic western contains familiar ingredients: heroes and guns, horses and cattle, outlaws and Indians, and the like usually situated in desert locales on the nineteenth-century U.S. frontier. (Fred MacDonald, 1987: 3)

Moreover, John Tuska in *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (1985) divides the westerns, according to their structure, in three main categories: the formulary western, the historical romance western – or the romantic historical reconstruction, and the historical reconstruction. Cormac McCarthy's novel reconstructs the events of the 1850s through historical sources, but he strongly deviates from the image of the traditional West. In *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Richard Slotkin describes a reconfiguration of the Western genre in film, reconfiguration which coincides with the Cold War and Post-Vietnam period², events that mark the beginnings of the nuclear age. In an era dominated by angst, the American exceptionalism began to be questioned. "Alternative westerns", that revise the major myths of America, appeared through the films of Sergio Leone, Sam Peckinpah or Clint Eastwood. As Steven Frye remarked in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian's* writer "enriches this alternative tradition" (2009: 73) of the films produced by these great directors, having common characteristics with Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* or Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue*, and although it narrates the events of the 1850s,

[...] it is born of modern memory – from a sensibility conditioned by two world wars, the physical and psychological effects of genocide, the devastation of colonialism and environmental waste, as well as the collective anxiety of the nuclear age." (Steve Frye, 2009: 67)

In revising the West and the Western genre, Cormac McCarthy works, as Steven Frye remarks, with three traditional forms: the frontier romance, with its myths and counter-myths, the "philosophically ambiguous narratives of Melville, Hawthorne, Poe and Dostoyevsky" (2009: 8), and the Southern gothic and Southern grotesque tradition, the last element being present in all of his novels.

The West in America and in Western literature means *conquest*. With every new conquest, "another stretch of territory, whether geographical or philosophical, comes under the hegemony of the United States of America" (Deborah L. Madsen, 1998: Web). The reinterpretation of the conquest of the West by the 20th century begins with Owen Wister's

² We should also note Slotkin's claim that any deviation from the original myth represents a change in the mentality of a culture.

The Virginian (1902), Zane Grey's fiction, and John Ford's cinematic creation of a modern myth of America.

"*The Frontier is the outer edge of wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization*" (Turner, 1921: Web). The kid meets Judge Holden, the epitome of war, in the East Texas town of Nacodoches, town which is located on the 98th meridian, the same meridian that separates the civilized and the wilderness. But how does McCarthy portray the civilized, the American, in his famous book?

Born in Tennessee, the kid flees away from home at the age of fourteen. Little is known about him – his mother died giving birth to him, his father had once been a teacher, but now "lies in drink", quoting "poets whose names are now lost" (*Blood Meridian*, 3). Arriving in Saint Louis, he embarks for New Orleans on a flatboat, which carries him for forty-two days on the river. Like a metaphorical image of the Europeans who once came to the new world, the child makes his journey to another place, leaving the South for the West.

"He lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors. He is not big but he has big wrists, big hands. His shoulders are set close. The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent. They fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. *All races, all breeds*. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes. Men from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated." (*Blood Meridian*, 4, my emphasis)

After a series of violent accounts, he meets Captain White who talks to him about the volunteers from the battle of Monterrey, 1846, and the treaty signed between Mexico and the United States. The treaty that Captain White mentions ended the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), which was caused by the Texas Revolution – Texas declared its independence from Mexico, independence that was recognized by the United States, but not by Mexico. In 1845 the United States congress voted to annex Texas and further Mexican territory, which led to war. At the end of it, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) was signed, and Mexico was forced to cede to the United States Upper California and New Mexico.

The action of the novel happens a few years after L. O'Sullivan has coined the famous term. Consequently, Captain White shares the same views as the journalist and makes a clear description of what Manifest Destiny is and why the American troops should take over Mexico:

What we are dealing with, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them." (*Blood Meridian*, 36)

Writing history is what he proposes to the kid, being one of the "instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land" (37). He is definitely sure that "Sonora will become a United States territory" and "Guaymas a US port" (37), but before they reach the Mexicans, they are attacked and annihilated by the Comanche people. The kid gets away and a strange destiny seems to carry him to the other side of civilization, to the Glanton Gang, the outlaws who hunt and scalp Indians for money. But in their thirst for gain and blood, they kill everything and everyone whom they meet and could be taken for an Indian.

Where are the cowboys, the sheriffs, the good guys who fight the bad ones? Who is the villain, who is the hero? Where is the code of honor present in all the Westerns? As Steven Frye remarks, "McCarthy simply lifts the veil, revealing the darker realities of American conquest in explicit terms." (Steven Frye, 2009: 74) There are no heroes here. Everything and

every race is sunk in violence, in their attempt to give birth to a new nation. “The violence of the encounter” (Timothy Parrish, 2013: 68) is the only thing left here:

Following Willa Cather and in many ways aligning with magical realists Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, and Juan Rulfo, McCarthy’s works explore the transformation of the New World not by the conquest of the Indians but through the antagonistic collaboration of the Indians and the Europeans. From this battle, one inevitably finds something older than Shelley’s Ozymandias: the violence of the encounter, perhaps the only truth humans can know. (Timothy Parrish, 2013: 68)

“The violence of the encounter” is one strong element with which McCarthy goes against the tradition: it replaces the traditional elements of the West and of the Western, it erases the difference between good and bad, and it redefines the history of the Wild West.

2.3. Glanton Gang: The Collective Soul of the Wild West

Individual heroism is the key to the Western formula. The heroic character is above laws and institutions, above everything that the civilized East represented. Through such protagonists,

[...] the Western denies the consolidation of power and bureaucracy that took place within United States culture in the early part of the century. The values celebrated in the Western include: territorial expansion, liberty, democratic levelling, national identity, the work ethic, racial (white) superiority, and violence (when used with restraint). (Deborah L. Madsen, 1998: Web)

Glanton Gang does not use violence with restraint, but spreads it throughout the unconquered meridian – the 98th meridian, the one identified by Turner as the meeting point between wilderness and civilization. The existence of this gang is historically verifiable, and one of the many sources used by McCarthy should draw our attention: Samuel Chamberlain’s memoirs, *My Confession: the Recollections of a Rogue*. Samuel Chamberlain was a member of the gang and personally met Captain John Glanton. As in McCarthy’s gang, they were hired by Americans and Mexicans to kill and to scalp Indians, and they operated in northern Sonora, New Mexico and Arizona. We should also note that the kid has some interesting resemblances with Samuel Chamberlain; the kid is the character on which we focus at the beginning of the book, the one who is used as a mirror reflection of that American mentality based on Captain’s White and Glanton’s ideas and conceptions, the same protagonist that suddenly disappears in the middle of the book to reappear at the end of it, when the gang is destroyed – probably because of him.

Samuel Chamberlain left Boston and went West after his father’s death. In 1846 he enlisted in the “Illinois Foot Volunteers” and went to war against Mexico. “According to Army records on March 22, 1849, he was listed as a deserter – he had left his regiment for Glanton’s gang (Chamberlain claimed that he was discharged in Mexico and had signed onto an expedition to California as a civilian when he joined Glanton).” (University of Virginia, American Studies, Web)

Moreover, Captain Glanton appears as a character in several histories of the mid-nineteenth century Southwest, for instance in Jeremiah Clemens’ *Bernard Lile* (1856). In all of the sources that he appears, his character is an unsettling one, but as John Sepich notes in his study of *Blood Meridian*’s historical sources,

Captain Glanton did what the state of Chihuahua hired him to do, and his life story, as well as the conditions of the time in which he lived, is presented in McCarthy’s novel with remarkable fidelity. The conflicts existing in and among the states of Texas, Chihuahua, New Mexico, and Arizona in 1849 and 1850 involved many peoples: Mexicans, both peon and military; United States Army troops; Texans, both Ranger and civilian; Comanches and Apaches; and Anglo gold-rush travellers on the Gila Trail. (John Sepich, 2008: 5)

Scalping for money was a common thing at that time. Chihuahua paid “scalp bounties not only to licensed alien parties, but also to peon guerilla bands”, who could win with a single scalp the money they “could earn by hard labor in a year” (qtd. in Sepich, 2008: 7). This explains why, in the late 1849, early 1850, the number of Indians in Mexico lowered, part because of Chihuahua’s willingness to pay – but at a rate below that for warriors – for the scalps of women and children. Glanton’s gang found a solution to this problem: “Chihuahua was inhabited by mestizos, whose hair was similar to the Indians’ in color and texture” (Sepich, 2008: 8) – and thus they started hunting both Indians and Mexicans. Glanton fought Mexicans in the Mexican War, and then he and his gang started killing for profit. Historian Ralph Smith, talking about the history of scalping, refers to what historian Marcus Webster once said: “For those of posterity who considered scalping a ‘grewome business ... it was a war necessity” (qtd. in Sepich, 2008: 6)

But who are the members of the Glanton Gang? What are their identities, who are they behind the hunting and the killings? We know that Glanton had once a fiancée that was killed. Their names are barely mention, and except for Tobin, “the ex-priest”, who joins the gang but keeps his religiosity and is against the judge’s philosophy and acts, we know almost nothing about the rest of them or how they got there. The only thing that they play and do is war, and as Steven Shaviro remarked in his essay “The Very Life of Darkness: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*”, all of these men “are childlike in their unconsciousness, or indifference, as to motivations and consequences” (2009: 20). Judge Holden, the real leader of the group, says:

Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. . . . All games aspire to the condition of war (*Blood Meridian*, 262)

Glanton Gang plays the game of war from the beginning to their ends. They do not think of consequences, of what they leave behind them, of what the future might bring to them.

Blood Meridian performs the violent, sacrificial, self-consuming ritual upon which our civilization is founded. [...] The American dream of manifest destiny must be repeated over and over again, ravaging the indifferent landscape in the course of its lemmings’ march to the sea. Our terrible progress is ‘less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle’ (337), an obsessive reiteration without advancement, for we build only to destroy. (Steven Shaviro, 2009: 20)

Being responsible for a major part of the action of the book, the gang plays the role of a collective character that is led by Judge Holden. With their help, their actions and their mentalities, McCarthy reverses the traditional history of the West.

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