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Evil in an Ocean of Evening Redness:
Figures of Evil in *Blood Meridian* and *Moby-Dick*

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Abstract

In this paper I analyze the question, "what is evil?" in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) by focusing on how he deals with evil in the novel, then comparing it with how the same topic is treated in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). In order to answer this question, I have divided this paper into different parts that aim to explain the different characteristics these two authors give to the figure of evil. I start by analyzing how the world these novels take place in is a determining part in the formation of evil. Secondly, I proceed to compare how the character of judge Holden resembles that of John Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* (1667)—since the devil in the literary tradition has been the ultimate embodiment of evil. Thirdly, my analysis takes me to comparing how evil affects two different kinds of men, i.e. judge Holden and Captain Ahab. Fourthly, I explain how evil is embodied in the two main foes both novels have—Moby Dick and judge Holden—and how evil grants them superhuman qualities that they use to their advantage. Finally, I conclude that evil, though difficult to define, is ultimately found—both in *Blood Meridian* and *Moby-Dick*—in the shape of violence.

Keywords: Evil; Cormac McCarthy; Herman Melville; *Blood Meridian*; *Moby-Dick*.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the inception of literature, mankind has used it to analyze and to try to answer questions of different nature (e.g. religious, philosophical, or ethical) that have always troubled men. Fiction has been an important medium authors have used—regardless of their mother tongue, country of origin, religious beliefs, or their own life experiences—to express and deal with what distressed them and humanity in general. Throughout literary history it can be observed that there are certain recurring themes which are dealt with from different perspectives. This might probably be because of the richness in content these themes offer to novelists, but also because of their complexity and difficulty to be summarized in just a few, universally accepted, valid words. Western authors—as well as authors from the other hemisphere—have worked on these themes endlessly since the times of the first philosophers and poets. It is my personal understanding that the most troublesome questions humankind has ever faced are the ones regarding humanity himself—i.e. its nature (e.g. good and evil), where humans come from and go to (e.g. religious and philosophical questions), and, especially, what the heart hides (e.g. obsessions, passions, and doubts).

In the nineteenth century, the novel was trying to find its way in the world and the United States was no exception. Although there had been texts and novels prior to that century, it is then that American novelists really started taking off and their fiction started to detach itself from England's leadership in the matter of literature written in English. Again, many of the important names of these new American writers dealt with some, if not all, of the above mentioned issues. One of the most acclaimed authors of this century is Herman Melville, and *Moby-Dick* (1851) is regarded as a masterpiece and an allegorical book dealing with many religious, moral, and ethical themes. *Moby-Dick* narrates the story of a crew of whale hunters commanded by Captain Ahab whilst they sail the oceans hunting down whales and especially Ahab's nemesis, the White Whale. Melville takes the reader to a world in which morality, good and evil, religion, and obsession collide both in his characters and in the pages of the book, as the novel opens almost infinite lines of interpretation.

At the beginning of the 1990s, another American author, Cormac McCarthy, gave one of the few interviews he has ever accepted to participate in. In this interview with *New York Times Magazine* he said, "The ugly fact is books are made out of books," and he also added, "The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written" (Woodward). Seven years before he pronounced these words, Cormac McCarthy had

written a novel which, likewise, is considered by many critics to be a most relevant text in American fiction—*Blood Meridian* (1985). With those words from the *New York Times Magazine*, McCarthy not only agrees that previous novels have been a source of inspiration for him, but, in my opinion, he also accepts to take up the baton—carried by previous authors—of answering these troublesome questions for humanity by trying to continue the task of giving new visions, angles, and answers to them.

Many scholars and literary critics—for example Harold Bloom in *How to Read and Why* (2001)—have previously stated that one of the sources of inspiration for *Blood Meridian* was Herman Melville's allegorical novel *Moby-Dick*—McCarthy himself has admitted that Melville's book is probably his favorite one. *Blood Meridian* is a Western that narrates the story of the kid, a teenage boy who joins a gang of scalp hunters while they move westward in America, along the frontier between Texas and Mexico, killing as many natives as they can, scalping them, and getting paid for it. Although at first glance *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* seem to have nothing in common, in my study of these novels I have found several shared themes. Given the nature and length of this paper, I have focused my analysis on attempting to answer one question: "What is evil?" I will use Cormac McCarthy's Western as the basis for my analysis of evil and I will analyze how it serves, too, as a comparison, contrast, and response to Melville's vision on the matter in his epic work.

Attempting to answer this question of what evil is by giving it a universally accepted solution is a titanic task. Evil—its definition, its components, its nature—seems to be deeply rooted in the human soul and it has been troubling intellectuals of different disciplines since the beginning of humanity. I think there are elements of evil that are intrinsic to human nature. On the other hand, evil can also be a construct based on a given moment in time or a given culture. Be that as it may, it is my understanding that evil does not come in one single form, one single entity, or one single manifestation, but it takes several deceitful ways and it is able to disguise and manifest itself and to proceed and act in what seems to be limitless ways. Therefore, I have narrowed the treatment, manifestations, and understanding of evil in these two novels down to five different approaches or angles to find out how McCarthy and Melville see, perceive, define, and deal with it. These five approaches correspond to the five following parts of this paper.

2. The world of *Blood Meridian* and *Moby-Dick*

To help us have a better idea of what these two authors understand as evil or what it implies, having a clear understanding of the kind of world the novels portray is mandatory. It is stated in these two literary works that the events narrated in them take place more or less at the same time. That is the end of the 1840s and the beginning of the 1850s (though *Blood Meridian* in its last chapter—XXIII—moves forward in time a few decades). The events in McCarthy's novel take place almost in their entirety along the Texas-Mexico border whilst Melville's happen in their majority both in the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. The two worlds, thus, could not apparently be more different one from the other, but it is appreciable that both of them frame perfectly and accurately a part of the America of the time. Although Melville begins his story in Nantucket and McCarthy in Tennessee, both plots move to locations far away from what were the early settlements of the, at the time, young country. On the one hand, Melville makes the decision to use the mighty ocean as the stage for his narration. Thornton Y. Booth—referring to the United States that was about to endure its Civil War (from 1861 to 1865) and was still growing as a country—explains that Melville "found in the ocean the symbol of the near chaos which he felt that sensitive and thoughtful men were having to live in: fluid, shifting, largely uncharted, vast, full of dangers and terrors" (38). On the other hand, McCarthy does not choose water but land and the world of *Blood Meridian* happens to agree with Booth's description—its desert landscape is indeed dangerous and terrific; albeit sensitive and thoughtful men like the ones mentioned by Booth are not numerous in McCarthy's pages. It is important to bear in mind that the Texas-Mexican border was an almost unexplored part of the America of the first half of the nineteenth century; an enormous place full of sand, dust, heat, cold, chaos, and violence, but mighty and sublime nonetheless. Barbara Glenn, in her essay titled "Melville and the Sublime in *Moby-Dick*," offers a description of the sea as "a rugged and broken surface; an apparent infinity in the succession of its waves; a vast extension, particularly in depth; and most of all, a vast disorder, terrible, irresistibly powerful and obscure" (167). This depiction of Melville's sea is also applicable to McCarthy's West.

The first Pilgrim Fathers to arrive to the new continent believed that what today is the United States of America was the promised-land, the paradise lost that had once been promised. These Puritans believed themselves to be the heirs to the kingdom of Heaven on earth, just as the Jews were at the times of Moses. However, this new land turned up to be a dangerous one, although prosperous in terms of vegetation, animal

population, and natural resources. God's promise could still be possible for the nineteenth century pilgrim—once the East coast had been proven not to be the land God had promised, one just had to move to the West and try to find it there. *Blood Meridian*'s land does not offer any safe haven for the pilgrim who wants to try his luck by walking, riding, or simply moving westward and this is probably because "McCarthy sees this paradox of the West as a place that lures with its promise of freedom and all the expectations invested in the American dream, only to deliver a kind of madness, a 'fatal course'" (Campbell 57).

Both Melville and McCarthy introduce the reader early on in their novels to the kind of world he/she is going to find—that is, a world of extreme violence. While Melville waits until the third chapter, entitled "The Spouter-Inn," to give a crude description of Nathan Swain's slaughter of more than a dozen whales in the course of a day, McCarthy, in the very first page of *Blood Meridian*, introduces the reader to the kid being the killer (in the womb, at birth) of his mother—the kid is, thus, a natural born killer in a world that would fit him like a glove. McCarthy does not wait long, either, to narrate one of the crudest massacres the book includes and which shows the reader that this world is merciless and evil abundant. This massacre closes chapter IV, in which the group of savages show no mercy at all when doing things such as,

> stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (McCarthy 56)

These outstanding levels of violence in McCarthy's west are also visible in Melville's novel in many instances. One of the crudest descriptions of violence happening overseas that Melville narrates occurs in the chapter entitled "Stubb kills a whale." It says,

> The red tide now poured from all sides of the monster like brooks down a hill. His tormented body rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed for furlongs behind in their wake. The slanting sun playing upon this crimson pond in the sea, sent back its reflection into every face, so that they all glowed to each other like red men. And all the while, jet after jet of white smoke was agonizingly shot from the spiracle of the whale, and vehement puff after puff from the mouth

> of the excited headsman; as at every dart, hauling in upon his crooked lance (by the line attached to it), Stubb straightened it again and again, by a few rapid blows against the gunwale, then again and again sent it into the whale. (Melville 311)

This dreadful but beautiful description of the sea—in the end, the world—the Pequod's crew sails in finds its counterpart in McCarthy's novel. Melville's description of the position of the sun, using the adjective "slanting," gives us an idea that the sun is setting—thus evening approaches and is witness to this slaughter carried out by Stubb. McCarthy's world is also painted with crimson hues. *Blood Meridian* has an alternative title (so does *Moby-Dick*, i.e. *The Whale*): *The Evening Redness in the West*. As it can easily be observed, this second title mirrors that scenario of merciless killing in which Stubb operates. With these two titles McCarthy seems to be much more critical of the America of the 1850s than Melville was. It appears that for McCarthy all the land in his book is this meridian of bloodshed, a setting day turned red that his characters populate; as a matter of fact he actually uses the words "evil terrain" (93) when referring to the land. Therefore, this West is pure evil. Steven Faulkner concurs with this when he writes, "McCarthy's world—and, we might argue, the real world—is rife with it. Evil is firmly imbedded in human life" (43).

One may wonder what happened to this supposed to be promised land. It seems villains have taken over the world in McCarthy's narrative, just as if God had left the place, had never looked back, had forgotten about it for good, and had remained silent ever since in a similar way as in Melville's novel: "Like the oceans of *Moby Dick* (…) the deserts in *Blood Meridian* contain an un-reckonable silence against which we continue to thrash and flail to no avail" (Dorson 115). Similarly to a priest who gets no answer from God, the kid—a wanderer since the age of fourteen—encounters a burning bush. McCarthy describes the scene this way, "In the distance before him a fire burned on the prairie, a solitary flame frayed by the wind that freshened and faded and shed scattered sparks down the storm like hot scurf blown from some unreckonable forge howling in the waste" (224). The description reminds us of Moses observing the burning bush which God used to talk to him. However, although the kid approaches the fire, observes it with interest, gets warmed up by its heat, and also falls asleep nearby it, God is speechless to him. Cormac McCarthy will not have God communicating to the kid or any other character. McCarthy's God (if He indeed exists in this West) is silent and will not deal with evil doers on a land that it is simply that, evil.

3. The judge as Satan, the personification of evil

In the first chapter of *Blood Meridian* the kid attends a religious sermon that is being given in what McCarthy describes as "the ratty canvas tent" (6). Inside this tent, the reverend refers to the land they are stepping on at that moment, he calls it "these here hell, hell, hellholes right here in Nacogdoches" (6). As has been stated in the previous section, McCarthy's West is no paradise but mostly the opposite, i.e. a hell on earth, and the reverend's words confirm that statement. The Bible states where the souls of sinners and wrongdoers who do not repent and ask for God's forgiveness end up for all eternity. However, Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (1307) is arguably the text that best describes in detail how hell is, the torments the condemned endure, and who the tormentor of these souls is. Hell has a lord that rules it and his name (one of them at least) is Satan. If Cormac McCarthy's West is hell on earth, this hell must have a lord that rules it.

Four centuries after Dante's poem, another poet, English in this case, attempted to narrate the downfall of who once had been one of God's angels. *Paradise Lost* (1667) became an epic poem in which Milton dared to give the main role not to God, but to the devil. Milton created a charismatic and smart character who is, among other things, a seducer, a philosopher, a warrior, and he is also curious and resourceful. McCarthy offers the reader of *Blood Meridian* an unforgettable character—that is judge Holden. The judge shares many of his qualities with Milton's Satan (for example, he philosophizes, fights, and gets everyone's attention every time he appears), but McCarthy also grants him other qualities that belong to different conceptualizations other cultures have also created for the devil's figure; an example of this is Steven Faulkner's affirmation that in American folklore, the devil is a fiddler (43). Indeed Holden is a fiddler, Tobin says it himself after mentioning how good a dancer the judge is, "And fiddle. He's the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that's an end on it. The greatest." (McCarthy 129).

Judge Holden first appears in *Blood Meridian* a few lines after the reverend pronounces the above cited words. It seems as if the reverend's mention of hell has served as a call for the devil, and he shall appear. McCarthy gives this initial description of judge Holden:

> An enormous man dressed in an oilcloth slicker had entered the tent and removed his hat. He was bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height and he stood smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God and he seemed to have removed his hat only to chase the rain from it for now he put it on again. (6)

The judge accuses the reverend of being an impostor and a child molester. The reverend, in an attempt to defend himself, calls the judge the devil. Judge Holden later on finds his niche in a gang of outlaws, commanded by John Joel Glanton, which Bent Sørensen describes as "a band of murderers, scalpers, thieves and rapists struggling towards neither sanctuary nor civilization, but rather towards a date with the Devil himself in the shape of the Judge" (17).

Brimstone and fire are two elements present in Dante's hell (e.g. *Canto XII* of *Inferno*) and were, too, powerful images used by Jonathan Edwards in famous jeremiads such as *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741). There are two remarkable instances in which the judge feels very comfortable among such elements. To begin with, McCarthy writes, "The judge like a great ponderous djinn stepped through the fire and the flames delivered him up as if he were in some way native to their element" (101). The judge, thus, is no stranger to fire and he also enjoys dancing naked in front of it while being observed by the rest of the men (and women and children) of the company.

Nevertheless, the other remarkable passage in *Blood Meridian* is one in which Tobin, the ex-priest, is talking to the kid and he is telling the young boy an actual story that happened to him. Tobin explains that he and the group of men he was riding with had run out of gunpowder and were being chased by some Native-Americans, which he refers to as "savages." Much to their surprise, the group finds the judge in the desert—he seems to have appeared out of nowhere. With no useful weapons to defend themselves and desperate, the judge tells them that everything they need to survive is in "our mother the earth" (McCarthy 136). They all head towards a mountain hoping to find shelter and protection and praying that the high ground will offer them some possibility of survival. They climb to the top of the mountain just to find that it is no mountain but a volcano. Tobin describes the terrain as, "rocks melted and set up all wrinkled like a pudding, the earth stove through to the molten core of her. Where for aught any man knows lies the locality of hell" (McCarthy 136). It is worth noticing that Tobin also implies that the entrance to the devil's lair is found right there. The judge, as Faulkner says, "*is* the devil, but with one arresting restriction: he is also a physical human being, literally the devil incarnate" (43) and precisely as this, the devil, Holden takes the gang to his burrow and becomes their savior thanks to his immense knowledge on how to use and obtain different elements—e.g. when McCarthy describes that the judge "set with his back to that gapin hole and he was chippin away and he called upon us to do the same. It was brimstone" (137). McCarthy goes on to describe how these men are able to create gunpowder using

what the earth offers—mixing brimstone, charcoal, and urine—to create the necessary gunpowder for their guns. In *Book VI* of *Paradise Lost*, Satan and his fiends are exchanging opinions and one of them states that they are going to need a better weapon if they indeed want to win the war against God. From line 470 to 491, Satan commands his minions to use the elements the land offers to create gunpowder by saying:

> Not uninvented that, which thou aright
> Believ'st so main to our success, I bring;
> Which of us who beholds the bright surfáce
> Of this ethereous mould whereon we stand,
> This continent of spacious Heav'n, adorned
> With plant, fruit, flow'r ambrosial, gems and gold, (…)
> These in their dark nativity the deep
> Shall yield us, pregnant with the infernal flame,
> Which into hollow engines long and round
> Thick-rammed, at th' other bore with touch of fire
> Dilated and infuriate shall send forth
> From far with thund'ring noise among our foes
> Such implements of mischief as shall dash
> To pieces, and o'erwhelm whatever stands
> Adverse, that they shall fear we have disarmed
> The Thunderer of his only dreaded bolt. (Milton 137-138)

Milton's Satan resonates in McCarthy's judge, Holden, not only in the instructions he gives to use the available elements, but also in the setting of the scene—hence, giving these passages a similar structural position. McCarthy not only uses Satan as a source of inspiration for the judge; I believe he wants, with the character of Holden, to develop Milton's Satan and to reach new levels of evilness. Both Satan and the judge are lords of their worlds, but there is another lord in *Moby-Dick* who also has things in common with them, especially the latter: the judge.

4. The judge and Ahab as embodiments of evil

Captain Ahab, although a man of noble intentions who wants to rid the world of the White Whale—the embodiment of evil in his understanding—, has a dark side that has led critics and academics (e.g. Harold Bloom in page 236 of *How to Read and Why*) to think of him as close to Milton's Satan and by extension to McCarthy's judge Holden.

This association of Ahab with the devil can be seen in comments such as: "Feeling that his central impulse comes from the devil, he proposes to be the devil's child" (Myers 31). It is Ahab himself who, when sitting alone in his cabin while observing the sunset—this is important because it also ties nicely with the secondary title of McCarthy's novel—claims to be "demoniac" and "madness maddened" (Melville 183). Nevertheless, that is not the only time Ahab refers to himself as devil-like. In the chapter entitled "The Doubloon," he says, "three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab" (Melville 471). If Ahab is indeed another version of the devil, his and the judge's evilness can be classified with the same criteria and associations that can be applied to Milton's Satan, i.e. smart, obsessive, and resourceful characters capable of horrific actions. However, both Ahab and Holden have other features that are sometimes common to and strange from one another.

To begin with one of the differences, Harold Bloom claims about Captain Ahab that he "is (like Macbeth) technically a hero-villain" (235) and he complements this statement three lines below by clarifying that to him Ahab is "primarily a hero." To me Ahab is indeed a hero whilst judge Holden is never so. The judge may be regarded as a hero by some readers because of some incredible achievements he is able to pull off—for example in the volcano scene explained earlier. However, Holden, albeit saving these men from a certain death, in the first instance is not saving anyone but himself. I cannot consider his action in that volcano passage a heroic one because it is not a disinterested act, i.e. one from which he would not benefit in any way or gain anything—a necessary condition for my understanding of a hero.

In contrast to Holden, Ahab is a man who has been exploring the oceans and hunting whales for decades, he says: "For forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep!" (Melville 590). No one has forced him to do it and he has risked and sacrificed everything (including enjoying life with his family) for a cause that he considers to be his life's duty—ridding the world of evil embodied in his nemesis, the leviathan, Moby Dick. With the previous cited quote Ahab expresses what he is willing to sacrifice, i.e. choosing to leave paradise to descend into and navigate through hell and die fighting. This mission of his is personal (the White Whale took Ahab's leg in their last encounter) and it is very interesting that he considers it to be a *war*.

With regard to *Blood Meridian*, in one of the many scenes in which Glanton's Gang rests in front of a fire, a conversation gets started and the men talk about war. One of these men, Irving, affirms that the Bible classifies war as evil (McCarthy 259). The judge answers to Irving's affirmation by saying that war had been part of the world since its inception and that war had waited to be discovered by men and that it endured, and it was loved by all men regardless of their age—emphasizing that "old men love it in them" (260), just as Ahab does. After this discussion on the topic of war, judge Holden gives his ultimate definition of war: "War is god" (261). Not only is Holden a man of war, he also adds a title to his name (judge) to show his commitment to this divine warfare as if it were a divine law and hence he were obligated to give testimony of the truth God is, just as "the one who chooses to live in the light of the truth about the world—Holden clearly represents this man—would devote himself to war in brash contempt of the principles of justice" (Cusher 227). If Holden understands war as God and divine justice, he must be referring to the Old Testament God, i.e. a punisher of wrong doers, a destroyer, a vindictive, and all-powerful Being. This type of violent and bellicose God is also present in Melville's work: "There seems to be no God in his universe, unless it is the testy, capricious Jehovah of the Old Testament, working not only good but satanic evil with his own hands" (Watters 176-177).

I have remarked Captain Ahab's noble understanding of what he believes his duty is. In McCarthy's western, judge Holden does not rid the world of evil because he is the personification of it. However, he does rid the world of something else and, as a result, this action can qualify as one of the most evil actions he ever performs in the book. McCarthy explains that the judge is regarded as "a man of learning" (122). In chapter X, Tobin explains some of the judge's abilities, "He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer" (129), and he also mentions that Holden can speak several languages. Judge Holden carries with him a little pad in which he draws things he sees, writes down notes and observations, and even uses to put inside it some samples of plants (an example of Holden's routine can be found in chapter XI.) Neil Campbell has an interesting way of seeing the judge's actions, "By reducing life to its constituents, its 'bones,' the Judge can read it, engulf it and ultimately control it" (60). However, this interesting and apparently innocuous act of control on the judge's part becomes to me ultimate evil when it is described what he does after he had finished taking his notes and observations, "When he had done he took up the little footguard and turned it in his hand and studied it again and then he crushed it into a ball of foil and pitched it into the fire" (McCarthy 146). The

judge is ridding the world of its past, of its identity, of its inheritance to those who come after him. Only he is allowed to know what has existed before and only he has the right to destroy it and to not let it exist forever. The judge justifies his behavior with this masterful utterance, "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent" (McCarthy 207). To Joshua Masters, judge Holden "posits himself at the center of meaning, as the being who controls words, and thus the things those words possess" (30).

Regardless of how noble Captain Ahab's intentions are, the truth is that the "supreme lord and dictator" (Melville 133) of the Pequod succumbs to the madness his godlike mission demands of him. It may not be his fault, though; Geoffrey Sanborn says about the captain, "But after making evil 'visibly personified' and 'practically assailable' in the whale, the meaning of that symbol gradually expands for Ahab until it includes the God who has taunted him into the conflict" (229). The task is too big for one man alone and craziness takes its toll in the captain. Obviously, his crew notice this and they try to warn him, but Ahab refuses to follow their advice of turning back the helm and heading home—he is infuriated and will not attend to reason. He has turned completely evil himself.

Both Melville and McCarthy offer their novels' characters the possibility of killing the evil men Captain Ahab and judge Holden have turned out to be. In the chapter entitled "The Musket" the loyal Starbuck goes to tell his captain about the change in the wind to their favor. However, before he enters Ahab's cabin, he pauses, sees the muskets on the walls, and remembers when the captain threatened him with using one musket against him because he had urged Ahab to forget his pursuit of Moby Dick, "there's the very musket that he pointed at me" (Melville 558). Starbuck checks that indeed the musket is loaded and wonders the following:

> I come to report a fair wind to him. But how fair? Fair for death and doom,—*that's* fair for Moby Dick. It's a fair wind that's only fair for that accursed fish.—The very tube he pointed at me!—the very one; *this* one—I hold it here; he would have killed me with the very thing I handle now.—Aye and he would fain kill all his crew. (Melville 558)

Starbuck, one of the sensible forces of good in the novel, finds Ahab to be sleeping, considers the possibility of mutinying and arresting him (in that way all the crew would be saved and would reunite with their families), but, in the end and given his good nature and loyalty to his captain, he cannot do it.

In *Blood Meridian*, one member of Glanton's Gang has the chance to kill the evil judge. McCarthy describes how the judge is playing with the little Apache boy he has taken with him; the child is sitting on the judge's lap, and the latter dandles the little boy just as a father would play with his son. McCarthy narrates:

> Toadvine saw him with the child as he passed with his saddle but when he came back ten minutes later leading his horse the child was dead and the judge had scalped it. Toadvine put the muzzle of his pistol against the great dome of the judge's head.
>
> Goddamn you, Holden.
>
> You either shoot or take that away. Do it now.
>
> Toadvine put the pistol in his belt. The judge smiled and wiped the scalp on the leg of his trousers and rose and turned away. (170-171)

The kid also has the chance in chapter XX to kill the judge, but he again fails to do it. Neither Melville nor McCarthy give their human characters the strength to kill these two men that pose such a threat for them. An explanation for why Toadvine and the kid fail to save themselves and others by pulling the trigger against Holden might be because "the Judge is a larger-than-life character, and in effect he is also larger than death" (Sørensen 23). If Holden is indeed larger than both life and death, he transcends the world populated by the rest of the inhabitants in McCarthy's West; the judge is above them, he is like a god bearing witness of his creation and that explains why "he hovers 'beyond the worst,' mocking and denying the presence of death like a desert Ahab chasing life-in-death" (Campbell 58). In contrast to Melville, McCarthy allows Holden, unlike Ahab, to survive his western. McCarthy may have decided to do so because he knows that Holden shares some features with Ahab, but there is also another character in Melville's novel that is evil, divine, mighty, a survivor in the novel, and the perfect counterpart to judge Holden: "Moby Dick."

5. The judge and Moby Dick: two forces to be reckoned with

In his book *How to Read and Why*, Harold Bloom praises how McCarthy has been able to create what he considers to be "the ultimate Western" (255). Bloom focuses his analysis of *Blood Meridian* in the figure of the judge. At first he associates this character with Captain Ahab, but later on Bloom affirms that he thinks that "McCarthy is warning his reader that the Judge is Moby-Dick rather than Ahab" (259). I cannot but concur with Bloom's association and I, too, find connections and references in the character of judge

Holden that are linked with both Captain Ahab (as I have already stated) and Moby Dick. To begin with, the descriptions of the whale and the judge seem alike, starting with their physical resemblance. In chapter 41, titled as the novel, Melville gives the following description of Moby Dick:

> For, it was not so much his uncommon bulk that so much distinguished him from other sperm whales, but, as was elsewhere thrown out—a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidical white hump. These were his prominent features; the tokens whereby, even in the limitless, uncharted seas, he revealed his identity, at a long distance, to those who knew him.
>
> The rest of his body was so streaked, and spotted, and marbled with the same shrouded hue, that, in the end, he had gained his distinctive appellation of the White Whale. (198-199)

Moby Dick's counterpart in *Blood Meridian*, judge Holden, is described many times throughout the entire novel. In the first chapter, as we have already seen, we are told that judge Holden is almost seven feet tall; he is hairless, has a face that resembles that of a child, and has small hands. However, it is my opinion that there is no better physical description of this man than the one in chapter XIII, when Glanton's Gang arrives to the city of Chihuahua and goes to the public baths. Here, the people in the scene cannot stop looking at Holden. McCarthy says:

> [The judge] had disrobed last of all and now walked the perimeter of the baths with a cigar in his mouth and a regal air, testing the waters with one toe, surprisingly petite. He shone like the moon so pale he was and not a hair to be seen anywhere upon that vast corpus, not in any crevice nor in the great bores of his nose and not upon his chest nor in his ears nor any tuft at all above his eyes nor to the lids thereof. The immense and gleaming dome of his naked skull looked like a cap for bathing pulled down to the otherwise darkened skin of his face and neck. As that great bulk lowered itself into the bath the waters rose perceptibly and when he had submerged himself to the eyes he looked about with considerable pleasure, the eyes slightly crinkled, as if he were smiling under the water like some pale and bloated manatee surfaced in a bog while behind his small and close-set ear the wedged cigar smoked gently just above the waterline. (174-175)

It is impossible not to notice the resemblance between Moby Dick and judge Holden in this passage. McCarthy describes the judge as if he were Moby Dick diving in those waters; he is comfortable there; his body is so enormous that it makes the water

level rise, and the smoke protruding from the back of his ear is just like a whale breathing through its blowhole.

In her essay "*Moby Dick*: Jonah's or Job's Whale?" Nathalia Wright offers the following reasoning regarding the whale's color, "whiteness signifies absence of meaning and even non-existence. (…) the White Whale is thus symbolic of a universe which, for all its marvels, is not only amoral but inscrutable—perhaps, indeed a complete illusion" (191-192). It is no wonder that the narrator, Ishmael, may think (at least until the first chapter that narrates the chase) that the White Whale as such does not exist because the Pequod crosses two oceans, gets near the coast of Japan, and her crew still do not find any evidence that Moby Dick is real. The White Whale is widely known to the majority of men, Ishmael included, only through the tales and stories told by Ahab, other sailors, and Sperm Whale fishermen—these three form a minority who "comparatively, had knowingly seen him" (Melville 194).

There is another interesting reflection regarding the skin color that both the whale and the judge share: "whiteness in nature terrifies, Ishmael surmises, perhaps by unnatural contrast, by its presentation of extremes. It is associated with death, with ghosts, with solitude. (…) Whiteness is spiritual, and clothes the object with which it is coupled with divineness" (Glenn 170). This explanation concurs with how the characters of Melville's and McCarthy's novels feel in relation with their correspondent foes. The White Whale and the judge terrify them not only because of their size and appearance—McCarthy even describes the judge's physical appearance as "vast abhorrence" (254) and Melville catalogues his monster as "a Sperm Whale of uncommon magnitude and malignity" (194)—but also because of their intellect and cunning which provides them with terrifying and outstanding levels of violence allowing them to turn the odds in their favor, e.g. the judge in the volcano scene and Moby Dick in the third day of the chase.

Barbara Glenn's last word in the quote in the previous paragraph ("divineness") is worth analyzing. It is Ishmael himself who establishes a connection between Moby Dick and Job's whale at the end of the forty-first chapter. He, therefore, gives Moby Dick a god-like implication as if the whale were indeed God. McCarthy also gives his reader a hint of the judge's divineness when he writes, "The judge sat upwind from the fire naked to the waist, himself like some great pale deity" (97). Since the White Whale does not have a voice, it is impossible to know unambiguously what his real motivations are to cause havoc and strike fear in the hearts of men. It may simply be that Moby Dick is fighting a personal vendetta with the men who threaten the lives of other whales in order

to protect his species from any harm; or that he simply defends himself when attacked; or it can also be that the whale is, as judge Holden, pure evil and the devil incarnate. Although this dual association of Moby Dick and judge Holden being God and the devil simultaneously may seem contradictory, Geoffrey Sanborn states that "the devil is not God, and yet he is" (234). Along the same line of thought, Ahab finally comprehends that his "god-like man" (Melville 88) and his evil side are but the same thing: "his being burned is the revelation—not yet understood by Ahab—that 'evil' and 'good' are not separate but One" (Walcutt 307).

Both judge Holden and Moby Dick share another godlike feature apart from the association of their white color with the divine, one that is responsible for their being considered as legends, myths, phantasms, and illusions. In the Bible, in Hebrews 4.13, we can read, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." This is just one instance of the Bible referring to God's capacity to be omnipresent—and Moby Dick, as a god, also has it: "The white whale is the embodied representative of Nature when it slays with 'demoniac indifference.' Moby-Dick is considered immortal and ubiquitous" (Watters 176). In the chapter named "Moby Dick," Melville explains this quality the whale has:

> One of the wild suggestings referred to, as at last coming to be linked with the White Whale in the minds of the superstitiously inclined, was the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time. (197)

In *Blood Meridian*, the kid confesses to Tobin that he had encountered the judge previously (referring to the reverend's tent at the beginning of the novel). Tobin responds to this by saying, "Every man in the company claims to have encountered that sootysouled rascal in some other place" (McCarthy 130). There is also the already mentioned desert scene in which the judge appears out of nowhere and there is another one at the beginning of chapter XXII in which the kid has been arrested and is in jail and "one morning he woke to find the judge standing at his cage, hat in hand, smiling down at him" (McCarthy 317). Therefore, this evil that is embodied in both the whale and the judge is omnipresent, ubiquitous, and immortal—neither of them die in the novels and McCarthy states about the judge, "he says that he will never die" (349).

6. Conclusion. What is Evil for McCarthy and Melville?

Throughout this paper I have classified the different representations of evil in both novels to try to answer the question of what evil is. I believe that evil does not come into one single form but many—hence the division exposed in this paper. Evil can be the world; or the characters that in literature have traditionally embodied it; or two men doing what they must; or the monster that haunts those who fear him; or even the ultimate representation of good—God. What to me is clear is that independently of what good and evil are, "One is not to be had without the other" (Myers 23). Some scholars—about Melville's understanding of evil—state: "his conclusion would seem to be that evil is an integral part of the cosmos itself" (Watters 173). Other scholars hold a similar opinion about McCarthy's book, "nowhere does the novel answer the question it raises, nowhere does it explain the mystery of evil in human hearts" (Schopen 191).

However, if I were to name one single element both novels have in common and which contains the essence of evil, that element would be violence. I think both Melville and McCarthy find in violence the answer to the question—evil is violence. In my study of both novels I have not found another element that is more recurrent and more connected to evil than violence. In addition, to me, McCarthy's depiction of violence is more powerful and shocking than Melville's because it is man-against-man violence as opposed to man-against-nature. Scholars such as Harold Bloom have admitted to having had difficulties when reading *Blood Meridian* due to the astonishing levels of violence portrayed in its prose. This is understandable because "McCarthy approaches the ugly fact of violence in such a detached, almost forensic manner" (Phillips 450). Examples confirming this can be found throughout the novel, but arguably the most remarkable one—mostly because of the innocence of the victims and the language used—is when one of the Delawares carries two little children, grabbing them by their ankles, and, next to a rock, swings them and bashes "their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew" (McCarthy 162).

A new question would then arise: why is violence in these two books so important and necessary? The United States has been rife with violence and death since its origin, which explains why Melville suspected that these elements "defined American history" (Phillips 439). McCarthy has been fascinated with violence and how it affects men throughout his career in books such as *Child of God* (1973), *No Country for Old Men* (2005), or *The Road* (2006). He tries, with the figure of the judge, to give violence the condition of a more human law—as opposed to Divine law—that is, a law of violence

that is to be used by men. Not only does the judge kill mercilessly, he destroys everything he does not approve of, causing mayhem and striking terror everywhere he goes while never losing his smile, hence enjoying violence. McCarthy affirms that, "there's no such thing as life without bloodshed" (Woodward). Ergo, violence seems to be an inherent and indivisible part of life and it gives testimony of both the truth and reality that are hidden in the human heart; in other words, violence and death "are the more or less objective truths of all human experience" (Phillips 439).

Regardless of our numerous efforts, we might never be able to get a clear answer to what evil is or an explanation to why violence fascinates humanity. Or it may also be that there is no answer to be found. The judge says it himself—and just like McCarthy, I will give the last words of this paper to this evil character who closes the novel before the words 'the end' appear—, "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery" (McCarthy 263).

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