

“See the Child”: Representations of Childhood in
Blood Meridian and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy

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Abstract

This essay aims to illustrate the way in which the American writer Cormac McCarthy constructs the role of the children in his novels *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road* to challenge the discursive reality elaborated by the two adult protagonists. The premise of this endeavor is that both Judge Holden and the man offer a logocentric vision of the world, which the young characters resist by questioning its validity and exposing its limits. The Post-Structuralist criticism of Jacques Derrida and Friedrich Nietzsche represents the theoretical foundation of the text analysis proposed below.

Keywords: childhood, Cormac McCarthy, Jacques Derrida, logocentrism, Post-Structuralism

The key to understanding the role of the young protagonists in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road* is to read them in the context provided by the adults that populate their worlds, particularly the other two main characters, Judge Holden and the man. The two nameless characters, the kid in *Blood Meridian* and the boy in *The Road* offer seemingly opposite embodiments of childhood and adolescence, one of violence and evil, the other one of innocence and

compassion. The kid, who is said to have "a taste for mindless violence" (*BM* 3), joins a group of scalp-hunters who massacre Native Americans and others both for bounty and for pleasure. Surrounded by sheer violence and evil, the kid embraces this lifestyle throughout the narrative. By contrast, wandering through a post-apocalyptic world while struggling to survive, the boy is constructed at first glance as a symbol of one's attempts at preserving one's humanity at all costs, being influenced by his father's simplified vision of the world that divides people into "good guys" and "bad guys." However, beyond this layer of morality that appears to separate them, the two children actually share the same function within the two narratives. Both the kid and the boy challenge the discursive reality constructed by the adults close to them by either resisting their perspective or by questioning its validity and exposing its limits.

But before analyzing the way in which the young challenge the old, it is necessary to see what the old represent. Through the characters of both Judge Holden and the boy's father, McCarthy seems to embody the concept of 'logocentrism,' a term used by Jacques Derrida to formulate his criticism of idealism. What connects both the judge's and the man's visions to a logocentric pattern is not necessarily their philosophical stand, which cannot be identified as explicitly idealist, but rather their attitude towards language as a means to gain control over existence by understanding it and fixing its meaning through words. It is what Derrida identifies as "realism or sensualism – 'empiricism' – [which] are modifications of logocentrism" (398). Derrida further explains this phenomenon:

the signifier 'matter' appears to me problematical only at the moment when its reinscription cannot avoid making of it a new fundamental principle, which, by means of theoretical regression, would be reconstituted into a 'transcendental signified'. It is not only idealism in the narrow sense that falls back upon the transcendental signified. It can always come to reassure a metaphysical materialism. (398)

In other words, it is not a matter of criticizing either idealism or materialism, but rather the underlying assumption of transcendence, of essence, and identity that idealism already shelters and materialism can develop.

Up until Post-Structuralism emerged, Western tradition based its knowledge of the world on logos ('mind' in Greek), or on the mind's capacity to grasp the truth, whether that truth was defined in a materialistic manner, thus dependent on our sensory perception of reality, or from an idealist perspective that envisioned the truth as a pre-existent idea, subsequently materialized as reality. What the two directions of thought had in common was the understanding of the world in terms of identity and substance. In the case of materialism people endeavored to make sense of the world via logic and science and through linguistic tools meant to define and categorize everything, whereas idealism discredited language in its written form as representation, which was seen as corrupting the pure, ideal truth that existed beyond linguistic expression. Although different in terms of attitudes concerning language and knowledge, both philosophical strands are following a pattern in which certain elements are always favored over their opposites, thus functioning in a dichotomist system. As such, even if logocentrism is originally used by Derrida to refer to idealism, his basic critique is of this simplified, black and white, perception of reality in which predefined hierarchies prioritize certain aspects in the binary oppositions that we use in our everyday life.

Prior to Derrida's theory of deconstruction, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in his groundbreaking work *The Will to Power*:

The belief that the world as it ought to be is, really exists, is a belief of the unproductive who do *not desire to create a world* as it ought to be. They posit it as already available, they seek ways and means of reaching. "Will to truth" - *as the failure of the will to create...* (270).

The "will to truth," as Nietzsche calls it, has something of a swampy feeling to it, as if truth may be as stagnant as the muddy waters of a bayou, difficult to explore, yet not entirely impossible

either, on condition that you are dedicated enough to undertake this endeavor. To think like this is, however, as much of a trap as it is to find oneself in the middle of a miry swamp, for as "Truth" is

not something there, that might be found or discovered - but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end - introducing truth as a *processus infinitum*. (269-270)

Nietzsche equates "the will to truth" to "the will to power" and argues that people are driven to acquire knowledge of the world in an attempt to gain control over existence: "there is in us a power to order, simplify, falsify, artificially distinguish" (268). He adds in this sense, "'Truth' is the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations" (268). However, this mastery is nothing but an illusion, since reality is fluid, contradictory, deceptive, and continuously changing.

Both Judge Holden and the man seem particularly concerned with understanding the world in clear terms in order to create a coherent narrative on which they base their own existence and the existence of the ones that are in their proximity. What for the judge is the aggressive narrative of existence as "war," for the father in *The Road* is the melancholic narrative of restoring a pre-apocalyptic order in which the child has to "carry the fire" of civilization and humanity into the future. Their motives are different, but the means by which they seek to fulfill their vision are the same. In this sense, language plays an essential part in both novels, as it is through the use of language that the two adult protagonists try to impose their views about the world.

At times the judge approaches the relationship between language and knowledge from an idealist point of view and makes statements such as "Books lie" (*BM* 123) and "[God] speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things" (*BM* 124), thus seemingly distrusting the possibility of written language to represent reality in its essence. He even emphasizes the limits of human knowledge when he affirms: "in this world more things exist without our

knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there like a string in the maze, so that you shall not lose your way" (*BM* 258). He reinforces his idealist vision by adding that "existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others" (*BM* 259), thus alluding to a transcendental truth hidden from human understanding. However, Judge Holden does not seem an ordinary man at all. As such, he undertakes the impossible task of "singling out the thread of order from the tapestry" because, in his opinion, the one to do that "will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate" (*BM* 210). Consequently, the judge's obsession with writing down and drawing everything that he encounters is equivalent to his "will to power," or his desire to become a "suzerain of the earth" (*BM* 209). For Judge Holden then, the desire to manipulate and to take control of everyone's fate by imposing his own terms of existence is what ultimately motivates his encyclopedic ambitions. But his ambivalence towards language can be read not only as inconsistency in his thinking system, but also as a sign of fissure at the level of the logocentric philosophy that Holden embodies.

As far as the father in *The Road* is concerned, he engages language in the context of what appears to be a survival instinct not only from a biological point of view, but also culturally as he struggles to preserve a microcosm of the lost world order. Right from the beginning of the novel, the man seems to transcend his parental love for the boy by putting all his faith in his ability to keep the legacy of the pre-apocalyptic world alive including the presence of God, in a world that is now "barren, silent, godless" (*TR* 1). As such, he tells himself: "If he [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke" (*TR* 1). Not only does the man demonstrate his belief in a transcendental entity, but he also formulates this belief in a relation of signification in which the child is regarded as the signifier of a transcendental signified. What is more, the verb "spoke" is a clear indication of a logocentric perspective because it discloses a subconscious preference for the uttered word.

Throughout the novel the man is often depicted as telling stories to the boy, "old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (*TR* 12) as if attempting to transfer all the wisdom of the past to the little boy while also perpetuating the oral tradition. However, sometimes he finds himself at a loss for words, as if the apocalypse has erased not only the outside world, but also the language that has defined that world, "the sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality" (*TR* 27). Once again we are left with the impression that what the character experiences as the gradual extinction of "the sacred idiom" is in fact the disintegration of an outdated system of knowledge centered on ideological discourses and the illusion of order.

The role of the kid, on the one hand, and of the boy, on the other hand, is to further undermine the old system to which both the judge and the man are so attached. In *Blood Meridian*, Holden's discourse of war shapes a violent reality to which the kid seems well adapted through his "taste for mindless violence" (*BM* 3) that translates into his joining of the Glanton gang and its primary activity of scalp hunting. Similarly, in *The Road*, the father creates the story of the "bad guys" and the "good guys" and identifies the ultimate scope of existence in "carrying the fire" of humanity, a narrative which the boy accepts as his reality. Both the kid and the boy, though, show signs of rebellion against the limiting world vision imposed by the two adults when their adjustment to the outside rules reaches its limit. This limit translates differently for the kid and the boy, but in both cases they seem to identify a certain weak spot or inconsistency inside the plans elaborated by the judge and the man.

As far as the judge is concerned, his obsession to "witness" everything and to capture the entire world inside the pages of his book in a yearning for mastery will also render him vulnerable to anything that can remain a mystery in front of his overwhelming scrutiny. The kid manages to do just that. His brief and concise interventions make his psychology quite opaque to both the reader and the judge. In spite of the focus that the author places on him right from the beginning of the novel through the suggestive

opening line "See the child" (*BM* 3), the kid in fact remains a mystery throughout the entire story. As such, the judge's limited knowledge of the kid prevents him from exerting control over the young character. The fact that McCarthy constructs the kid more like an absence than like a presence suggests that the character may function as a challenge of the logocentric system and its assumption of presence, identity, and essence.

Throughout the story, the kid also challenges the order imposed by the malevolent judge on other levels. One of the ways in which he does this is through the subtle traces of compassion that he shows in contrast to the aggressive acts that set the norm of his world. Perhaps the most suggestive episode in which the kid's humanity shines through is when he attempts to confess his life story to an old woman and offers to "convey her to a safe place" only to discover that she passed away a long time ago and was now "just a dried shell" (*BM* 332). The judge is well aware of the strange nature of the kid and accuses him of having "a flawed place in the fabric of [his] heart" (*BM* 316), which is "not the heart of a common assassin" (*BM* 315), for he "alone reserved in [his] soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (*BM* 316). Much to the judge's discontent, the kid refuses to shoot him even if given the chance, thus refusing to succumb to the rules of war dictated by the judge himself. Although seemingly passive by taking no action to stop the evil embodied by Holden, the kid actually demonstrates his resistance to the narrative that the judge constructs while also challenging his authority.

Despite the fact that in *The Road* both the father and the boy are humane and can be seen as "the good guys," there is a very subtle difference between the two, which helps in deconstructing the logocentric system of the father. The father constructs his discourse around the issue of morality and even though he does want to protect the child whom he regards as the very essence of humanity, he seems so concentrated on their survival, on protecting their lives from danger, that the moral cause seems at times left out. The boy longs for human connection and support, which are both aspects of humanness, but his father's desire to secure their survival

often impedes the fulfilment of these additional needs that the boy has. Even when danger is not imminent, the father overreacts and prevents the boy from interacting with other people. Such is the case when the boy sees another child, who immediately hides from his sight. When the young protagonist insists that he "just wanted to see him" (TR 26), the father fails to understand his yearning for connection and instead scolds him and denies the existence of that other boy: "There's no one to see. Do you want to die? Is that what you want?" (TR 26). Each time they seem to violate the terms of the narrative about the "good guys," the boy seeks reassurance and asks: "Are we still the good guys?" (TR 23). What for the man looks like a simple story meant to clarify their situation, for the child becomes a source of confusion because surviving often merges with losing their status as morally good people. The boy often sees beyond their personal gain and shows compassion towards the people they encounter without expecting anything in return, thus undermining the egoistical system that the father unconsciously perpetuates. Whether we are referring to the man struck by lightning that they see at some point during their journey, to the little boy mentioned above, the old man called Ely that they encounter on the road, or even to a dog, the boy demonstrates compassion and altruism that transcend the limited vision of the father.

Both the beginning and the end of *The Road* offer the key to understanding the role of the child in deconstructing a system that even when disguised as virtuous in scope, is in fact harboring corruption, discrimination, hatred, egotism, and fear. Although throughout the story, the father is the one to lead the boy, who is submissive to his father's rules of existence as survival, at the beginning of the novel the father's dream foreshadows a change of roles. We are told that, "in the dream from which he'd wakened he had wandered through a cave where the child led him by the hand" (TR 1). As the story progresses, so does the child seem to develop agency, which will eventually make him capable of shaping his own future. Stepping outside the pattern of his father's teachings, which have always placed an emphasis on skepticism regarding

other people, the boy will choose the path of trust. Consequently, after his father's death, the boy is forced to take a leap of faith and join the family he meets on the beach in spite of not knowing whether they are well intended or not. The boy does ask the new man "How do I know you're one of the good guys?", to which the man replies: "You don't. You'll have to take a shot" (TR 92). Even though the boy uses his father's linguistic tools to help him decide, such as the questions about "carrying the fire" or about "eating people," the decision alone is ultimately based on the boy's trust in humanity. As such, instead of blindly following a vision that has rendered "the world as it ought to be" (Nietzsche 270), the boy follows his "*desire to create a world as it ought to be*" (Nietzsche 270).

In conclusion, through the two seemingly different, yet very much alike portrayals of childhood, McCarthy offers the young ones an extremely important role in both *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road*. Read in the context of the discourses elaborated by Judge Holden and the man to justify their logocentric perspectives on the world, both the kid and the boy can be interpreted as a challenge to the knowledge system based on essence and identity. Through his grotesque rendering of a violent universe on the one hand, and a post-apocalyptic scenario on the other hand, McCarthy has created an allegory of the faulty type of system that has been governing humanity for a long time. However, through their resistance to the narratives of war in the case of Holden, as well as of skepticism and false morality in the case of the father, the two children disclose the fissures that deconstruct the system on the inside, thus questioning its long-lasting authority.

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