

Inescapable Manifest Destiny

Meridian n. point or period of highest development, greatest prosperity, development of power, or the like.

McCarthy rejects the romanticized depiction of the West stemming from Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" and instead depicts the true brutality of history. "[Blood Meridian is] built upon a foundation of mythic national/cultural nostalgia – in particular, for a vanished pioneer lifestyle once galvanized by the individualism of the cowboy ethos" (Wallach xv). When comparing Turner's biased, linear progression of American history to McCarthy's violent, cyclic interpretation, the reader questions his/her own morality and purpose in society. McCarthy proposes this question to all Americans: can mankind escape destructive patterns to transform its destiny?

In Turner's essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," he defines his idea of the American Identity and its positive effects on society. Turner claims the frontier positively shaped the current social and political structures by fostering the development of the American character that embodies dominant individualism, a love of adventure and conquest, and all the stubborn and expansive qualities of men. McCarthy weaves the character of Judge Holden throughout *Blood Meridian* as a vehicle for measuring the substance of Turner's claim. The judge creates a paradox for the reader. He conforms to the individualistic, self-made man that is Turner's hero, yet social order does not dictate his actions. The judge instead acts as a mechanism through which the reader confronts Turner's claim because this apparent hero displays brutal violence, evil morality, a greed-driven attitude, and attempts to dictate his own mortality.

The frontier according to Turner is linear, but the borderland, according to McCarthy, is cyclic. A circle makes no net progress, it is endless. The cycle of bloodshed repeats with no

movement towards an enlightened man, so he is trapped to this destiny. According to Neil Campbell, “McCarthy sees that the pursuit of the American dream in the West contains within itself the horrific inevitability of its own failure.” Additionally, “The West is [...] an unattainable dream that cannot be possessed, only edged towards in a movement which is ruthless and violent and driven by a kind of madness to succeed which pushes aside all moral law;” “the push West can only ever be a movement towards death” (Campbell 225). We all struggle against inevitability of death.

The Frontier Thesis

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner released his influential essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” to a rapt audience. In it he introduces the idea of the Frontier Thesis in which “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development” (2). This concept depends upon a linear movement “forward and a swifter pace” westward (7). It depends upon a conceived image of progress through imperialism and superiority. It depends upon the concept of social Darwinism of survival of the fittest in which the “primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier [must evolve] into the complexity of city life” (3). From this movement, Turner identifies his foundational American character that in turn creates the American democracy we thrive in.

Turner’s American identity exemplifies Manifest Destiny from the perspective of an Anglo-American. Turner defines the American as “strong in selfishness and individualism” (17), with “coarseness and strength [and] restless, nervous energy” (20) and “expansive power inherent in them” (6). Turner writes from the perspective of an Anglo-American primarily

because he identified with their societal class, wrote primarily to scholars of the same class, and the only research of any importance to him originated from investigators of similar persuasions. From this leading research of the time Turner concluded that the selfish and individual qualities of specific Anglo-Americans compelled them to push westward and claim land and resources from which democracy expanded. Those pioneers lacking in these vital qualities did not gain the power necessary to influence policy, and therefore were not considered true Americans because they did not contribute to the formation and preservation of democracy. Patricia Limerick refutes Turner's claim by uncovering his bias and ignorance. She challenges, "America's grand venture in continental Manifest Destiny as it looked to Mexico [was] a shameless land grab and an aggressive attack on Mexican sovereignty" (232).

Turner's American character recurs in *Blood Meridian*, though in a negative light. McCarthy based many of his characters on Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession*. The leader of the gang, John Joel Glanton describes the stubbornness of the men in the gang to a bartender: "if you was anything at all other than a goddamn fool you could take one look at these here men and know for a stone fact they aint a one of em goin to get up from where they're at to go set somewhere else" (235 McCarthy). Glanton's men embody the determination so esteemed by Turner, yet in this instance, the American stubbornness results in the thoughtless murder of the barkeeper. These men operate under their own selfish influence and control by self-guided motives, making them "intolerant of administrative experience and education" (Turner 17). Although Turner avoids/denies the negative consequences of American conquest, McCarthy forcefully confronts his audience with the truth. McCarthy scholar, John Sepich, cites Vereen Bell's remark in *Achievement* that "we have the queasy feeling that we are being told, for the

first time, the raw, unromantic truth about both sides of the war for the Southwest territories” (47).

Scalping

Turner’s romanticized view of America contrasts with McCarthy’s graphic interpretation of scalping. In McCarthy’s honest retelling of the borderland battles, he does not hesitate to describe the brutal business of scalping, a consequence inherent in Turner’s positive projection of the acquisition of the American southwest. On page 98, Glanton murders an old Indian woman and then orders his man to procure her scalp by saying, “Get that receipt for us.” McCarthy’s use of the word “receipt” suggests a monetary relationship to the human scalp. The scalp is a commodity, a resource dependent upon the death of a person, and one that needs to be recorded for reimbursement. Sepich references a professional Indian hunter, James Hobbs, who recalled his first-hand reaction to scalping: ““some of the party said it looked barbarous; but I kept on scalping, saying that business men always took receipts, and I wanted something to show our success”” (6). Hobbs removes the human element from the equation of scalping in this justification. By polarizing the situation into two factions, good and evil, the human brain overcomes the moral dilemma of not only killing another human being, but also disfiguring that person for money.

Scalping has economic and psychological repercussions. In basic economics, for an object to retain value it must exhibit short supply and high demand. A scalp attains high value by fulfilling both these requirements. Sepich describes why the supply is limited when quoting Dodge: “scalping is annihilation [to the Indian]; the soul ceases to exist. This accounts for ... the care they take to avoid being themselves scalped” (6). In this respect the physical scalp

represents the difficulty of the task, increasing its value, since a desperate Indian will do anything to prevent this fate. Chamberlain corroborates this evidence as Sepich notices on pages 263-264 of *My Confession* in which a wounded Indian commits suicide by dragging himself over a cliff, out of reach of the scalp hunters. A character in *My Confession* responds to this behavior saying, “The doggone mean red nigger done that thar, to cheat us out of his har!” We return to the idea of a scalp being a receipt. The receipt proves the hunters completed the transaction, fulfilling the contract.

Demand for scalps increases as “Governors of some northern Mexican states established scalp bounties, turning Indian scalps into commodities redeemable for cash [...] of course there was no certain way to distinguish an Apache scalp from any other dark-haired scalp” (235 Limerick). Glanton exploits this fact and slaughters any person whose scalp resembles an Apache in numerous massacres throughout *Blood Meridian*. Turner inadvertently claims this violence as a consequence of conquest, “it appears then that the universal disposition of Americans to emigrate to the western wilderness, in order to enlarge their dominion of inanimate nature, is the actual result of an expansive power inherent in them” (6). Inherent expansion equates to inherent violence and conquest in man because “free land” does not exist, man must always take (forcefully) from another. In the example of Glanton the “morality of scalp hunting is not problematic for them” (Sepich 10) again depicting the readiness with which mankind will persecute and exploit fellow human beings for profit.

In the context of *Blood Meridian*, scalping is a perverted extension of Manifest Destiny, and hence the American Dream: the ethos that declares following democratic ideals will lead to prosperity. In *Blood Meridian* McCarthy’s characters also seek this ideal in terms of pursuing their own fate of land and wealth. Few characters actually attain the dream. Most die brutal

deaths, some by the hands of their comrades, which confronts the held notion that any American can achieve the dream by conforming to society's expectations. "McCarthy sees that the pursuit of the American dream in the West contains within itself the horrific inevitability of its own failure" (Campbell 225). If the basis for motivation and progress in America is built upon the false notion that a man/woman can exceed the conditions of birth, then the idea of determining one's own fate or destiny seems unattainable. McCarthy's exception to this fallacy is the judge believes so. He believes by controlling the fate of those around him, he will free himself of an ordained destiny as evidenced by his remark on page 199 of *Blood Meridian*: "In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation." He quests for immortality through ownership because property equates to power, and power equals immortality. He collects and destroys, not dissimilar to American patterns of conquering.

The Paradox of judge Holden.

The chilling presence in *Blood Meridian* is the judge, who seems to appeal to the audience as a source of higher thinking and reasoning, indicative of associations with high, refined, cultured, Americanized society – a character representing Turner's ideal American man. Yet the judge is the most vicious killer in the book, seeming to relish in the act. In one instance, the Judge recovers an Apache child after a massacre and the gang expresses affection towards the child. A short time later Toadvine confronts the judge, who is carrying the scalp of the dead child, "the judge smiled and wiped the scalp on the leg of his trousers" (164). At this instance the immortal aspect of the judge is depicted when Toadvine has an opportunity to murder the judge, yet fails to do so. The judge escapes several similar situations without apparent intervention, living up to his immortal identity. Turner's ideal American identity "work[s] for the good and the evil" (19) and the judge portrays this character thoroughly when the reader interprets "good" as

embodying the self-made American, even though the judge is unrestrained and lacks social order.

Cyclic – Historical Proof

In the epigraph to *Blood Meridian* the Yuma Daily Sun relates that “a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull [...] shows evidence of having been scalped.” Before beginning the novel, the audience now perceives that the behavior of scalping is not only perpetuated throughout the history of mankind, but that this repeated pattern is inherent, perhaps instinctual, to mankind.

The term “meridian” indicates an unsustainable cycle that only exists in the context of its progress, so must continue to move. This movement is not necessarily forward, so cannot be defined as progress according to Turner. McCarthy explores the circular nature of this pattern, “for the earth is a globe in the void and truth there’s no up nor down to it” (130). This maintains the continuity and connectedness of past human events to modern issues. Given this cycle, do we continue to invest energy into the ruthless pattern of violence driven by selfish motives? “The West is [...] an unattainable dream that cannot be possessed, only edged towards in a movement which is ruthless and violent and driven by a kind of madness to succeed which pushes aside all moral law” (Campbell 225). While we currently distance ourselves from the violence citizens and government commit against minorities, racism continues to manifest throughout law and society. The esteemed, pure democracy of Turner, “democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education” (17) is hypocritically intolerant of those people different from the Anglo-American. Individualism is by

definition a “social theory advocating the liberty, rights, or independent action of the individual” (dictionary.com).

McCarthy confirms the validity of historical figures and events in *Blood Meridian* to lend authority to his argument that men are inherently violent and destined to die in search of false motives – money, power, immortality. McCarthy writes always as an observer, never as an omniscient narrator, keeping the stance close and allowing the reader to respond emotionally to the violence of the novel. Most of historical sources for *Blood Meridian* exist as personal accounts, diaries of the events during and after the Mexican-American war. A prime example and primary source for McCarthy is Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confession*. Chamberlain’s recollections fueled the basis for McCarthy’s key characters: Glanton, Judge Holden, and the kid (Chamberlain himself for moments – the sometimes reluctant, innocent, naïve player), among others.

McCarthy determines the cyclic and unproductive destiny that men in his novel are fated to follow. Life nears its climax only in the proximity of its inevitable end. This results in no forward progress because the only true, dependable progress is towards death. We, as humans, all share this experience: blood both gives and takes life. This contradicts Turner completely, who only values men through their productivity. Does man desire escape or is he content to fulfill the cycle? According to Turner, “it appears then that the universal disposition of Americans to emigrate to the western wilderness, in order to enlarge their dominion of inanimate nature, is the actual result of an expansive power inherent in them” (6). The term inherent implies destiny, unchangeable.

Death is the inevitable end, but the Judge claims to be immortal. In *Blood Meridian* on page 199 the Judge remarks “the freedom of the birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in

zoos.” The Turner idea of free land is what drives progress, but the end result is to contain, to dominate, as the Judge expresses. This poses a moral dilemma to the audience. Assume the reader buys into the American character presented by Turner, but when faced with the reality, brutal violence and no attainment of the American dream, is it worth it to continue along that path?

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