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“THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE UGLY: THE  
WESTERN GENRE IN THE WORKS OF CORMAC MCCARTHY”

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## Abstract

The Western genre may be America's most significant mythology. The figures of cowboys and frontier settlers have seared themselves into the national consciousness through the popularity of Western fiction, which both appeals to and is responsible for many of the country's most valued principles and ideals. This thesis looks at one of contemporary literature's most influential Western writers, exploring the works of Cormac McCarthy and how they have adapted common Western themes and conventions into modern settings. By exploring how McCarthy's *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men* use common Western tropes to convey contemporary messages and ideas, this thesis attempts to both explain the lasting power of the genre as well as the ways in which the genre can be reconceptualized and reimagined to explore modern day American issues.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction: The Good, the Bad, and the Reconceptualization of the Ugly .....	1
Chapter 2: What's in a Western? .....	4
Chapter 3: The Corrupted Western in <i>No Country for Old Men</i> .....	8
Chapter 4: A New Frontier in <i>The Road</i> .....	22
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Variations on a Theme .....	34
Works Cited .....	37

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## Chapter 1: Introduction: The Good, The Bad, and the Reconceptualizing of the Ugly

The American Western has taken on many forms. The advent of new mediums and the lasting power of the genre has brought the American Western through numerous incarnations and interpretations – from the direct historical accounts found in works such as *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, to the dime store novels and pulp fiction popularized by writers like Zane Grey and Max Brand, to the spaghetti western films of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, to long-running western television shows like *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*. As Ed Minus writes in an essay for the *Sewanee Review*, “[T]he Western.. has been mythologized, demythologized, romanticized, deromanticized, spoofed, mongrelized, inflated, deflated, politicized, allegorized – transmogrified in every conceivable way” (Minus 83). Indeed, one need only to trace the rich lineage of the American Western to its most recent works– represented by genre defying films like 2007’s *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* and 2010’s remake of *True Grit* to television shows like *Deadwood* and *Firefly* – to realize just how much the genre has been transformed since the time when actual cowboys and Indians occupied the West.

From the standpoint of popular culture, it can be rather easy to see why the Western has leant itself to so many adaptations over the years. Its literary origins in pulp fiction, where the stoic figures of Jesse James and Billy the Kid battled insurmountable danger with smoking guns, are deeply entertaining in a purely American sense. But that appeal to the base American desire for stoic, deeply independent heroes exists solely because of the mythologized West. The Western marks the true beginning of American culture, when both the governmental structures and physical boundaries were being formed to create the country as it is today. Therefore, as a starting point for our national identity, the Western offers itself as a sort of measuring stick with which we can compare ourselves to. The figures that actually occupied the Old West and helped

to create the country as we know it today may be, in fact, different from how they are portrayed in early Western literary works, but it's those portrayals that have formed resonant icons of cowboys and frontier settlers that still remain entirely influential on the nation's identity. As such, comparison to these mythological founding figures is constant, and can serve to represent the state of American culture at any given point.

To further explore this notion, this thesis will take a look at the works of one of America's most important contemporary Western writers, albeit the works of his that, while not specifically taking place in the Old West or even existing as Western stories in the traditional sense, nevertheless use themes and tropes found in Western literature to comment on contemporary culture. Specifically, I will explore Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men*.

McCarthy, of course, lends himself easily to the Western genre, responsible for novels like *Blood Meridian* and the three books that comprise his "Border Trilogy," which practically redefined the Western genre from the action-oriented and formulaic films and television series of the 1960s and 70s. *Blood Meridian* has even been referred to as "the ultimate Western, not to be surpassed" by Yale University professor Harold Bloom (Bloom 152). The two novels I will look at, however, are more contemporary adaptations of the Western mythology, not only in the sense that they are his two most recent works, but because each applies Western themes to a modern setting rather than modern themes to a Western setting. *No Country for Old Men* takes place in 1980's Texas, and presents a harrowing take on the concepts of justice and the battle between good and evil. McCarthy uses his characters, especially that of Sheriff Bell, a figure of traditional Western justice that is forced to confront the troubling violence of a new generation, to comment on an American culture that is moving away from its romanticized past in a new, deeply darker

direction. Similarly, *The Road* takes place during an indeterminate point in the near future, sometime after the collapse of modern civilization. McCarthy uses *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic setting to invoke the untamed frontier of the American West, drawing a clear comparison to the beginning of Western civilization to its eventual demise and prospective rebirth. Both novels serve as evidence of the Western genre's staying power and influence on the American consciousness through their reimagining of its conventions to apply to modern issues.

## Chapter 2: What's in a Western?

Before I can jump into a discussion of how McCarthy's works use Western tropes to comment on contemporary American culture, it is important to identify the parameters of the Western genre. That is, to explore what it is that defines the genre, as well as what aspects of a work place it within the genre. It is also important to note the significance of the Western genre's influence on the national identity and consciousness, so as to understand why the genre remains so relevant to the country at any given time in its history.

First, we must establish what we mean when we refer to things like the Western genre or the Old West. The Western genre, although steeped in a specific historical period of America, is not always concerned with historical accuracy. While the Western is certainly based upon the people and events that existed and took place during the time of the American frontier, the factual representation of a historical period is not always its primary concern. Rather, the Western genre as we know it today is more mythology than history. As Richard Slotkin explains in his book *Gunfighter Nation*:

Myths are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness... Over time, through frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, "icons," "keywords," or historical clichés. (Slotkin 5)

The Western, like any myth, is a collection of established narratives comprised of these "deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols." The genre is, at its core, a series of romanticized images.



Thus, while they are certainly founded upon historical fact, the meaning of Western conventions – the cowboy, the frontier, etc – is not so much shaped by what they meant at the time of their existence, but rather the perception of them that has been shaped over time through these numerous retellings. For instance, of the mythical cowboy figure, scholar Marshall Fishwick says, “[W]e are dealing not so much with specific individuals as with a recognizable type; not with a mere historical reality, but with a fictional ideal” (Fishwick 78). The emphasis on a type and fictional ideal over specific individuals is important, as it shows the cowboy is not so much a person as he is a collection of personified principles and ideals. The cowboy “embodies the middle ground between savagery and civilization” (Book v). He has “come to symbolize a freedom, individuality, and closeness to nature” (Fishwick 91). He has, like most symbols of the west, come to represent the foundation upon which the country was built, and as such serves as a starting point that McCarthy, through numerous reconceptualizations and reimaginings, can compare and contrast modern America to.

Secondly, it is important to further note what specific set of symbols comprise the Western genre, while at the same time acknowledging that there exists no single set of defining characteristics that a work must adhere to in order to be considered Western. It would be oversimplifying the argument to say that the only things a work needs to be considered western is a stoic cowboy figure, a couple of horses, and a handful of tense standoffs. Rather, it is imperative to identify the most basic themes and ideas inherent in the Western genre, so as to be able to discuss how these aspects of the genre are adapted to comment on contemporary society. There are certainly common aspects shared amongst stories in the genre, but it is impossible to take from these shared characteristics a single foundation from which all Western stories can be built. Even if we were to use examples of the works that originated the genre, doing so would fail to capture the sheer breadth of topics, themes, and ideas that the Western genre has grown to encompass. Alan Bourassa discusses this matter in his essay “Riders of the Virtual Sage: Zane

Grey, Cormac McCarthy, and the Transformation of the Popular Western,” where he talks of the limited, but necessary scope provided by using Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage* as an example of Western literature with which to compare other works to:

*Riders of the Purple Sage* is an example of the Western – indeed, one of the most popular examples. And as an example, it stands in the problematic relationship of all examples to what they exemplify. Examples are both singular and general... [T]he example cannot serve in its particularity insofar as it is an example of an essence. Its particular features, its elements, cannot stand for all the elements of every example of the genre... But nothing can serve as an example unless it is made up of particular features, singular points. (Bourassa 438)

Thus, we must acknowledge that it is impossible for any single work to encompass every characteristic that comprises its genre, but nevertheless note that there exist specific points that do, in fact, define a genre. It is from around these points that works are built, incorporating and altering these points in order to fit into the genre.

With these in mind, we can now look at those common points to identify a basis for the thesis’s primary argument. As Bourassa states:

We are usually at least passingly familiar with the Western ethos if we have seen even a smattering of Western films and television shows... We know the terms in which it is usually discussed: the love of the land, of independence, the hero who comes from outside of the community to restore order, redemptive violence, the martial skills of the hero, the special relationship with the chosen animal (the noble horse, the loyal dog), the good-hearted woman in need of rescue, the implacable enemy bent on domination. (439)

Bourassa acknowledges that there are some aspects of the Western genre that are easily identifiable from nothing more than a passing familiarity with any cowboy movie or television show. They are certain icons of the genre, so to speak, instantly recognizable and likely to be

included in a Western story in some capacity. Indeed, several of these recognizable points play a part in the works of McCarthy, specifically the martial skills of the hero, attempts to restore order, redemptive violence, and the enemy bent on domination. From these base points McCarthy creates even more complex, deeper themes.

In addition to describing the more basic aspects of the Western, Bourassa elaborates on the genre's standard conventions, stating, "Cowboy stories have guns, they have horses, they take place in the American West; in more complex terms, they are about the American Garden of Eden, the pastoral vision of a nation, the value of individual striving and heroism, manifest destiny" (440). Here, Bourassa lays out the deeper themes that exist at the heart of most Western stories in clear terms, and in doing so explains both why the genre is so powerful of an American institution and why it can be used to comment on contemporary culture. As the perceived "American Garden of Eden," the Old West represents the most idealized aspects of American culture – rugged individualism, justice, the desire to expand and advance – in their purest, most unambiguous terms. These are believed to be the building blocks of our country, and by invoking the Old West, the works I discuss in this thesis comment on contemporary culture by exploring how these formative characteristics have either been lost, corrupted, or have simply failed, or how they have survived and evolved to adapt to modern issues.

### **Chapter 3: The Corrupted Western in *No Country for Old Men***

As I've previously discussed, neither of the two works I am writing about are Western stories in the traditional sense, but rather incorporate and reimagine themes and aspects of the Western genre in a contemporary setting. Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, however, may be the work that most closely resembles a traditional Western. In addition to the Texas setting, there are a number of distinct symbols and characters that tie the story to the Western genre. As Bourassa discussed, there are the basic, instantly recognizable symbols of horses and guns – as two sheriffs inspect a crime scene, they do so on horseback, guns slung over their shoulders: “He handed Wendell one of the lever action rifles he'd brought and swung up into the saddle and pulled his hat down” (70). The novel also describes several of its violent conflicts as “shootouts,” as well as throws around words like “outlaw” and “desperado” (237). And like Boursassa further cited, there are in the novel the traditional Western figures of the “good-hearted woman in need of rescue” and the “implacable enemy bent on domination,” as well of that of the traditional cowboy. Sheriff Bell, the novel's guiding voice, is the hero trying to restore order. The outlaw can be found in Anton Chigurh, a force of destruction who leaves countless bodies in his wake. And the girl in distress can be found in Carla Jean, whose husband's actions set the events of the novel in motion and put her squarely in danger. But it's the way that McCarthy interprets and uses these figures that make them not only a significant reimagining of Western tropes, but a way for McCarthy to convey his novel's message. By

placing these traditional figures in a contemporary setting, McCarthy's modern interpretation of a Western story is a startling look at how American culture and values have transformed and, in some cases, been completely destroyed from those that the country was founded upon. The novel's title is indicative of its underlying message – America is literally no longer a country for the noble, stoic heroes who occupied its mythic birth.

McCarthy's use of Western tropes to explore contemporary American culture is primarily accomplished through the character of Sheriff Bell. Bell serves as the novel's narrator and mouthpiece, physically and emotionally embodying a nostalgia for the past and a concern for the future. McCarthy makes sure to steep Sheriff Bell deep in the Western past, making him representative of cowboy mythology and an older, simpler type of law enforcement. He accomplishes this by having Bell constantly discuss the past, and his fondness for older, simpler times. At one point, Bell narrates, “Some of the old time sheriffs wouldn't even carry a firearm.... I always liked to hear about the old timers. Never missed a chance to do so” (63). The statement perfectly encapsulates Bell's character, representing a wistfulness for a bygone era, one characterized by simplicity and a respect for the law. While this may not be a sentiment of the Western genre in itself – indeed, violent conflict is the most significant aspect of many a Western story – it represents the sort of lawful, tamed ideal that Western heroes stood for. The Western is concerned primarily with the constant striving of civilization to overcome lawless wilderness, and Bell's adherence to such ideals places him squarely as a representation of Western heroes.

McCarthy further places Bell as a man of the past by making him one who is distinctly not of the present. During one passage, Bell doubts the use of advanced technology in his line of work:

I don't know that law enforcement benefits all that much from new technology...I still like the old Colts. .44-40... I like the old Winchester model 97... That cruiser of mine is seven years old. It's got the 454 in it. You can't get that engine no more. I drove one of the new ones. It wouldn't outrun a fatman. I told the man I thought I'd stick with what I had. (62)

Bell's preference for older technology is evidence of a resentment of future advancements, representing how not only out of step he is with modern culture, but how he actively resists it. While this passage shows a single man who is not simply influenced by the past, but one who stubbornly clings to his old ways, it still gives readers the sense that the future brings a lessening of things, rather than an improvement of them. It's merely a hint of a sentiment that overwhelmingly pervades the novel, one that suggests that the more America moves away from the ideals of its glorified and romanticized past, the worse and more corrupt the country becomes.

But McCarthy doesn't connect Bell to the past through wistfulness and stubbornness alone. Bell has ancestral ties to the time of the Old West, explaining, "We came here from Georgia. Our family did. Horse and wagon" (123). It is through this ancestral connection that McCarthy deepens Bell's attachment to the past, and in turn the attachment any American has to their nation's past. Bell states, "... the dead have more claims on you than what you might want to admit or even what you might know about and their claims can be very strong indeed" (124). This statement is made even more significant when Bell tells readers that he was sheriff at the same time as his grandfather Jack was, stating, "I think he was pretty proud of that. I know I was" (90). The fact that Bell is proud of the fact that he follows in one of his ancestor's professions, one that's steeped in Western myth, is telling of how heavily Bell is influenced by the past. Here, McCarthy is directly addressing the power of the Western mythology through commenting on how influenced Bell has been by his ancestors. It is here we begin to gain a

sense of the deep influence the birth of our nation has had on our identity as Americans, as Bell's ideals, principles, and his very livelihood have all been shaped by his connections to his ancestors. It echoes the sentiment that the country's guiding principles were founded in the time of the Old West, and that the mythology of the Western echoes itself in our national identity for generations after its time. But in *No Country*, McCarthy is interested in exploring how we have lost sight or have corrupted that idealized identity.

The first sense of this corruption is one that opens the novel and sets the tone of the grisly violence that follows. While at one point in the novel Bell claims "I never had to kill nobody," the book opens with Bell narrating, "I sent one boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville" (4). The conflicting statements are evident of the nature of Bell's character, unwilling as he is to engage in direct, life threatening conflict, but it's also symbolic of the law enforcement's helplessness in directly confronting the kind of violence and crime that characterizes the novel's contemporary setting. As Bell explains, it was his "arrest" and his "testimony," but there's the feeling that such actions are an afterthought compared to the boy's crime of murdering a fourteen-year-old girl (3). But what is important in this opening passage is the overwhelming sense that Bell's experience with the nineteen-year-old he sentences to death is evidence of a dark, troubling shift in American society. As Bell explains:

He'd killed a fourteen year old girl... and he told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he'd do it again... I don't know what to make of that. I surely don't. I thought I'd never seen a person like that and it got me to wonderin if maybe he was some new kind. (3)

While criminals and outlaws are a staple of the Western genre, the kind of criminal Bell describes in the book's opening is in no way romanticized or adventurous, as such figures usually are in the action fueled Western stories. And as Bell adds, "... he wasn't nothin compared to what

was comin down the pike” (4). This act of senseless murder that opens the novel is indicative of some darker, more sinister force at play, one more so than mere criminals and robbers to overcome. What Bell perceives is a sort of moral decay, something that is corrupting America at its core. This is a sentiment echoed through out the book through Bell's ruminations. At one point, Bell narrates: “Mostly I... try and figure out what might be headed this way. Not that I've done all that good a job at headin it off. It keeps gettin harder” (40). The passage once again reflects Bell’s inability to confront the kind of crime plaguing contemporary America, that whatever is headed his way is not merely some villain to be vanquished to restore order, but rather a deeply rooted issue with American civilization itself. In what is perhaps a passage that perfectly encapsulates this theme, Bell states:

I read in the papers here a while back some teachers come across a survey that was sent out back in the thirties to a number of schools around the country. Had this questionnaire about what was the problems with teachin in the schools... And the biggest problems they could name was things like talkin in class and running in the hallways. Chewin gum. Copyin homework. Things of that nature. So they got one of them forms that was blank and printed up a bunch of em and sent em back out to the same schools. Forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide. (196)

Here, McCarthy lays out the novel's themes in their simplest terms. Bell's talk of the world going to hell may smack of an old man losing grip with the world changing around him, but his thoughts on the corruption of American society comes in the middle of a novel about a blood soaked conflict over a stolen cache of drug money. Through Bell's commentary, McCarthy frames the plot of his novel as something more than a modern crime thriller with Western trappings. McCarthy positions the violence in his novel as a symptom of a much larger, more intangible threat to American society. As many essayists state, the Western genre is concerned,



primarily, with the genesis of America. But by creating a modern day Western and surgically removing all of the idealistic, romanticized aspects of the genre, McCarthy concerns himself with the corruption and inevitable destruction of the nation as opposed to its birth.

McCarthy uses Bell's internal monologues interspersed throughout the book to voice and set-up the themes he wishes to explore, but he executes them through the novel's central plot. It is in *No Country*'s primary conflict that McCarthy reimagines the Western as a fatally violent crime thriller to evidence America's moral corruption, by creating an outlaw that Bell cannot even hope to fight in the character of Anton Chigurh. Chigurh, a deadly, business-like assassin, is at his core the evolution of the common Western villain. As a rival hitman says, "Chigurh is an outlaw" (157). But he comes to stand for much more than a simple antagonist. McCarthy imbues his villain with an almost otherworldly presence to elevate him to more of a force than a mere character. In fact, when asked how dangerous he is, Wells, the rival hitman, replies, "Compared to what? The bubonic plague?" (141) The comparison to a plague is entirely apt, as McCarthy views the terrible actions of his novel's villain as symptomatic of a sort of moral disease. The scene in which we're introduced to him, he claims two lives with cold, calculating precision, and his complete lack of emotion belies an almost inhuman detachment from the world. In quick succession, two acts of murder are described with business-like factuality:

Chigurh squatted and scooted his manacled hands beneath him to the back of his knees. In the same motion he sat and rocked backward and passed the chain under his feet and then stood instantly and effortlessly... He dropped his cuffed hands over the deputy's head and leaped into the air and slammed both knees against the back of the deputy's neck and hauled back on the chain. (5)

And, shortly after:

He placed his hand on the man's head like a faith healer. The pneumatic hiss and click of the plunger sounded like a door closing. The man slid soundlessly to the ground, a round hole in his forehead from which the blood bubbled and ran down into his eyes carrying with it slowly his uncoupling world to see. Chigurh wiped his hand with his handkerchief. I just didnt want you to get blood on the car, he said. (7)

The acts of violence immediately establish Chigurh as an outlaw, a man with a penchant for killing and little value for human life. But more than that, there is a chilling precision and complete lack of passion to Chigurh's brutal murders. The fact that he murders a man simply to take his car, and that the act of violence that introduces the reader to him is described in the most basic, matter-of-fact terms, is perhaps even more frightening than if Chigurh was framed as a psychotic killer. Rather, he is business-like in his violence, a complete lack of emotion making him evil and criminal in the purest of terms. More importantly, though, is the fact that Chigurh's introduction isn't entirely an isolated incident. The short scene comes directly after Bell's story about the nineteen-year-old he put to execution, and reflects a key component of that story. As Bell explains about the murder, "The papers said it was a crime of passion and he told me there wasnt no passion to it" (3). Chigurh's murders are equally without passion, making him evidence of what Bell referred to as "some new kind." This is significant in not only representing the moral corruption that Bell decries, but also in how it reconceptualizes another Western convention. As Richard Slotkin explains in *Gunfighter Nation*, violence played an important part in the myth of the American frontier. He states, "In each stage of development, the Myth of the Frontier relates the achievement of "progress" to a particular form or scenario of violent action," elaborating that conflict was a "central and peculiar feature of the process" of this progress. (12) Slotkin goes on to say that, "The Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of ... regeneration through violence"

(12). Thus, it isn't simply that violence is a thrilling pulp aspect of action-oriented Westerns, but rather something that plays an active role in the mythological Old West's focus on progress and the development of American civilization. But the acts of violence that occur in *No Country* serve the exact opposite purpose. Their lack of passion or a grander purpose serve only to show the country in decline, and any acts of violence that could initiate such renewal never occur. The novel's outlaw figure is one who unflinchingly claims lives in a search to reclaim lost drug money, and his acts of violence are the ones that represent, in Bell's eyes, a threat to the fabric of America. They are without romance or idealized purpose, and McCarthy purposefully never counters them with more heroic acts of violence. Rather, McCarthy eschews Western convention by making the inevitable showdown between his novel's outlaw and sheriff hero a nonviolent anticlimax to exemplify the novel's themes of futility and surrender to moral corruption rather than the themes of progress and renewal that typify the Western genre.

But before discussing the novel's anticlimax, it is important to explore what leads up to that moment, and how it further reimagines Western tropes. The Western genre is concerned primarily with the triumph of good over evil, of civilization and government triumphing over wilderness and lawlessness. But in Bell's conflict with Chigurh, the opposite is true. By framing his novel in the Western genre, McCarthy casts law enforcement as completely helpless in the face of contemporary evil. We see these signs of helplessness acknowledged throughout the book, in Bell's reluctance to face Chigurh and his admitting of the law's inability to protect against this new breed of criminals. This is especially evident in his meeting with Carla Jean, the good-hearted woman in need of saving that, in the end, Bell is unable to save. While investigating the men pursuing her husband, Llewelyn, and the money he stole, he contacts her to press her for information. The conversation between the two has a distinctly defeatist tone:

How do you think this is goin to end? he said.

I dont know. I dont know how nothin is goin to end. Do you?

I know how it aint.

Like livin happily ever after?

Somethin like that. (129)

Bell's investigation and pursuit of Chigurh is an honest attempt at protecting the citizens of his county, yet he already seems resigned to the fact that he will fail. He is attempting to gain information from Carla Jean that could help, but she appears to not trust him, and even says as much:

Well, she said. I'm sorry you come all this way not to do no better than what you done.

Well, he said. You do the best you can. Sometimes things turn out all right.

Do you really care?

... Yes mam. I do. The people of Terrell County hired me to look after em. That's my job. I get paid to be the first one hurt. Killed, for that matter. I'd better care.

You're askin me to believe what you say. But you're the one sayin it. (133)

Carla Jean displays an inherent distrust of law enforcement, not merely in the sense that giving up information about her husband could put him in trouble, but seems to seriously doubt that anything Bell could do to help would prove useful. It's this distrust and lack of faith in the ability of the law to protect its citizens that reveals several aspects of Bell's investigation into Chigurh's pursuit of Llewelyn. It reveals Bell's honest dedication to his job and his duty to protect people, but it shows distinct limits to the dedication. Bell is willing to embark on “a three hour drive to Odessa” to press Carla Jean for information, but as has been established, isn't going to put himself at hazard to save Llewelyn or confront Chigurh (125). Not necessarily out of cowardice or an unwillingness to die in the line of duty – as he says at one point, “I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job,” – but rather out of an acknowledgment that doing so wouldn't accomplish anything (4). Bell is almost pragmatic in discussing Llewelyn's fate with his wife, which is not only another way for McCarthy to remove the romanticism of the genre from

his world, but an acknowledgment of his inability to stop Chigurh and criminals like him, and his ability to live with this failure. As he tells Carla Jean before leaving, “If he gets killed then I got to live with that. But I can do it” (133). Thus, there's not only a sense of failure, but an acceptance and surrender to this failure. This sentiment of the law's helplessness is echoed throughout Bell's investigation, all while Chigurh's body count steadily rises. At one point, Carla Jean articulates her lack of faith in the law, realizing she couldn't turn to them for help even if she wanted to:

We aint running from the law, Mama.

You couldnt call on em to help you though, could you?

... No. We couldnt. (202)

Carla Jean's lack of trust in the law is completely founded, reflected best in Bell's inevitable failure. Both Llewelyn and Carla Jean are murdered, the former by the Mexican drug cartel whose money he stole, the latter by Chigurh, even after he has successfully retrieved the cash. As Bell surveys the scene of Llewelyn's murder, the following exchange occurs:

Well, the sheriff said. There aint nothin you could of done about it.

No, Bell said. But you always like to think there is. (240)

This moment, occurring as it does while Bell inspects Llewelyn's lifeless, bullet riddled body, is a frank acknowledgment of the sense of futility that has marked the entire novel. In McCarthy's reconceptualizing of the Western, the hero fails to triumph, outclassed by evil forces much greater than him, and the scenario in turn reflects the novel's perceived state of America as crumbling to the criminals who have grown more powerful than the law.

The caper to this underlying theme comes in the novel's anticlimax. Confrontation is inevitable in most Westerns – indeed, some of its most lasting tropes stem from the hero facing his enemy head on, guns blazing. Showdowns at high noon and shootouts in dusty towns are

predicated on violent confrontation. But the novel blatantly defies this convention to drive home its point about the inability of law to overcome modern outlaws. After Llewelyn's death, Bell returns to the motel he was shot in, moments after Chigurh leaves the room with the cache of drug money that Llewelyn had hidden away. For a moment, it seems as if the paths of the two men will finally converge, ending in a climactic confrontation. But the two only ever regard each other from a distance:

He set the bag in the floor and he'd reached for the key to turn on the ignition when he saw the Terrell County cruiser pull into the lot in front of the motel office a hundred feet away. He let go of the key and sat back... Chigurh waited, the pistol in his lap. (243)

And, from Bell's perspective, in a conversation with himself as he stands in the empty motel room:

You dont know for sure that he's out there, he said.

Yes you do. You knew it at the restaurant. That's why you come back here.

Well what do you aim to do?

... He stood with the revolver in his hand, his thumb on the knurled hammer. Then he opened the door and walked out. (243)

The scene is all build up, layering the tension on thick and guiding us to our preconceived notions of how a Western ends with its focus on Bell's gun and the possibility of a one-on-one showdown, good versus evil, the hero against the villain. Yet, when Bell walks out, gun primed to shoot, Chigurh is not there to meet him. And rather than searching for him, Bell drives down the road to call and wait for backup. When backup arrives, Chigurh is nowhere to be found, and Bell says simply, "I think we been outgeneraled" (245). This lack of a final confrontation poses a significant question. Why did Chigurh, who up to this point has killed every one of his enemies, allow Bell to live? With what we know about the characters and themes of the novel, we can

infer the answer. Wells, the rival hitman hired to hunt Chigurh, describes Chigurh as an “outlaw” and a “psychopath,” but also describes him as having “principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that” (153). And of Sheriff Bell, he says, “I don’t think of him at all. He’s a redneck sheriff in a hick town in a hick county. In a hick state” (157). These observations essentially set up the novel’s anticlimax. Chigurh is not a man who kills senselessly, driven by a purpose that is not entirely made clear to the reader but a purpose nonetheless. Thus, he would not kill Bell simply to kill him. It is, perhaps, that Bell is such a non-threat that he does not even register on Chigurh’s radar. He is an afterthought, evidenced by the fact that he arrives at the motel after Chigurh has already taken back the money that Llewelyn had hid, and by the fact that Wells barely considers him a player in the novel’s central conflict. Thus, just as a showdown in a Western solidifies the hero as a protector of good and the community, *No Country*’s distinct lack of one solidifies Bell as completely ineffectual against the criminals he is entrusted with bringing to justice. The anticlimax is addition through subtraction, another way in which McCarthy reconfigures an aspect of the genre to bring his point across.

The novel ends on several notes that further comment on not only the book’s connection to the Western genre, but contemporary America’s connection to the Western mythology. As Bell returns to the scene of the crime that started the book’s chain of events, a drug trade gone awry where Llewelyn first stumbled upon the money, the sheriff comments, “...it just seemed to me that this country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too” (284). The comment, as well as the novel’s Western trappings of shootouts in the streets and violent murder, is an acknowledgment of the kind of violence this country was founded upon. Thus, the novel may be a testament to the corrupting and moral decay of the country, yet it seems to suggest that where America stands today is more of an evolution of our own national identity formed from

our bloody past rather than a significant departure from what came before. But if McCarthy realizes that violence simply begets more violence, he also notes that something has been lost that gave that violence purpose and made it a part of the fabric of the Western mythology. In the book's closing pages, Bell makes an observation about a stone carved water trough near his house, saying, "And I got to thinkin about the man that done that... This man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years. Why was that? What was it that he had faith in?" (307). For Bell, the water trough represents a faith in the future of America that characterized the Old West, the belief in progress that gave meaning to violence. But Bell perceives this faith as having been lost over time. He describes the water trough as built to last "ten thousand years," yet he says the man who chiseled it "had to know bettern" to think that "nothing would change" (307). Thus, the trough represents "some sort of promise in his heart," some intangible belief in a grander purpose of taming and settling the frontier for the benefit of future generations. Yet this belief, which shaped our national identity, which romanticized violence, which made the Western such an integral part of our country's mythology, has been lost to time and stands as nothing more than a relic of our past. The symbol of the trough reflects an earlier quote from Chigurh, who when describing a coin he flips to determine whether or not he kills someone based on what they call, says, "To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment" (57). This quote, along with the novel's closing images, and the conventions it uses throughout, combine to reflect the novel's treatment of its own Western roots. The novel uses Western conventions in a contemporary setting to both invoke the same themes of the Old West yet interchange them with another point in American history. The Western genre itself is like the water trough, symbolic of our past, representing a faith in our future, yet as the



novel's reimagining of its conventions to paint a stark portrayal of contemporary America show, serving as nothing more than a sign of a time long since passed for which to admire and bemoan the loss of.

#### Chapter 4: A New Frontier in *The Road*

McCarthy is similarly interested in reconceptualizing Western conventions to explore contemporary themes in his novel *The Road*, though the aspects of the genre he uses and the way in which he uses them vary greatly from the way he employs them in *No Country for Old Men*. At first glance, *The Road* seems like a natural progression from *No Country*, as McCarthy takes the moral bankruptcy that characterized *No Country* to its logical conclusion in *The Road* – the complete collapse of American civilization into violent barbarianism. *The Road* takes place in a post-apocalyptic America at an indeterminate point in the future, both the country's society and landscape having been laid to waste by a never quite explained cataclysmic event. The novel follows an unnamed man and his son as they attempt to survive in a barren wasteland, battling elements and enemies alike, all while trying to cling to their own humanity in the face of unimaginable violence and horrors. The premise, quite frankly, sounds like the kind of bleak future Sheriff Bell thought inevitable in *No Country*. Yet, while the novel is very much filled with despair, *The Road* is a deceptively hopeful book. By bringing civilization to its end, McCarthy manages to bring it back to its beginning, creating a new American frontier in the process. Where *No Country* was concerned with the loss of Western ideals and romanticism, *The Road* is concerned with rediscovering those aspects of the mythology, creating a new frontier through its characters and physical setting that invokes the frontier of the Old West.

The book's primary connection to the Western lies in its physical setting. *The Road's* post-apocalyptic world is as much of an untamed wilderness as the old frontier, equally savage and devoid of law, government, and structure. Yet, at the same time, it is a testament to the civilization that once occupied it. McCarthy mixes images of the natural world with images of

the industrial world to give the setting both a sense of unbound wilderness and lifeless ruin. The very first words that McCarthy uses to describe the setting are “barren, silent, godless” (4).

Words like “barren” and “silent” imbue the setting with a sense of emptiness, while the use of the word “godless,” is particularly significant, as it suggests the land now lacks even the basic governing influence of religion. And as the nameless father further surveys the land, McCarthy reinforces the distinct lack of life, as well as the traces of ruined civilization:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing. Beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels... He got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain down there where the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. (8)

The passage, which comes in the book’s opening pages, is perhaps the most telling as to the nature of *The Road’s* post-apocalyptic setting, and encapsulates the way in which it represents a contemporary frontier. There is, first and foremost, the emphasis on the natural aspects of the setting. The mention of a river valley, a mudbank, meadowlands and plains all take prominence over the symbols of ruined industrial life. It is here that we gain the sense that *The Road’s* futuristic wasteland is, in a sense, a kind of return to the natural, untamed wilderness of the old frontier, as those signs of civilization’s taming of the natural world have all fallen into various states of disrepair and abandonment. The symbols of civilization are described, quite literally, with words like “abandoned” and “burned.” Roads, houses, and street lights exist as nothing more than symbols of destruction and collapse. The city the father sees in the distance is referred to as nothing more than a shape, an outline lacking life and vibrancy. These ruins of civilization

are both at odds and in conjunction with the reemerging aspects of the natural world. They are obviously succumbing to the encroaching forces of nature, but at the same time both the natural and industrial aspects of the setting are cast over with a gray, lifeless pall, combining to create what McCarthy refers to as “the waste.” This wasteland is the novel’s new frontier, completely different from the old in its distinct hopelessness and lack of life, but at the same time just as wild, untamed, and dangerous as the frontier of old. And it will be in the father and son’s traversing of this wasteland, at once futuristic and old, at once natural and industrialized, that McCarthy will explore mankind’s resiliency for rebirth and renewal in a contemporary interpretation of the Western’s frontier myth.

The other way in which McCarthy ties his post-apocalyptic future to the Old West, and one that differs wildly from how he made the connection in *No Country*, is through his novel's father and son heroes. While Sheriff Bell represented a deromanticizing of the cowboy myth, the father and son represent a reemergence of it. Where Bell failed in protecting his community through direct confrontation, the father and son are the complete opposite, the father going to any length to protect his son from danger. As Ashley Kunsu explains in her essay “Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, ”:

... while grace and redemption are at best tenuous, unrealized possibilities in prior McCarthy novels, in *The Road* these aspects fundamentally drive the narrative: out of love for his child and hope for some salvation, the man pushes himself to the point of death to preserve the child's physical and spiritual safety. (58)

The father's dedication to his son, and the extremes to which he goes to ensure his safety, position him as not only a hero of this new frontier, but one who bears a striking resemblance to the heroes of the Old West.

This connection between the father and the heroes of the Old West is established in several ways, the first being several overt references to the simplistic, good versus evil dichotomy that defined many of the conflicts in early Western literature. Early in the story, as the father and son are traveling, the father tells his son “old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them” (41). The moment is brief, but obvious in both its referencing of Western stories and its connecting of the father to these stories through the phrase “as he remembered them.” The mention of this moment between the father and his son is evidence of their attempts to preserve these stories of courage and justice, both in their memories and their actions. This is further reinforced in an exchange between the two, one that takes place directly after a violent confrontation:

You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anybody who touches you. Do you understand?

Yes.

He sat there cowered in the blanket. After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? He said.

Yes. We're still the good guys.

And we always will be.

Yes. We always will be. (77)

The exchange is a literal acknowledgment of the father and son's position as “good guys,” and the use of such a colloquial term represents a distinct, black and white simplicity to the world that they inhabit. The mention of God is especially important, as it another simple way to separate the heroes from the villains, bestowing upon them a religious morality that contrasts with the “godless” country. As Kuhn explains, “In *The Road*, basic differences divide the good from the bad... Their status as good guys inheres in, if nothing else, their refusal to eat people” (59). This simplicity is further evidence of how *The Road's* futuristic wasteland is, in essence, a

return to the beginning, as the romanticized Western frontier was considered a “magnificent country that could clarify the difference between good and evil characters,” as evidenced by the type of hero versus villain narratives that typified most Westerns (Blake 211).

This simplicity is both acknowledged and evidenced, as we see the lengths the father will go to protect his son and overcome evil. Just as conflicts were settled in the Old West through violence and brute force, the heroes of *The Road* overcome evil in a similarly active fashion. Evil as it is represented here unquestioningly earns the title of “bad guys,” taking the form of roving gangs of “road agents” and “marauders” who have formed from the remnants of mankind. The first people the father and son encounter in the novel are a group of these evil and dangerous men, who are described with unambiguous menace: “They came shuffling through the ash casting their hooded heads from side to side. Some of them wearing canister masks. One in a biohazard suit. Stained and filthy. Slouching along with clubs in their hands, lengths of pipe” (60). Describing them as “stained and filthy” gives them an air of wilderness, while emphasizing the weapons in their hands makes their threat all too apparent. But this first encounter is merely a hint of the depths to which mankind has sunk, as it is in an encounter with another caravan of these marauders that reveals the true horrors of the wasteland's lawless population:

An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings.... The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry.... Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. (91)

The description of the caravan is, like the wasteland itself, a mix of the primal and the modern.

Tennis shoes and car parts are mentioned in the same breath as pregnant slaves and ragged

children in collars. It's a horrifying sight, one that manages to both convey the absolute degradation of modern society into brutal lawlessness and further position the father and his son as forces of purity and innocence by comparison alone, remnants from a time of civilized life struggling to maintain their morality and lives in the face of wild and violent forces. But while the comparison and their continued evasion of the marauders make them heroes on principle alone, it is through a direct confrontation with one of the caravan's members that the father establishes himself as a strictly Western hero through violent action and quickness with a gun. While hiding from the first gang of men they encounter in the novel, the father and son are found in the woods by one of its members. McCarthy once again creates a mix of the old frontier with the new, describing the man as both "an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes" and dressed in a "black billcap with the logo of some vanished enterprise embroidered across the front of it," combining the untamed naturalness of a wild animal with another symbol of America's collapsed civilization (63). The man and the father have a tense stand-off with one another, and when the man makes a move to draw his hunting knife and take the child, the father takes swift action:

He was a big man but he was very quick. He dove and grabbed the boy and rolled and came up holding him against his chest with the knife at his throat. The man had already dropped to the ground and he swung with him and leveled the pistol and fired from a two-handed position balanced on both knees at a distance of six feet. The man fell back instantly and lay with blood bubbling from the hole in his forehead. (66)

The hero dispatching of an outlaw with the quick work of a gun is a distinctly Western scenario, and despite the grimness of a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the scene practically takes on the same meaning as if it had taken place in the old frontier. The father's actions prove his "martial skills" while protecting his son, a symbol of goodness, and despite taking the life of another man, there

is no doubt that McCarthy paints these actions as heroic. As Kunsza observes, “Although the father commits acts that, by our present standards, if not immoral and unethical, are at least reprehensible, he does these things solely for the safety of the child” (59). This noble, God-appointed task cannot be construed as anything other than heroic, and even in a setting that is perhaps more bleak and more threatening than that of *No Country's* contemporary Texas setting, McCarthy manages to rediscover the romanticized and noble aspects of the redemptive violence in his new frontier that had become such an important part of the fabric of the old frontier. It's a discovery that not only shows the degrees to which the Western genre's conventions can be reconceptualized, as McCarthy uses violence in two very different ways in each of his novels, but one that deepens the connection between the Old West and *The Road's* post-apocalyptic America.

Through methodically constructing a new frontier that harkens back to the old with the use of popular Western conventions, McCarthy establishes a stage upon which *The Road's* central, distinctly Western theme can play out. As Alan Bourassa mentions, one of the conventions of the Western is the idea of the “American Garden of Eden,” the frontier as a paradise in which the American Dream of a civilized, progressive society can be realized. On the surface, the novel's new frontier seems to lack any hope for a future, as the story is focused primarily on the father and son's struggle to survive while observing the collapse of the world around them into nothingness. The novel even frequently waxes philosophic on the finite nature of civilization. At one point, the father has a feeling “beyond the numbness and the dull despair” of “the world... shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities... in time to wink out forever” (89). At another, the father's thoughts encapsulate the dire bleakness of their world's future in no uncertain terms: “The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat



your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye...” (181). Both quotes are concerned with positioning the wasteland as the end of civilization, a sentiment reinforced by the frequent acts of depravity the father and son witness. Thus, for all the grisly horrors the two encounter, and with barely even the fragments of a structured civilization existing, it can be hard to think of the novel as seeing any flicker of hope for the future in the post-apocalyptic wasteland. But while perhaps *The Road*'s frontier lacks the vibrancy and promise of the Old West's pastoral paradise, it still holds the promise of sustaining the life of American society, however faint of a promise it may be. Because like the stories of the old frontier, *The Road* is concerned with settlers traversing stretches of dangerous wilderness in search of a home, a haven, the American Eden. Because as Richard Slotkin explains, according to the myth of the frontier the “conquest of the wilderness... has been means to our achievement of a national identity... and a phenomenally dynamic and “progressive” civilization” (10). And the father and son's conquest of this wilderness, or at the very least their survival of it, is represented through one of the novel's reoccurring motifs. For in addition to labeling themselves the “good guys,” the father and son also task themselves with the carrying of a metaphorical fire:

Because we're the good guys.  
 Yes.  
 And we're carrying the fire.  
 And we're carrying the fire. Yes.  
 Okay. (129)

The metaphorical image of the fire is a briefly mentioned one, but an image that's entirely resonant and one that plays a significant part in the novel's themes. While what the fire is or stands for is never outright explained, there are moments throughout the book where we begin to understand what the fire represents and what it means for the father and son to carry it. The

metaphorical carrying of the fire is literally manifested only a few pages later when, while searching an abandoned home for supplies, the father tasks his son with holding a makeshift lamp – what is, quite literally, a fire contained in a bottle. While afraid of what they may find after a search of a previous home turned up starved and beaten captives locked away in a basement, the son relents and agrees to hold the lamp. The father tells him, “Okay. This is what good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up” (137). The combination of the father and son as “good guys” with the literal image of carrying the fire makes the metaphor seem as if it is representing a kind of perseverance, an indomitable spirit the father and son must maintain if they wish to keep going. But the moment is made even more significant when their search produces an underground bunker packed with a store of untouched supplies. It is one of the book’s few hopeful moments, the father and son on the edge of starvation finding their salvation through their will to keep pressing on. While it proves fleeting, the fact that their goodness and will to not give up are briefly rewarded by a discovery that sustains their survival is still significant. It represents not only the pair’s immediate personal survival, but McCarthy elevates the fire metaphor to represent the hope for all of humanity’s future. The importance of the man and his son clinging to their morality and will to survive is not simply a struggle of good versus evil, but as in stories of the old frontier, it is a fire necessary for building a new world. The only way the father and son can conquer the frontier’s wilderness, and as such create a new civilization, is by maintain their moral connections to the world before the collapse. McCarthy highlights the decay and destruction of post-apocalyptic America in *The Road*, but his novel is steeped in the American frontier’s thematic issue of building civilization out of untamed wilderness. As the father tells his son at one point, “When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given

up. Do you understand? And you can't give up. I won't let you" (189). The father's stressing of their status as good guys, his son's need to carry on a proverbial fire, and his need to never stop searching for a better world are all indications that his desire to preserve his son's morality and protect him at all costs stretches beyond a deeply seeded paternal instinct and becomes, in part, a hope for something to rise from the ashes of civilization.

Where the frontier of the Old West was full of untapped potential, the wasteland sees that potential exhausted, but as I've stated, McCarthy's purpose for bringing things to their end is to bring them back to the beginning. As Kunska explains, "The end and the beginning are inseparable in *The Road*. For it is the end of the old world that signals the possibility of a new one, and the novel's own ending so clearly harkens back to a beginning," (67). The book's end does, indeed, signal the possibility of a new world, doing so once again through the end of something. The father, after growing increasingly sick and being mortally wounded by the arrow of another survivor, stops on the side of the road and knows "this was the place where he would die" (277). He lays with his son by his side for several days before finally succumbing to his wounds, but not before leaving his son with several important words. The first of these touches once again on the carrying of the fire metaphor, defining it in even more explicit terms than McCarthy had used it previously. The man's son, desperate not to be left alone in the world, begs his dying father to take him into death with him. His father, obviously, tells him he can't go:

You can't. You have to carry the fire.

I don't know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I don't know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (279)

In his dying moments the father acknowledges his son's responsibility in carrying the fire, making clear that in protecting him he was not only guaranteeing the safety of his son, but attempting to ensure that the remnants of a lawful civilization he worked so hard to maintain would survive as well. The father's faith in his son's ability to carry on this fire is reinforced in his dying words. The final conversation between the two, about a little boy they spotted on their journey, is a deeply hopeful one. When the son asks if his father thinks the boy will be okay, he tells him, "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (281). Here, he is obviously referring to his own son, and the father's practically blind faith in fortune finding his son and guaranteeing his safety is indicative of his perseverance in the wasteland's wilderness. Though he dies, the father ultimately conquers the wilderness, refusing to succumb to its evils and managing to successfully impart his faith in the goodness of civilization in his son for him to carry on. And the father's faith is ultimately rewarded, as goodness does indeed find his son. After three days by the side of his father's body, the boy is found by a family of survivors. The family are fellow "good guys" who, when asked if they're carrying the fire, reply, "Yeah. We are" (285). They immediately take the boy in, and the book closes with the following passage:

The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him... She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (286)

The image of something being passed on, here the "breath of God," is repeated in the book's closing moments. And despite the narrative's primary concern with the end of civilization, we are once again reminded of the novel's underlying theme that the end is not really the end, and so long as the indomitable spirit of the American people, shaped as it was by the frontier's

“recurrent struggle of individuals conquering largely empty wildernesses,” is carried on, that American civilization will continue to survive in some capacity (Beck 267). For in McCarthy’s use of the end to return to the beginning, his “burned out landscape, strangely, is a new if unlikely Eden” (Kunsa 62). Whether it is represented through fire or the breath of God, McCarthy perceives the American ideal of striving for a national Eden as an undying sentiment, one that carries on from its birth in the old frontier, and one that turns *The Road*’s young boy into “Adam reinvented,” a child “carrying the fire of hope and righteousness from the old story toward the new one” (Kunsa 69). Thus, while *No Country* is focused on a corrupted American culture that is losing sight of its own ideals, *The Road* proposes that the only way to regain those guiding principles is through complete destruction and a return to the beginning. For, as McCarthy’s use of Western conventions attest, the ideals the country was founded upon in the conquering of its frontier are so deeply embedded in the nation’s identity that they can never truly be forgotten. The romanticized West may be temporarily lost or corrupted, but it is essentially American and as such will ultimately prevail in the bleakest of circumstances.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion: Variations on a Theme

Although *No Country* ends on a note that is vastly different tonally from *The Road*, it, too, ends with the image of carrying fire. While *The Road* uses this metaphor, as it does throughout its story, to create a sense of hope for the future of American civilization, *No Country* uses the image to signal the kind of cataclysmic demise that creates *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic wasteland. In the closing passage, Bell discusses two dreams he had. Both are of his father, and the second one he describes as "like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night" (309). We again have the use of distinctly Western imagery, with the mention of older times and the two men traversing wilderness on horseback imbuing the scene with a sense of the past's influence. Bell goes on to say, "I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do... And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there" (309). Here, more so than in *The Road*, it is up to speculation to determine what the fire is, but it seems as if the fire Bell's father carries is similar to the internal one the man and his son carried – that is, it represents a hope for the future. With all of Bell's talk about what the country's future holds, and with this scene's proximity to Bell's observations about the water trough that represented "some sort of promise," it becomes clear that the fire his father is fixing to build is the same intangible spark of life that similarly represented the settlement of America and survival of civilization in *The Road*. Yet while both novels are concerned with the carrying of this fire to sustain American civilization, the image as it is used in *No Country* is nowhere near as hopeful as it is in *The Road*. Here, the scene McCarthy sets up plays out like some version of the afterlife. The fact that it is Bell's

deceased father carrying the fire is significant, as is Bell's assurance that "whenever I got there he would be there." Whereas in *The Road* the young son carries the fire into an unclear but promising future, in *No Country* the fire is carried by a spirit in the past to a finite and final destination. Thus, in *No Country*, the image of carrying the fire is a culmination of the book's depiction of a corrupted America losing sight of the ideals it was founded upon. The fire is more lost than carried, another relic of the past that the Western represents in *No Country*'s contemporary world.

The way in which McCarthy uses a single metaphor in two vastly different ways is perhaps the most explicit evidence of the adaptability of the Western genre to convey contemporary ideas and observations. It is the nature of all literature that allows themes and conventions to be used in an infinite number of contexts, but the conventions McCarthy uses are distinctly Western, and he uses them specifically to deal with the future of America through its past. There is no doubt that McCarthy means the fire used in both novels to invoke associations with the themes and sentiments of the Western genre. It is, in essence, the frontier spirit, the desire to create civilization out of the untamed land, to create the American Garden of Eden, to establish a present while building for the future. It's the American identity, and McCarthy's contemporary novels, by steeping themselves in the conventions of the Western, acknowledge the significance of that identity as well as comment on how it has shaped the present and future of America. *No Country* acknowledges that America has a bloody history, and the kind of violence that was romanticized in the nation's most lasting mythology – the renewal through conflict – helped shape the kind of contemporary criminal culture that could bring about the demise of the country. But in *The Road*, he also acknowledges that the frontier that helped shape the country's most appealing and romanticized qualities – rugged individualism, a dogged

determination, a heroic, steadfast belief in the ability of law and morality to trump criminality and evil – is responsible for what McCarthy perceives as an incorruptible guiding force that will ultimately ensure the survival of American civilization in the face of cataclysmic disaster and collapse. Because while it is fascinating that McCarthy can reconceptualize the Old West and recreate its trappings in a modern setting, it is important because it serves as evidence of the importance of the Western's influence on the American identity. It is not only a genre that has seen countless reinventions, but such a significant mythology that the fact that it can still be used today to comment on modern issues – crime in America, the sustainability of our civilization – is telling of both how deeply resonant the Western genre is with our national consciousness and how irrevocably it formed the qualities and principles valued by the country's culture. It is such an intrinsic part of the fabric of America that McCarthy's reconceptualizations of its conventions serve as a reminder that the American people will always inevitably draw comparisons between the present and the Old West, when the country's ideals and guiding principles were at their most romanticized.



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Thesis Title: The Good, The Bad, and the Reconceptualization of the Ugly: The Western Genre in the Works of Cormac McCarthy  
Thesis Supervisor: Robert Burkholder

### Experience:

Editing Intern for Dr. Cheryl Glenn, May 2010 – December 2010  
Intern for The AV Club Philadelphia, May 2011 – Present

### Awards:

Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society  
Jacquelyn Ciferri Award for First Year Writing  
Dean's List

### Activities:

Writer/Blog Editor for PHROTH Humor Magazine