

Molly Listen

ENGL 3711

Analytical Essay I

“Only the judge seemed to weigh them up at all and he was sober in the doing, judging perhaps he did that things are seldom what they seem” (266). The brutal geographical and political landscape of the American West during the 1840s and 1850s lends itself to controversial topics such as racial violence, discrimination, and enslavement. Throughout *Blood Meridian*, there are seemingly infinite conflicts and brutal encounters between white Americans, Mexicans, Blacks, and Native Americans. A surface-level reading might make *Blood Meridian* seem like an overtly racist text, specifically because of the casual and frequent use of derogatory language. But although McCarthy represents race as stereotypical and historically anachronistic at times, the motivations of humans seem to be a result of the malevolence of human nature and financial incentives instead of true hatred toward people based solely on their nationality and the color of their skin.

In engaging with severe violence between multiple racial groups, McCarthy attempts to exemplify the degeneracy of humans and the tendency for mankind to be violent and destructive by nature. The judge poses that “Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the power in favor of the weak” (261). Many of the characters seem to be motivated by weakness in other humans. Glanton’s men are described, “hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy” and encountering “a band of peaceful Tiguas camped on the river and slaughter them every soul” (162, 180). However, the brutality is not reserved to Glanton’s men alone. Instead, it seems to be a byproduct of living away from civilization for extended periods. Glanton and his men encounter a bush hung with dead babies, who “had holes

punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats,” presumably a result of another group’s brutality (60). After witnessing and participating in an extreme amount of carnage, when Glanton’s men enter a civilized town, “there was nothing about these arrivals to suggest even the discovery of the wheel” (242). By the middle of their journey, Glanton and his men have witnessed degeneracy and have reverted to savages. Not only do Glanton’s men perform violent acts, but they are also victims of violence. Captain White’s crew is attacked by Comanches and later, Glanton’s men are victims of a surprise attack when a group of Yumas “swarmed up the hill toward the fortifications where the Americans lay sleeping...all of them armed with bows and clubs” (286). In describing violence initiated by all racial groups, McCarthy aims to exemplify mankind’s tendency to revert to their primeval disposition. As described by the judge, “War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him” (259). The travelers, regardless of race or ethnicity, are all slaves of violent nature.

In addition to the theme of instinctual aggression and the primitive nature of mankind, the overwhelming motivation for scalphunters and other groups is to attain financial prosperity and material wealth. Glanton’s gang is contracted by the Mexican government to kill and scalp Native peoples for a reward of “a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gómez’s head” (83). With the promise that they will earn a huge bounty for collecting the head of Gómez, the Apache chief, and other Apache scalps, Glanton’s men are primarily motivated by coins and spoils of war. At one point, the men slaughter a gang of Apaches and try to pass off another man’s head for Gómez, presumably so they can receive the hefty reward. Other Americans also went and scalped “injins” who had been “dead a hundred year” (82). In other words, they collect scalps not because they have a malicious intention to eliminate a Native American race, but instead, they scalp them solely for economic benefit. It seems that the men do not really care the

ethnic groups of the people who they kill. Perhaps they do not have any true hostility toward Native peoples but instead, kill the Apaches just so they can get paid. One woman is slaughtered and scalped and her race is not even mentioned. Instead she is described as being a “weathered old woman the color of pipeclay” (102). In the spirit of economy, peoples’ race is insignificant to the price that is paid to Glanton’s gang for collecting scalps. Killing nearly every person they come across and having no regard toward them exemplifies a larger logic of dehumanization in *Blood Meridian*.

When they return to the governor’s palace, Glanton’s men hand in one hundred and twenty-eight scalps and eight heads in exchange for “full payment in gold” (174). Later in the novel, the men take over the operations of the ferry and increase the fares so they can get paid more money. Eventually, they decide to rob the ferry travelers and collect “thousands of dollars in gold and silver coins as well as jewelry, watches, pistols” (275) along with other forms of wealth. Amidst the scorching desert heat, Toadvine gives the judge his only hat in exchange for one hundred and twenty-five dollars. After the Yuma ambush and slaughtering of Glanton, the Yuma Natives separate the stolen property, “guns and clothing were divided upon the clay and divided too were the gold and silver” (287). To all except the judge, material wealth is a significant motivation. Instead of targeting specific cultures, each group of men kills whoever stands in their way of earning wealth, regardless of their race.

All of Glanton’s men treat stolen goods and human parts as commodities. Despite differences in race and ethnicity, the deterioration of humanity shared between each of the men has an equalizing effect. While the scalphunters openly demonize Native peoples by calling them, “halfnaked savages,” “redskins,” “ignorant heathen savage” and other demeaning names, white characters are not exempt from criticism in *Blood Meridian* (82, 138, 148). McCarthy

mocks the notion that white men are civilized. One of Captain White's men calls out to the kid, "come on out. I'm white and christian" (30). This description is meant to make the man seem moral and trustworthy, but he recruits men to kill and scalp Mexicans for profit. The most prominent example of a Caucasian character that is educated and seemingly civilized is the judge. The judge, described as being "blinding white" and shining "like the moon so pale" (83, 174), is arguably the vilest and most savage of all the characters depicted in *Blood Meridian*. He expresses his desire to become a suzerain, or a "special kind of keeper" whose authority "countermands local judgements" (207). In short, he yearns to be a supreme leader. Even though his skin color is white, the judge's character exemplifies blackness and deceitfulness. The outer layer of skin is a pale shroud cloaking his internal wickedness. The judge is described as being a "sooty-souled rascal" (130) and it is said that he could "outdance the devil himself" (129). These descriptions of a white character seem contradictory if McCarthy is trying to demonize only Mexicans, blacks, and Native Americans. At one instance in the novel, white men were described as being so relentless that they resembled savages, "white men who preyed on travelers in that wilderness and disguised their work to be that of the savages" (159). By the end of *Blood Meridian*, nearly all of the main white characters have participated in horrific crimes as a part of Glanton's gang. Instead of engaging with the stereotypical glorification of white men, like in other traditionally "Western" depictions, McCarthy poses that the white characters are some of, if not the most, evil and savage.

Despite the graphic and violent descriptions in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy engages with ideas of tolerance and equality among races. Glanton's gang is incredibly diverse. It is comprised of a large number of white men, Native Americans (Delawares), one Mexican man (John McGill), and one black man (Jackson). In *Blood Meridian*, there are two men named "John

Jackson,” “one black, one white, both forenamed John” (85). These identical names seem to be a statement that although each of these men have different races and nationalities, they are both similar in nature. Throughout the novel, it seems that each man in Glanton’s gang is treated equally, regardless of race. In an altercation between both of the John Jackson’s, the black man Jackson claims, “Any man in this company can sit where it suits him” (111). When the altercation persists, the black man Jackson kills the white man. In a demonstration that men within Glanton’s gang were not preferred because of race, “The men moved away. No one spoke” (112). The men also show solidarity of people within their group when they enter an eatinghouse and the owner asks for the “people of color” to sit at a different table (245). In response, Glanton retorts by telling the owner that none of his men are “goin to get up from where they’re at to go set somewheres else” (245). The black man Jackson eventually kills the restaurant owner. However, when confronted by a lieutenant about the incident in the restaurant, Glanton and the judge (two white men) defend the black man Jackson and proclaim that they plan to “Deny ever goddamned word of it” (247). In each of these examples, all of Glanton’s men, while brutal to all races and ethnicities outside of their pack, demonstrate tolerance and acceptance of everyone within their gang, regardless of race.

Men of all racial identities die over the course of the novel and none of them are spared because of their race. When describing how the last of the Delawares, the Vandiemender, and a man from the east named Gilchrist were found dead, mutilated, and hanging from a tree, McCarthy remarks, “Among their barbarous hosts they had met with neither favor nor discrimination but had suffered and died impartially” (237). Throughout the novel, men of each race are at times ruthless, slaughtering hundreds of men at a time. However, sometimes there is a complete lack of conflict between races. Every one of the main western explorers seems ruthless

and violent, but the kid gets criticized for showing mercy, “You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (312). Although the judge singles the kid out, other characters also show mercy during their journey. Glanton and his men even cordially meet a group of Apaches and repay them for injuring one of their horses, “the whiskey was exchanged for upon a Saltillo blanket spread on the ground” (253). During another encounter, Glanton and a Mexican colonel “exchanged rudimentary civilities” (255) before passing in peace. Glanton’s men share a sense of comradery and brotherhood, not because they share the same racial identity or viewpoints, but because they are all united for a common cause: to scalp Natives in order to make a profit. While exchanges with strangers outside the group are often violent and result in bloodshed, McCarthy demonstrates several tranquil encounters between different racial groups and traveling gangs.

*Blood Meridian* is less a statement about differences between race and more about human nature and the innate tendency for humans to be violent and relentless, either to obtain pleasure or wealth. Glanton’s gang, composed of men who have diverse backgrounds and differing skin colors, expose a flaw in the theory that *Blood Meridian* is a racist text. Although this novel is ridden with scalping, slaughter, and destruction, every group, in spite of race, participates in these activities. Rather than demonizing whites, blacks, Mexicans, or Native Americans in isolation, McCarthy asserts that all humans are vicious and ruthless by nature. The judge, when philosophizing about mankind, questions, “And is the race of man not more predacious yet?...do you not think that this will be again?” (153). He answers his own questions by saying, “Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons” (153). *Blood Meridian*, although set in the American West, does not glorify white characters while demeaning minorities. Instead, it is a testimony

that all humans degenerate and become vicious and brutal as a result of mankind's inherent immorality.