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Stones, Coins, and Wolves: Savage Civilization in *Blood Meridian*

Critics of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* frequently condemn its graphic violence and lack of moral weight as senseless and gratuitous. While this may be true, it should not serve as the basis for negative criticism, as it is the main tool that McCarthy employs to present his view of human nature in relation to civilization. We can better understand McCarthy's depiction of human nature by considering Freud's take on mankind in society in *Civilization and its Discontents*, where Freud writes that men are:

...creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them [a] helper...sexual object, [and] someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation...to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus* [man is wolf to man] (Freud).

In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy locates this wolfish aggression in the 19th century American Southwest in the wake of the Mexican-American War. However, he suggests that the landscape of *Blood Meridian* is merely a microcosm of the United States as a whole, and possibly any other imperialist nation. McCarthy conveys this complex analysis of mankind and society with three simple images: stones, for civilization; coins, for capital; and wolves, for Freudian aggression. He suggests that man's aggression is spread throughout the country, as society exploits man's predisposition for violence to dominate other peoples or nations for its own capital gain. Thus,

national expansion becomes an economic equation, growing through the commodification of human life through war and violence.

If one considers *Blood Meridian* as a critique of aggressive patriarchal imperialism, then one can also think of it as McCarthy's meditation on the Freudian view of human nature, in which "man is wolf to man." Regardless of whether or not McCarthy read Freud, he constantly juxtaposes themes of wolves, civilization, and capital violence to provoke his audience to think critically on their correlation. He does this in the opening passage: "[the child] stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves" (3). The wolves introduce themes of wilderness and viciousness, and the protagonist's introduction paints him as not particularly enlightened or innocent, as he "can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3). The kid represents Freud's common man in civilization, which becomes clearer once he wanders from home and begins to look for ways to satisfy his aggressiveness. As he travels, the landscape itself is defined by violence and exploitation. The kid sees "Blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton. A shadowed agony in the garden." (4). McCarthy specifically centers on slavery in the United States, highlighting the most overt evidence of ordained exploitation for national capital gain. The allusion to slavery invites the reader to think about the imperialist and violent nature of the United States as it expanded westward and became a dominating economic power, especially through the abuse and exploitation of African slaves and Indigenous people. At the end of the first chapter, McCarthy guides the audience down the road of Manifest Destiny, or "the mid-19th century expansion to the Pacific [which] was regarded as...an ostensibly benevolent or necessary policy of imperialistic expansion" ("Manifest Destiny"): "The kid touched up the mule and they went

sucking out past the old stone fort along the road west” (15). McCarthy steers his readers west, past the “old stone” of civilization that has already been established, to trace the path of America’s expansion. However, he aims to show that this “benevolent or necessary” path is paved with the sweat, blood, and wholly uncivilized treatment of human beings.

McCarthy further implies the violence of imperialist expansion as the kid travels west and comes closer to meeting Captain White and John Glanton. The kid “keeps from off the king’s road for fear of citizenry” as “the little prairie wolves cry all night” (16). McCarthy suggests that the government and its citizens are a threat to survival, and the wolf imagery echoes the wolves present at the kid’s birth, reinforcing the general tone of violence and savagery during his travels. McCarthy introduces the hermit at this time in the novel to anticipate the nature of the kid’s employment as a soldier and a scalp hunter. The hermit, who “was a slaver,” states that he “made good money,” but also lists money as one of the “things that can destroy the earth” (18). Even though the hermit is supposedly separated from society, he is most identifiable by his involvement in the slave trade, as well as his ownership of “some man’s heart, dried and blackened” that cost him \$200 (19). McCarthy uses an ex-slaver to introduce the economically driven civilization that the kid is moving towards. The hermit foretells the kid’s involvement with Captain White and Glanton, especially when he says, “You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And evil can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it” (20). The hermit gives an omen of what the kid will find further west, which is systematic oppression that runs on capital gain. Although the hermit’s section is brief, McCarthy uses it to prime the audience for the violent world that the kid will

soon contribute to. It is not one of complete chaos, as some would believe. It is more accurately a world of organized and profitable brutality.

McCarthy uses the kid's recruitment into Captain White's army to more clearly combine themes of civilization, war, and economy. The kid's recruitment accurately illustrates Freud's assertion that, "as a rule [man's] aggressiveness waits for some provocation or puts itself at the service of some other purpose, whose goal might also have been reached by milder measures" (Freud). McCarthy suggests that man's predisposition to violence is most exploited by war wagers looking to make some sort of capital gain. This exploitation is shown when the recruiter from Captain White's army tells the kid that he will be rewarded with money and property, stating, "Hellfire son, you wont need no wages. You get to keep everything you can raise. We goin to Mexico. Spoils of war. Aint a man in the company wont come out a big landowner" (32). Up until this point, the kid has just been wandering and doing odd jobs. When he is recruited, he has just been robbed and is looking for ways to make money as well as do something with his time; joining a violent and illegal war effort seems like an opportunity as good as any other. After White's army is defeated by Apache warriors, the kid comes across Mexican bandits who tell him, "When the lambs is lost in the mountain...They is cry. Sometime come the mother. Sometime the wolf" (68). McCarthy emphasizes the savage and animalistic actions of White's army and the Apaches alike as they battle over land, since they are certainly more like the "wolf" than the "mother." The bandit's warning also preempts the kid's involvement in Glanton's gang, which is similarly motivated by monetary gain, since Glanton is promised "a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gomez's head" (83). Before the kid joins Glanton's gang, however, McCarthy combines money and violence yet again in the harrowing image of the goldseekers that the kid sees from his prison cell, "itinerant degenerates bleeding west-ward like

some heliotropic plague” (82). The words “degenerates,” “bleeding,” “west-ward” and “plague” illustrate those moving west for wealth as bringers of blood, sickness, and violence, and Glanton and his gang soon join their company.

Once the kid joins Glanton’s gang, McCarthy uses the judge, one of the most violent characters of *Blood Meridian*, to lecture about human nature, especially with the story of the traveler and the harnessmaker. Coincidentally, the images of wolves, stones, and coins converge on this particular story, which indicates McCarthy’s attempt to communicate a broader message about civilization and men’s place in it as a whole. Not surprisingly, the tale of the traveler and the harnessmaker is one of greed, exploitation, and violence. The traveler gives the harnessmaker “two coins which like [he] had never seen,” but the harnessmaker is so greedy that he kills the traveler with a rock and robs him. The traveler’s wife is so heartbroken that she lays wild primrose and “[puts] it on the stones” (151). McCarthy combines coin and stone imagery yet again to form a correlation between capital greed, civilization and death. Ultimately, the harnessmaker’s crime prompts his son to go “away to the west and himself [become] a killer of men,” as well as the traveler’s son to be “broken before a frozen god” never to “find his way” (151-152). The judge follows the story with an argument about civilization: “Here are the dead fathers...entombed in the stone...For whoever makes a shelter of reeds...has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures...But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe” (152). McCarthy uses the distinction between reeds and stone to make a distinction between the natural world and man’s dominion over it. He suggests that those who build civilization “in stone” take a less natural path in life. The judge concludes with the statement: “Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet?...His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once

his darkening and the evening of his day.” (153). To Freud and McCarthy alike, man’s decision to create civilization and pursue economic advancement has resulted in his being more savage than the beasts of the wilderness, like the wolf. That is why “in the affairs of men there is no waning,” because their success is immediately defined by the violence that it took to get there (153). The title word “meridian” stands out, and McCarthy seems to be waving his hands back and forth, telling his readers to pay attention. Here, he offers the main tension of the novel between the advancement of civilization and its direct correlation with man’s savageness and greed.

McCarthy follows the judge’s story of the traveler and the harnessmaker with the Glanton gang’s first slaughter and scalping of the Native Americans and Mexican slaves. Glanton’s gang ambushes the Apaches, but “within that first minute the slaughter [becomes] general,” and the men scalp anyone whose hair can pass for Apache. Even McGill, a previous member of the Glanton Gang, is scalped. The gang’s actions are the most obvious showing of economically driven violence and exploitation; the death of one human, in accordance with the literal commodification of human body parts, results in the success of another. Freud states that “it is not easy for man to give up the satisfaction of this inclination to aggression,” and that “the advantage which a comparatively small...group offers of allowing this instinct an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders” is valued in society (Freud). The Glanton gang’s employment is a prime example of society channeling man’s aggression towards a common enemy, as well as how the commodification of lives lays the foundation of civilization. However, the Glanton gang also kills and scalps the Mexicans that they were hired to protect, suggesting that once their aggression is authorized, it cannot be contained. McCarthy suggests this correlation with stone imagery yet again, when one of the Delawares takes “a naked infant...in each hand...and [bashes]

their heads against the stones.” McCarthy juxtaposes the image of babies being smashed upon stones with Glanton’s men kicking among the smoldering ashes “because some gold coins had been found” (163-165). Again, at one of the most violent scenes in the novel, McCarthy pairs stone and coin imagery to show the relationship between the savage formation of civilization and capital reward.

While Glanton and his gang wander and scalp Native Americans, Mexicans, women, children, and the elderly alike, the judge begins speaking more directly about war and money, as well as demonstrating money’s correlation to violence. For example, when Glanton’s gang stops by a village, a young boy approaches the judge and tries to sell him puppies. The judge takes the opportunity to overpay the boy: “the judge had dredged from his polluted clothes a small gold coin worth a bushel of suchpriced dogs” (201). By this point in the essay, the reader should be hesitant, given the dangerous significance of coins, and this case is no exception. First, the judge performs a magic trick: “the coin was gone. He wove his fingers in the empty air and reached behind the boy’s ear and took the coin and handed it to him” (201). Then, the judge takes the purchased puppies and hurls them into a nearby river. The magic trick suggests that money is an illusion, but powerful nonetheless. It permits the judge to kill the dogs not in defense, and not for survival, but for the sole purpose that he bought them and has domination over them. The judge always has more than enough money throughout the novel, which is shown again when the judge overpays for Toadvine’s hat (295). Although the judge is frequently attributed with violent and dominating supernatural powers, sometimes his power is simply being wealthy. The judge performs another coin trick further in the novel, when he makes money seem to appear out of thin air. He then throws the coin into the darkness, and it appears to travel right back to him. The judge states, “The arc of circling bodies is determined by the length of their tether...Moons,

coins, men” (257). Just as the moon orbits around the earth because of the earth’s gravitational pull, the judge suggests that men are similar “circling bodies” that orbit around money, their movement restricted to the tether of gold and coins.

The height of Glanton’s economic success, as well his violent streak, occurs when he takes control of the ferry. He betrays the Yumas, “[takes] the scalps,” and then monopolizes the ferry operation so that he can rob people: “Ultimately all pretense was dropped and the immigrants were robbed outright. Travelers were beaten and their arms and goods appropriated and they were sent destitute and beggared into the desert” (273). Even Doctor Lincoln, who is introduced as a moral character, is bought out. He attempts to “remonstrate with [the gang],” but is “paid his share of the revenues and sent back” (273). Glanton’s ferry operation serves as a model of a well-organized, morally corrupt business that profits off of human suffering. However, since the man’s “meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day,” Glanton’s ruin is inevitable, and McCarthy signals the end of his success with an especially poignant scene – Black Jackson reaching down and picking up a coin: “In the floor of the scow was a small coin...He bent to fetch it. He stood up...and as he did so a long can arrow passed through his upper abdomen” (285). The scene of a man picking up a coin and being shot through the middle with an arrow is sudden and shocking, but in McCarthy’s Freudian universe of human nature, it is only a matter of time before the Glanton gang falls victim to other men’s aggressions. McCarthy intentionally places that gold coin at the fall of Glanton’s monopoly to emphasize that it was the pursuit of money that led to Black Jackson’s and the rest of the gang’s violent deaths.

After he ends his involvement with Glanton’s gang and escapes the judge, the kid arrives at the west coast, the metaphorical end of civilization. However, the judge still haunts him, and

the kid dreams of him when he undergoes surgery in town. The judge is “a great shambling mutant, silent and serene,” who seems to lord over the kid, and “Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks...[the kid] saw his own name...logged into the records as a thing already accomplished” (322). The juxtaposition of “loins” and “ledgerbooks” presents a correlation between manhood or sexual reproduction and economic accounting, which ultimately suggests that in civilization, mankind has evolved from animals to an even more savage race that treats lives as commodities; And the kid, who has managed to retain at least a small level of decency and independence in the novel, feels in his core that he has been used just as everyone else in the world has been used. The audience never learns his name because it is only important in a romantic or sentimental context. In *Blood Meridian*, his name is only needed in the context of civilization, in the judge’s ledgerbooks as a thing to be used or “accomplished.” In his fever dream, the kid also sees a coinmaker beside the judge, “hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage of a dawn that would not be;” and it is “this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge” (323). That “coinage of a dawn that would not be” is the kid’s struggle to create something of meaningful worth. He has made it to the west coast, but his life is hard and empty, as he is traumatized by the time spent with Glanton, his success tainted by his violent past. He can only imagine meaningfulness as kind of coin, because the only thing that has been meaningful or sacred in his life has been capital wealth.

At the end of the novel, the judge triumphs over the kid, now “the man.” Although this conclusion is shocking and upsetting to many readers, it seems only natural if one reads *Blood Meridian* through Freud’s understanding of human nature. Because he is the embodiment of war, aggression, and economic exploitation, the judge holds the ultimate power over every person in

the novel, even the protagonist. However, at the end of the novel, McCarthy undermines the judge's position in the novel ever so slightly, with the line, "He wafts his hat and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps" (349). This passage recalls the line "The arc of circling bodies is determined by the length of their tether...Moons, coins, men" from earlier in the novel (257). Whereas before he suggested that men revolve around money just as the moon revolves around the earth, he now likens the *judge* to the moon, not the men. This comparison suggests that men have more power in the equation than the judge would like them to believe, as the judge relies on men's propensity for violence and exploitation just as much, if not more than men rely on the judge. This should not be understood as a message of hope, but instead as a message of responsibility, which is reinforced in the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*. Although it conveys a message of endurance, it is not endurance against any evil force, but instead a kind of perseverance in the face of, or in conjunction with, the evil forces of war and aggression. Stone and civilization imagery arise again, as a man "enkindles the stone in the hold with his steel hole" (351). McCarthy leaves the reader with the tension between the advancement of civilization and the stagnation or decline of human dignity. He writes: "the wanderers...move haltingly in the light like mechanisms...and they cross in their progress one by one...which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hold owed its existence to the one before it" (351). To McCarthy, the rise of civilization directly results in the fall of man, especially if material wealth is the main motivator. The unthinking man will fall prey to his own aggressions and get stuck in the greater cycle of violence and domination, where "man is wolf to man."

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