

The Nihilistic Cosmos of Cormac McCarthy's Later Works

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Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's later works all portray a nihilistic literary cosmos that rejects the notion of a world governed by moral justice. As Vereen M. Bell states, in McCarthy's novels "ethical categories do not rule," and "moral considerations seem not to affect outcomes" (31-32). Whereas the heroic protagonist in conventional genre fiction is usually protected as a result of his or her moral goodness, heroism and morality provide no such protection in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005), *The Road* (2007), and *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form* (2007). This absence of an interfering force of justice is defined by a violent universe devoid of an intervening divine figure and by clear negation of values and meaning that leaves the characters in the text despairing over the bleak world they live in. In this nihilistic cosmos immoral or amoral acts receive no retribution, and moral acts receive no reward. The destructive and negating agency of nihilistic figures such as *No Country for Old Men's* Anton Chigurh meet no moral counterforce that strive to balance out the dissymmetry of justice in the texts. The nihilistic eloquence of White in *The Sunset Limited* rhetorically dominates the theistic arguments of Black, which leaves Black speechless and desperately praying for a silent God to speak up and give him the words he needs to counterbalance White and restore the moral symmetry. In *The Road* our "good guys" see it as their moral duty to "carry the fire," a task that entails carrying the seed for restoring civilization and preserving moral goodness in a post-apocalyptic wasteland riddled with amoral cannibals, murderers, and rapists. It is a task that further underlines the dissymmetry created by a nihilistic universe that has negated morality's value and meaning, because the text makes it

unambiguously clear that civilization is irretrievably lost and “cannot be made right again” in spite of efforts to carry the fire by good guys.

As such, morality seems to not influence the outcomes of events in McCarthy’s later works. To maintain a moral fortitude provides no reward, and, as we see in *The Road*, instead seems only to prolong and intensify suffering. McCarthy’s “good guys” steadfastly carry the fire southward along the road with a goal of overcoming the apocalyptic obstacles in their path while they repeatedly show signs of expecting moral rewards for their suffering and perseverance. At the end of the text however, the significant absence of these rewards reveals the futility of maintaining a moral ideology in a nihilistic world. The final passage of the novel makes it clear that whatever value or influencing power might have once existed in faith or morality it is no longer present. That the characters in the text refuse to let the unsustainable nature of those values break their spirit and drive them to despair is an example of the failure of nihilism. What the French writer and critic Maurice Blanchot writes about the dark and devastating narratives of Franz Kafka we can thus apply to *The Road* as well:

Kafka’s narratives are among the darkest in literature, the most rooted in absolute disaster. And they are also the ones that torture hope the most tragically, not because hope is condemned but because it does not succeed in being condemned.

(Weller 116)

Ultimately, the nihilistic cosmos of McCarthy’s later works portray the cause of human civilization’s death to be the decay of morality through the absence of divine justice. Even though some remnants of moral goodness still remains to the very end, that goodness does not have the capacity to restore civilization, because the negating force of nihilism is always present to overpower and negate the moral code.

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Introduction

Literature as Governed by Divine Justice

[We are here] on our little blue planet. Here at this exact, tiny, special blink in time. Here, but only "here" in the way a beetle might be "there" on a sidewalk of Times Square during rush hour. Sure, the beetle can survive, but only for as long as it's not in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nobody's out to get that beetle... but nobody's watching where they're stepping either. (...) No matter WHAT or WHO is out there, he or it doesn't "care" if you define "care" in terms of life and death. Nobody is special. Nobody gets a pass.

(Truant)

Johnny Truant's philosophy of an apathetic universe that is as concerned about individual human safety as we humans are concerned about the safety of a beetle in Times Square might seem overly pessimistic to some, as it leaves little room for optimism in the act of measuring one's own worth in the world. If nobody is special, then as far as the universe is concerned everyone holds equal value. And if everyone holds equal value the concept of value itself becomes meaningless. Singular quantities or uniform values cannot be measured or rated. This philosophy is explored in the 1996 novel *Fight Club*, where Chuck Palahniuk's nihilistic *Übermensch*, Tyler Durden, teaches his followers a doctrine that states, "You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile" (134). Of course, the irony of this novel is precisely that Tyler Durden's philosophy that judges no one to be special gets preached by a man who transcends all conventional norms and creates a devoted cult following that effectively worships him for being special. Therein lies a nugget of truth about conventional literature: regardless of whether or not our real-life universe is concerned with the value of "special" individuals, it is evident that in most genre literature the textual universe

predominately puts greater value on a small number of special individuals than it does the general population. This convention presupposes that some special individuals *do* get a pass. If the beetle in Times Square actually is special, then this implies the presence of a tangible agency or force that watches over and protects it from getting stepped on. I will assert in this thesis that the watchful agency that can be found in most conventional literature is a *divine force of justice*: divine on account of the apparent greater value placed upon *morally "good" individuals* as opposed to their immoral or evil counterparts. Whenever we as readers encounter narratives that stray from this convention we take notice. For example, Vereen M. Bell states in his article "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy," that Cormac McCarthy is an author whose "vivid facticity of his novels consumes conventional formulae as a black hole consumes light" (31). According to Bell, McCarthy's works reject the conventions of genre literature by stripping his universes of the governing principle that considers anyone to be special. In these texts, any character can be the beetle on Times Square during rush hour, even the heroic protagonist. Anyone might get stepped on at any time, because the divine force of justice that usually protects special individuals is either *absent* or *unwilling* to interfere.

In conventional genre fiction, it is both expected and presumed that the hero of the narrative will endure all hardships and eventually overcome all obstacles, that he or she will not be bested by the villain or fail at a task. There is an expectation in the reader that the symmetry of good and evil will always be maintained, that moral goodness will rise up to counter immoral evil even if the odds of a moral victory seem heavily in favor of evil. This expectation of a moral symmetry relies on the presence of an agency or force of justice that has the power to influence the outcome of events. For example, consider the apparent conventional wisdom that supposedly trained or experienced gunmen and fighters do not seem able to hit their mark when they attempt to confront the hero. On the other hand, the

heroic figure is often a perfect shot. “Fill your hand, you son of a bitch!” cries deputy marshal Rooster Cogburn in Charles Portis 1968 Western thriller novel *True Grit*, before he heroically charges his steed to confront four bandits in a familiar climactic western showdown that plays out as if the bandits were armed with pellet guns.

[Rooster Cogburn] took the reins in his teeth and pulled the other saddle revolver and drove his spurs into the flanks of his strong horse Bo and charged directly at the bandits. It was a sight to see. He held the revolvers wide on either side of the head of his plunging steed. The four bandits accepted the challenge and they likewise pulled their arms and charged their ponies ahead. (...) I believe the bandits began firing their weapons first (...) I do know that the marshal rode for them in so determined and unwavering a course that the bandits broke their “line” ere he reached them and raced through them, his revolvers blazing, and he not aiming with the sights but only pointing the barrels and snapping his head from side to side to bring his good eye into play.

(192-193)

Not only do the bandits fire first, they outnumber the lone gunman four to one, and yet significantly they are somehow unable to bring him down. Meanwhile, the hero, who is not only ocularly challenged but is not even bothering to aim properly, emerges triumphant and relatively unharmed. It is apparent that the heroic figure of the narrative benefits from a tangible protection that the villainous figures do not share. There is a sense that if the hero is the beetle in Times Square, people are watching their step to avoid harming it. Had there been no such protection shielding the hero, this scene would realistically have ended with Rooster Cogburn dead on the ground before he could fire off a second shot from his revolver. Yet because he is the heroic figure he is protected somehow, and the only factor that separates him from the villainous bandits is his morality, his capacity for self-sacrifice, and his unselfishness.

At the base of this convention, it seems clear that the outcomes of events in most literature seem to be influenced by the morality of the individuals within the narrative. To have a *good* moral fortitude gives the hero an unmistakable advantage over those who lack such moral fortitude, like the villain. This leads to a problematic dichotomy of good and evil that necessitates the presence of a divine force of justice that has the power to influence events in favor of moral goodness. This force has to be *divine* in nature because morals in the absence of divinity cannot provide the tangible and observable effect upon events that is found so often in conventional literature. Eric J. Wielenberg points out in his article “God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” that “there is a reason to be moral only if God exists. William Craig, for example, declares: ‘if life ends at the grave, then it makes no difference whether one has lived as a Stalin or as a saint. ... You may as well just live as you please’” (Wielenberg 13). If the moral fortitude maintained by the hero of the narrative is not empowered by a divine and protective force of justice, then the hero could not possibly beat the odds or evade harm so consistently. The evidence we find in conventional literature implies that the hero’s rewards for moral fortitude indicates that within the frame of the text there must be some influential force present to grant these rewards.

Thinkers seeking a basis for moral principles outside of a divine foundation have often evoked the Categorical Imperative of Immanuel Kant, which states that all rational beings hold an intrinsic value that must be respected. In his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* he writes, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant 30). The Categorical Imperative is a morality built upon a code of judging each problem categorically instead of hypothetically. In contrast to a moral system governed by divinity, the Categorical Imperative does not have the power to influence the outcome of moral decisions because it is solely dependent on a person’s own will to act morally, and not on an external authority enforcing a moral code. To act morally

according to Kant is to judge the act as conforming to a universal law; i.e. an act can be considered moral only if you would wish all others to act the same way. Thus the moral law is not proposed until the act is conceived in the doer's mind, and accordingly, consequences or rewards cannot be taken into consideration because there is no law until the act has been either carried out or abandoned. To kill another rational being is immoral, because if everyone began to kill each other, there would be no humanity left, and the act would thus negate itself. If you kill another, then you are accepting that others kill you. This leaves no room for hypothetical conundrums and the system can function independently of an enforcing agency, relying instead on the actor's own will to act morally. The Categorical Imperative is thus fundamentally different from a moral system governed by divinity, because rewards for adhering to this principle are not a factor when considering the consequences of an act. Instead it is built upon respecting the inherent value of rational life, regardless of circumstance. In this ideology, no one is special. The moral are not worth more than the immoral, and neither party are rewarded or punished on account of the moral nature of the actions they choose to perform. If conventional genre literature based its moral system on the Categorical Imperative, or on a different system similarly free of divine agency, then there could be no tangible protection shielding our moral literary heroes from harm.

Wielenberg argues that *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy presents the Categorical Imperative in its most basic form. "In the world of *The Road*, there is a simple rule for distinguishing the good guys from the bad guys. Bad guys eat people; good guys don't. This is what remains of the Categorical Imperative: don't treat people as mere food" (4). The novel portrays desperate and struggling survivors who roam a post-apocalyptic landscape. Some of these survivors have surrendered their morals to desperation and starvation and have resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. They have stopped respecting the intrinsic value of rational beings, and clearly do not act according to any universal law. Others, such as our

two protagonists, the Man and the Boy refuse to relinquish their moral principles of respecting the value of human life, and would rather starve to death before they resort to cannibalism. Thus *The Road* presents the reader with a clear dichotomy of good and evil, seemingly through the Categorical Imperative instead of a moral code dependent upon a divine presence, because the bad guys do not seem to receive any retribution for their crimes.

However, here we encounter a problem; if our good guys truly respect this principle that all rational beings hold intrinsic value they cannot harbor any selfish expectations that to uphold such a principle will somehow benefit themselves. As we have seen, to expect reward from a moral act would be to undermine the Categorical Imperative, because it would negate the intrinsic value of rational beings and would not accord with the universality of the act. Expecting a reward would require adding a negating clause to the imperative itself. “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law, *as long as you stand to benefit from it.*” We see this problem clearly articulated in McCarthy’s novel, where our good guys repeatedly make statements that indicate an expectation of reward and protection for maintaining their moral principles.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That’s right

Because we’re carrying the fire.

Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire.

(The Road 87)

To “carry the fire” in the novel is a complex moral duty that only “good guys” preserve, but their expectation that the act of carrying the fire will provide them with protection implies that they are not only agents of morality for the sake of respecting the intrinsic value of rational beings, but also to reap some tangible beneficial reward, such as protection from

unjust harm. McCarthy's characters thus articulate both their own and the reader's expectations for divine intervention in the universes of conventional genre literature: any hardships and challenges that befall good moral characters are mere temporary setbacks in a narrative that will inevitably end in triumph for these characters as a *result of their moral fortitude*. Moral goodness will be rewarded, and immorality will be punished before the conclusion of the narrative. This convention is so ubiquitous in literature that whenever we as readers experience a narrative, we expect the formulaic moral symmetry to always be maintained. We expect an outnumbered Rooster Cogburn to defeat overwhelming odds because a just universe would ensure that his heroic and self-sacrificial morality is rewarded. However, as I will argue in this thesis, McCarthy's later works pointedly reject these conventions. In these texts, there is no divine force of justice that can influence events or revert the *status quo* of a moral symmetry.

The Later Works of Cormac McCarthy

In his book, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, McCarthy scholar Steven Frye categorizes the period of McCarthy's later works as beginning with the publication of *No Country for Old Men* in 2005, stating that "the novel is a departure from anything McCarthy has written before, with a sentence-level style as spare and laconic as anything published in the contemporary period" (153). This laconic style is further intensified in *The Road* (2006) and reaches its stylistic peak in *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*, released later that same year. This "novel," which is written in the form of a play, is comprised of dialogue almost entirely unbroken by descriptive prose. Most academic papers written about McCarthy's later works focus on the problematic portrayal of ethics and morality in the texts, and the way his writing rejects literary conventions. For example, Frye notes how these three

texts all involve the same issues: exploring “the bleak reality of despair in world [sic] of violence, together with the human potential for self-sacrifice and intimacy” (152). The intimate father-and-son relationship in *The Road* is considered to be the pinnacle of McCarthy’s character studies. Alan Noble, in his article “The Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” calls it one of the most “intimate and loving father and son relationships in American Literature” (93). Some however argue that the spare and laconic narrative style blocks the reader’s connection with these characters. Lydia Cooper, in the introductory chapter to her book *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy*, writes that McCarthy’s narrative style “seems to almost consciously reject the twentieth-century novel’s attention to the important role of literary empathy” (*No More Heroes*, Intr. Ch). She argues that the omniscient narrator in McCarthy’s texts alienates readers because of the distant and indifferent voice relating these stories of despair in a world of violence. I however, believe that this distant and tonally objective narrative voice emphasizes the nihilistic universe in which the characters struggle for survival, and symbolizes God’s absence or indifference towards the despairing population in the texts.

Though the mentioned article by Vereen M. Bell was published in 1983 and concerns only McCarthy’s early southern works, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979), he does identify the absence of moral justice in McCarthy’s works: “Ethical categories do not rule in this environment, or even pertain: moral considerations seem not to affect outcomes” (31-32). Bell regrettably does not expand on this hypothesis, and instead concludes that the nihilism in the texts remains ambiguous, providing “questions while supplying no answers” (Bell 41). To incorporate McCarthy’s later works in this discussion on the nihilism that pervades his texts, this thesis will explore *No Country for Old Men*’s, *The Road*’s, and *The Sunset Limited*’s rejection of the conventions that presupposes a textual universe governed by justice and morals. It will show how these texts

present a violent world where the bleak reality that causes such despair is the *absence* of justice. Erik J. Wielenberg concludes that the novel remains ambiguous concerning the existence of God (14). I argue that McCarthy's later works are not ambiguous concerning God's presence. These are texts in which the universe presented is an amoral and *nihilistic* cosmos. The justice that we have come to expect from genre literature is absent, which means that morality goes unrewarded and immorality unpunished.

Defining Nihilism

Time is not going to stop (...) It's forever. And everything that exists will one day vanish.

Forever. And it will take with it every explanation of it that was ever contrived. From Newton and Einstein to Homer and Shakespeare and Michelangelo. Every timeless creation.

Your art and your poetry and your science are not even composed of smoke.

(The Counselor: A Screenplay 61)

Nihilism as a singular concept has been subject to a lot of discussion. In the introduction to *Modernism & Nihilism (2011)*, Shane Weller writes that thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have discriminated between various forms of nihilism, and argues that "there is no nihilism *as such*; there are only specific deployments of the term, each of which has to be considered in its specificity, which means in its discursive context, including its relation to earlier determinations" (10). He goes further to name the nihilistic categorization in the works of some of said thinkers, such as Donald A. Crosby in *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism (1988)*, who discriminates

between political, moral, epistemological, cosmic, and existential nihilism. Of these, Crosby considers existential nihilism to be the principal form of nihilism, as it is the inevitable apex of all the nihilistic forms. Existential nihilism as Crosby defines it “judges human existence to be pointless and absurd, (...) [leading] nowhere and [adding] up to nothing” (Weller 10-11), which is the logical culmination of the other forms.

In her review of Crosby’s text, Karen L. Carr criticizes Crosby’s attempt at categorizing nihilism of not being “entirely successful” (Carr 591). She points out that the seemingly incomplete reasoning concerning his conclusion that existential nihilism deems human existence to be “pointless and absurd” implies that “as long as one is not plagued by overwhelming despair, one is not nihilist” (593). Carr argues that it should be possible to hold a nihilistic conviction without being crippled by its negative implications, that one can “deny the possibility of truth and value, but [remain] unmoved by any alleged loss” (593). This is an important distinction that evokes the two primary definitions of a nihilistic conviction proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche, namely that of the *active* nihilist, and that of the *passive* nihilist. In this categorization, only the passive nihilist falls victim to despair, while the active nihilist rather embraces the void in an “increased power of the spirit” (Weller 36). Weller writes that according to Nietzsche, the passive nihilist sees existence as punishment, and in response only wants to reduce their suffering as much as possible. The character of White in *The Sunset Limited* internalizes this trait, as we see in the final moments of the text when his forceful nihilistic argument against the theism proposed by Black reaches its climax.

Your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. (...) And justice?

Brotherhood? Eternal life? Good god, man. Show me a religion that prepares me for

death. For nothingness. There's a church I might enter. Yours prepares one only for more life. For dreams and illusions and lies.

(*The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form* 137)

The suicidal White's nihilistic despair culminates into a yearning for *nothingness*, for the torture and punishment of existence to cease altogether and grant him relief from the unceasing "shadow of the axe" that "hangs over every joy" (137). The passive nihilist's only answer to reduce suffering is to negate it, and since their conviction concludes that existence *is* suffering, the final solution is to negate existence itself: hence, suicide.

Contrastingly, the active nihilist "is not content to be extinguished passively but wants to extinguish everything that is aimless and meaningless in a blind rage" (Weller 36). While the passive nihilist deems existence to hold no value, he or she inescapably remains "attached to those highest values that are no longer sustainable" (35). The active nihilist is instead a "'violent force of *destruction*' directed against those values" (35). White's attachment to cultural constructs such as books and art, his declarations that these things have - or have had - *value* to him, and the despair that results from the unsustainable nature of that value, is what fuels his decision to end his life. Active nihilism on the other hand seeks to actively destroy the unsustainable existing values in order to create *new* values. Nietzsche defined what he considered to be the ultimate form of nihilism as "existence (...) without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale in nothingness" (36). This "eternal recurrence" is the source of despair for the passive nihilist, because it establishes nihilism as *never-ending sameness*, a drudgery existence that reaches no conclusion and contains no hope of relief. White's longing is not for salvation, it is for an absolute and irreversible *end* to this punishing existence. What defines the active nihilist is their rejection of that sameness, their aversion to despair, and their aim to overcome nihilism itself by breaking the eternal recurrence through

the power of destruction. As Weller puts it, “active nihilism is the passage to the limit of nihilism” (36). Destruction becomes the only solution to negate the despairing power of the void, the negation of nothingness, the negation of nihilism itself.

To avoid a deeper philosophical debate about defining the true nature of nihilism then, for the purpose of this thesis I conclude that the unifying element of all the nihilistic forms is *negation*, and that negation of value is a principle internalized by *active* and *passive nihilists*. Cormac McCarthy’s later works are significant in their portrayal of a small and concise cast of characters grappling with large existential dilemmas, often with a distinct dichotomy of opposing philosophies, and the end result consistently culminates into a negation of values and meaning. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in *No Country for Old Men* faces the overwhelming and, to him, incomprehensible force of nihilism in the figure of Anton Chigurh and is powerless to stand against the negating qualities that Chigurh internalizes. *The Road* presents a godless post-apocalyptic world that retains no apparent value or meaning, where our good guys represent the final remnants of moral goodness in a wasteland filled with amoral cannibals and rapists and murderers. *The Sunset Limited*, while remarkably less complex in its portrayal of clashing philosophies than *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, is in many ways a focal point of the nihilistic themes portrayed in the other texts. White and Black’s miserable debate on the merits of existence and its meanings and values showcases, as Frye points out, not only McCarthy’s concerns for “the bleak reality of despair in a world of violence, together with the human potential for self-sacrifice and intimacy” (Frye 152), but also the apparent nihilism that governs his universes. Black’s final unanswered prayer to God concludes the text and pointedly emphasizes how McCarthy’s later works abandon the familiar literary conventions of moral symmetry and a higher force of justice that rewards the moral figures for their fortitude and perseverance. In stripping his characters of the moral protection, McCarthy reveals a literary universe that is lacking the

familiar moral symmetry, a universe in which there is no external force of justice to pass judgment on immorality or to protect and reward the righteous, and this absence is what this thesis will explore.

Chapter 1 will focus on *No Country for Old Men*, and explore in-depth the nihilistic qualities of Anton Chigurh and the negating force he maintains throughout the text in relation to the justice figure of Sheriff Tom Ed Bell. The chapter will show how the novel introduces the reader to the familiar set pieces and tropes that have come to be expected from formulaic and conventional genre fiction before pointedly discarding these tropes and leaving them unfulfilled in the final portion of the text. *No Country for Old Men* sets up a hero vs. villain dichotomy with clear moral and just implications that prepare the reader for the expected heroic triumph in the end, before it rejects this dichotomy completely by showing the heroic figures fail and the villainous figure triumph. Anton Chigurh's nihilistic power comes not only from his *destructive* capacity, but significantly also from his *eloquence*. Chigurh, like White in *The Sunset Limited* and the Man's wife in *The Road*, shows how the nihilist commands the power of speech in a way that silences and negates all opposing arguments. White's power of spirit and suicidal conviction only gets stronger as he is allowed to articulate his frustrations with existence through speech, which silences Black and leads him to despair when he cannot find the words to combat the forceful rhetoric of nihilism. Finally, Bell's retirement from the police force symbolizes God's abandonment from the novel's amoral universe, and I will examine how the final dream sequence of the text introduces the concept of carrying fire that is so prevalent in *The Road*.

Chapter 2 will explore *The Road's* religious undertones that emphasize the moral expectations that both the reader and the characters in the text retain in spite of the apparent absence of a divine force of justice with the power to affect outcomes. I will show how the Man and the Boy's hopeless trek across the ashen landscape only seems to drive home the

conclusion of an entirely nihilistic universe indifferent and unforgiving and apathetic to the suffering of good moral characters. The “Man” and the “Boy/Child’s” allegorical tags for the protector and the protected emphasize the impotence of God and the futility of their mission to carry the fire, and how the decay of human connection has eroded the foundation for goodness and trust to the point where names are too precious or personal to share. However, in spite of unambiguous signs that there is no brighter future ahead, that the road does not lead anywhere, that the father and son should not have stepped onto the road in the first place, hopelessness and despair do not break their spirits in the end. *The Road* is thus a work in which nihilism fails. The apparent hopelessness of their situation and the moral void of the setting that surrounds them does not make the Man and the Boy let go of the fire and fall into despair like the passive nihilist figure of White in *The Sunset Limited* or the Man’s wife in *The Road*. Nor do they attempt to overcome nihilism by becoming forces of destruction, such as the active nihilist Anton Chigurh. Their response to divine absence and the nihilistic hopelessness of the universe is to valiantly keep carrying the fire through unwavering faith in the value of trust and human connection, even though they inhabit a nihilistic world that negates those values and cannot be made right again.

Chapter 1 – Abandoning All Hope in *No Country for Old Men*

Negating Genre-fiction

People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they dont deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did.

(*No Country for Old Men* 91)

Critics and scholars are divided on whether or not to categorize McCarthy's ninth novel as simple genre fiction or as a highly literary work that aims to defy genre conventions. In the blurb pages of the Picador press edition of the novel, various critics describe the novel as one or the other. Annie Proulx states that *No Country for Old Men* "transforms a standard western good-guy bad-guy plot into serious literature." A review from *Daily Telegraph* labels it a "highly literary thriller" while another review from *Scotland on Sunday* calls it a "neo-Western," and "no mere thriller." Lydia Cooper suggests that the novel evokes "archaic tropes and modes of narration more typically associated with the folktale," in order to "explore the relationship between storytelling and morality" ("He's a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?": Folklore and Morality in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*" 38). On the other side of the coin, *The New Yorker* critic James Wood famously labels it a "morally empty book" (Wood), and effectively dismisses the novel as a mere pulp thriller. In *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* Steven Frye writes, "*No Country for Old Men* blends the popular American genre of the western and the crime novel, but it is a work of genre fiction nonetheless" (153).

In his article "What have you done. What have you failed to do': Aesthetic and Moral Complacency in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*," Vincent Allan King

investigates why the novel elicits such an overwhelmingly divisive and negative response from professional critics. He refers to this response as a “deep cultural bias against genre fiction” (536). It is significant, he states, that most critiques of the novel, negative and positive alike, make attempts to pigeonhole the novel into certain genres or sub-genres, which indicates how “it seems practically impossible, at least initially, to think of *No Country* as anything other than ‘genre fiction’” (537), and he goes further to ask why the novel apparently seems to elicit “our bias against genre fiction” (539), in such a way. The negative responses from professional critics seem to imply that critics deem the novel to be sub-literary, as less than literature, on account of its utilization of genre tropes. Clearly *No Country for Old Men* does evoke certain genre conventions, most particularly from the Western and the Thriller genres, but the question remains why an established and acclaimed author like Cormac McCarthy would choose to delve into “lowbrow” depths of genre fiction after authoring highly praised literary works, such as 1985’s *Blood Meridian* or his 1992-1998 *Border Trilogy*.

King suggests that the conventional nature of the novel distorts the reader’s perception of its contents. If the reader views the contents of the novel through the lens of genre fiction - as a conventional Western or a thriller – then he or she presumes that certain aspects of the novel will follow the conventional framework, and perhaps the reader then fails to recognize that these tropes do not actually play out in a conventional fashion. King’s example of this is the retirement of character Sheriff Ed Tom Bell.

Bell’s position as the sheriff marks him as the “detective-in-charge,” as the genre hero of this genre fiction. (...) But Bell’s status as the genre hero rests largely upon the assumption that *No Country* is a genre fiction. So if the novel’s architecture suggests that it is anything but a standard genre fiction, then it may also be the case that Sheriff

Bell isn't the moral paragon that we assume he is.

(544-45)

Indeed, Bell's "moral complacency," as King calls it, reveals how the novel's conventional architecture distorts the reader's perception of the text, and exposes the reader's expectation for *No Country for Old Men* to adhere to certain genre tendencies when in fact it overturns them. By placing Bell at the apex of the novel's moral hierarchy, and then have him neglect to carry out his promises and duties, the novel subverts the reader's presumptions of a conventional genre narrative in order to reveal a nihilistic universe in which the collapse of the moral hierarchy is the onset of civilization's ruin. The text introduces the reader to familiar genre set pieces that imply the narrative will play out in conventional fashion according to genre fiction tendencies, but they do not. When viewed through the lens of genre fiction, Bell's retirement from the force without first apprehending, or even confronting Anton Chigurh reads like an incomplete thriller narrative; the reader is deprived of the conventional heroic triumph over the villain. This absence of denouement in the genre narrative reveals how the novel negates genre conventions by placing the Western thriller in a nihilistic setting devoid of moral justice, thus exploring the outcome of what happens when genre fiction is stripped of the justice and moral symmetry that tends to govern it.

From this I conclude that *No Country for Old Men's* genre fiction set pieces are used as a basis for comparison that highlights the nihilism of the novel. By subverting the reader's expectations of a conventional narrative, the novel draws the departure from the familiar into sharper focus. I will delve further into how the novel negates genre fiction by examining the plot, the hero vs. villain dichotomy, and the absence of justice and protection. I will examine the nihilistic force that is Anton Chigurh in opposition to the agent of justice that is Sheriff Bell, and show how Llewelyn Moss acts as a substitute protagonist in order to fill the void left by the physical absence of the sheriff. Further, I will draw intertextual comparisons

between Anton Chigurh's power of eloquence to silence others, and White's similar dominance in *The Sunset Limited*. Then, to conclude the discussion on *No Country for Old Men*, I will examine how the final passage in the text underlines the bleak nihilistic darkness that permeates the novel and guides us by firelight through to McCarthy's next novel, *The Road*.

The Retirement of Sheriff Bell/The Retirement of God

Now I aim to quit and a good part of it is just knowin that I wont be called on to hunt this man. I reckon he's a man.

(No Country for Old Men 282)

The familiar Western and thriller set pieces in *No Country for Old Men* are apparent at even a surface-level glance. There are gunslingers, lawmen hunting criminals, and the American southwestern setting. We are introduced to a familiar hero vs. villain dichotomy in the opening passages, initially by Sheriff Bell's monologue where he describes a "true and living prophet of destruction" (4), and then in the first un-italicized passage where we witness the destructive power of Anton Chigurh as he strangles a police deputy to death with the chain between his cuffed hands (5). Daniel Butler states it in his article, "What's wanted is a clean sweep': Outlaws and Anarchy in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*," that Chigurh's crime spree is "familiar behavior for the thriller villain, on the run from the law" (46), but he also points out that there is an "anarchical element to Chigurh's violence" (46), that disturbs the genre categorization we attempt to put on him, which I will examine later. Butler then goes on to name Chigurh the archetypal Western "man in the black hat," stating that "the demands of the genre requires"

such an archetypal villain to be “worthy of the hero” (46), whom Butler designates Llewelyn Moss, and *not* Sheriff Bell, which is a significant departure from the genre-conjecture that identifies Bell as our heroic figure.

As both King and Butler point out, Sheriff Bell’s questionable heroism is problematic when we attempt to place him at the moral center of the novel. Because he is the sheriff, the agent of justice and law and order, the reader attributes qualities to Bell that he is *expected* to have, because that is what conventional genre fiction has instilled in the reader. Note for example the surface-level similarities between Sheriff Bell and Deputy Marshal Rooster Cogburn from Portis’ novel *True Grit*: they are both elderly *moral* men, whose characters have been hardened by violence and the grueling moral choices their position has required of them. They are both given the task to hunt down a dangerous and destructive criminal. But while Rooster Cogburn carries out his duties, which shows his heroic strength and resolve and capacity for self-sacrifice, Sheriff Bell unceremoniously abandons his duties. Cogburn’s defining heroic moment in *True Grit*, after he “[abandons Mattie Ross, the young girl] in [the] howling wilderness to a gang of cutthroats who care not a rap for the blood of their own companions, and how much less for that of a helpless and unwanted youngster” (Portis 182), shows him honoring their agreement and the moral duties of his position by putting aside his own selfish motivations and confront the villains. In contrast, Bell explains in the very first passage of the novel that he is *unwilling* to confront his foil. “I walked in front of those eyes once. I wont do it again. I wont push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him” (*No Country for Old Men* 4). Despite half-heartedly hunting Anton Chigurh throughout the majority of the text, Bell abandons the hunt and gives up his duties as protector and agent of justice. He accomplishes nothing, and he lets the villain run free. The distinction between the two novels is remarkable. *No Country for Old Men* sets up a similar thriller genre plot as *True Grit* in order to elicit the reader’s expectations for justice to prevail and the symmetry or

balance of law and order to be restored by the lawman rising up to face the criminal, but all of these expectations get methodically deflated as the novel progresses.

King suggests that because of Bell's passive unwillingness to act as the agent of justice, he is best seen as the "partner in crime" to Chigurh and Moss because he, like them, is unwilling "to expend the moral energy required to make daily wagers - and to accept the risks that go along with them" (King 549). I will pose another argument: that the unwilling Sheriff Bell, as the highest-ranking authority figure in the text, represents the unwillingness or absence of *God* in the novel's universe. Bell's retirement from the police force represents the retirement of God from his position of complete authority over the world.

The analogous relationship between Bell and God is striking. In his review of the novel, Erik Miles Williamson states that Bell is "more a conscience than a character" (Williamson 2). Bell repeatedly puts himself above the general population of his jurisdiction by virtue of him being the sheriff. He claims that he has "pretty much the same authority as God," and that his position is to "govern" (*No Country for Old Men* 64). Then, at other times, he laments the inadequacy of his position to influence events or to withstand the torrential violence and amorality that ravages the world. "Part of it was I always thought I could at least somewhat put things right and I guess I just dont feel that way no more" (296). "I wake up sometimes way in the night and I know as certain as death that there aint nothing short of the second coming of Christ that can slow this train. I dont know what is the use of me layin awake over it. But I do" (159). Biblical texts make it clear that it was God himself who sent Christ to earth in order to set things right, and Bell's laments suggests a sense of futility or powerlessness in this notion. A sense that perhaps God no longer has the ability to initiate the second coming of Christ, that perhaps this world, like the world in *The Road* cannot be made right again on account of the lawlessness and the violence that permeates the novel's universe.

The power of God lies in the establishing of laws and a universal moral code, but in *No Country for Old Men*, these laws no longer hold any substance. “They dont have no respect for the law? That aint half of it. They dont even think about the law” (216). If Bell, the sheriff of the county is incapable of enforcing his own laws because criminals do not recognize them, then that suggests that laws are entirely dependent upon the population’s acceptance of them. If all it takes to transgress a law is to renounce it, then the law can only function as a code for those who already adhere to it, which negates the power of the law entirely. A true preacher aims his preaching efforts at the sinners. He does not spend his energy preaching fruitlessly to the choir. That the nihilistic criminals of the text can render Bell impotent by simply rejecting his authority proves that the moral code has lost all its substance, and all its power to influence. As Williamson states: “Without a universal moral code, humanity is reduced to a nebulous relativism that can make a right of any wrong, a wrong of any right and can justify any action with ease” (Williamson 2). When the population grows apathetic towards a universal moral code, both Bell and God loses their power to influence and govern. The violence in the text then cannot be described as immoral, or as “inexplicable evil,” as Cooper have done (“He's a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?” 37), because morality requires the acknowledgement and recognition of laws and a universal moral code. Instead, the pervasive nihilism in the text demands that we read the violence in a new light. To not recognize the moral system, to not even take it into consideration at all, is *amoral*: the negation of morality, and thus, the negation of divine justice. Bell’s impotence in enforcing justice upon those who do not even think about the law suggests a similar impotence in God punishing those who do not consider the moral implications of their acts.

We see this apathy towards Bell through the other figures’ response concerning him. Anton Chigurh certainly remains unconcerned about the threat of justice throughout the text, and so do the rest of the criminals in the county. As Bell states, “I think for me the worst of it

is knowin that probably the only reason I'm even still alive is that they have no respect for me" (*No Country for Old Men* 217). The implication Bell proposes is that had he attempted to enforce his position with a more present authority, the amoral opposition would simply dispose of him. This suggests that the power of the authority figure is dependent upon the respect and recognition of his laws, and so in the absence of this respect, justice no longer retains the power to govern the population or to influence people. Bell's power is negated by the apathy and non-recognition of his authority. Thus, for an agent of justice to abandon his responsibility in the face of amorality emphasizes the inadequacy of the moral system he represents when it attempts to confront its own negation. Bell's failure then, is the failure of God faced with a faithless population; the negating power of nihilism has rendered him impotent and toothless.

We see this impotence clearly through Sheriff Bell's extensive monologues in relation to his passive unwillingness to act throughout the text. For all his moral speeches, and his strongly articulated wish to be able to make things right, he accomplishes *nothing*. Bell simply does not *act*. As a sheriff, as an enforcer of justice, he is always lagging behind the violence, never able to perform the protective duties of his position. In a conventional genre text this cat-and-mouse chase would represent the rising action of the narrative, the steady raising of the stakes until the inevitable confrontation between the sheriff and Chigurh. In *No Country for Old Men* however, there is a significant absence of payoff to these genre tendencies. Bell never closes in on the criminal, and eventually he simply gives up, and Anton Chigurh receives no retribution for his crimes. Lydia Cooper suggests that of the two protagonists in the text, after Llewelyn Moss's death "readers are compelled to recognize the "true protagonist," Bell" ("He's a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?" 41). Yet we cannot ignore that Sheriff Bell does not fulfill the role of protagonist. His influence over the events in the novel is negligible, his presence affects nothing, and his passivity and unwillingness to

act on his moral convictions leave a huge imbalance in the text. We have a strongly present antagonist, but no protagonist willing to confront him and revert the *status quo* of moral symmetry. As King writes, “Bell is the resident Chigurh expert. If he isn't on Chigurh's trail, then no one is” (King 547). Indeed, no one is present to hold Chigurh accountable for his crimes, not even God. Whether Bell is the moral center of the novel or not becomes irrelevant. As a vocal authority he is heavily present, but as a physical enforcer of justice, he is entirely *absent*. His voice alone holds no power to influence events, no capacity to enforce the authoritative function of his position. In that sense, Bell's voice, and thus for all purposes, the voice of God is impotent in *No Country For Old Men*, and leaves the universe of the novel void of agency that enforces justice, and it effectively becomes a *godless* universe.

In this divine absence events are unaffected by the morality of the novel's inhabitants. We have seen the tangible protection that shields moral characters in conventional genre fiction like *True Grit*, where Rooster Cogburn, the ocularly challenged lone gunman can confront an entire group of bandits and take them out before they can cause him harm. Shootouts in *No Country for Old Men* read like the reversal of such familiar Western confrontations. In the absence left by Sheriff Bell, our last remaining heroic figure in the text is Llewelyn Moss, the Vietnam veteran deer hunter who finds the drug money and activates the plot. Lydia Cooper points out that Moss is far from a moral paragon, as his greedy nature is what causes his troubles, but also that he still remains “free of the homicidal sociopathology that seems to afflict the truly evil characters” (*No More Heroes* Ch 4). Cooper's mislabeling of the amoral characters as “evil” aside, the only active moral counterpoint to Chigurh's antagonism is Moss, and in the shootout scene at the Hotel Eagle we see how this moral dichotomy is irrelevant within the novel's nihilistic universe.

By the time [Moss] crossed the street Chigurh was already on the balcony of the hotel above him. Moss felt something tug at the bag on his shoulder. The pistolshot was just

a muffled pop, flat and small in the dark quiet of the town. He turned in time to see the muzzleflash of the second shot faint but visible under the pink glow of the fifteen foot high neon hotel sign. He didn't feel anything. The bullet snapped at his shirt and blood started running down his upper arm and he was already at a dead run. With the next shot he felt a stinging pain in his side. He fell down and got up again leaving Chigurh's shotgun lying in the street. Damn, he said. What a shot. (...) He spun with the shotgun and thumbed back the hammer and fired. The buckshot rattled off the second storey balustrade and took out the glass of some of the windows.

(No Country for Old Men 113-14)

Daniel Butler describes this scene as an “absurdist retelling” of iconic Western scenes because of its “anarchistic character” (Butler 41). But while the state of disorder in the scene may seem anarchistic because it contrasts so sharply with the iconic Western scene where moral justice governs the outcome and the heroic figure principally emerges triumphant, this shootout reads like an absurdist retelling because the moral protection is gone, and the trope of villainous incompetence is neutralized. The scene is chaotic only when we read it through the lens of conventional expectations for a textual universe governed by divine justice. Chigurh's superior skill with the gun is all that governs this shootout. And while Moss's flailing shot does manage to injure Chigurh in the leg, this injury does not slow him down or inhibit him in any way, almost as if he is impervious to damage, which we will examine further later.

Significantly, the description of Moss's buckshot that takes out the glass on some of the windows of the building later on proves to have hit an innocent old woman, and killed her. “A rockingchair by the window where an old woman sat slumped. (...) She'd been shot through the forehead and had tilted forward” (*No Country for Old Men 147*). The tragic

image of the old woman highlights the absence of justice influencing the outcome of events. There is no force of protection that keeps innocent or good figures safe from harm, which reveals how morals do not affect outcomes in this text. If having a moral fortitude does not affect anything, then what is the point of making the effort to maintain it? In *No Country for Old Men*, the new nihilistic criminals that Sheriff Bell is unable to understand and combat are unconcerned with such moral dilemmas. They have decided that there is no point to even consider the question.

We see this in the opening passage of the text, in the young murderer that Bell says knew “was goin to hell,” before Bell states that “he wasnt nothing compared to what was comin down the pike” (3-4). This young murderer, though he has a disrespect of morality through the way that he challenges it, clearly still accepts it and subjects himself to its rules and laws of justice. Bell then goes on to describe “another view of the world out there” (4). This new view, which we learn throughout the course of the novel is a *nihilistic* view, no longer binds itself to the laws of morality, and does not adhere to them. Characters like Chigurh do not think in terms of moral right and wrong, and are not even on the border between the two. They instead remain completely *outside* of a moral system. As we saw earlier, “they don’t even think about the law,” and as such, they have effectively negated morality’s power to govern them, which neutralizes its value. Sheriff Bell repeatedly attributes the loss of moral value to his own feeling of inadequacy and impotence. “I always knew that you had to be willin to die to even do this job. That was always true. Not to sound glorious about it or nothin but you do. (...) I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that” (4). To be willing to sacrifice himself in order to protect his population is in Bell’s perspective an inconsequential and inadequate sacrifice that does not have the capacity to change the amoral void. In order to truly make a difference, to have the strength to combat amorality it is not

enough to simply be willing to die for what's right, for what's morally good. In order to combat nihilism one would have to put one's soul at hazard, and would have to renounce one's morals entirely in order to enforce his or her authority on these amoral criminals. But to give up morality in order to protect it is to negate it. For Bell to be able to combat nihilistic figures like Anton Chigurh, he would have to put his "soul at hazard" and embrace nihilism, except there is no such thing as a "just" nihilist. One cannot be nihilist and still value concepts like justice, because – per the active nihilist's way - that would entail a conviction that such value is unsustainable, and that it therefore must be destroyed. Thus, if Sheriff Bell were to embrace nihilism, he would be embracing his own negation, and his moral capacity for self-sacrifice would inevitably become an inescapable process of self-destruction. Bell's realization that he cannot do that, that he is not *willing* to do what it takes to perform his duties is the ultimate defeating blow to his self-worth and capacity to keep his position as the Sheriff. "He'd felt like this before but not in a long time and when he said that, then he knew what it was. It was defeat. It was being beaten. More bitter to him than death" (306).

From Bell's conviction that in order to successfully carry out his duties he must be willing to put his soul at hazard, we must necessarily then ask what it means to have a soul. Lydia Cooper argues that through the juxtaposing of Bell and Chigurh's characters, the novel provides "sufficient evidence to suggest that, in McCarthy's universe, characters who recognize their ethical responsibility to nature and to humankind possess a "soul," while those who do not are empty shells of flesh" ("He's a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?" 55). Certainly, figures like Chigurh do not recognize any ethical responsibility, but are they empty shells of flesh because of it? Cooper goes further to argue that to recognize this ethical responsibility is what awakens the soulful character to the "crucial necessity of human interconnection," that "[l]ove and goodness (...) occur only in relationship" (55-56), whereas the soulless shell will be unable to achieve this love and goodness. This categorization seems

to evoke Karen L. Carr's critique of Donald Crosby's definition that implied nihilism necessarily leads to despair. This argument omits nihilism's capacity to increase the power of the spirit, to *empower*, and not just to diminish and defeat. Before I give Chigurh his due, I must acknowledge that there is a significant heightened level of eloquence and language in the nihilistic figures of McCarthy's texts that sharply brings this increased power of the spirit into focus.

We see this in clearly in White in *The Sunset Limited*, where his energy and rhetoric steadily grows stronger throughout the course of the debate he has with Black. As the two of them delve deeper and deeper into existential questions and concepts, White's nihilistic arguments completely dominate Black's theistic ones.

Your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. And if that pain were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash. And justice? Brotherhood? Eternal life? Good god, man. Show me a religion that prepares one for death. For nothingness. There's a church I might enter. Yours prepares one only for more life. For dreams and illusion and lies. (...) Do you understand me? *Can you understand me?*

(The Sunset Limited 137-38)

Black's only response to this onslaught of overpowering rhetoric is to sit "with his head lowered," speechless and unable to conjure the words to counter the nihilistic arguments. This implies that those who are "empty shells of flesh" harbor the power of eloquence, while those who have souls do not, which in turn suggests that faith and goodness is somehow *beyond* the rational mind's capacity to articulate it, which we will examine closer in the next

chapter. Through the loss of the capacity for love and goodness the soulless gain other capacities that allow them to dominate and overpower. White's question of "Can you understand me?" only emphasizes the moral dissymmetry in the text, how any attempt to counterbalance nihilism gets negated and neutralized. Black cannot claim to understand White's yearning for the void because, just like Sheriff Bell's moral paradox cannot allow him to put his soul at hazard, for Black to acknowledge the merits of nihilism would be to destroy his own theistic conviction. Tellingly, Black's unanswered prayer at the end of the text is not for God to give him an understanding of nihilism, for to do so would negate God's presence. Instead he prays for the *words* needed to combat nihilism, the eloquence needed to counterbalance White and restore the moral symmetry that is absent. "If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words? You give em to him. What about me?" (142). By Cooper's definition, if Black is the only of the two who recognizes ethical responsibility, then he is the only one who possesses a soul and sees the value in brotherhood and human relationship, while White is an empty shell of flesh.

At first glance, this seems to be true. As White states: "The truth is that the forms I see have been slowly emptied out. They no longer have any content. They are shapes only. A train, a wall, a world. Or a man. A thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void. No meaning to its life. Its words. Why would I seek the company of such a thing?" (139). Indeed, if there is no meaning to a man's words, they are by definition empty, like the man himself. However, this emptiness still allows a capacity for spiritual vitality. White might be unable to find value in human relationships, but he finds freedom and relief in solitude, in the void that Black deems so despairing. To the nihilist, despair lies in the unsustainable values that non-nihilists cling to, and not in the void itself. The void grants relief, it is the cherished *conclusion* of suffering, and not the cause of it. To have a soul, to have the capacity to take part in the love and goodness of human relationships is a capacity that might hold value to

those who do not abide by nihilism, but the nihilists do not view their lack of this capacity as a loss, they view it as liberation. This distinction is crucial, and it is what shows how nihilism is not the middle gray area in a spectrum of black and white, good and evil, hope and despair, or theism and atheism, it is *separate* from these opposing ideologies, which is why it is incomprehensible to non-nihilists like Black, who see the world in a spectrum of black and white (105). For either Black or Bell to adopt nihilism in order to bring the dissymmetry of morals and justice back into balance, they would need to resign their morals and deny their convictions, which would only negate the symmetry further. This paradox neutralizes any attempt at combating nihilism, and shows how nihilism's negating force is all-encompassing. It silences all arguments against it, it devours all opposing forces, and it remains firmly on the *outside* of any balanced spectrum.

The Active Nihilism of Anton Chigurh

He's a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that.

(No Country for Old Men 153).

We see proof of this paradox in the scene where Chigurh arrives to kill Carla Jean, Moss's widow. Carla Jean, begging for mercy, tells Chigurh: "You don't have to [kill me]." To which Chigurh responds: "You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn't allow for special cases" (259). By any moral standard, sparing Carla Jean's life is the right thing to do because she is completely innocent in the ordeal with the drug money that Moss set in motion. It follows then, that for Chigurh to show mercy and compassion and walk away would be an act of moral goodness. To do so,

Chigurh states, would be to make himself vulnerable, not because he is an *immoral* figure who actively seeks to disrespect moral goodness at every opportunity, but because it would be to abandon the strict nihilistic and *amoral* outlook that keeps him out of reach from authorities and agents of justice like Sheriff Bell. For him to delve into the realm of morality for this one special case would imply that he does recognize and acknowledge the moral code, it would imply that he values some lives over others, it would imply that he has simply been the immoral counterpoint to Sheriff Bell's morality all throughout the text, and *that* would imply that he is not nihilist. But Chigurh has only "one way to live," and "it doesn't allow for special cases." The only mercy he is willing to give her is to flip the coin, seemingly to give her the illusion of choice, and to give her a final spark of hope that a universe governed by divine justice would perhaps grant her protection. "Yet even though I could have told you how all of this would end I thought it not too much to ask that you have a final glimpse of hope in the world to lift your heart before the shroud drops, the darkness. Do you see?" (259). However, his repetitive question "do you see/understand?" instead implies that he flips the coin in order to teach Carla Jean that the universe is indifferent to her innocence and that entitlement is not a real concept. "I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? (...) You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world. Do you see?" (259-260).

Chigurh's efforts to convince Carla Jean of his conviction have unmistakably preachy connotations to them, akin to that of a religious missionary. His arguments, like White's, are forcefully eloquent to the point of caricature, and we must ask the question why he goes to such lengths to convert Carla Jean to his way of thinking when his intention to destroy her is clear from the very beginning of their encounter. Indeed, the instant she understands him, he

shoots her (260). To answer why he goes through this trouble, we must examine his actions throughout the novel and ask: what does Anton Chigurh *want*?

Many scholars argue that Chigurh is pure evil. “Chigurh is Satan incarnate, or the embodiment of inexplicable evil/fate” (Walsh 342). “More than most of McCarthy’s novels, this narrative does not settle for mere symbolism. Chigurh is not “like” Satan; at some level of the story, he just might *be* Satan” (“He’s a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?” 46). As we have seen however, these descriptions of Chigurh as “evil” fail to recognize how the text demands Chigurh’s actions and motivations to be viewed as strictly *amoral*. None of his acts of violence give any indication that he revels in his murderous ways, that he kills out of malice. Note for example his apparent indifference to the outcome of the first coin toss in the text.

You stand to win everything, Chigurh said. Everything.

You aint makin any sense mister.

Call it.

Heads then.

Chigurh uncovered the coin. He turned his arm slightly for the man to see. Well done, he said

(No Country for Old Men 56)

Had he been truly evil, and reveled in violence and immorality, binding the fate of the victims to the outcome of a coin toss would be counterproductive to his “evil” motivations. Instead he compliments the proprietor for calling the side that saves his life. That Chigurh spares some people but not others, seemingly through the random element of the coin, suggests that his violence is the enactment of a calculated purpose, which implies that he

abides by the power of chance as the governing force of the universe. Steven Frye however, argues that Chigurh is an agent of chaos theory.

From his point of view, consistent with chaos theory, an irreducibly complex matrix of cause and effect has brought them both to the present moment, and though chance governs the fall of the coin, it is a chance mitigated by all the intricate consequential moments that precede it. Even the portentous fortune in the toss is circumscribed by time and previous events, and the fact that Chigurh could act out of free will, choosing not to kill, is from his point of view a comforting illusion devoid of truth.

(Frye 162)

Frye's reading argues that the act of the coin toss becomes simple theatrics, a trick Chigurh uses to prove to his victims that choices are illusions that have negligible effects on the determined sequential order of events. In Chigurh's view then, to spare Carla Jean's life would be to "second say the world," to attempt to upset reality as he sees it. "When I came into your life your life was over" (*No Country for Old Men* 260). He has no power to walk away because her death by his hand was already determined long before he arrived.

However in the coin toss we can find more significance than Frye's argument accounts for. While certainly inconsequential in the deterministic sequence of events, the symbolic flipping of the coin also shows how the fate of a person is not tied to the moral framework upon which they live their lives. "[Chigurh] turned [the coin]. For her to see the justice of it" (258). The only representation of active justice present in the text is the coin, which is a symbol for a duality that is fundamentally different from the good/evil dichotomy presented in the beginning of the novel. By allowing the outcome of the coin toss to decide the fate of his victims, Chigurh negates the moral constructs that the victims live by, and reduces this constructed state of being from the complex dichotomy of morals into the more

fundamental dichotomy of life and death. As Carla Jean maintains how she “don’t know what [she’s] ever done” to deserve death, Chigurh assures her that “none of [it] was [her] fault” (256-57). In *No Country for Old Men*, to be morally “good” or “evil” is an irrelevant abstraction that holds no value or capacity to influence events. In this nihilistic universe one is simply alive or dead, with no higher force of justice present to enforce a moral code.

There are two significant murders in the novel that suggest there is more to Chigurh’s violence than a nihilistic disregard for morality: the murder of Carla Jean, and the opening scene in the novel which shows Chigurh strangling a police officer to death with the chain between his handcuffs.

[The deputy] was slightly bent over when 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. If it looked like a thing he’d practiced many times it was. 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)

This scene is significant in several key aspects. Note for example the nature of the assault: the chain around Chigurh’s wrists that is meant to restrain him and immobilize him becomes in his hands the destructive tool of his escape; he negates the authority of justice by using its own powers against it. Furthermore, the symbolic gesture of savagely killing a police officer, an agent of law and order and justice, establishes Chigurh as a figure who defies these principles. Most significantly however, we must ask why Chigurh even let himself get put in these chains in the first place, since throughout the rest of the text he roams freely, effectively untouchable by any lawman. The deputy says that Chigurh “just walked in the door” (5),

which implies that he did it for some purpose. This purpose, as Chigurh later states, was to see if he could “extricate [himself] by an act of will” (174-175).

The “will,” and in particular the “will to power” in relation to nihilism is a concept that has divided thinkers since Friedrich Nietzsche’s ambiguous proposal of the concept in his writings. Bernard Reginster, in his book *Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, argues that the will to power “is the will to the overcoming of resistance” and is the key for “overcoming nihilistic despair” (131-32). He then cites Nietzsche’s statement that “what human beings want, what every smallest organism wants, is an increase of power; driven by that will they seek resistance, they need something that opposes it” (133). By this definition Chigurh purposely allows himself get captured by the police with the intent to find out if he can extricate himself by an act of will, to learn if he has the capacity to overcome the restraints of justice. This experiment would allow him to better himself, to increase his power further. He later deems this act to have been a “vain thing to do” (*No Country for Old Men* 175). Vain because it implied that nihilism would provide him the same power and protection that moral paragons believe their virtue gives them, that *he* would have the advantage on account of his amorality. “Getting hurt changed me, he said. Changed my perspective. (...) The best way I can put it is that I’ve sort of caught up with myself. That’s not a bad thing. It was overdue” (173). For Chigurh’s perspective to have changed by getting hurt implies that he was indeed convinced that nihilism would protect him, that his belief in nihilism had empowered his vanity beyond the point of reason. The leg-wound that Chigurh receives from Moss’s buckshot makes him realize that nihilism does not provide him a tangible protection or powers after all, but that instead it simply *distances* him from the authority of justice and morality. He has caught up with himself in the sense that he now knows his limits and his weaknesses, and understands that nihilism does not make him special and does not give him a pass. This shows that the two ideologies, moral and amoral, are not higher or lower than the

other in any determinable hierarchy, but that they are simply independent of each other. Nihilism keeps justice from touching Chigurh, but it does not make him impervious to damage or free from human flaws such as vanity. The only power nihilism seems to provide is the power of eloquence, but it does give the nihilist a distinct advantage in overcoming obstacles, because it liberates the nihilist from the burden of weighing and judging the value of those obstacles and the moral consequences of their actions. Chigurh's power is his capacity for unrestrained destruction, for unremorseful violence, and all his actions throughout the text suggests that this is what he wants. Chigurh's will to power, his will to overcoming nihilism, is achieved through destruction. He is thus undeniably a figure representing Nietzsche's *active nihilist*.

Why then would Chigurh expend such an effort to convert Carla Jean to his way of thinking before he kills her? Every element at play in this event should point to a quick and unceremonious murder, but significantly this does not happen. No compassion or moral dilemmas enter Chigurh's mind or obstruct his actions. However, as we have seen, Chigurh has at least one principle that he is not willing to resign under any circumstances. "You are asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do." The dominating principle that governs Chigurh's actions is that he can never recognize or give credence to morality, for to do so would be to acknowledge the rules of the moral system, and that would make him vulnerable to justice. Sheriff Bell cannot touch Chigurh as long as he remains outside of the moral framework. It follows then, that the only thing Chigurh values is his nihilistic conviction that nothing has value. But whatever value he finds in this conviction is, like all other values, *unsustainable*, and per the active nihilist's way it must be destroyed to create new values. By converting Carla Jean to nihilism then, Chigurh creates a new nihilist who internalizes the same conviction that he does. This new *value* in Carla Jean consequently needs to be destroyed in order to feed the eternal recurrence of unsustainable value and

meaning. To destroy the value in himself would be self-destructive and would neutralize his will to power, but to destroy it in another only fuels and strengthens it. Anton Chigurh is the active nihilist, the true prophet of destruction, whose will to power is an attempt to overcome nihilism itself by breaking free from the eternal recurrence of unsustainable values.

To make a Fire somewhere out there in all that Dark and all that Cold.

That country had not had a time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of. I've read a little of the history of it since and I aint sure it ever had one. But 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)

Values and moral goodness are heavily portrayed in *No Country for Old Men* as relics of the past, as something only the old generations nurtured, and something the new nihilistic generation disregards. Sheriff Bell's laments throughout the text concern his mournful conviction that the world's reduction of values is a devastating loss that will inevitably cause the eventual collapse of human civilization. In Bell's view, while the nihilists thrive in solitude the rest of society's struggle to maintain the interpersonal relationships and the communal nature of civilization cannot be sustained indefinitely. "It starts when you begin to overlook bad manners. Any time you quit hearin' Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight. (...) You finally get into the sort of breakdown in mercantile ethics that leaves people settin' around out in the desert dead in their vehicles and by then it's just too late" (304). It is clear that Bell, our resident God figure, retains no hope for a brighter or better future in this increasingly amoral world, because he insists time and time again how "it's just too late" and

that there is “nothin short of the second coming of Christ that can slow this train.” This melancholy tone of doomsday monologue that runs throughout the text emphasizes the notion of civilization’s inevitable and irretrievable violent end as a result of amoral nihilism. As the new generation of figures like Anton Chigurh is able to walk freely, destroying and demolishing as they please safely out of justice’s reach, the moral goodness of the older generation has no weapons or tools to combat them and restore the moral symmetry.

Chigurh’s departure from the text only emphasizes his untouchable nature, his ghostlike qualities. After suffering the car collision he simply walks off “up the sidewalk, holding the twist of the bandanna against his head, limping slightly” (262). This seemingly random car collision at first glance offers the possibility for a higher force of justice to have finally caught up with our elusive villain, there to penalize Chigurh and make him receive retribution for his abominable crimes. Yet he is barely slowed down by this accident, which only shows how he remains untouchable and that his nihilistic conviction leaves him far out of reach from moral justice. A slight limp and a cut on his head cannot be considered a fair retribution for his murderous acts by any functional moral code. Any hope or genre expectation for the textual universe to restore the moral symmetry limps away along with Chigurh, and we never see either of them again.

The final passages of the text then, concern Bell and his retirement, which proves how the novel’s conventional genre fiction setup serves to draw the reader’s attention toward the genre expectations of a universe governed by justice and moral symmetry in order to bring the nihilistic absence of these forces into focus. *No Country for Old Men* is a novel concerning the retirement of God as he gives up the world to the new wave of amorality, and effectively abandons all responsibility for rectifying the moral code and securing a brighter future. In the ultimate passage, when Bell describes the second dream about his father, we see the final remnants of hope for a better future getting erased.

It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin.
(...) and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to
do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon.
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. And then I woke up.

(309)

The act of carrying fire is a significant and somewhat ambiguous motif in McCarthy's later works, and I shall examine it more deeply in the next chapter, but for now I suggest that to carry fire symbolizes to carry the seeds of civilization (Wielenberg 3), the beacon of light to guide others and to represent virtue and the preservation of a moral code. Consistent with Bell's statements that the old moral code is the virtuous one, his father carries fire "in a horn the way people used to do." And for the father to build a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and cold suggests that he aims to create a moral sanctuary in the midst of the amorality of the new generation, a place where good people can seek refuge, a place that preserves the old virtues and values. At first glance this ending to the novel implies that there is hope yet for a better future of civilization, as long as someone is willing to carry the fire as a model for others to emulate. However, the final line where Bell "wakes up" signifies how this dream was just that: an illusion, a fiction, and a false and hollow promise. As Bell states concerning the man he imagines carved the water trough, "I think about him settin there with his hammer and his chisel (...) and I have to say that the only thing I can think is that there was some sort of promise in his heart. And I dont have no intentions of carvin a stone water trough. But I would like to be able to make that kind of promise. I think that's what I would like most of all" (307-308). Bell's statement that he has no intention of carving a water trough, of constructing something that will last far off into the future, and that he would like to make the

promise that such an endeavor would be valuable but cannot in good faith do so, signifies the futility he sees in the future of civilization. In Bell's view the future of civilization is doomed for destruction, and his retirement is his terminal defeat as an agent of justice and moral goodness. In the relentless oncoming torrential force of nihilism, Sheriff Bell and God renounce their duty and responsibility to make things right again, and they leave the world to meet its inevitable violent annihilation alone.

Chapter 2 - The Dead End of *The Road*

Moral Expectations

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world.

(*The Road* 1)

While *No Country for Old Men*'s controversial utilization of "lowbrow" genre fiction elements garnered criticism from professional critics, McCarthy's next novel, *The Road*, has enjoyed near universal acclaim. Though it is generally agreed that the novel utilizes distinct elements from the survivalist quest narrative, critics are divided about how to further categorize the novel. Richard Walsh recognizes that the post-apocalyptic genre "typically features heroic, survivalist fantasies," but he argues that "*The Road* does not follow these tropes" (Walsh 345). Lydia Cooper writes, "McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel is in many ways itself a classical hero story. The world of *The Road* is constructed out of symbols, and the quest narrative structure evokes all the parameters of the mythological hero's journey" (*No More Heroes* Ch 5). In another article she further proposes the novel to be a "Grail narrative" ("Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative"), where the Boy in the novel represents the divine chalice. Steven Frye identifies *The Road* as a "parable, a kind of biblical allegory that blends figurative and mythic qualities with the intimate emotional textures that naturally bind a parent and a child" (165). The novel's many biblical allusions and symbols have caused some critics and scholars to view the text as a retelling of biblical stories, specifically the book of Job (Walsh) or the book of Revelations (Grindley).

However, despite the divided opinions among critics and scholars concerning the categorization of the novel, there is an overwhelming consensus that *The Road* is an exceptionally profound work of literature. In *The Road* McCarthy avoids the usage of familiar genre tropes and conventions, and therefore does not, as King puts it, “elicit the reader’s deep cultural bias against genre fiction.” I argued in the previous chapter that the genre tropes and conventions of *No Country for Old Men* were utilized as a way to subvert the reader’s expectations of a conventional western thriller narrative in order to highlight the nihilistic absence of a higher force of justice and moral symmetry in the text. By setting up the familiar genre set pieces in the beginning of the novel before pointedly rejecting and neglecting the resolution of these set pieces towards the end of the text, *No Country for Old Men* provides a strong sense of loss that disrupts the narrative structure and leaves it incomplete when we view it through the lens of conventional genre fiction. The reader’s expectations of a textual universe governed by justice and moral symmetry are thus negated and neutralized, which emphasizes the inherent nihilism of McCarthy’s text. In the transition between *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* these same expectations undergo a significant shift away from the reader and onto the characters in the text itself. While the attentive reader can recognize the signs of doom to come, our protagonists, the Man and the Boy, remain steadfast on their journey south, both hoping and expecting rewards for their moral fortitude and perseverance. These expectations are articulated clearly in interactions between the father and the child, by their reactions to events that occur, and by their motivations for survival and perseverance throughout the text, as I presented in the introductory chapter.

We’re going to be okay, aren’t we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That's right.

Because we're carrying the fire.

Yes. Because we're carrying the fire.

(*The Road* 87)

They expect protection from harm by virtue of carrying fire in a dangerous and violent world, just like the reader expects the heroic figures to be protected in a conventional genre text.

To Carry the Fire

He knew that he was placing hopes where he'd no reason to. He hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily.

(228)

Let us now examine what it signifies to carry fire. In the closing passage of *No Country for Old Men* the act of carrying fire, as described by Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, is seen as carrying a beacon of light and hope. The image of the father's willingness to go ahead into the cold and the dark in order to build a fire so that the son can later arrive at a shelter of warmth and light symbolizes the old generation working to ensure a bright and better future for the coming generation. The fire represents a sanctuary that conserves the good moral ideology and provides safety and refuge in a world of amorality and danger (Walsh 346). Thus a father's capacity and *willingness* for action and self-sacrifice gives the son both protection and a goal to work toward. If the father is unwilling to go ahead and build that shelter, unwilling to carry the fire, there is no light up ahead for the son to find, and the son is left to find his own way in all the dark and cold. This image of parental neglect is articulated

by Bell when he describes the “percentage of children in this country bein raised by their grandparents” because the “parents wouldnt raise em” (*No Country for Old Men* 159). Sheriff Bell, as we established, is unwilling to carry the fire because he considers the future to be lost and the act to be futile. To carry the fire can thus be seen as parental responsibility towards sustaining goodness in the world that the children can inherit, a responsibility that the Man in *The Road* considers his primary duty. “He knew only that the child was his warrant” (*The Road* 3): the protected in the Man’s task as protector.

In contrast to *No Country for Old Men* however, the motif of fire is an ambiguous symbol in *The Road*. On the one hand fire is suggested to be the main element of the global catastrophe that resulted in this post-apocalyptic wasteland. The world is covered in dust and ash, the trees are dead, and there are no living creatures left besides the few straggling surviving humans. As the flare-gun that the Man finds in the stranded ship proves when he shoots the crossbowman towards the end of the text, fire is the cause of death and suffering. Yet on the other hand the flare-gun is also an instrument of hope and rescue, and fire provides light and heat by which the characters can see and warm themselves, not to mention cook food on. “[The Man] banked the fire against the seam of rock where he’d built it and he strung the tarp behind them to reflect the heat and they sat warm in their refuge while he told the boy stories” (41-42). Fire offers both the preservation and the destruction of life. This ambiguity problematizes any firm definition of the concept of carrying the fire.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Eric J. Wielenberg suggests that to carry the fire “is to carry the seeds of civilization. If civilization is to return to the world, it will be through the efforts of ‘good guys’” (3). The Man and the Boy are carrying fire on the road, which is one of the last remnants of civilization at its peak.

Why are they the state roads?

Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.

But there's not any more states?

No. (...)

But the roads are still there.

Yes. For a while.

(43-44)

Roads lead to destinations, which is a promise to those that travel the road that they are headed *toward* something. Just as Sheriff Bell's father lighting a fire up ahead gives Bell a goal, the road gives the Man and the Boy a goal and a heightened sense of purpose. They are carrying the fire with a hope to someday rekindle civilization, and the promising road fuels their expectations for a brighter future and places value on the concept of hope.

In addition, the novel proposes a significant causality between the act of carrying fire and being "good guys," in a world mostly populated by "bad guys," by rapists and murderers and cannibals.

We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?

No. Of course not. (...)

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys.

Yes.

And we're carrying the fire.

And we're carrying the fire. Yes.

(*The Road* 136)

The dichotomy presented suggests that to carry the fire is a task only performed by good people whose ethics are governed by moral goodness, as defined by the capacity to place value on life. As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, Wielenberg argues that *The Road* presents Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative in its most basic form. "Bad guys eat people; good guys don't. This is what remains of the Categorical Imperative: don't treat people as mere food" (4). The act of cannibalism can never be considered a moral act according to the Categorical Imperative, because it can never be accepted as a universal law. If everyone began to eat other people, then humanity would be doomed. Most of the survivors who roam the wasteland no longer adhere to this principle, and so they cannot be considered moral once they show a willingness to transgress this universal law of respecting the value of life. Careful reading of the conversation shows that the Man and the Boy are not good guys simply because they do not resort to cannibalism: they do not resort to cannibalism because they are good guys. "We wouldn't ever eat anybody, no matter what." Instead of passively avoiding cannibalism, they rather assume an *active* position of rejecting the mere prospect of it. This willingness to act on their good morality show that the Man and the Boy are among the few who still claim to respect the inherent value of life, and are thus among the last remaining moral people who are fit to carry the fire.

And yet, even with this clear-cut moral baseline the border between good and bad still becomes blurred in the novel. The Boy challenges the father's moral principles by stating that in the stories the father tells the child "[they're] always helping people," while in the real world they "dont help people" (287), which reveals that there might be more to morality than to reject immoral prospects such as cannibalism. The Boy's challenge implies that to disregard someone in need of help is also to disrespect the value of his or her life. Indeed, if the Man and the Boy want to have any chance of rekindling civilization, then they will need to form a larger community than simply the two of them. They will necessarily have to

actively reach out to other good guys, but the Man remains unwilling to do so even until his death, as he tells the Boy: “Keep the gun with you at all times. You need to find the good guys but you cant take any chances. No chances. Do you hear?” (297-298). As Wielenberg points out in his article, “it is impossible to follow these instructions; there is no way to connect to other good guys without taking some sort of chance” (8). From this, the Man’s flaws and distrust of others are revealed to be so crippling that he is actually prohibiting the rekindling of civilization, and that he may not be fit to carry the fire after all, which I will examine more closely later on.

From this, I conclude that the act of carrying fire is the symbolic task of working to restore moral goodness to the world and bring civilization back to its old glory where communities of moral people can cooperate for a better future instead of this bleak survivalist world where short-term and selfish gain is the norm. To carry the fire is an active duty to maintain the moral ideology that life has a value that must be respected, and therefore only good moral people who are willing to expend the moral energy can perform this task. I will examine how the bleak post-apocalyptic setting affects the moral outlook and the expectations of these “good” characters within the narrative, and how *The Road* remains consistent with *No Country for Old Men*’s godless universe. In the wake of God’s resignation and the loss of justice and moral symmetry *The Road* presents the logical conclusion to the new amoral and nihilistic world presented in McCarthy’s previous novel. The messianic qualities of the Boy, his capacity for forgiveness and complete trust in the goodness of others, problematizes the question of God’s presence or involvement in the events of the novel, but ultimately the answer is revealed to be an unambiguous divine absence. Finally I will conclude that in contrast to *No Country for Old Men*, where Sheriff Bell admits defeat in the face of nihilism, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* are works in which nihilism fails to break the spirits and the moral resolve of its characters. In spite of the overpowering negating force

of nihilism in the textual universe, the characters remain determined to keep carrying the fire to the dead end of the road, to keep working to make things better, even though the future no longer retains any trace of light and goodness.

Expecting Rewards from Empty Promises

Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again.

(The Road 300)

As we have seen, the Man and the Boy make clear articulations that they expect protection from harm because of their virtue of carrying fire and being moral good guys. And while the reader's expectations concerning *No Country for Old Men's* conventional set pieces are left unfulfilled, the Man and the Boy's expectations for tangible rewards are at a surface glance met. Interpretations of the ending to *The Road* are divided as to whether or not it ends hopefully, with many scholars pointing to the *deus ex machina* nature of the old war veteran's appearance to save the Boy from almost certain death to be a sign of divine intervention, if not from a tangible deity, then at least from a tangible force of "goodness" in the novel's universe. Lydia Cooper concludes that "because the boy subsequently finds others, the narrative suggests that he is capable of finding what his father is not: goodness in other people" ("*The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative" 233). She labels this goodness as being "nothing less than the divine in human nature." Wielenberg urges the reader to consider the "pattern of near demise followed by unlikely rescue that repeats itself throughout the story," and asks whether these events are "the hand of God reaching into the burned-out hellscape to protect the child" (1), before ultimately concluding that the novel leaves the

question of divine presence unresolved and ambiguous. He argues instead that the central purpose of maintaining morality in the story, the primary purpose of carrying the fire, is to maintain a capacity for interpersonal connection. His argument then evokes Cooper's conclusion that in McCarthy's later works only those who possess a soul are capable of human relationship. "God or no God, the most valuable thing in this world is love, and a good reason to struggle to be moral is that doing so is the only way to attain genuine love" (14).

Contrastingly, Tim Edwards in his article "The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" writes that "though the man's son, in the end, seems indeed to find 'goodness,' we cannot ignore how that closing coda undercuts whatever hopeful ending the boy's rescue has promised" (60).

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

(*The Road* 307)

In Edwards' reading, the ending paragraph describing the maps of the world as a thing that can "not be made right again," is an unambiguous sign that any hope for a better future for the Boy is unfounded, and that in spite of the *deus ex machina* quality of the Boy's rescue civilization remains irreparably broken. Alan Noble writes that the *deus ex machina* ending is a "calculated one," and he labels the Man's faith in God to keep his son safe to be "absurd"

and “irrational by human calculation,” but he then states that ultimately a belief in any higher power necessarily *has to be* absurd and irrational. To accept such a complex and in many ways self-contradicting faith allows one “to fully accept the nihilism of the novel without in any way diminishing its hope” (Noble 107-08). Noble’s interpretation allows for hope to survive in a hopeless world because of faith in the divine’s power to reward and protect the faithful, even if all signs indicate that this faith is unfounded. That this faith actually *does* seem to pay off for the Man, that the Boy is rescued beyond all likelihood after the death of his father and protector, seems to imply an unmistakable presence of the divine in *The Road*, the presence of a higher force of justice that rewards moral fortitude and protects the good. At first glance then the question of divine presence in *The Road* seems to be answered.

However, closer examination reveals that these seemingly beneficial and rewarding events actually serve to prolong the Man and the Boy’s suffering in the end. The promises of a better future that keep them walking the road, and all the unlikely encouragements that reassure them that they are walking the righteous path are ultimately proven false. When we recognize the hollowness of the hopeful signs, it becomes clear that by all rationale they should not have put their faith in the road, because nothing good is waiting for them at the end of it.

As Wielenberg points out, the pattern of near demise followed by unlikely rescue repeats throughout the text. Death by starvation or worse is always but a few steps away when the Man and the Boy stumble across life-saving quantities of food and shelter, and they use these life-saving treasures to reassure themselves that the food and the shelter are rewards for carrying the fire and for being good guys. Note for example how the Man responds to the Boy’s question about whether or not it is okay for them to take the food they find in the survival bunker.

Is it okay for us to take it?

Yes. It is. They would want us to. Just like we would want them to.

They were the good guys?

Yes. They were.

Like us.

Like us. Yes.

So it's okay.

Yes. It's okay.

(The Road 148)

The Man sees the survival bunker as the sanctuary built by the old generation so that he and the Boy could find a place of warmth and safety in all the dark and cold. He is convinced that it was passed on from other good guys to them as a token of goodness and as a passing of the torch in a sense. The Man later describes the bunker as a “tiny paradise” (159), and paradise is of course reserved for the righteous. The discovery of this shelter thus reassures the Man that they are indeed the good guys and that they have found the food as a reward for their righteousness, which further encourages him to keep walking the road and carrying the fire exactly like they have been doing. We see this in the final words he speaks to the Boy before his death. “Keep going south. Do everything the way we did it” (297). The Man, having recognized the pattern of unlikely rescue and concluded that it has to be the result of divine intervention, urges the Boy to keep following the road and to keep acting the same way in the belief that all those rewards would not have led them to that point for no reason or purpose.

This unwavering faith in a higher force of justice and goodness only emphasizes the tragic truth of its absence. When the Man tells his son that “goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (300), he fails to recognize, or perhaps willfully ignores all the near-fatal hardships they have endured on their trek southward. During the course of the text all the Man’s long-term goals of reaching a clearly defined destination or rebuilding civilization have steadily given way to short-term survival. When the Boy asks his father

what their long-term goals are, the Man can only admit that they have none (170-171). At the beginning of the text we learn that they are “moving south” because “there’d be no surviving another winter” (2) in that place. Later we learn that they are headed for the coast, but once they get there the ocean is “bleak,” “cold,” “desolate,” and “birdless” (230): in other words, empty and hollow. With every goal they set for themselves, both short-term and long-term, they either do not reach it, or they do and it is proven as cold and desolate and dead as everything else. The Man even acknowledges the absurdity of the hope he keeps placing on the future. “He knew that he was placing hopes where he’d no reason to. He hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily” (228). He claims that goodness has always found the little boy, but has it really? The narrative makes it clear that any short-term benefit, such as the discovery of the survival bunker, may provide them with temporary comforts, but at the end of the road there still awaits nothing but certain death and the irretrievable collapse of human civilization. This doesn’t sway them however. Our protagonists are wandering aimlessly in a dying world that grows darker every day, a world that can “not be made right again,” all because of an unyielding faith that they *are* carrying the fire for a purpose, that they *are* good guys that will eventually receive their reward.

And yet, as the veteran’s little company proves, the promises of the road are hollow and dangerous. The veteran’s company has fared a lot better than the Man and the Boy; they have established a small but intact community of a man and a woman and two children. In contrast to the Man’s broken family and the lingering traces of the Man’s self-destructive wife that haunt him throughout the narrative, the veteran has managed to do what the Man could not: protect his warrants. The little boy in the veteran’s company is strongly implied to be the very same child that the Man and the Boy encounter earlier in the text, who the Man refuses to help despite the his son’s pleas (88-90). The veteran accomplishes this by rejecting the false promises of the road. As he tells the Boy near the end of the text, “you can stay here

with your papa and die or you can go with me. If you stay you need to keep out of the road. I don't know how you made it this far. But you should go with me. You'll be all right" (303). The veteran's remarks imply that to stay on the road is to die, because the dangers are simply too great to counterbalance the meager benefits. Staying on the road means walking the same path as murderers and rapists and cannibals, and it means scrounging for the same slim pickings as many others. The prospect of carrying fire on this vile path may seem to reinforce the virtuous nature of the task, because then the carrier can become a symbol of enlightenment and a model that the "bad guys" can adopt, but the veteran's statement, which is supported by the closing coda of the novel, implies that the goodness of the world has lost its capacity to make things right again. While the Man and the Boy risk their safety because of repeated reinforcement of the belief that they are walking the righteous path and carrying the fire towards a goal, the veteran understands that these promises are false, and thus he urges the boy to step off the road with him. Had the Man and the Boy recognized the empty promises for what they are, and left the road like the veteran's little company, they would have fared better as well, as their mental and physical suffering would have been lightened.

The Virtues of the Son

[The Boy] took the cup and moved away and when he moved the light moved with him.

(296)

The dangers of the road are constant and apparent throughout the narrative. Our protagonists' many encounters with bad guys support the veteran's warnings and urge the reader to ask why they do not try to step off the road if the risk is that great. If they are

carrying the fire for the purpose of rebuilding civilization, then the road can only be an obstacle on the journey towards that goal. And if they are not carrying the fire, why carry on at all? The Man's wife makes this dilemma clear in their argument.

I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. (...) You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. (...) The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart.

[The Man] didn't answer.

You have no argument because there is none.

(58-59)

The wife mirrors White's passive nihilism perfectly. As she sees it their existence has degenerated into pure suffering, where the only logical conclusion to stubborn perseverance is being raped and eaten by the hands of murderers and cannibals. She maintains that there is no rational reason to keep suffering, and thus she proposes suicide for all of three of them. The Man is unable to argue with her nihilistic eloquence, just like Black in *The Sunset Limited* is left speechless after White's spirited rant. "She was right. There was no argument" (60). And yet, also like Black the Man is still not convinced. Even though they cannot find the words to argue against the nihilistic rhetoric because their faith is not rational, they still maintain faith that there is goodness worth living for, worth suffering for. For Black, that

goodness is brotherhood and human relationship: “You must love your brother or die” (*The Sunset Limited* 121). For the Man, that goodness is the Boy.

It is clear that the Man’s faith is constructed entirely around the parental duty of caring for his child, his “warrant,” and in this world of amorality and nihilistic ruin, he turns to the Boy for value and a purpose to live. As the wife says, the Man cobbles together a ghost and convinces himself that this divine ghost has given him the Boy to care for and nurture because this Boy represents the next generation and the future of humanity. If this Boy is pure goodness, then there is hope for a good future as well. “[The fire] is inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (...) You’re the best guy. You always were” (298). Indeed, many scholars have recognized the many messianic qualities of the Boy. Steven Frye notes how the Man “sees the boy not only as his son but as a figure of divine import, and though the boy will display extraordinary qualities of kindness, the man’s belief in the boy as the incarnate Word of God could be taken as an expression of mere sentiment, were it not for the many references to divinity, in the context of description and allusion to God” (Frye 172). Cooper’s article examines how the Boy is a Grail, a “symbolic vessel of divine healing in a realm blighted by some catastrophic disease” (“*The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative” 219). The Boy signifies the only tangible trace of divinity remaining in this nihilistic wasteland, the last hope for a better future, and thus the Man places upon the Boy all of his own value and the value of moral goodness. The Boy asks his father, “What would you do if I died?” and the father replies, “If you died I would want to die too” (9), because if the Boy died the future would die with him, and thus there would no longer be any reason for the Man to keep surviving. However, by the Man’s own admission, if good guys “keep trying” and “dont give up” (145), then either the Man is not the good guy he claims to be, or goodness can only exist for the purpose of nurturing goodness. If the goodness of the Boy is lost, the father would lose his purpose, because he is not able to recognize goodness beyond the Boy. In the Man’s

view the rest of the world has degenerated into immorality, and the only remnant of light and goodness is his child.

Significantly, the Boy is repeatedly described as a guiding light throughout the text. In the opening passage the Man has a dream where “the child [leads] him by the hand” into a dark cave, with their combined “light playing over the wet flowstone walls” (1). Towards the end of the text the Man sees the Boy “standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (293). Consequently, the Boy signifies not only light and a better future, but he is a paragon of moral goodness, a perfect example that others should strive to model themselves after. He is far more trusting and respecting of the goodness in others than the Man is, as we see through the way the Boy insists to help the old man who calls himself Ely, the little boy they encounter, and even the thief who steals all their food and clothes. The Man wishes to justly punish the thief for his crimes and leave him naked and starving, just like he left them. But the Boy, true to his messianic qualities, forgives the thief instantly.

Just help him, Papa. Just help him.

The man looked back up the road.

He was just hungry, Papa. He’s going to die.

He’s going to die anyway.

He’s so scared, Papa.

(277)

Throughout the text the Man is unwilling to help anyone outside of his and the Boy’s little community, and only through the Boy’s pleas and insistences does he agree to treat some others the way that he himself has taught the Boy is the way of moral goodness. Wielenberg argues that these flaws are simply what makes the Man human, that his struggle to act on the

goodness of his own teachings only reflects the terrible experiences the Man has endured and suffered damages from, that he has “lost the capacity to trust and make connections with others” (8). As such, because he recognizes these flaws in himself he also recognizes that the Boy still retains the capacity for trust and connections, and this capacity is what the Man nurtures throughout the text. This capacity, we learn, is the foundation for civilization. As long as good people are willing to actively expend an effort to connect with other good people, and cooperate for the purpose of nurturing their shared goodness, then there may yet be hope for humanity and civilization. In a significant passage of the novel the Man fears that the Boy has lost this capacity. When the Man and the Boy are standing by the hatch door of the survival bunker, not long after having witnessed the horrific cellar where the cannibals keep their prey of human prisoners imprisoned, the Man sees into the Boy’s face and fears “that something was gone that could not be put right again” (144). He fears that the Boy has now witnessed the true capacity for horrific violence and remorselessness in the savage humans around them and that he will never be able to trust in the goodness of others again.

The Boy’s ultimate act of trust when he agrees to go with the veteran at the end of the text seems to suggest that the father’s fear did not materialize. But we cannot ignore how the final passage of the novel closely mirrors this passage. As the closing coda of the text makes it clear that there is a “thing [that can] not be put back. Not be made right again” (307), that thing is the capacity for trust in the goodness of others and the capacity for human connection. Even in light of the Boy’s trust in the veteran this final passage negates any hope for the future of civilization, because it implies that one person’s trust, even someone as messianic as the Boy, or even a small group, like the veteran’s little company, is not sufficient to rectify and rekindle civilization. The Boy, for all his goodness, does not have the capacity to nurture moral goodness back into the human race. Civilization in *The Road* has largely fallen victim to nihilism and amorality, and goodness does not have the power to

combat them, just as we saw in *No Country for Old Men*. And yet, in spite of all signs that perseverance is futile the Man's faith in the goodness of his son holds all of his hopes for the future, and this faith never waivers.

The Faults of the Father

You should thank [the Boy] you know, the man said. I wouldnt have given you anything.

(184)

The true damning flaw of the Man then, is his irrational and absurd faith in the repairable power of divine justice. This faith has convinced him that as long as he performs his parental duty of nurturing his child everything else will be made right as a reward. His every act thus centers on protecting the Boy, his warrant, and everything else becomes subsidiary. "My job is to take care of [the child]. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches [him]" (80). Yet in protecting the Boy from risk or harm over the short-term he loses sight of the long-term goal of carrying the fire, of passing something on to the next generation, which is his son. He makes every effort to take care of the Boy with the conviction that by doing so, by doing God's will, the Boy will remain protected even after his own death. It is the same expectation of divine protection that we find shielding the hero in a conventional genre text, but the nihilism of *The Road* does not allow for the Man's expectations to be met. As Cooper states: "Such behavior may enable survival in the immediate future but builds no framework upon which to construct a future for humankind" ("*The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative" 233). The Man's goal cannot be to rekindle civilization because he makes no effort towards that end. His duty as he sees it is solely to protect the Boy in the present and short-term future so that the Boy can one day rekindle

civilization in his stead. This goal is doomed to fail. Survival, as we see throughout the text, only gets more difficult as time passes; food only gets scarcer; bad guys only get more desperate. Everything decays. As Alan Noble states, the Man's decision to place his absurd faith in the force of goodness to protect the Boy after his death is nothing less than "child abandonment, in a war zone, during a famine, after a natural disaster, at the end of the world. And at this point in the narrative the father has less reason to hope that his son will find a better future to the south, not more" (105). If the father is not willing to work for the rebuilding of civilization – if the father is unwilling to go ahead and build a fire - the Boy's road becomes a dead end. The result of this parental neglect means that there is nothing waiting at the end of the road for the Boy to find, no moral sanctuary to use as a foundation to rebuild civilization on. Furthermore, in a strictly practical sense, the Boy has no capacity to rebuild anything, because all the skills his father has taught him encompass only survival in the short-term and an absurd faith in a divine force that should protect him just because he is the moral "best guy" who is willing to carry the fire on a godforsaken road towards an undefined destination that has been abandoned by the old generation.

Alan Noble states that "the man in *The Road* believes himself to be appointed by God to care for his son, which also entails a promise with a moral obligation: it must be right and good to keep his son alive even in a world which appears to offer no future" (97). The Man's faith then surrounds a promise: if he was appointed by God to care for his son, then God has made a promise to not take the son away from him, a promise to continue to reach into the barren hellscape to protect the Boy even in the Man's absence. "The man's belief that he has been appointed to care for his son is also the belief in the goodness of God, because an appointment to preserve the life of his son is only reasonable if there is some better future or good to preserve it for" (98). Unavoidably then, the Boy's fate and thus the fate of civilization rests entirely upon the absence or the presence of God, or goodness, and a divine

willingness to intervene. As we have seen, the Man's faith that God or some other force of divine goodness will not allow his son to be harmed seems at first glance to be rewarded. The *deus ex machina* ending of the text where the Boy finds a community of good guys willing to take him in suggests that goodness is present after all, that God is there to reward the righteous for carrying the fire. Ultimately however, this turns out to be a hollow reward, as the final coda of the text effectively negates any such short-term success.

In the Man's faith then, we find an answer to the question of God's presence in the text's universe. "If [the Boy] is not the word of God God never spoke" (*The Road* 3). The Boy, as we have seen, is the paragon of virtue, the messiah for others to model themselves after: he *is* goodness. He personifies such purity and goodness that the Man can only profess that if the Boy does not prove God's existence, then God does not exist. It is a constructed faith based on the Man's conviction that protecting and nurturing his child is a God-given task, which must consequently be an act of moral good. From this conviction we can presume that from the novel's lack of specific names, the tags "Man" and "Boy/Child" are allegorical symbols that represent the protector and the protected: the agent of moral justice and the innocent in a world of amorality. To be a true man is to protect the innocent, to nurture the future generation. The Man will kill anyone who touches the Boy because the act of harming an innocent is an immoral act that must be punished. As we have seen Wielenberg point out however, the Man fails in his function as appointed protector when he tells the Boy to find other good guys but to not take any chances. "It is impossible to follow these instructions; there is no way to connect with other good guys without taking some sort of chance" (Wielenberg 8). By providing the Boy with such contradictory guidelines, the Man exposes the truth about how he is no longer able to protect the child, and that he might not ever have been truly capable of it at all, and this implies that if God chose the Man to perform this task, then God's choice was flawed.

Recall how earlier in the text the Man and the Boy encounter another child of about the Boy's age. Our Boy wants to help, but the Man is unwilling, and they leave the other child (*The Road* 88-90). This neglect reveals that the Man has constructed his moral framework to only concern the safety of *his particular child*. Other children are not included in this framework, and as such he does not consider them his warrants. This reveals that the Man does not respect the value of life outside of his and his son's tiny familial community. If the Man had adhered to the Categorical Imperative he would have realized that this breaks the universal law. No civilization can be built without a willingness to cooperate and reach out to others. If everyone thought like the Man the Boy's future would be a solitary future indeed. In neglecting the other boy the Man reveals his incompetence as God-appointed protector and agent of justice. Perhaps this could have been justifiable if he proved capable of protecting his own child, but he is not; he actively prohibits the Boy from helping and connecting with other good guys, he abandons the parental duty of building a fire in order to ensure a safe future for the Boy, and with his death he leaves the task of protecting the Boy to God in his stead, effectively returning the responsibility given to him back to its source. He maintains that "goodness has always found the little boy," and that goodness will ensure his safety like it always has, which we have seen is by no means an accurate or rational assessment of their past experiences. The Man completely fails in the God-given task he believes he has been given, and if he cannot care for the Boy, then a few distinct answers to the question of God's presence in the text are proposed.

If the Man's faith is well-founded, and God has appointed him to care for the Boy, then his incompetence in that task reflects God's incompetence at choosing his servants. And a flawed God is an inherent negating paradox akin to Sheriff Bell's self-destructive moral paradox of embracing nihilism to overcome it. If God is flawed, then he cannot be God; if God is not flawed, he cannot have appointed the Man to care for the Boy. This leaves the

Man's faith in error; either God has not appointed him to do anything, or God is simply absent from the text's universe. In either of these cases, the world in *The Road* is left without a divinity willing to interfere. However, as Wielenberg argues, we seem to find traces of a force of divine "goodness." For example, in contrast to the Man, the war veteran does include children into his little community, including the little boy that we encounter earlier in the text, and he takes our Boy into his protection as well. Does the veteran then represent the "goodness" that the Man is so convinced will find and protect the Boy? Is the veteran God's hand reaching into the hellscape to protect the child in the Man's stead, as a passing of the torch in a sense? If the fire is inside the Boy like his father says then perhaps there is still hope for the future.

The symbolic gesture of stepping off the road is significant in the answering of this question. All throughout the text the Man and the Boy have walked the road out of a hope that it will lead them to a better place, a safer place, where they can live more comfortably, but each destination has only proved to be hollow. To step off the road then is an ambiguous act. On the one hand it represents stepping away from the path of murderers and rapists and cannibals and choosing another path: a path of goodness that the wanderer can walk without fear for his or her own safety, perhaps with the purpose of establishing a new and good civilization away from violence and amorality. On the other hand stepping off the road is to give up the task of carrying the fire, and along with it the hope of rekindling civilization. The veteran answers the Boy's question of whether he carries the fire with another question: "You're kind of weirded out. Aren't you?" (303). This dismissive remark suggests that he is unfamiliar with the notion of carrying fire, or that he simply have not heard the concept of carrying the willingness to rebuild civilization expressed in such a way. Indeed, at the Boy's insistence he states that yes, he is carrying the fire. The Boy then asks if the veteran has any kids, knowing that children are the future hope for civilization. And finally he asks if they eat

people, to which the veteran's reply is no. The Boy is then convinced that the members of this little community are good guys like him, and he agrees to step off the road and go with them. We could conclude from this that the novel ends hopefully and that the fire is still glowing bright in the Boy and his new community of good guys as they step off the path of amorality in order to build a new civilization elsewhere.

However, I argue that the final passage of the novel negates this hope completely. "On [the brook trouts'] backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again" (307). The Man's faith that God or goodness will protect the Boy seems at first glance to be rewarded through the *deus ex machina* of the veteran accepting the Boy as his warrant, but then we are reminded that this temporary triumph cannot be sustained. As we saw Tim Edwards point out, "we cannot ignore how that closing coda undercuts whatever hope is left in this world" (Edwards 60) The nihilistic blighted wasteland will not be magically repaired because of the moral fortitude of a small group. Survival, while perhaps made somewhat easier by avoiding the perils of the road, is still doomed to fail by lack of food. The novel makes it unambiguously clear that the world is dead, that all the animals are gone, and that there is no eco-system left to sustain crops. In this godless nihilistic wasteland every road is ultimately a dead end. By all rationale our good guys should abandon all hope of a better future, but somehow they do not. And in a way, this irrational unwillingness to submit to the all encompassing nihilistic void is what makes *The Road* an infinitely more devastating read than *No Country for Old Men*. Sheriff Bell's retirement, his resignation upon realizing that there is no way to defeat the nihilistic void reads like a sigh of final relief in comparison to the good guys in *The Road*'s stubborn refusal to give up on the future in spite of all their suffering.

Where Nihilism Fails

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.

(138)

Shelly L. Rambo states in her article, “Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road After the End of the World*” that “McCarthy catches the reader in a schizophrenic (...) post-apocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility (there is, in Christian terms, no resurrection ahead)” (101). This crisis reflects our characters’ refusal to surrender to the darkness around them. The Man’s wife says that he talks about “taking a stand” when there “is no stand to take” (*The Road* 59), and even he cannot argue against this. He readily admits that he is “placing hopes where he has no reason to.” In moments of clarity he sees the “absolute truth of the world,” and it is “darkness implacable” (138), unforgiving, unyielding, and all encompassing. Even the purity of snow has decayed into sullied gray flakes that the Man catches in his hand to watch them “expire there like the last host of christendom” (15). And yet in spite of all this dark and cold hope is never extinguished. To his last breath, the Man retains faith that goodness will return and protect the Boy. As Alan Noble concludes in his article, this faith is not rational by human calculation, it is *absurd* (108), but also that it has to be in order to preserve hope in this bleak oblivion.

Shane Weller's book, *Modernism and Nihilism* describes the devastating narratives of Franz Kafka as among the darkest in all of literature, because they are the ones that torture hope the most tragically.

Ironically, Kafka's works are dark not because there is no hope but precisely because hope survives all failures. (...) One might even go as far as to say that (...) Kafka is a writer in whose works nihilism fails, Nietzsche's "death of God" resulting not in a sense of absence, nothingness, or despair, but rather in the spectrality of the divine or what in his 1943 essay [French writer and critic Maurice] Blanchot describes as "dead transcendence"

(115-16)

In this view the absence of God does not result in despair, but instead in a spectral divinity, a ghostly force that is even more infallible and invulnerable because there is no way to combat it. The faith that before was dependent upon the *presence* of this agency no longer requires a divine presence to be sustained: it can be maintained in the void left by its *absence*. Not even the negating force of nihilism can break the spirit of such a faith because there is nothing to negate. It is an irrational, and unjustifiable faith that refuses to acknowledge or recognize the forces that strive to negate or neutralize it. As White states in *The Sunset Limited*:

So you come to the end of your rope and you admit defeat and you are in despair and in this state you seize upon this whatever it is that has neither substance nor sense and you grab hold of it and hang on for dear life.

(*The Sunset Limited* 108)

This is the faith that has taken hold of the surviving good guys in *The Road*. This is what allows the Man to deny the existence of God and in the same breath swear by God's capacity

to protect the Boy. “There is no God and we are his prophets” (*The Road* 181), says the old man who calls himself Ely in an absurd and irrational paradoxical statement that reveals the impossibility of hope while simultaneously proving its preposterous sustained presence. Ely adopts his name from the biblical prophet Elijah who is famed for surviving starvation solely through his faith in God to send ravens to feed him. In the novel he is unwilling to reveal how he sustains himself before he makes it clear that he thinks everything “will be better when everybody’s gone” (183). And yet Ely still decides to place one foot in front of the other every day, refusing to give up on survival and embrace death like the Man’s wife. “My only hope is for eternal nothingness” (59). If he truly believed that everything would be better when everybody is gone – relief through death – then the logical and reasonable action would be suicide, as we see in White and in the Man’s wife, but Ely seems to not even consider this option. At the Man’s question of how he lives, Ely responds simply that he “just keep[s] going” (179), which reveals a conviction of perseverance or hope without any foundation to support it. Ely’s rationality recognizes the futility of existence while his illogical faith sustains hope and keeps urging him onwards, just like the Man.

In this sense, *The Road*, in the same spirit of Kafka’s tragic narratives, is a novel whose nihilistic universe tortures hope far past the point where it should have been condemned and broken, but that in the end does not succeed to condemn hope entirely. We see the failure of nihilism in *The Sunset Limited* as well, when Black addresses God and begs for aid and answers that he does not receive, before he accepts God’s silence without condemning his own faith.

I don’t understand what you sent me down there for. I don’t understand it. If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words? You gave em to him.
What about me?

[Black] kneels weeping rocking back and forth.

That's all right. That's all right. If you never speak again you know I'll keep your word. You know I will. You know I'm good for it.

(The Sunset Limited 142)

Black challenges and accuses God of aiding White by giving him the eloquence needed to overpower Black, while neglecting to give Black the eloquence needed to restore the moral symmetry. In that accusation, Black condemns God of actively aiding his own negation. Once again we find a similar paradox that we have seen in the other texts. If Black's accusation is accurate, and God provides White with the rhetorical power of eloquence instead of giving it to Black, his faithful agent of morality, then God is actively working toward his own destruction. If Black is wrong, and God did not give White the words, then the force of nihilism shows its negating capacity to overpower all obstacles once more, and the question of God's presence becomes irrelevant because of his apparent inability or unwillingness to influence the outcome of events. In a just and morally symmetrical universe, Black and White, as the binary dichotomy of their tags suggests, would be equal but opposite forces on either end of a linear spectrum. A text governed by this just symmetry would not allow one to dominate the other, but in McCarthy's text White utterly overpowers Black. It is an asymmetry that runs through all of his later works, as we have seen. Just as Sheriff Bell could not counterbalance Anton Chigurh's nihilistic dominance, as the Man could not argue with his wife's nihilistic rhetoric, so is Black unable to counter White with his theistic arguments. In each text nihilism negates any attempt to oppose it. And yet, in spite of God's silence and absence, and in spite of Black's failure to save White from suicide, Black promises to keep doing what he considers to be God's work even if God never speaks to him again. His faith does not get destroyed. The ending of *The Sunset Limited* thus mirrors our good guys' irrational faith in the power of goodness and absurd hope for a better future in *The Road*.

Finally then, we need to ask *why*? Why does not the literal end of the world, the irreparable annihilation of human civilization not succeed in condemning hope and make our good guys admit defeat? What is it that they cling to? “Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave” (*The Road* 180), says Ely, who will not give the Man his real name because he feels he cannot “trust” the Man with it (182). If trust has decayed to such an extent that even one’s name is considered too valuable or perhaps too vulnerable for exploitation then how can civilization ever be restored? Civilization is built on trust and cooperation, and once that trust is gone there is no going back. The few remaining survivors in the world are left to wander alone if they cannot extend a willingness to connect with others and trust them. In a world governed by nothing, by nihilism, trust loses all its value. Goodness requires morality; morality requires divine presence, or universal agreement to a constructed moral system. Even the Categorical Imperative, which states that all good moral actions must be performed according to the principle that deems it acceptable to be a universal law, requires recognition and acceptance of the moral construct that to *not* act according to the universal law is somehow *immoral*. In a world governed by nothing, by *amorality* – the complete non-recognition of morality as a governing concept – the value of such concepts as laws, trust, goodness, and rational life is negated.

The world of *The Road* is thus the logical conclusion to the nihilistic setting introduced in *No Country for Old Men*, where trust in the goodness of others has been mostly extinguished and stripped of its value, and the few remaining that do still value the goodness in others do not have the capacity to make things right again. Yet in our good guys we still see traces of an absurd *willingness* to try in spite of clear indications that it is futile. Thus, when Ely states that nobody wants to be there, but that nobody wants to leave either, he articulates the illogical hope for a better future, a hope that is fueled by a belief that goodness nurtures further goodness. Our good guys refuse to give in to the futility of existence like the

nihilists because they cling to the hope that there *is* a reason to carry the fire, that there *is* a moral reward for their perseverance waiting somewhere despite all the clear indications that this is nothing but a false promise. They believe they have the capacity to influence events by the power of their will to act out of moral goodness. In *The Sunset Limited* Black repeatedly begs White to stay in his apartment because he is convinced that as long as he can get White to stick around long enough for him to recognize the goodness then he can save White from suicide. “You must love your brother or die” (121). If one cannot love one’s brother and trust in his goodness then one has lost the capacity to connect with others, and one’s own goodness, if present, is not allowed to grow. Black trusts in the goodness of others, and his goal is to nurture the goodness that he sees in other people, even in White, so that goodness can grow beyond himself. This, he is convinced, is the answer to restore the world from its present forlorn state to one of flourishing goodness. When we read *The Sunset Limited* in the company of the rest of McCarthy’s later works however, Black’s efforts seem hopelessly insufficient to achieve the change that he hopes he can inspire in the world. God’s silence may not sway his faith, but the attentive reader of McCarthy recognizes that this divine silence is a far too prevalent and significant an absence to suggest a divine willingness to interfere with the nihilistic void that slowly envelops the world. The silence makes it clear that God, the father of all, has abandoned his responsibility to govern.

The tragic image of the father neglecting to go ahead to build a fire for the son, then, lies at the heart of McCarthy’s later works: the neglected responsibility of the present generation to work toward a safe and better future for the coming generation. In the absence of a governing agency of moral justice or divinity, most of the remaining population has given up on this responsibility. As amorality slowly smothers the goodness out of the world, that goodness loses the capacity to make things right. The few who remain hopeful, such as our good guys or Black, do so out of an irrational belief in the divine’s power to make things

right. While they wait in vain for God or goodness to return from the grave and repair the nihilistic void that currently shrouds the world, humanity takes its last breaths before terminal annihilation. In Cormac McCarthy's later works the last shadow of goodness is coughing up blood on its deathbed while its child sits helplessly by its side, cradling its cold hand. Even in the unlikelihood that another good guy comes along to protect the child, there is no longer any fire up ahead in all the cold and all the dark for the child to find. The child has nowhere to go.

Conclusion - Here at the End of All Things

People are waiting. For what? At some point you must acknowledge that this new world is at last the world itself. There is not some other world.

(The Counselor 146)

Thus the divine reaches its conclusive end in Cormac McCarthy's later works, and with it dies the possibility for a better future for civilization. As God renounces his responsibilities in *No Country for Old Men*, his responsibilities to enforce justice and to control and maintain order, mankind is left to face their anarchical future alone. In this new divine absence humans are free to construct their own moral ideologies, free to transgress the old social norms, and to test their own capacity to transcend the old virtues. Moral codes are stripped of their power because there is no force present that can impose consequences for immoral acts or rewards for moral acts. In McCarthy's nihilistic cosmos any wrong can be made right, and any right can be made wrong. Active nihilists like Anton Chigurh can roam the land and murder and destroy at will, completely free from moral boundaries. Agents of moral justice, such as Sheriff Ed Tom Bell are powerless to oppose figures like Chigurh, because they do not have the capacity to enforce moral justice upon men who do not recognize, acknowledge, or accept their authority. McCarthy's texts thus reveal a moral dissymmetry that transgresses conventional genre fiction. Where a conventional genre text would work to restore the *status quo* of good and evil, McCarthy's texts are significant in that amorality consistently overpowers moral goodness. The nihilists in these works repeatedly negate all arguments that attempt to oppose their nihilist ideologies, as we see in *The Sunset Limited* and in *The Road*.

Ultimately, nihilism results in the violent and irreparable death of humankind's entire civilization, on account of the moral population steadily fading away while the amoral population dominates. As fathers start to neglect their parental duty of going ahead to build a foundation of goodness that their sons can improve on the sons get lost in the amoral void. In the end the fate of the world depends upon trust in the goodness of others, and that trust is fading. Sheriff Bell's crushing defeat comes from his realization that he is no longer able to trust the new generation in *No Country for Old Men*, and he does not retain hope that the future holds any promises of warmth or goodness. As he learns how the current generation of new parents sends their children to be raised by their grandparents, Bell looks into the future and sees a generation of unwanted children with no one willing to nurture them. In *The Road*, parents see their offspring as nothing more valuable than an evening's meal, and even to trust someone else with your name is seen as a risk. Black in *The Sunset Limited* trusts White with his moral beliefs and it all but destroys him to experience how White's nihilism devours those morals to empower his own will for self-destruction. Once the trust in others is gone, so too goes civilization and community. In the now famous interview with Oprah Winfrey, when asked about what readers should take away from *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy states that they should be "grateful," and "appreciate" that life is good. Accordingly, his later works urge the reader to appreciate the goodness they find in their brothers and sisters, to cherish their own capacity to trust others, and be grateful for that capacity while they can. Because all too soon, like the flame upon a candle, that trust will inevitably be extinguished. And the dark and the cold of the crushing black vacuum of the uncaring cosmos will engulf all.

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