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The Search for Meaning and Morality in the Works of Cormac McCarthy

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By

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY **Shane P. Moon** ENTITLED **The Search for Meaning and Morality in the Works of Cormac McCarthy** BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Humanities.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the work of Cormac McCarthy, in which I will argue against assertions that McCarthy's work is nihilistic in that he presents a world in which life is meaningless. I will analyze three of McCarthy's novels, one from each of the common categorizations of his work: *Child of God* (Appalachian period), *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, and *The Road* (Western period), and *The Road*. Through this analysis, I will conclude that McCarthy's novels are not nihilistic; instead, McCarthy's novels contain strong allusions to the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard. In *Child of God*, Lester Ballard's madness is analogous to Sartre's idea of living in bad faith. *Blood Meridian* also contains allusions to Sartre's philosophy while engaging the philosophy of Nietzsche. *Blood Meridian*'s protagonist, the kid, exemplifies Sartre's ideas on essence and morality, whereas the antagonist, Judge Holden, espouses theories on morality akin to Nietzsche's idea of master and slave morality. Finally, in my examination of *The Road*, I will show how the novel's main characters, the father and son, parallel Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, in which Kierkegaard discusses the nature of faith in the face of the absurd through his analysis of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Ultimately, I will

conclude that McCarthy's work does not suggest that life is meaningless; instead, it suggests that the individual creates meaning, as the existential philosophies of Sartre, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard assert.

Commented [BB0]: The majority of this research paper does not focus on *The Road*, instead discussing other works of McCarthy's. Due to the irrelevancy of these segments to my research, they have been marked out with dark red highlighting. The relevant material begins on Page 54 of this document.

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Introduction

Literature is not immune to the debates of scholars. In fact, it revels in these debates, exploring them within the context of fiction. Dennis Sansom writes, "The artist's imagination, especially in literature, pictures what can happen…it enables us to imagine what the pure reason of science and the practical reason of moral universalizability cannot enable us to know" (3). The collective work of Cormac McCarthy is yet another landscape that philosophers, theologians, and critics traverse, each staking claim for the rightness of their arguments. In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov asserted, "without God and immortal life? All things are lawful then" (312). The scorched and barren landscape of *The Road*, teeming with cannibals and depravity, or the violent, bloodstained plains of *Blood Meridian* may only support Karamazov's statement. Or they may not. In contrast to both theological and the traditional philosophical views of ethics, existential philosophers reject the idea of divine will or objective reasoning as a necessary explanation for morality. An irrational, chaotic, and – for all intents and purposes –absurd world (like the one McCarthy presents) is not necessarily a hindrance to morality.

A common criticism of Cormac McCarthy's work is that it is nihilistic, frothed with wanton violence, and – like the worlds he creates – ultimately meaningless. Vereen M.

Bell writes, "Ethical categories do not rule in this environment, or even pertain: moral considerations seem not to effect outcomes; action and event seem determined wholly by

capricious and incomprehensible fates" (32). However, this is a gross misrepresentation of McCarthy's writing. While many of his works can be read as nihilistic, in that McCarthy's novels depict a world without any divine (depending on an idea of God's purpose or will) or natural moral order (deriving morality from human nature), many scholars and critics are missing the deeper existential philosophies present in his work. Contrary to the nihilistic interpretations of Cormac McCarthy's writing, I will show that the world he presents suggests that life isn't void of meaning but rather that meaning does not depend on a pre-existing or given moral order to exist; instead, meaning depends on a created moral order.

Because nihilism is a key aspect to my defense of McCarthy's work from nihilistic interpretations, it is important to understand how critics of McCarthy's writing have used the term. While there are many interpretations and definitions for nihilism, for the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on one specific definition of the term as it is the most commonly used definition and the one that McCarthy's critics use: that "nihilism is the belief that existence is meaningless" (Reginster 21). The word nihilism derives from the Latin *nihil*, meaning nothing. Perhaps the first person to espouse nihilistic philosophy was the Greek philosopher Gorgias (485-380 BCE), who put forth the theory that nothing exists. While Gorgias may be the first to explain nihilistic theories, the term is most frequently associated with the 19th century existential philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche notes, "the philosophical nihilist is convinced that all that happens is meaningless and in vain" (*Will* 23). When Nietzsche proposed the death of God, he theorized a systematic devaluation of values. Nietzsche writes that nihilism appears "once the belief in God and an essentially moral order become untenable" (*Will* 35). Of course,

Nietzsche was not proposing that God did not exist when he said, “God is dead,” but that the belief in God has been discredited. Therefore, the death of God also saw the death of a true, valuable world. Reginster writes, “If the realization of our highest values requires the intervention of God…then these values must be of a particular sort. Specifically, they must be values that cannot be realized under conditions of our life in this, the natural world” (45). Therefore, without God, we are left in a world that does not have any inherent values. If life is valueless, then it is meaningless. However, it should be noted that while many view Nietzsche as a nihilist himself, he did not view nihilism as an ending point, but rather as being something that must be overcome through an affirmation of life.

The question regarding the basis of morality has been heavily debated in philosophical and theological circles for millennia. Throughout that time, three traditional categories have emerged as the primary views of ethics: virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism. While each of these traditions disagree about what makes actions moral, they all agree that moral principles can be rationally justified on a universal scale. However, these philosophical views are not to be found in the works of McCarthy, which is what has prompted many to claim that his work is nihilistic (without moral values, then all things lack value. The world, then, is meaningless). Arguing that even the most redemptive notions in McCarthy’s work are just another form of nihilism, Christopher R. Nelson writes, “indeed, redemptive interpretations could be read as more nihilist in that they reject what is in favor of what should be” (32). However, this is not the case. What can be found in the works of Cormac McCarthy is a conglomerate of existential philosophies, which, generally speaking, believe that any morality or purpose in life is

created from choice rather than from a universal sense of true and false. In this thesis, I will evaluate the work of Cormac McCarthy in three separate sections based on the common grouping of McCarthy's writing: the early novels (referred to as McCarthy's Southern or Appalachian novels), the Western Novels (McCarthy's foray into southwestern storytelling), and *The Road*. Each section will incorporate the works of critics, philosophers, and literary scholars, all of who engage in the debate about the meaning in McCarthy's work. In particular, I will compare McCarthy's work to the anti-nihilistic sentiments of existential philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Soren Kierkegaard. Sartre sees morality as the choice of an ultimately free individual. Nietzsche opposes the universality of the traditional three views of ethics, choosing instead to espouse a more individualized ethics; Kierkegaard seeks to treat morality as a manner of faith rather than reason.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will explore McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, comparing it to Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of abandonment and bad faith. In this novel, McCarthy writes one of his darkest characters, Lester Ballard. Ballard is rejected by society and, as such, experiences a form of existential abandonment. Without parents or a sense of community, Ballard is an outcast from society. He is left to fend for himself, eventually making his home in a cave. Sartre proposes that we are condemned to be free in a world where we find ourselves alone and without excuse. However, where Sartre claims that our freedom requires us to be responsible for all of our choices and actions, Ballard flees his freedom into what Sartre refers to as "bad faith." Living alone in the woods, Ballard succumbs to madness, murdering and storing the bodies of his victims to create a perverse family. To experience intimacy, Ballard resorts to necrophilia. I will

show that Ballard's actions and mental state correspond with Sartre's "bad faith," ultimately proving that *Child of God* is not a nihilistic novel, but one in which McCarthy begins his exploration the existential philosophy.

As McCarthy began writing novels centered on the early American Southwest, the violence he depicted only lent more weight to the claims of modern analyses of his work. *Blood Meridian, or, the Evening Redness in the West* is often cited as McCarthy's magnum opus. It is also considered, however, one of the bloodiest, most violent novels in the past century, pitting the protagonist, known as the kid, against the ruthless, warloving scalp hunter antagonist (Judge Holden). Joyce Carol Oates writes, "*Blood Meridian* celebrates an unflinching and numbing nihilism" (160). Although the extremity and the senselessness of the violence in the novel suggest nihilism, in that the characters appear to have no values, the contrary is true. For example, *Blood Meridian's* protagonist, the kid, embodies a core Sartrean concept. For Sartre, existence precedes essence. Sartre understands essence as a universally shared set of properties that define our moral purpose, as well as our nature as human beings. From Sartre's philosophy, we are to comprehend that humanity does not possess a natural essence in the sense of a moral purpose. First, we exist, and then we create our essence (or moral identity) through our own choices and actions. This is an evolving process that continues until our death. In *Blood Meridian,* McCarthy presents the reader with an essence-less protagonist, the unnamed kid, who – unlike Lester Ballard – accepts the radical freedom to which he is condemned and accepts responsibility for his choices and actions. Similarly, in this chapter, I will explore how many critics have associated *Blood Meridian's* antagonist,

Judge Holden, with the philosophy of Nietzsche. While they suggest a kindred philosophical spirit between the two, I argue that Holden is more of a caricaturized, extremist version of Nietzsche's philosophy, one with whom Nietzsche would most assuredly disagree.

Finally, in the third chapter, I will compare McCarthy's latest novel, *The Road*, with Soren Kierkegaard's, *Fear and Trembling*. This chapter will examine the novel's protagonist, the father, and his relation to Kierkegaard's analysis of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. In particular, I will show that the father embodies faith in the face of the absurd in the same way that Kierkegaard proposes Abraham does when tasked with killing his own son. For Kierkegaard, Abraham became the "father of faith" because he showed faith in God when all logic suggests that he shouldn't. Abraham is commanded by God to kill Isaac. However, God promised Abraham that Isaac would be the father of nations. Abraham is forced to show faith in the face of the absurd in that he is to kill the son who will father nations. Similarly, in a post-apocalyptic world, a world where there is no apparent purpose or meaning, the father struggles with the ever present fact that he and his son may be raped, murdered, and eaten and his belief that he has been commanded by God to keep his son alive. I will also examine Kierkegaard's theory of the teleological suspension of ethics, in which he claims that the ethical is suspended so that one can do his duty to God. This relates to the ethical quandaries the father experiences throughout *The Road*, explaining any unethical behavior he exhibits.

Each novel, in the critics' defense, has a flair for the macabre. Yet, reading McCarthy's work as strictly nihilistic is a mistake. Instead, a deeper reading suggests that far from being nihilistic, like many existentialist philosophers, McCarthy sees the

acknowledgement of the darker aspects of existence as an opportunity to critique nihilistic views that despair of morality in a world without God or a moral order. In fact, the nihilism that certain critics and scholars read in these novels often comes from the antagonists, suggesting – as Nietzsche did - that nihilism is not the pervading truth of the world, but something we must confront and overcome. James Watson echoes this sentiment, stating that it is the "evil characters" of McCarthy's novels that are able to "articulate, with ineluctable logic, the savage nihilism of the world" (8). Ultimately, this thesis will conclude that McCarthy's work is not nihilistic, contrary to popular analysis. Instead, the roots of McCarthy's fiction are planted in existentialism's attempt to provide morality apart from divine will or rational proof and to provide a foundation for a meaningful existence.

I: "A Child of God Much Like Yourself": Lester Ballard, Abandonment and Bad Faith

Cormac McCarthy's first four novels are commonly referred to as his "Southern," "Appalachian," or "Tennessee" novels due to their general location in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee. These four novels, published over the course of 15 years, left McCarthy in relative obscurity as an author. What little scholarly work that has been written on McCarthy generally came after the publication of McCarthy's last of the four Southern novels, *Suttree* (1979). These early novels perplexed critics and scholars because of the graphic nature of their stories, the harrowing accounts of violence enacted by the protagonists, and their vivid depiction of the most taboo subjects in society such as murder, incest, and necrophilia. For these very reasons, many critics were left to say, "Cormac McCarthy's novels are as innocent of theme and ethical reference as they are of plot" (Bell, *Ambiguous* 31), that McCarthy's prose "explores nothing at all" in reference to content and theme (Prescott 67), and McCarthy's writing is "an affront to decency on every level" (Sullivan 71). In comparing McCarthy to Faulkner (which is often the case for McCarthy's early work), Mark Royden Winchell writes:

> Faulkner was at heart a moralist who believed in an irreducible core of human dignity. His work possesses a moral center, either explicit or implicit, that judges the evil and depravity in the world. In McCarthy's universe, that center either does not exist or cannot hold. (294)

In particular, McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, drew the ire of many critics, leading them to draw the aforementioned conclusions while labeling McCarthy's works as nihilistic.

Because of the gratuity of Lester Ballard's actions, Erik Hage writes, "Taken at a purely thematic level, *Child of God* (1973), is surely McCarthy's most shocking novel" (55). The shock of the *Child of God* has led many to assume, as they did with his previous novels, that it is "lacking in…point," (Brickner) or that it is "prevailingly gothic and nihilistic" (Bell, *Achievement* 1). For Brickner, McCarthy's "writing" (he does use quotations around the word) is "nasty" and "strives to be tragic [but] is never more than morose" ("Rev. *Child of God*). The pointlessness of *Child of God*, according to Brickner, is solely a result Ballard's irredeemable depravity and McCarthy's failure to provide moral justice for such a character. Bell, on the other hand, describes McCarthy's writing as nihilistic, stating:

> In each of these [Southern] novels, existence not only precedes but precludes essence. But if essence has been precluded, the human dream of it has not, so the pressure of meaningfulness remains even where meaning will not separate out. (*Achievement* 9)

Generally, essence refers to the nature of a thing. However, in existential philosophy an essence is the nature of a person as defined through action. There is no predetermined nature. For example, it is not the case that a person tells the truth because they are honest (a predetermined nature); rather, they are honest because they have proven time and again that they tell the truth (actions defining essence). According to Bell, McCarthy's early fiction, including *Child of God*, presents readers with an essence-less world, an existential void from which they try to extract meaning, but in which there is no meaning to extract. However, Bell is mistaken about the meaninglessness of McCarthy's work.

Written in three sections, *Child of God* tells the story of Lester Ballard, an Appalachian Mountain-dwelling serial killer and necrophiliac, who, throughout the course of the novel, "violates the most sacrosanct of moral boundaries and descend[s] into a horrifying psychological oblivion" (Frye 39). When we first meet Ballard, McCarthy tells us that he is "small, unclean, unshaven…A child of God much like yourself perhaps" (*Child* 4). There is not a hint of irony in McCarthy's statement. McCarthy is not looking for us to despise Ballard, but to sympathize with him; as a "child of God," Ballard is the representation of all of us. Of course, we are not all sociopathic murders, but – in an existential sense – we are like Ballard in that we have all suffered abandonment.

Despite the nihilistic label attached to his work, McCarthy's fiction presents the reader with a world in which morality and meaning do exist; meaning and morality depend on a created moral order rather than a moral order defined by God or through a universalized ethics. Although McCarthy's early fiction is certainly some of his darkest work, with *Child of God* perhaps containing some of his most disturbing and depraved scenes of all of his writing, that does not make the novel itself nihilistic. Eric Carl Link writes, "A grim world is not always a meaningless world" (158) and "[*Child of God's*] grim vision, as previously noted, does not…degenerate into nihilism" (159). The worlds McCarthy presents in his fiction suggest that life isn't void of meaning, but rather demonstrate the existential view that meaning does not depend on a pre-established or given moral order to exist; instead, meaning depends on a created moral order. *Child of God* does not deviate from this trend. In fact, it is in *Child of God* that McCarthy "first sets…the existential agenda the he will pursue in *Suttree* and the later western writing"

(Holloway 125). Specifically, it is in *Child of God* that McCarthy first emphasizes aspects of the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre that will later help McCarthy sketch *Blood Meridian's* protagonist, the kid. In particular, Lester Ballard's abandonment and alienation from society parallels Sartre's theory of abandonment. Moreover, Ballard's descent into madness acts as a metaphor for Sartre's idea of bad faith in that Ballard disassociates himself from reality, rejecting his freedom.

A main aspect of existential philosophy is the idea of abandonment. Particularly, for atheistic existentialists such as Sartre, abandonment is the state in which we find ourselves in a world in which God does not exist. Sartre states, "And when we speak of 'abandonment'… we merely mean to say that God does not exist, and that we must bear the full consequences of that assertion" (*Existentialism* 27). According to Sartre's philosophy, we are abandoned not through the loss of God in the sense that God once existed and now no longer does, but in that there is no longer any *a priori* good, a good that exists as a truth outside of experience. Similarly, Ballard is abandoned by his parents and, as a result, he is left without a paternal guide to show him any of the "truths" of the world.

By using the term "abandonment," Sartre emphasizes the sense of loss caused by the realization that there is no God to warrant our moral choices. This word choice stresses the solitary position of human beings, alone in the universe with no external source of objective value. Without God, without any *a priori* good, there is nothing we can inherently rely on to tell us what to do. We are "left alone and without excuse" (Sartre, *Existentialism* 29) to make our own decisions and to feel the weight of those decisions. We no longer have a structured set of values telling us who we ought to be or

how we should act. Therefore, abandonment implies that it is up to individuals to determine values for themselves, and they should recognize that the foundation of those values is freedom (the ensuing result of our abandonment).

Edwin T. Arnold notes, "What Lester wants is permanence, even (or especially) the permanence of death, but what he experiences in his life is change in the form of desertion and denial and loss. He expects to be abandoned" ("Naming" 56). After his mother deserts him and his father hangs himself as a result, Ballard is left parentless at the age of 10, a child abandoned by his parents. From this moment, the only life that Ballard knows is abandonment. Robert L. Jarrett writes, "[Ballard has] internalized this isolation from family and society, existing in a state of alienation and anomie" (39). McCarthy presents Ballard as a child abandoned and parentless. In this sense, it is as if McCarthy wants us to view Ballard as a sympathetic character early in the novel.

Child of God opens with townsfolk swelling onto Ballard's land like "a caravan of carnival folk" (McCarthy, *Child* 3). Ballard, meanwhile, is "straddlelegged," urinating on the floor of the barn in which he lives, and the reader may find it foreboding that the first depiction of the novel's protagonist is one in which he is urinating on the floor of his own derelict home. Because of his abandonment, Ballard has not been afforded a proper social education and, subsequently, exists in a state of "alienation and anomie." Outside of the barn, the townspeople have arrived to participate in the auctioning of Ballard's land, long since repossessed by the county. Ballard attempts to disband the auction with verbal threats while toting his rifle; however, he is incapacitated by a blow to the back of the head with the blunt side of an axe. Now homeless, an exile from his home and

community, Ballard seeks refuge in an abandoned cabin on a neighbor's property. He roams the wild, occasionally showing up in stores, churches, and neighbor's homes, looking for some type of acceptance from society.

Not everyone, however, views Ballard as a sympathetic figure with whom we can both identify and empathize. Lydia R. Cooper notes that while McCarthy seems determined to have the reader "interpret Ballard as a sympathetic…man," the ability for the reader to do so "grows increasingly absurd as Ballard's depravity sinks to new depths, literally and metaphorically" (*Heroes* 41). Cooper emphasizes that Ballard himself resists empathy through the depravity of his actions. Similarly, she asserts that the brief narrative sections in which townspeople try to describe Ballard ultimately fail to understand him, finding him to be "essentially unfathomable" (*Heroes* 41).

However, Cooper neglects the fact that it is Ballard's abandonment by his parents and community that is the root of his psychosis. Because Ballard has been abandoned by his parents and forced from his home by his community, he is left to care for himself in a state of complete isolation, which only nurtures the madness that leads him to become a murderer and necrophiliac. Jay Ellis writes:

> The implicit argument of *Child of God* is that Lester Ballard is *made* a necrophilic murderer by the circumstances and forces of the society that refuses, repeatedly, to claim him in the absence of his family. Abandonment by the mother, witness of the father's suicide, forced homelessness…are the recipe for the Ballard we see by the end of the book. (80)

Sartre would reject the determinism that Ellis suggests is involved in Ballard becoming a murderer. Ballard's "facticity," a term Sartre uses to denote the basic facts of existence (Ballard's environment and history, for example), would not be responsible for shaping who he becomes. Instead, we are all responsible for our own choices and actions and, therefore, capable of creating our own essence. It is Ballard's responsibility then to create his own essence. It is not Ballard's circumstances that define his essence, as Ellis suggests. However, what Ellis's rightly recognizes is that, similar to Sartre's existential view of abandonment, Ballard's abandonment has left him without any *a priori* good. Without parental and societal guidance, Ballard does not have the proper knowledge to exist as a functioning member in society. Ballard's abandonment and rejection from society only fosters his mental deterioration, leading him to perform appalling acts in his attempt to create a community. Again, Sartre would reject such blatantly deterministic ideas. As I shall show later, this mental deterioration and the ensuing actions caused by Ballard's psychosis are congruent with Sartre's theory of "bad faith."

Ballard haunts the Frog Mountain Turnaround, where couples fornicate. Ballard, with the first hints of his oncoming necrophilia, takes to voyeurism, masturbating while he watches the unaware couples. On one particular morning, Ballard finds an abandoned prostitute. His attempts at compassion and at aiding the young woman are only met with derision and false rape accusations, furthering Ballard's abandonment by society and stimulating his already emerging psychological break from reality.

The second section of the novel finds Ballard slipping deeper into a state of madness. Ballard finds a young couple dead from asphyxiation. He takes possession of the young girl, taking her back to his cabin where he "unbuckled his trousers and stepped

out of them and laid next to her" (McCarthy, *Child* 92). It is easy to read this as a simple act of necrophilia; however, nothing with McCarthy is that simple. As Ballard begins to have relations with corpses, what he is really looking for is a relief from his abandonment; he is searching for solace from his isolation. Arnold writes, "To say that he 'rapes' her…misinterprets Lester's own needs, for he is not about violence but about companionship" ("Naming" 55). McCarthy's own words lead to this conclusion. McCarthy writes, "He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she could not hear him?" (*Child* 88-89). For Ballard, the corpse with whom he copulates is not a fulfillment of his perverse sexual desires. Instead, it is a reprieve from the anguish resulting from his abandonment by his parents and, later, by his community.

Vereen Bell does not see Ballard's mental deterioration, which stems from his isolation and abandonment, as analogous to Sartre's existential philosophy. Instead, Bell views the cause of Ballard's actions, his isolation and abandonment, as an opposing force to his brutality and perversion, out of which comes the truth of McCarthy's nihilism. Bell writes, "Risking portentousness, one might characterize McCarthy's nihilism as not simply ambiguous, but dialectical…There is Lester Ballard's helpless loneliness and hunger for love and the remains of the victims of it" ("Ambiguous" 37). For Bell, *Child of God* presents the reader with unresolved longing. Ballard hopes to find a home and a community of people with whom to share his life. Instead, McCarthy only gives the reader an inverted pacification of Ballard's desires. Instead of allowing Ballard the chance for love and acceptance, McCarthy has Ballard create his own community from the victims of his depravity. The reader is left, then, with only Ballard's longing and the

sadistic fulfillment of that longing. However, no real conclusion is ever given, or, as Bell states, "The vague dialectic is one thing, its irresolution is the other" ("Ambiguous" 38).

In an attempt to keep the body of the young girl thawed and warm, Ballard accidentally burns down his cabin, losing his "love." Ballard resorts to living in caves. He murders a neighboring woman, burning her house down to conceal that he has taken her body. To build himself a community, an attempt to alleviate his isolation, Ballard takes to killing couples at the Frog Mountain Turnaround and taking them to his cave, where he is surrounded by his "family." In his own mind, he has found acceptance, love, and a society of which he is a member, apart from the one from which he has been exiled. Ultimately, he is inextricably alone. In his isolation, Ballard slips deeper into his madness. Ballard wanders about the woods dressed in his victims' clothing, watching Greer, the new owner of Ballard's land. McCarthy writes, "He'd long been wearing the undergarments of his female victims but now he took to appearing in their outerwear as well. A gothic doll in illfit clothes" (*Child* 140). Staring at his former property, Ballard begins to lay "queer plans" to murder Greer and take back his property.

The property that Ballard lost at the beginning of the novel plays an increasingly important role in the development of Ballard's psychosis. Although his initial expulsion from his home only seems to be a passing plot point meant to propel the novel into what will later become Ballard's necrophilia, there are greater existential implications to this house. Because it was the place of his initial abandonment by his parents, and, later, the place where he was abandoned by and alienated from his community, Ballard's relationship with his former home acts as a metaphor for his existential anguish.

Earlier, I discussed Sartre's proposal that freedom is the result of our abandonment. Because there are no longer any *a priori* moral truths, values, or good in the world, we are left to determine our own moral truths, values, and goods. However, in doing so, we are committing ourselves to anguish. Sartre writes, "This is what abandonment implies: it is we ourselves, who decide who we are to be. Such abandonment entails anguish" (*Existentialism* 34). According to Sartre, we are free in that the meaning of the world and the essence (what Sartre referred to as "man's past") that we prescribe to ourselves is determined not solely by our choice, but by action, "without justification and without excuse" (*Being* 39). We are what we do, not just what we choose. However, because of this freedom, because we now dictate the meaning of the world and of our own essences, we experience anguish. Sartre writes, "In anguish, I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself" (*Being* 40). Sartre asserts that we are "condemned to be free" (*Existentialism* 29). This condemnation stems from the fact that we do not create ourselves and yet we are free because we give meaning to the world. However, anguish exists because we must bear the responsibility for the decisions we make regarding the world. As a result, freedom is anguish. Because freedom is the foundation of value, in that we decide what is valuable, our freedom is anguished because it lacks a foundation, in that there is no foundational reason or purpose for our existence (Sartre, *Being* 38).

The house from which Ballard is ousted is the very place in which he first experiences abandonment. After the departure of his mother and the suicide of his father, Ballard is left alone in this house, a child abandoned. When we first meet Ballard, his

home is being auctioned and he is violently dismissed from the property. In this sense, his community has condemned Ballard to freedom. Without a home, without a family, Ballard is left to determine what meaning the world should have and what his essence should be. As in Sartre's theory of anguish, Ballard in his freedom experiences a sense of anguish. He must bear the responsibility of who he is and what meaning the world will hold. Because the house is the source of Ballard's abandonment and ensuing condemnation to freedom, it is also the source of his anguish. David Holloway asserts, "Lester's relationship with the house is ruled by an existential anguish…that compels him to return over and over to look with despair upon the source of his alienation" (129). Ballard returns to the house again and again, perhaps believing that by returning to his home, he will somehow reverse the anguish he experiences in his freedom. As Ballard descends deeper into his madness and his depravities multiply, John Lang observes that his visits to the house similarly multiply ("Lester" 92). It is because Ballard seeks refuge from his anguish that he begins to formulate his plans to take back his home. However, Ballard's desire to flee from his anguish is an act done in what Sartre would refer to as bad faith.

Throughout the novel, Ballard slips deeper and deeper into a state of madness. First, he merely engages in voyeurism. However, not long after, he engages in his first act of necrophilia. After losing the body of his first "love," Ballard takes to murdering people to create a sense of community for himself. As I noted before, the root of his psychosis stems from being abandoned by his parents, exiled from his home, and ostracized by his community. Because we are abandoned in the world without any reason, we are condemned to be free. We must bear the responsibility of our choices and actions.

Because we have the weight of creating both meaning and value in the world, we feel anguish. Similarly, because we are not alone in the world, we are subjected to being an object of someone else's consciousness. Ballard's abandonment by his parents echoes Sartre's theory of abandonment, as I have shown. However, Ballard, instead of accepting his abandonment, his freedom, and his anguish, attempts to flee them, secluding himself deep in the woods where he will live in an abandoned cabin and, later, in caves. Similarly, as Ballard slips deeper into the state of psychosis that drives him from reality and toward murder and necrophilia, McCarthy exemplifies what Sartre would refer to as bad faith.

Simply stated, bad faith is a lie to oneself. According to Sartre, our nature is both freedom and facticity. What we are consists of consciousness, or what Sartre referred to as "being-for-itself," and material existence or "being-in-itself. Bad faith uses "being-foritself" to deny our "being-in-itself," or vice versa. Sartre writes:

> It follows that the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as a deceiver of the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Better yet I must know the truth very exactly *in order* to conceal it more carefully. (*Being* 49)

In that sense, bad faith means that we make a free choice to actually deny ourselves the freedom to which we are sentenced. For example, I could pretend that I am someone that I am not, denying any limitations to my freedom. In doing so, I am using my "being-foritself" to deny my facticity, my past and the facts about me (my being-in-itself). In this sense, I am pretending that I am solely my mind, thoughts, and wishes, and that I am not

also my actions and my material reality. On the other hand, Lester Ballard seeks to flee his freedom by pretending that he is just his material existence (his being-in-itself) determined solely by his past and the facts of his existence. In this manner, he denies the responsibility for his actions. He is acting in bad faith in that he is ignoring his ability to choose and define himself and his future.

For Sartre, bad faith is not a state; he asserts that there must be an original intention at the heart of one's bad faith. While this may seem to contradict my assertion that Ballard's madness and ensuing actions are emblematic of bad faith, the opposite is true. McCarthy's depiction of Ballard as a man deeply haunted by his own psychosis is merely a metaphor for Sartre's bad faith. Ballard, though a free being, disassociates himself from reality and, in turn, rejects the freedom to which he is condemned. In this way, his madness lifts the burden of his freedom and relieves him of the responsibility to decide for himself what to do, since his behavior is as though set in stone by the definition of the predetermined role he has adopted, that of murderer and necrophile. Sartre states, "If we define man's situation as one of free choice…then any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith" (*Existentialism* 47). When Sartre refers to a "deterministic theory," he is referring to the idea that we are governed by a set of rules and definitions that encapsulate the essence of who we are. In Ballard's case, his dissociation from reality is a role he assumes, which requires that he become first a voyeur then a murderer and necrophile so as to quell the anguish he associates with abandonment, freedom, and alienation.

Section three of *Child of God* begins with the Sevier County's Sheriff Fate investigating the murders committed by Ballard. With the coming of spring, evidence that Ballard left in the winter snow is discovered. Although the evidence could be condemning, it is Ballard himself that brings about his own demise. Throughout his bouts of madness, Ballard finds moments of clarity, moments when "some old shed self …came yet from time to time in the name of sanity, a hand to gentle him back from the rim of his disastrous madness" (McCarthy, *Child* 158). Later, he dreams that he is "riding to his death" (McCarthy, *Child* 171). Ballard returns to his home in the skirts of his victims, wearing a dried scalp on his head like a "frightwig" (McCarthy, *Child* 172), enacting his plans to take back his home and attempting to murder Greer. However, Ballard's attempt fails and he himself is severely injured. He awakens in the hospital in police custody and is missing an arm. In this way, McCarthy is suggesting, much like Sartre, that "anguish, properly speaking, can neither be hidden nor avoided" (*Being* 43). Our freedom requires that we choose what meaning we attribute to the world and by which means we will define our essence. Ballard seeks to flee this choice; however, as Sartre contends, "what is impossible is to not choose…if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes a choice" (*Existentialism* 44).

Similarly, bad faith serves as an attempt to flee from the person that one is. Ballard, who has been ostracized and alienated from his community, seeks to flee from his abandonment and anguish, to flee from the very society that does not accept him. However, his longing to be a part of that society leads him to create his own society in the spirit of bad faith. Because he is still fleeing from his own freedom, his requirement to choose for himself, Ballard is acting in bad faith. Sartre writes, "I shall be able to later

use bad faith so as to hide…but bad faith is also a confession since it is an effort to flee the being which I am" (*Being* 261). Nevertheless, one can exist in a state of bad faith, much in the way that Ballard exists in his own madness; however, there are moments of clarity and reprieve from it.

Ballard is kidnapped from the hospital by angry townspeople who threaten him until he shows them where he keeps his victims. After taking them to the caves, Ballard eludes them in the deep darkness, surviving for five days underground before emerging from the earth in birth-like imagery. Cooper agrees that Ballard is birthed from the cave; however, she concludes, "what is birthed from these caves is pure horror" ("McCarthy" 46). Conversely, Ballard's "rebirth" is more likely emblematic of an epiphany, in that he seems to have shed his madness. Ballard stumbles to the road in darkness, watching a church bus pass by with children seated in the seats. When Ballard takes note of one of the faces, "he was trying to fix in his mind where he'd seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. This gave him the fidgets and though he tried to shake the image of the face in the glass it would not go" (McCarthy, *Child* 191). In this moment, Ballard experiences the depths of his alienation.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses a theory that he calls "the Look." I have established that we are abandoned in the world and, as a consequence, condemned to our own freedom in that we are free to create whatever meaning we wish in the world; however, the world also includes other people. As a result, I am not only the revealer of the world, I am also the revealed. Through their existence, I am revealed to others. Therefore, I am not merely the subject of my own being, but I am the object of another's consciousness. Essentially, as a human being I am mentally aware of the world.

Therefore, I reveal the world though my consciousness of it. However, since I am also an object for the consciousness of others, they reveal factual truths about who I am independently of my own will. Throughout the course of *Child of God*, Lester Ballard engages in the world unreflectively. He is absorbed in his own world and does not experience himself in any other way than a first-person perspective. All things are subjective to Ballard and they only have importance in light of what he is doing. However, "the Look" to which Sartre refers is a process in which I recognize that my own subjective existence has become a part of another person's subjective existence. When this happens, I become aware of my being and of what it is that I am doing. I cannot experience myself as something until the other "looks" at me. Sartre writes, "But in order for me to be what I am, it suffices merely that the Other look at me" (*Being* 262). Therefore, we can only identify and acknowledge ourselves as what we are through another person. Steven Crowell states, "It is because there are others in the world that I can take a third-person perspective on myself; but this reveals the extent to which I am *alienated* from a dimension of my being: who I am in an objective sense can be originally revealed only by the Other" ("Existentialism").

When Ballard sees the face of the boy in the window of the bus, he experiences "the Look." He sees not only the face of the child, but also sees himself. Ballard gets a third-person perspective of himself, experiencing himself not only as the object of his own being, subjective and alienated, but as an object in the world around him. When I stated that Ballard's rebirth from the cave brought forth an epiphany, rather than "horror," it is because Ballard is able to recognize himself for who he is and was in the face of the boy who "looked like himself." Because Ballard experiences "the Look," he

also experiences shame. Sartre writes

> Now, shame…is shame of *self*; it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed the object which the Other is looking at and judging…I am this being. I don't for an instant think of denying it; my shame is a confession. (*Being* 261)

According to Sartre, "shame therefore realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself" (*Being* 221). What he means by this is that through shame a person can come to realize an aspect of his being. However, shame is not a wholly reflective process; one cannot realize an aspect of his being and feel shame solely from self-reflection. Ballard alone in the woods, copulating with the victims of his madness, does not experience shame. He neither judges himself nor blames himself for his actions. Instead, he lives his own actions. However, once "looked" upon, Ballard can feel shame and it "gave him the fidgets." In this case, being seen by the Other allows for an intercession between Ballard and himself. Sartre writes, "I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other" (*Being* 222). It is because of the Other, that Ballard can pass judgment on himself as an object because he, himself, is an object to the other.

We see Ballard experience a break from his madness and the sum of his actions when he sees the face of a young boy looking out of a church bus window. In this, we see, in effect, that Ballard awakens from his bad faith. Simply that Ballard has existed in a state of bad faith does not mean that he is not afforded the ability to return to a state of good faith. Sartre writes, "A person can lie in bad faith, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakenings to cynicism or to good faith, but which implies a constant

and particular style of life" (*Being* 50). After seeing the child on the bus, Ballard returns to the hospital with some remnants of his own sanity, rebirthed from the earth, "swaddled in outsized overalls and covered all over with red mud" (192). He tells the nurse that he is supposed to be there, effectively turning himself in to the authorities. Ballard is never indicted and he is sent to a state psychiatric center where he dies of pneumonia. Ballard's body is shipped to the medical school where he is "flayed, eviscerated, dissected" (McCarthy, *Child* 194). After the students are finished with his body, Ballard is "scraped from the table into a plastic bag" (McCarthy, *Child* 194) and taken to a cemetery outside of the city, finally finding himself a part of the society for which he longed.

Child of God, although bleak, does not exude nihilism as purported by McCarthy's critics. Instead, McCarthy presents the reader with a deeply intricate study of Sartre's existential philosophies of abandonment, freedom, anguish, and bad faith. Although the novel does not make moral judgments nor does it make a statement about what morality should be, that does not make in nihilistic. Instead, *Child of God* offers the readers the beginning stages of McCarthy's exploration into existential philosophy. McCarthy provides the reader with a protagonist who, by all accounts, should be viewed as reprehensible. However, we can sympathize with Lester Ballard because, like him, we are abandoned in a world without warrant or reason. Similarly, the result of our abandonment provides us with anguish in that we are condemned to be free. We are, like Ballard, in a constant state of anguish because we are required to create the meaning and value that exists in the world. On our shoulders is the weighty burden of responsibility to create meaning and value with no other foundation than our own freedom. Although

Ballard is tortured by his own madness into acts of the deepest depravity, McCarthy uses Ballard's madness as a metaphor to explain how in bad faith we can actively and freely choose against our own freedom. Perhaps that is a warning from McCarthy. When we act in bad faith, we are only inhibiting our own freedom and, in doing so, not only are we detached from reality, but we disassociate ourselves from our responsibilities not only to ourselves, but also to the entirety of humanity. This very idea will permeate McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* and through its protagonist, McCarthy will offer a more in-depth study of the ethics that develop from Sartre's existential philosophy.

II: "See the Child": *Blood Meridian*'s The Kid and Sartre

Cormac McCarthy continued to mire in obscurity after publishing his first four novels, including the previous chapter's *Child of God*. It was not until the 1985 publication of his seminal novel *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, that McCarthy began getting serious attention in the literary world. In fact, McCarthy's first four novels sold only a few thousand copies upon initial release.[1] It was only through grants and fellowships that McCarthy was able to eke out a living as an author. However, after the publication of *Blood Meridian* (although its initial publication sold poorly as well), McCarthy's reputation as a literary powerhouse grew as scholars and critics began to take notice of McCarthy. Specifically, eminent literary critic Harold Bloom championed McCarthy, saying that *Blood Meridian* was one of the greatest novels of all time, marking it as a "continuation of an American literary heritage that coursed straight out of [Herman] Melville and [William] Faulkner" (Hage 11). Nevertheless, *Blood Meridian* was not without its detractors. Many denounced the novel for its grotesque portrayal of violence and for its lack of morally centered characters. Despite such criticism, I will show that *Blood Meridian* is steeped in the existential philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche. Through the analysis of *Blood Meridian's* the kid (Sartre) and judge Holden (Nietzsche), I will show that *Blood Meridian* is not nihilistic; instead, McCarthy's novel espouses a form of existential morality expressed through the kid.

[1] Author Vereen M. Bell estimates that McCarthy's first five novels, including *Blood Meridian*, sold roughly 15,000 copies altogether in the original Random House editions.

McCarthy is an interesting figure in the world of literature. Despite his success over the recent years with novels such as *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Road*, McCarthy's writing is commonly criticized for being nihilistic. What makes McCarthy interesting, however, is that one is hard pressed to find purely negative criticism of his writing. Most of the "negative" reviews of McCarthy are intertwined with excessive praise for the grandiose and poetic language he uses to create worlds characterized by "stark pessimism, apocalyptic imagery, and deliberation on the inevitable violence of the human condition" (Hage 11). In this sense, there is no criticism that is actively against McCarthy's writing. Nevertheless, a continuing accusation lodged against McCarthy's work is that it is pervasively nihilistic, a criticism that I contend is a gross misrepresentation of McCarthy's writing.

Oddly enough, one of the first scholars to actively write about McCarthy's work, first publishing in literary journals, then writing an entire book, is the very person who described McCarthy's work as nihilistic (Monk 116).[2] Vereen M. Bell first accuses McCarthy's writing as being nihilistic in his article "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy," stating, "this is McCarthy's metaphysic: none, in effect; no first principles, no foundational truth; Heraclitus without logos" (32). What Bell asserts in this passage is that throughout McCarthy's novels, the characters plod through the plot aimlessly, that moral considerations do not affect the outcomes of situations, and that "action and event seem determined wholly by capricious and incomprehensible fates" (Bell, "Ambiguous Nihilism" 32). Author Edwin T. Arnold agrees with this interpretation of Bell's criticism, writing, "Foremost among the

[2] Monk notes that William J. Schafer (1977), Dianne L. Cox (1980), and John Ditsky (1981) published on McCarthy's work, but that it was Bell who "legitimized McCarthy as literary figure whose work demanded serious critical attention" (116).

readings found in Vereen M. Bell's *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* is the idea that McCarthy's books are essentially nihilistic, devoid of conventional plot, theme or moral reference" ("Naming" 45). However, this is not necessarily the case. Certainly, one could make the argument that McCarthy has an inherently pessimistic view of humanity and the entirety of the world, challenging the readers' sensibilities, but that is not nihilism. Nihilism is the acknowledgement of the complete meaninglessness of existence. Instead, as I have shown with *Child of God*, McCarthy's novels are filled with allusions to existential philosophy. In particular, *Blood Meridian* continues McCarthy's explorations of Sartrean philosophy through his protagonist, the kid, while also delving into the work of Friedrich Nietzsche through the character of judge Holden.

Like McCarthy's work, existentialism was accused of being overly pessimistic. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre notes the overwhelming accusations hurled at existential philosophy, writing, "Others have condemned us for emphasizing what is despicable about humanity, for exposing all that is sordid, suspicious, or base, while ignoring beauty and the brighter side of human nature…that the fundamental reproach brought against [existentialists] is that we stress the dark side of human life" (17-18). Originally a lecture Sartre gave to defend existentialism, *Existentialism is a Humanism* was published to give the general public a clearer understanding of existential philosophy. At its core, this philosophy does not accentuate society's darker nature or ignore aesthetic beauty; instead, it asserts that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, *Existentialism* 20). What Sartre means by this statement is that first we exist and then we give ourselves an essence. This contradicts the general theory that there is some sort of base human nature that is universal. Instead, this statement asserts that we do not have a universalized, preprogrammed nature. Essence, as I stated in the

previous chapter, is the culmination of our choices and actions. For example, I cannot be a courageous person had I never acted courageously. Courage is not a characteristic inherently tied to my essence. I am courageous only in that I have acted courageously time and again. In *Blood Meridian*, Sartre's theory of "existence precedes essence" pervades McCarthy's protagonist, the kid.

At the core of existential thought is the theory that human existence occurs before human essence. Sartre succinctly explains this theory, saying, "What [existentialists] have in common is simply their belief that existence precedes essences" (*Existentialism* 20). Traditionally, essence is defined as preceding existence. Essence is the defining characteristics and fixed properties that every being of a kind has and must have to be of that kind; it is the blueprint for existence. Just as a home cannot exist without a blueprint, a thing cannot exist without its essence. Sartre's theory opposes previous philosophical thought that claims that human beings possess an inherent human nature, a nature that universally exists in all human beings. However, Sartre asserts that human beings exist first and only after recognizing their own existence are they capable of defining themselves. Sartre writes, "We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself" (*Existentialism* 22). In this sense, humans are unique in that they are the only being which seems to exist without having a pre-given form or set of limitations on its nature and identity. Through recognizing his own existence, man is able to adequately define himself through his own choices and actions. There is no predetermined nature that guides and defines man. Similarly, at least for atheistic existentialists such as Sartre, there is no God who defines the essence of humans in that He has given a deterministic set of characteristics or a moral purpose that we ought to fulfill or realize. Previous Western

philosophical thought often asserted that all human activity was either divinely preordained or predestined prior to birth. In its place, man does not have any specific nature; instead, man is the culmination of his choices or – as Sartre states – "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (*Existentialism* 22). In an otherwise meaningless and absurd existence, an existence in which there is a lack of divine (depending on God's purpose or will) or natural moral order (deriving morality from human nature), meaning and morality is defined not by God or human nature, but by choices we make and the coinciding actions resulting from those choices.

Written as a fictionalized account of the rapacious settling of the American West, much of *Blood Meridian* is taken from historical events. In particular, McCarthy used Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confessions: Recollections of a Rogue*, a memoir recounting Chamberlain's involvement with the notorious band of mercenary scalp hunters known as the Glanton Gang, as a source of inspiration for *Blood Meridian.* The novel follows the 14-yearold protagonist simply known as "the kid," who leaves his home in Tennessee for the Western territories, a move that mimics McCarthy's own relocation from Tennessee to the American Southwest.

As a part of the idea that existence precedes essence, Sartre asserts that a person's past does not define who they are or who they will be. Instead, because we are always defining ourselves through our choices and actions, we are always capable of restructuring who we are. A person who has proven herself to be a pathological liar can, at any point, become an honest person. While the past has shown that person to be a liar, she is capable of telling the truth. Should she choose to always tell the truth, she will no longer be a liar, but become an honest person. It is her actions that define her. In that sense, although the past

(part of our facticity) cannot be changed, essence is an evolving process in which a person chooses through his or her action who to be. Sartre writes, "My past therefore is a concrete and precise proposition which as such awaits ratification" (*Being* 502). What this means is that although the past remains a static part of one's life – in that what has been done and what has happened cannot be changed – it does not define a person as they are in the present nor can it affect the outcome of future choices. As I stated in the previous chapter, Sartre asserts that we are all condemned to be free. As a result, we are responsible for our choices and actions; we cannot rely on the past as an excuse for our present actions nor as a set of guidelines for the future. By allowing our facticity, the facts about ourselves (it is a fact that I have been a pathological liar) to determine our actions in the present or in the future (I must always lie because that is what I have done in the past), we would be living in bad faith as Lester Ballard did.

When the reader first meets the kid, he has run away from home at the age of fourteen. In leaving his home in Tennessee for the West, the kid is also leaving behind the past, all the things that he was, making the choice to recreate himself. McCarthy writes, "His origins are become as remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains as wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (*Blood Meridian* 4-5). In writing this, McCarthy is not only eviscerating the past for the kid, but he is also presenting the reader with a protagonist who lacks defined characteristics. Lydia Cooper writes, "In *Blood Meridian*, the unnamed kid is 'divested' of his inherited identity…having shucked off the trappings of his genetic inheritance, never finds another identity to replace the one he has lost" (*No More Heroes* 53). The kid does not have a home, a name, a family, or a clear

backstory. For the reader, the kid is essence-less. Similarly, not only does McCarthy show the basic tenants of existential philosophy in that the kid leaves behind his past, making his "origins as remote as his destiny," but he also poses the very question at the heart of existential thought. If there is not a human nature, from where do we derive humanity's proper purpose or function and, thus, the moral rules humanity ought to follow? Arnold suggests that this question is the heart of the novel: "This question is the thematic center of the novel. Although the kid will ride with many men on this staging ground it is Judge Holden…who places the questions before the kid" ("Naming" 62). However, to contradict Cooper, who claims that the kid never regains an identity, I will show that the kid evolves through the course of his decisions to create his own essence, shaping himself by his own "will," rejecting the pressure to succumb to the war-loving, violent men with whom he travels.

By refusing to name his protagonist, McCarthy is giving the reader a main character that lacks any identifiable essence. Having a name would prescribe an essence to the kid, as it reflects a predetermined plan the author has for the character. For the reader, when a character has a name from the beginning of a novel, that character is given an essence prior to existence. This, in many ways, is similar to the way our own names tend to reflect our familial and cultural pasts, providing an essence as to who we are and from where we come. However, without an origin and backstory, the kid has no predetermined limits to how he can develop or who he can become. No future plot development will contradict or seem unrealistic in relation to his childhood, family, or upbringing. His future is radically open, formed only by his actions in the book, not by the backstory as in the main characters of most novels. Jay Ellis writes, "The kid is even less firmly cast, and is furthermore not yet fully

tempered…he is an adolescent, a yet-formed man, however frequently the narrative describes his physical abilities in adult terms" (*No Place for Home* 156). He is mostly unknown and undescribed to the reader. McCarthy describes his protagonist, "See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt…he can neither read nor write" (*Blood Meridian* 3). In her essay, "In Rough Country 1: Cormac McCarthy," Joyce Carol Oates writes, "Though 'the kid' is the closest to a sympathetic protagonist in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy makes no effort to characterize him in any but a rudimentary way. We are not meant to identify with him, only just to perceive him" (155). The reader is not meant to associate an essence with the kid. McCarthy's protagonist has not been named and, in a Sartrean sense, has not been prescribed an essence.

Like *Child of God*, McCarthy presents the reader with a protagonist existing in a world that seems to exist without God. While *Child of God*'s world expressed this idea through Lester Ballard's abandonment, McCarthy is more forth coming in *Blood Meridian*, expressing this idea through imagery that suggests a Godless universe. Barcley Owens writes, "Throughout the novel, violence overwhelms the tabernacles of Christianity, lending the primal theme an iconoclastic aura" (4). Twice the kid enters a church and both times he finds the churches littered with dead bodies. McCarthy writes, "He walked around the side of the church and entered the sacristy…In the room was a wooden table with a few clay pots and along the back wall lay the remains of several bodies, one a child" (*Blood Meridian* 26). The word choice is interesting here. The kid enters the "sacristy," which is a place where the priest prepares for a sermon or a place where sacred things for worship are kept. Instead of finding a priest preparing or sacred things for worship, the kid finds only dead bodies. Similarly, on that same church, statues of saints built into the façade are tattered from the

gunfire of "American soldiers trying their rifles" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 26). Here, the reader is presented not only with the desecration of a church, but a metaphorical murder of God.

A similar passage exists when the kid enters another church. Inside he finds the massacred remains of "scalped and naked and partly eaten bodies of some forty souls who'd barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 60). Instead of finding sanctuary in the house of God, these believers found only murder and torture and rape. Before leaving the kid notices a "dead Christ in a glass bier…broken in the chancel floor" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 60). Again, McCarthy's word choice is interesting. The dead Christ is entombed in a glass bier, a surface on which a corpse is place before burial or cremation. Here, not only is Christ – and, to that extent, God – dead, but he lays dead on the chancel floor, the place in a church reserved for clergy members. It is as if McCarthy wants the reader to recognize that God, himself, is dead at the feet of those who worship him. In this sense, like he did with Ballard, McCarthy is showing that the kid also experiences the abandonment that one experiences in a Godless world.

If God is dead, as McCarthy has suggested in his writing through the aforementioned imagery, then there is a lack of divinity in the world; God has not given us a moral purpose, a standard of right living or human perfection that we have to live up to as instructed by God. Because of this, as I have explained in the previous chapter, Sartre espouses the idea are condemned to be free in that we did not create ourselves (we were born into the world not by our own volition, but through a series of events which resulted in our birth) and, as a result, we are condemned because once we are born into the world, we are responsible for all of our choices and actions (Sartre, *Existentialism* 29). However, despite the non-existence of a

divine figure and because of the ensuing freedom to which we are condemned, a moral order can still exist in the world. With the responsibility of freedom comes the responsibility of choosing not just who one is, but who all of humanity is. Essentially, through our choices as individuals, we are choosing what humanity is as a whole. Sartre writes, "And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" (*Existentialism* 23). Sartre claims that any one of our actions at the same time wills that our actions create an image of humanity as we wish it to be. While this could open Sartre to the idea of relativism, the idea that every person chooses for himself or herself what is right and wrong, making the whole of morality subjective to the individual, the opposite is true. Sartre asserts that we all "always choose the good, and that nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all" (*Existentialism* 24). For me to believe something is good, to commit myself to it morally, is for me to believe that it is good for all. I cannot pretend in choosing my morality that all that matters is what I think is good. My values are commitments to others; I am choosing this because I think it would be good if others chose it as well. I might turn out to be wrong, but I was intending to choose for all humanity, even if I was wrong. When acting in complete authenticity (good faith), man will recognize his own freedom and, as such, will the freedom of others. In willing our own freedom, we understand that it is contingent upon the freedom of others. Therefore, should a person act in such a way that they do not choose the good, that they do not actively will their own freedom and at the same time the freedom of others, they are acting in bad faith as Lester Ballard did in *Child of God*.

Certainly, *Blood Meridian* is an exceedingly violent novel. With scenes that depict dead babies hanging from a bush to become "larval to some unreckonable being" and

dialogue such as, "Hell, there's no God in Mexico" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 34), it is easy to see why Cooper remarked that *Blood Meridian* is "McCarthy's most spectacularly nihilistic work" (*No More Heroes* 3). However, reducing McCarthy's magnum opus to a work of nihilism is a too narrowing. Unquestionably, the novel provides the reader with a depravity that they will unlikely find again, but *Blood Meridian* delves deeper into the nature of existence. It gives the reader more than a meaningless world void of morals. In *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye writes, "*Blood Meridian* is the question of meaning, purpose, and value in a universe that yields answers only in bright but fleeting glimpses" (66). Through the internal struggle of the kid and his external struggle with Judge Holden, we are able to see those "bright but fleeting glimpses" of light in an otherwise dark and pessimistic novel.

Early in *Blood Meridian*, the reader sees the kid acting in good faith, "operating on a level of complete authenticity" (Sartre, *Existentialism* 49), and – as a result – acting in a way that asserts a form of Sartrean morality. After travelling on his own, the kid joins Captain White's army company only to see the majority of the company massacred by Comanche Indians with only a few survivors escaping, including the kid. After the attack, the kid finds another member of White's company, Sproule, who is badly injured and infected with tuberculosis. Instead of leaving him in the desert to die, the two travel together through the desert. In this particular instance, it would have been easy for the kid to leave Sproule behind. In fact, Sproule encouraged the kid to leave when onset by a group of Mexicans, saying, "Go on…Save yourself" (*Blood Meridian* 63). However, the kid does not respond, choosing instead to sit with Sproule until the Mexicans arrive. The kid does not do this because it is a moral imperative or because it is a divine commandment. Rather, the kid

chooses to stay because he is free to make the choice and he recognizes that in willing his own freedom he must also will the freedom of his comrade. In making the choice he chooses that humanity make the same choice. In a Sartrean sense, the kid is responsible for himself (his choices and actions) and, therefore, he is responsible for all men (willing that they act in the same manner). In this sense, there are very real moral implications in every choice, but they are, however, still choices.

Chihuahua City, where he sees the decapitated head of Captain White paraded about in a glass jar. To escape imprisonment, the kid joins John Joel Glanton's band of scalp hunters, who have been commissioned by the Chihuahua city's government to eliminate the Apache Indians in the region. After joining Glanton's gang, the kid is introduced to Judge Holden, the novel's antagonist. Judge Hage notes, "while Holden is capable of unspeakable acts of sadism, what truly amplifies his terrifying aspect is his seer refinement" (99). Holden is exceedingly intelligent; he is multi-lingual, a musician, a dancer, and he often makes notes of geological and biological specimens as they travel across the west. However, Holden's intelligence is matched only by his predilection for senseless violence. At one point, Holden buys a litter of puppies only to throw them from a bridge into the raging river below. He saves a young boy only to fondle and molest him before murdering the boy days later.

Much of the academic response to *Blood Meridian* has focused primarily on Judge Holden. Certainly, his character is larger than life, often compared to both the white whale Moby Dick and Captain Ahab. Similarly, Holden's philosophical diatribes on geology, biology, the nature of existence, God, and the universe have led many to assert a kind of kindred intellectual spirit to Nietzsche. Denis Donoghue writes, "Nietzsche is Judge

Holden's philosopher, not McCarthy's" (277). When the judge states, "War is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will…War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is God" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 249), Steven Frye likens Holden to the Nietzschean *Übermensch* (commonly translated as "overman" or "superman"). Frye notes that Holden appears to reject "external notions of value and through a process of self-discovery defines morality through the force of will" ("Histories" 7), and in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* he more explicitly states, "McCarthy implies Nietzsche's philosophy of the *Übermensch* and gives it life in the historical figure of Judge Holden" (*Understanding* 84). However, while certain correlations exist between Holden and Nietzsche, Holden is not altogether representative of Nietzschean philosophy.

In one of his many diatribes, Holden preaches, "If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of Mankind would he not have done so by now?" (*Blood Meridian* 146). This, among other of Holden's statements and actions (such as wrecking a Christian revival in the beginning of the novel), implies the idea that "'God is Dead,' that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable" (Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 199). Nietzsche saw that Enlightenment reason led man to the same conclusion. Therefore, in a sense, Holden "represents the endless futile quest of empirical reason to replace God" (Cant 174). Throughout the novel, Holden collects specimens and keeps a journal of the geology and biology the west (one can assume he has done this throughout his many travels). This exemplifies his "empirical" sense of knowledge. He approaches the knowledge of the world scientifically. Yet, after notating specimens or geological finds, he destroys them. When others ask him about his research, Holden claims, "Whatever exists in creation without my

knowledge exists without my consent," and "The freedom of the birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 198-199), and it is here that Holden separates from Nietzsche. Holden seems to demand a world without freedom, one governed entirely by a single authority: himself. In this sense, Holden's world is not godless; he wants to be god, reducing others to mere things. If he is anti-freedom, as this quote implies, then he is anti-existentialist because the existentialist thinkers treat freedom as the foundation of being.

The judge's view of morality is also linked to Nietzschean philosophy. Holden states, "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak" (*Blood Meridian* 250). For many, this seems to echo Nietzsche's moral philosophy, in that Nietzsche believed only the strong were moral in that they impose law on themselves rather than having others impose it upon them. The "morality" of the weak is just revenge, not "self-mastery" of the strong. To the critics who compare Holden to Nietzsche, they see Holden's philosophy as synonymous with Nietzsche saying, "Isn't it time to say of morality what Master Eckhart said: 'I ask God to rid me of God!'" (*Gay Science* 166). They see both Holden and Nietzsche as "invalidating morality" (Ellis 153), seeking to rid the world of morality. However, Holden's idea of morality is a sort of caricature of Nietzschean philosophy taken to an extreme, and, as such, his interpretation of Nietzsche's moral philosophy is misunderstood.

While it would appear that Nietzsche was against morality altogether, he believed that some moral views were invented by the weak as revenge against the strong. Generally, he attributed this to Western morality, both Christian and philosophical (Plato, Kant, utilitarianism, etc.). However, Nietzsche was not against all morality. In *Genealogy of*

Morals, Nietzsche differentiates between "master morality" and "slave morality." Nietzsche writes, "While every noble [master] morality develops with a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset say No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself'" (*Genealogy* 472). Master morality originates when a "noble type of man experience *itself* as determining values…it is *value-creating*" (*Beyond* 395). The noble man is powerful, strong, and has complete control over himself. With such control, he recognizes that he also creates his values. What is "good" originates in self-affirmation and what is "bad" originates from what has proven to be not "good." Nietzsche notes that the noble man delights in "being severe and hard with himself" (*Beyond* 395). To that extent, Nietzsche goes out of his way to show how "master morality" can include things that one may consider traditionally moral, such as helping the unfortunate. However, this is not done completely from a state of "pity," but from an "excess of power" (Nietzsche *Beyond* 395).

"Slave morality," on the other hand, arises from a place of *ressentiment* (resentment) (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 472); it is a rejection of and reaction to "master morality." Whereas "master morality" is individualized, "slave morality" argues that morality should be the same for all. However, "slave morality" is pessimistic about the human condition. Nietzsche writes:

> Suppose the violated, oppressed, suffering, unfree, who are uncertain of themselves and weary, moralize: what will their moral valuation have in common? Probably, a pessimistic suspicion about the whole condition of man will find expression, perhaps a condemnation of man along with his condition. The slave's eye is not favorable to the virtues of the powerful: he is skeptical and suspicious, subtly suspicious, of all the "good" that is honored there

> [nobles] – he would like to persuade himself that even their happiness is not genuine. (*Beyond* 397)

As a result of the rejection of "master morality" and its pessimistic view of humanity, "slave morality" emphasizes pity, patience, industry, humility, and friendliness in that they are useful qualities for "enduring existence"; Nietzsche notes, "Slave morality is essentially a morality of utility" (*Beyond* 397).

By pointing out the different types of morality, Nietzsche is not rejecting morality altogether. Instead, he is rejecting some moralities. In this instance, he is rejecting "slave morality" because it emphasizes the "herd" over the individual. Nietzsche's main objection is the universalization of morality, the idea that there should be one set of moral rules for all of humanity. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes, "Let us consider finally what naivety it is to say 'man *ought* to be thus and thus!'" (56). Nietzsche rejects the universalization of morals on the principle that creating a universalized system is to "deny the world," whereas Nietzschean philosophy seeks "honour in affirming" (*Twilight* 56).

With the understanding of "master" and "slave" morality, it is understandable that critics draw parallels between Nietzsche and Holden. In fact, Robert L. Jarrett asserts, "But [Holden's] philosophy is more Nietzschean…amounting to a précis of Nietzsche's *Toward a Genealogy of Morals* (1887), especially its devastating critique of Western ethics through an analysis of the relations between master and slave" (82). Holden's view on morality seems to emphasize Nietzsche's view on morality. However, there is a difference. When Holden says, "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak" (*Blood Meridian* 250), he suggests that we should reject morality altogether and that the strong should exploit the weak. Holden states, "Historical law subverts [moral law]

at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong…" (250). However, Nietzsche does not deny morality altogether; instead, he rejects the universalization of morality. He rejects the moralities like "slave morality" that seek to impose morals on the strong in favor of the weak. There are real similarities between Nietzsche and Holden; one could argue that Nietzsche's view on morality could lead to Holden's view. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Nietzsche would not intend for such a view to come from his philosophy.

When the kid joins Glanton's gang he meets the ex-priest Tobin. The kid's immediate distaste for Holden as well as his attempts to help other gang members draws the ex-priest Tobin – who also dislikes Holden, although he has a certain awe of his intellect – closer to the kid. In *Sorrow's Rigging*, Gary Adelman writes, "Covenants between gang members are brittle. The kid is only one who answers appeals for help and treats his cohorts as comrades in arms. The ex-priest is attracted by such ingenuousness, and especially by the kid's obvious distaste for the judge" (41). Throughout the course of the novel, the reader is presented with what is akin to a power struggle for the kid's soul. Holden tells the kid, "Don't you know that I'd have loved you like a son?" (*Blood Meridian* 306). Meanwhile, Tobin "urges the kid to resist the judge at all turns" (Arnold 63). Because of his dislike of Holden, the kid tends to side with Tobin, although he does not share Tobin's awe of the Holden, saying, "He ain't nothin. You told me so yourself. Men are made of dust and earth…That it was a naked fact and the judge was a man like all men" (*Blood Meridian* 297).

While the Judge is a larger-than-life figure, often speaking in grandiose soliloquys, leading many to assume that he is the voice of McCarthy himself, it is Tobin who more accurately reflects McCarthy's voice. Arnold concurs, writing, "Some readers assume the

judge speaks for McCarthy Himself, but Tobin, I think, comes much closer" (63). It is important to note not only that Holden is the antagonist of the novel, but also that it is Tobin – the voice closet to McCarthy's own – who is the advisor of the kid. Sartre notes that even when we seek out advice, in seeking out our advisors we already have an idea of what they will advise, making the advice that we receive a choice that we have already made. Sartre states, "to choose one's advisor is only another way to commit oneself" (*Existentialism* 33). Similarly, it is Tobin who expresses to that judge that "[the kid] is a free agent," implying that the kid is free to choose, not just between aiding the judge or not, but between following the judge's path – becoming the judge himself – and following a path of his own. In this sense, McCarthy is saying that the kid is condemned to his freedom; the kid is required to choose, but it is his choice and he must bear the responsibility of that choice. Should the kid choose to heed the advice of the Holden, it would be easy to agree with critics such as Jonathan Pitts who concludes, "It is difficult not to see *Blood Meridian* as nihilistic" (23). However, the kid shows disdain for the judge's philosophy and, as a result, recognizes his own freedom and the responsibility that coincides with such radical freedom.

The gang continues to hunt and murder Apaches, Mexicans, and anyone else, claiming their scalps and returning to Chihuahua City as heroes. After setting out from Chihuahua City, Glanton and the gang murder, pillage, and rape their way across the West, eventually settling down at a river in Yuma where they assert their dominance by taking over the ferry service, charging four times what was once charged to cross the river.

It is important to note that McCarthy never shows the kid participating in the bloodshed and violence that the rest of the gang enacts. Undoubtedly, he participates in the brutalities; however, the reader never sees him involved in the act of scalping, raping, or

murdering. While we can assume the kid participates, it is through his participation that he finds a moral center. Adelman writes, "[The kid's] terrible immersion in slaughter and scalptaking extends over a year, during which he grows morally…Moral consciousness in opposition to such a predisposition and the viciousness of the world will come to define him" (36-37). Although we can be certain that the kid partook in the atrocities committed by the Glanton Gang, he is more often depicted showing mercy to several different characters throughout the novel. For example, when a fellow member of the gang, Shelby, is injured, the kid is left behind to kill him. The kid says, "If you want me to just leave you I will" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 207). The kid recognizes, like he did with Sproule, that he has the responsibility to choose what to do. He does not have to thoughtlessly heed the commands handed to him. The kid is condemned to his freedom and, in acting in good faith, he must accept his responsibility to choose not only for himself, but also for all humanity. Instead of killing Shelby, the kid helps him hide in a bush, and then rides off where he finds another member of the gang, Tate, struggling with a lame horse. Again, instead of leaving Tate behind, the kid helps him by bringing him along, suggesting again that the kid acts in a way that recognizes that he has a responsibility to choose not just for himself, but for all of humanity. Should he choose to leave Tate behind, to kill Shelby, then the kid is willing that this is how all of humanity should act in this situation. However, as Sartre asserts, we always aim for the good and what is good for one must be good for all.

It is for this very reason, among other instances where the kid shows mercy (where he acts in the spirit of Sartrean morality), that Holden and the kid have conflict. Of the kid, Holden says, "There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart…you alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (*Blood Meridian*

299). While stationed at the river, the Glanton Gang is attacked and massacred by the Yuma Indians. The kid, an ex-priest named Tobin, and Judge Holden escape the massacre. Holden finds Tobin and the kid in the desert; he is naked save for the hat he wears. Tobin tries to convince the kid to kill the defenseless Holden, saying, "Do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit" (*Blood Meridian* 285). However, the kid does not. As a result, Holden tracks them throughout the desert – after getting clothes and food from another set of survivors he finds – seeking to kill both the priest and the kid. Hiding in a cave, there are two separate occasions that the kid has the opportunity to shoot Holden, but defers. Even for the judge, the kid recognizes that he is still condemned in his freedom, that he cannot take morality on authority from any other source (duty, the church, Holden). He has to choose his moral standards and hold himself to them. That he chooses this standard freely and that he recognizes that others can do the same is what makes the kid moral in Sartrean terms. The kid no longer wants to kill wantonly because he recognizes it as not willing the freedom of others. Therefore, he refuses to impose his whims as moral law on others by killing them, including Holden. As Adelman writes, "the kid develops a spiritual dimension that haunts him for the rest of his life" (36). While it is not a spiritual dimension in the sense of theological values, it is the existentialist understanding that, because of this, Holden continues to plague the earth and, as Tobin predicted, the kid's leniency makes his life forfeit.

Because of the novel's violent content, and because the novel's protagonist is murdered by an overwhelming force of "evil," it would be easy to conclude that *Blood Meridian* is overtly nihilistic, that the worldview McCarthy present lacks any meaning. However, the novel is deeply entrenched in Sartrean existential philosophy. Sartre states,

"Man makes himself; he does not come into the world fully made, he makes himself by choosing his own morality; and his circumstances are such that he has no option other than to choose morality" (*Existentialism* 46). Throughout *Blood Meridian*, the kid exemplifies Sartre's philosophy. McCarthy presents the kid as a child lacking an essence, a background, or any identifying characteristics. Throughout the novel, amidst the horrifying acts of murder and rape and scalping, we see the kid grow morally. Despite his participation in the actions of the Glanton Gang, the kid stands apart from the rest of the gang. His past actions cease to be his present following the massacre of the rest of the gang. Again on his own, the kid no longer lives a life in which murder is an activity. Because he is "condemned to be free," as Sartre asserts, the kid refuses to accept Holden's worldview.

Thirty years later, the judge and the kid reunite in a bar. After a brief conversation, the kid again resists the judge, telling him, "You ain't nothin" (*Blood Meridian* 331). Although Holden later murders the kid, suggesting – as many have – that *Blood Meridian* is nihilistic, the victory is the kid's. Frye writes:

> [The kid's] death then becomes a measured victory…at least insofar as he is destroyed but never internally defeated, and he stands as an example of moral rectitude and heroism in the face of omnipresent evil. (90)

Although Holden murders the kid, and the novel concludes with Holden dancing and claiming that he will never die, that does not imply that morality has fallen prey to a nihilistic worldview. Instead, morality still exists through the freedom of choice and the responsibility of freedom. In McCarthy's world, characters are still free to make their own choices and, consequently, McCarthy leaves the reader with one particular moral choice left. As Arnold states, "the judge can still be faced" (65).

III. "He is the Word of God or God Never Spoke": The Father, Abraham, and the Absurdity of Faith

For most of his career, McCarthy's writing was met equally with praise and criticism. However, *The Road,* McCarthy's tenth and last novel, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, "is the only one of McCarthy's books to have been received with uniform approval" (Cant 266). McCarthy's previous novels often deal with questions of God, meaning, value, and morality, and he often asks these questions through the depiction of the worst that humanity has to offer. Stephen Frye writes that McCarthy's work only asks "the ultimate questions – the nature of the real, the possibility of the divine, the source of ethics and identity" (*Understanding* 3). Perhaps it is for this very reason that opinions on McCarthy's earlier work were not as favorable or so unanimously praising as they were for *The Road*. Whether it is Lester Ballard's madness and necrophilia or Judge Holden and the rest of the scalp hunting Glanton Gang, McCarthy uses these character and their depravities, their brute violence, to present the reader with the deepest of philosophical questions. While *The Road* continues to ask the same questions as McCarthy's previous work (and continues to deal with the depths of human wickedness), it does so by presenting the readers with a protagonist who "holds on to a notion of God in the wake of an apocalypse that has taken hope, most of life, and certainly all organized religion with it," making *The Road* "much less nihilistic and pessimistic that most of his other work" (Hage 142). Although I fundamentally disagree that McCarthy's previous work is nihilistic and have provided examples to the contrary, *The Road* indeed provides an alternative form of existential philosophy that differs from the work of Sartre and

Commented [BB1]: Cormac McCarthy does not write about menial matters and everyday inconveniences. His sets his sights on humanity's ultimate questions. In addition to the usual appeal of any well-written work of fiction, *The Road* engages readers with the discussion of life's greatest dilemmas.

Nietzsche that I have shown exist in *Child of God* and *Blood Meridian*. Instead, *The Road* is based on the existential Christian philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard and his theory of faith. Perhaps it is for this very reason that *The Road* was met with such great praise.

As I have shown in the previous two chapters, McCarthy's answer to these questions is deeply imbedded in existential philosophy. In *Child of God*, we see McCarthy begin his dalliance with existential philosophy by having Lester Ballard's abandonment and madness parallel Sartre's existential theories of abandonment and bad faith. McCarthy continues this theme in *Blood Meridian* where he further explores Sartrean existential philosophy – in particular, how we can find a foundation for our morality within the confines of our own freedom – and stretches his existential allusions to the work of Nietzsche, as expressed through the character Judge Holden. Despite existential themes and a predilection for biblical imagery, McCarthy's work has been often criticized as nihilistic. However, *The Road* thoroughly dismisses the notion that McCarthy's writing is nihilistic. *The Road* presents a post-apocalyptic world, a world without moral or societal rules, a world in which "the death of all these things – society, taboo, God – becomes a license for anarchy and chaos…to murder at will and to consume the flesh of one's fellow man" (Rikard 221). In contrast to his previous works, where the characters themselves are responsible for any perceived nihilism, it is the world itself that seems to confirm an ever-present, pervasive nihilism in *The Road*. And this nihilism seems to infect the inhabitants of the world. Yet, despite the complete breakdown of all the societal conventions that hold together ideas of morality and meaning, a father and son navigate the horrid terrain of Appalachia, holding fast to a basic form of morality.

Commented [BB2]: The author of this paper compares the moral explorations within *The Road* to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Though I am not well-versed in the perspectives of Kierkegaard, and of Christian philosophies more broadly, I understand that he was an early adopter of existentialism. Additionally, I am aware that Kierkegaard emphasized how truly believing in God requires an individual to make a "leap of faith" beyond logical reasoning. This concept, of making such an emotionally driven commitment, ties into *The Road's* concept of "carrying the fire".

Commented [BB3]: The author highlights how Cormac McCarthy has built a world in which the environment in itself is the birthplace of widespread nihilism.

This stark juxtaposition illuminates the idea that morality is not founded upon theological values, nor on reason, but on a radical choice or a leap of faith, echoing the Christian existentialist beliefs of philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.

The Road is a post-apocalyptic novel set in the southeastern portion of the United States (Tennessee is the general consensus) ten years after an unexplained cataclysmic event has destroyed the majority of civilization and most other forms of life along with it. Because *The Road* takes place in Appalachian region, Cooper asserts, "*The Road* symbolically bridges the geographical divide between McCarthy's earlier Appalachian novels…and his Texan novels" (132). In many ways, McCarthy is returning home in *The Road*, but he does not come home to the "tablets of stone …grown with deep green moss…and vines like traces of an older race of man" of *Child of God*'s Sevier County (McCarthy, *Child of God* 25). Instead, the setting of *The Road* is more closely akin to the "purgatorial waste" of *Blood Meridian*'s Mexico, equally populated by "savages" and "heathens" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 60-62). Void of life and color, McCarthy's world is "like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world," where nights are "dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before" (*The Road* 1).

McCarthy leaves the event that ruined the world obscured. What he does not leave obscured, however, is a source of inspiration for the novel. The Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, San Marcos, contain a large collection of letters, papers, notes, and drafts written by Cormac McCarthy. In a typescript copy of the first draft of *The Road*, McCarthy noted, "(Kierkegaard: Abraham and Isaac)" (qtd. in Noble 93). Many have picked up on the Kierkegaardian analogies in *The Road*. Steven Frye writes, "More

Commented [BB4]: Moon reinforces the connection between Kierkegaard's view of belief in God as a leap of faith and the position of morality that the man and the boy hold dearly.

Commented [BB5]: Moon introduces evidence that *The Road's* connections to Kierkegaard are not coincidental. McCarthy took some degree of inspiration from Kierkegaard's ideas for his writing.

broadly, [*The Road*] reflects a form of Existential Christianity rooted in Soren Kierkegaard…" (*Understanding* 177). Thomas H. Schaub cites *The Road* as an example of Kierkegaard's "'leap' from faith to reason" (153). D. Marcel DeCoste notes that when the child's mother hopes for "eternal nothingness" (McCarthy, *The Road* 57) in death, she exemplifies Kierkegaard's theory of despair, stating, "In these words, we may discern Kierkegaard's insight…that to despair is willfully to turn from faith and from eternity with God" (77). From this particular note on the original draft of *The Road*, however, it is clear that McCarthy drew from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, in which Kierkegaard discusses the story of Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, at the behest of God, and, in doing so, becomes the father of faith and the exemplar for Kierkegaard's discussion of faith "by virtue of the absurd" (*Fear* 29).

McCarthy describes *The Road*'s landscape as "cauterized," an "ashen scabland" in which vegetation ceased to exist (*The Road* 13). The entire world is "barren, silent, godless" (McCarthy, *The Road* 4). Many of the survivors have resorted to cannibalism for sustenance or, as McCarthy describes, they have become, "shoppers in the commissary of hell" (*The Road* 181). Those who don't resort to cannibalism scavenge for food, living their daily lives at the most primitive level of human existence. In *The Road*, this delineation between cannibals and foragers is what separates the immoral from the moral and, as Gabe Rikard notes, "In such a savage world, morality and ethics are impediments to survival" (221). However, the father and son continue to hold fast in their morality and in the faith that being one of the "good guys" is the continued will of God.

Commented [BB6]: Rikard, much like others who have analyzed *The Road*, assign the labels of good and bad to the foragers and cannibals respectively. The good guys do all that they can to adhere to the values they feel are aligned with the will of God. In many instances, these values provoke actions that, in their righteous impracticality, are a hinderance to survival. As a result, the commitment to ethical principles that the main characters maintain is a burden upon their survival.

The father and son forage empty gas stations and homes for canned food and useful items. They are faced with terrors befitting the worst nightmares: "a frieze of

human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes" (McCarthy, *The Road* 76) and "a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (McCarthy, *The Road* 167). Certainly, McCarthy's flair for the macabre is at its best in *The Road*. However, such a world needs to exist for McCarthy to draw his parallels to Kierkegaard. In what other world would faith be as absurd as in the world that McCarthy provides in *The Road*? They are robbed of all their possessions. Despite the horrors they encounter, the father and son continue along the road, reassuring themselves that they are "the good guys," that they are "carrying the fire" (McCarthy, *The Road* 83). Michael Chabon writes, "They are carrying the fire through a world destroyed by fire, and therefore – a leap of logic or faith that by the time the novel opens has become almost insurmountable for both of them – the boy must struggle on, so that he can be present at, or somehow contribute to, the eventual rebirth of the world" (112). Realizing that they will not be able to survive another winter, the father and son and travel south and east toward the sea where they hope to find a warmer, safer environment. Although the world is nothing more than a crematory, a cosmic pyre charred and ruinous, the father and son have faith that a better world can still exist, or may even still exist.

Commented [BB7]: In this passage, Chabon eloquently encapsulates the concept of "carrying the fire". They must continue to uphold the morality of a better world in order to preserve such values for a point at which that world is reborn.

Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, opens *Fear and Trembling* by relating a story of a man who grew up enamored with the story of Abraham. As a child, this unnamed man read of Abraham's great act of faith in God's commandment to sacrifice his son, Isaac. As a child, the story made sense and he was inspired by the act that made Abraham the "father of faith." However, as he grew into a man, "life had separated what had been united in the child's pious simplicity" (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 7). The older the man became, the more intrigue the story held. It is

through this fictional man that de Silentio works out at least four different ways in which Abraham could have avoided the complete absurdity of his own faith. For Kierkegaard, absolute faith in God is absurd because it is impossible for one to truly know God and to understand his purpose. Therefore, Abraham's faith in God necessitates his belief that what God commands is good or necessary; it requires him to accept the absurd. Kierkegaard writes, "[Abraham] believed; he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he still was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He believed by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question…" (*Fear* 29). Abraham dearly loved Isaac. However, he was willing to sacrifice his son because God commanded it. His faith, however, is not so blind as to commit murder simply because God commands it, but he believes whatever it is that God commands him to do must certainly be good.

In the first imaginative "story" of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son, Abraham takes his son to Mount Moriah and attempts to explain that God requires him as a sacrifice. However, when Isaac cannot understand, Abraham pretends to be an idolater willing to sacrifice his son because "it is my [Abraham's] desire" (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 9). In this example, Abraham pretends to be an idolater so that Isaac does not lose faith in the goodness of God. In the next example, the story occurs exactly as it does in the Bible, but Abraham "saw no more joy" (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 9). Although Isaac flourishes afterward, Abraham cannot forget that God demanded him to sacrifice his son. In this example, Abraham's faith is no longer pure in that he no longer "believed by the virtue of the absurd" (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 30). The third iteration of the story finds Abraham deciding that he is wrong in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham is troubled in that he

believes that it was a sin to be willing to sacrifice Isaac, "the best that he owned" (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 10). It was a sin in that he neglected his duty as a father, believing it possible that he had not loved Isaac completely, and "what sin could be more grievous" (Kierkegaard *Fear* 10). The last variation of this story shows Abraham's left hand "clenched in despair" when he draws his knife. Isaac sees his father's apprehension and the "shudder [that] went through his entire body" and, as a result, loses his faith (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 10-11). Through these imaginative alterations of Abraham's story, Kierkegaard seeks to prove not what faith is, but what faith is not, and in reading McCarthy's *The Road* alongside of *Fear and Trembling*, we can see how the father's faith that they are "the good guys" who are "carrying the fire" is a belief in the "virtue of the absurd."

In the opening pages of *The Road*, the reader can begin to see the parallels between McCarthy's work and *Fear and Trembling.* However, there is a difference between McCarthy's father and Abraham. While Abraham's faith is founded on God's command that he must sacrifice his son, the father believes it is his God-given duty to care for his son. McCarthy writes, "He knew only that they child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (*The Road* 5). For the father, protecting his son is not only the duty of a father to a son, but protecting his son is protecting the very existence of God himself. In some sense, the father and son's relationship parallels God the father and Christ the son as savior of mankind. The duty is more than just a father's duty, since – like Christ – his son is potentially the salvation of humanity. Noble asserts, "At the very least, for the father, the child warrants the existence of God. The boy authorizes his father to live in a way that is consistent with the belief in

Commented [BB8]: Though this exploration had already established the boy as a vessel for the continuation of faith, this phrasing introduces an additional layer. The father's protective instincts are a metaphor for his protection of the essence of God in a Godless world.

God" (98). Although the father and Abraham differ in what they believe they are commanded to do by God, they have faith in the face of the absurd.

Kierkegaard notes that when Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son, he did so with the faith that God would not require Abraham to kill his son. Kierkegaard writes:

> But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too *early* not too late. He mounted the ass and rode slowly along the way. During all this time he believed; he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he still was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He believed by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it was indeed absurd that God, who demanded it of him, in the next instant would revoke the demand. (*Fear* 29)

Abraham's faith was absurd in that he fully believed that God would revoke his demand for Abraham to sacrifice his son, or that should he have to sacrifice Isaac that God would "give him a new Isaac, call the sacrificed one back to life" (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 30). Abraham knew that he was commanded to sacrifice his son, but he also knew that the goodness of God would not require him to sacrifice (or permanently lose) his son. Similarly, because of *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic setting, cannibalistic antagonists, and world generally devoid of the values of society, the Father's hope that his son will have a future, a life worth living, echoes Abraham's absurd faith.

Throughout the novel, McCarthy often alludes to the son as a messianic figure. The father refers to his son as "a tabernacle" (McCarthy, *The Road* 273) and says his head is a "golden chalice, good to house a god" (McCarthy, *The Road* 75). Steven

Faulkner writes, “And there again, after all these books, the image of the chaliced, sleeping god rises again. This boy…is a word of God made flesh, if not *the* Word of God made flesh. He surely is a Christ-figure, baptized and anointed, in communion with his often-forgiven father” (45). Although he was born shortly after the event that ruined the world, the boy’s innocence and goodness lead some scholars such as Steven Frye to claim that the boy embodies a messianic figure because he is “unselfishly concerned with others in a wasted world” (“Histories” 9). Whether the father sees his son as “a god” (McCarthy, *The Road* 172) incarnate or merely as proof of God’s existence, we cannot be certain. However, what can be certain of is that the father sees his responsibility toward his son as “a sort of Manifest Destiny handed down to him from above” (Hage 142). After killing a cannibal who attempted to abduct the boy (presumably for food, but other horrors are always implied), the father explains, “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (McCarthy, *The Road* 77). Through such dialogue, McCarthy’s allusion to Kierkegaard grows stronger. Noble writes:

> As de Silentio tells us, Abraham’s promise led him to an absurd faith because he was forced to believe that God would not take his some from him, since his son was the fulfillment of that promise. Likewise, the man’s appointment to care for the boy leads him to an absurd hope: that it would be better to keep his boy alive despite the apparent hopelessness of the world. (99)

The father’s faith, like Abraham’s, is founded on absurdity in that what God is asking them to do defies logic. Why would God command Abraham to sacrifice the son he promised would be the father of nations? Similarly, how could God ask the father to keep

Commented [BB9]: One can interpret the father’s view of the boy in either of these fashions. It may be the literal sentiment, that the boy himself is God, or a more metaphorical perception, that the boy is proof of God.

Commented [BB10]: Cormac McCarthy uses the literary device of allusion in making reference to Kierkegaard’s ethics.

his son alive in a world in which starvation is eminent and suffering and a torturous death seem all but inevitable? How could God ask the father to keep humanity alive (the son acting, like Isaac, as potentially the father of many nations) in a world in which is seemingly not worth living? According to Kierkegaard, this faith is only possible through "the virtue of absurdity" when "human calculation [is] out of the question." For Abraham and the father, any rationalization or assumptions regarding God's plans would halt their ability to have faith. Instead, Kierkegaard refers to this a "caricature" of faith, what he refers to as "paltry hope" (*Fear* 30-31).

In all caricatures there is a likeness to the subject that is being caricatured. With faith, Kierkegaard's "paltry hope" embodies some characteristics that resemble faith. Consider again the story of Abraham. He is asked to sacrifice the very son that God promised would be the father of nations. Although Abraham had faith that God would not require Isaac, Kierkegaard paints Abraham as uncertain of what will actually happen. Kierkegaard writes, "surely it will not happen, or if it does, the Lord will give me a new Isaac, namely by virtue of the absurd" (*Fear* 101). While this may seem like Abraham knows the outcome of God's command, it is instead a belief that God will fulfill his promises. For Abraham and the father, God is good and God is love. Faith, then, is in knowing that God will fulfill his promises despite being unable to understand how God will do this or how it is possible for Him to do it. "Paltry hope," on the other hand, is based on human experience that tells us what is probable and possible. Moreover, "paltry hope" lacks the confidence of faith. Although one who has this hope can calculate the probability of a situation and what is possible, her hope of what could likely happen is never free from doubt. However, we are told that Abraham "believed and did not doubt"

(Kierkegaard, *Fear* 17). While Abraham is not certain whether or not God will require him to sacrifice Isaac, he is never without faith that God will fulfill his promises, even though rationally he cannot comprehend how those promises will be fulfilled

Certainly faith can seem to have a certain degree of irrationality to it. Kierkegaard himself often referred to faith as believing what is "preposterous" (*Fear* 17). In *The Road*, the father has faith that his son can have a bright future while recognizing that a bright future appears to be all but impossible. Such a faith would appear to be "preposterous" to just about anyone. In a flashback sequence, McCarthy shows exactly how preposterous such a faith can seem to another person through the mother of the child. McCarthy writes:

> What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film…I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it…You have no argument because there is none (*The Road* 55-57).

The mother justifies her own suicide by pointing out the utter meaningless and absurdity of the existence in which they currently live. However, the father does not, nor has he ever, truly shared her fatalistic view of the world. Whereas the mother is, for all intents and purposes, opting out of existence, choosing to die in her own way rather than be raped, killed, and eaten, the father pleads with her to stay with him and the child. He claims that they are "survivors" and that she is "talking crazy," but she does not share the same faith and, perhaps, has not been given the same purpose that God has given to the father.

Commented [BB11]: The mother's words serve as a anchor point for what just about anyone would think of the father's outlook. It relies on hope amidst all that is futile.

Commented [BB12]: To what extent might the mother's determination towards suicide have stemmed from a fear of alternative scenarios for her demise?

The mother in *The Road* exhibits two aspects of Kierkegaardian philosophy. First, she demonstrates Kierkegaard's "paltry hope." Because suicide is the only logical solution to the apocalypse for her, she cannot make the leap of faith necessary to face the absurd. Therefore, she is unable to understand her husband's faith that a brighter future is possible when the experiences that they have had in the post-apocalyptic world have proven otherwise. For her, the only logical end is the inevitable rape and murder they will endure before becoming someone's dinner. As a result, the only hope or faith she has is that death brings about an "eternal nothingness" (McCarthy, *The Road* 57). But even this cannot be approached in the way that Abraham approached the sacrifice of his son,

"without doubt."

Nevertheless, her argument is not without some ethical implications. She admits, "I'd take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do" (McCarthy, *The Road* 56). For the mother, the only ethical solution to the current situation is suicide. For her, continuing to exist is merely waiting for a much more painful, horrifying death. Therefore, the mother concludes that the only viable solution, the right thing to do, is for each of them to commit suicide. If we suppose, like the mother, that the only ethical solution to the apocalypse is suicide, then the father's continued vigilance in keeping himself and his child alive is an unethical action. However, Kierkegaard accounts for such an unethical action in what he refers to as the "teleological suspension of the ethical" (*Fear* 46).

Commented [BB13]: Without taking Kierkegaard's leap of faith, the mother is to view the father's outlook as morally twisted. The man's actions, at least as they appear under the lens of the woman's only logical solution, are unethical.

Before we can understand what Kierkegaard means when he refers to the teleological suspension of ethics, we must first understand his conception of ethics.

Kierkegaard often relates the ethical to "the universal," writing, "The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which may be expressed from anything that it is in force at every moment" (*Fear* 46). While Kierkegaard does not set out to write a book on ethics in *Fear and Trembling*, it must be addressed and, therefore, he uses the term ethical in the Hegelian sense, as Kierkegaard viewed Hegel as the dominant view amongst his peers. Hegel theorized that ethics are the result from reason, which reflects the nature of the very essence of humanity (absolute Spirit). This is realized through customs and laws of society. Hegel referred to this form of social ethics as *Sittlichkeit*. The ethical is the universal in the strong sense of the true good of every human being as human. Kierkegaard writes, "[The ethical] rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its telos,[3] but is itself the telos for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has assimilated this into itself it goes no further" (*Fear* 46). According to Hegel, there is nothing higher than the ethical, including the laws and customs of society. Laws and customs must conform to ethics, not the reverse. There is only one aim for a person and that is *Sittlichkeit*, and it is because of this belief that Hegel protested "loudly and clearly against Abraham enjoying honor and glory as a father of faith," believing instead that he should be "remanded and exposed as a murderer" (Kierkegaard *Fear* 47) because he has sacrificed humanity, the universal (his duty as a father, his innocent son) to his personal subjective interest (his faith, his personal feelings, his love of God). For the Hegelian ethics, no one individual is higher than the humanity, not even Abraham himself. Considering that the entirety of *Fear and*

Commented [BB14]: This statement suggests that there are innate moral values behind our societal framework. Hegel's philosophy sees that laws and customs are in themselves governed by the moral values that humanity holds.

[3] Telos is generally understood to mean the end, goal, or purpose.

Trembling is dedicated to understanding the nature of the faith that Abraham exhibited on Mount Moriah, Kierkegaard deeply disagrees with Hegel on this point. For Kierkegaard, there is, in fact, something higher than humanity: God.

In many ways, *Fear and Trembling* is Kierkegaard's attempt to attack and discredit Hegel's theory of *Sittlichkeit*. Kierkegaard viewed the society around him as an "enormous illusion," one in which "we are all Christians" in that we are nice people who live respectably and fulfill our social responsibilities (*The Point* 42-43). Kierkegaard's problem with his own society, the society he referred to as "Christendom" and, in particular, Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, is that if there is nothing higher than *Sittlichkeit*, then faith is something that everyone already has. For Kierkegaard, faith exists when a "single individual is higher than the universal" (*Fear* 47). For Abraham to display his faith in God, he had to act outside of humanity. Hegel never allows us to violate humanity's interest, since there's nothing higher than that. To put the individual above humanity is a sin. However, Kierkegaard allows us to act against humanity, if God requires it, even though we cannot understand how or why God can ask us to act against humanity, God is still higher. For Kierkegaard, without faith, customs and laws of humanity can themselves be deified in the sense that there would be nothing higher than these customs and laws. As a result, faith would not be faith. It would cease to exist. Kierkegaard writes, "if this [the individual being higher than the universal] is not faith, then Abraham is lost and faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed" (*Fear* 47). Faith cannot exist because faith would simply be conforming to the social customs and laws of society. In this sense, faith is paradoxical. In faith, we are asked to believe that which we cannot believe to be possible.

Kierkegaard recognizes the paradoxical nature of faith and yet he states that faith cannot exist if it is not a paradox. Kierkegaard writes, "Faith is precisely this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal and is justified over against the latter not as subordinate but superior to it…that they single individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute" (*Fear* 48). What Kierkegaard means by this is that when an individual is higher than the universal, they have left the universal and rational to be in a world of complete and absolute subjectivity. In this state, there are no objective certainties. As a result, the individual is in danger of being in a state of self-deception or of being deceived. Therefore, one must make the "leap to faith." One cannot know whether or not God truly exists; she can only have faith that God exists. There always exists the possibility that she is being deceived or that she is deceiving herself, which is why such a leap is made in "fear and trembling."

Both Abraham and McCarthy's protagonist do not act ethically in regard to the customs and laws of their cultures and, as a result, their actions cannot be justified by appealing to existing social standards. For Abraham, it is unethical for him to murder his son at the behest of God. For the father, it is unethical to allow the continued existence of his son in a world in which he will only experience needless suffering. However, according to Kierkegaard, both Abraham and the father are justified in their actions because their faith places them higher than the universal. They both follow a "mandate from God" that supersedes *Sittlichkeit.* Kierkegaard refers to this as the "teleological suspension of the ethical" (*Fear* 46). Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical states, "It is possible to purposefully suspend this universal social ethic in order to obey a

Commented [BB15]: This statement reflects how the line between right and wrong becomes so blurred in the world of *The Road*. Though existing social standards would deem the looting of homes to be unethical, it can be seen as honorable that the man and the boy rely on "foraging" for sustenance (rather than resorting to cannibalism). Their actions cannot be justified by appealing to customs and laws that haven no presence within *The Road's* context.

higher and more valid command from God" (Rae 79). Abraham and the father do not act ethically in that they do not follow the universal. Instead, Abraham and the father "transcended the whole of the ethical and had a higher telos outside, in relation to which he suspended it" (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 52). However, because God commands them and they have faith that God will fulfill his promises, ethical requirements are suspended so that they may do as God commands.

Throughout *The Road*, McCarthy allows the father to "suspend the ethical" so that he may fulfill his duty to God to keep his son alive. The father has murdered an encroaching cannibal intent on taking his son. When the father and son are robbed of all their possessions, they track down the bandit who stole from them. The father, using a pistol as an intimidation tool, commands the thief to not only return the items he stole but to give them the clothes he is wearing, leaving the burglar stranded naked. When the father tells the son that he was not attempting to kill the thief, the son replies, "But we did kill him" (McCarthy, *The Road* 260). Despite these instances where the father disregards the ethical so that he may fulfill his duty to God, the primary suspension of the ethical that occurs is the father allowing the son to continue to live, even though living will result in great suffering. The potential for the mother's words to ring true always exists; "Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us…They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us" (McCarthy, *The Road* 56). However, like Abraham, the father does not disregard the ethical lightly. The teleological suspension of the ethical causes the father a form of existential angst.

Although the traditional customs and laws of a society (*Sittlichkeit*) can be suspended in favor of the higher calling of God, that does not amount to a complete

Commented [BB16]: The father sets aside his morals for what he believes to be a higher priority in the process of "carrying the fire", ensuring the survival of the boy. However, while he is quick to do what he feels must be done to protect the boy, he is not so quick to brush off ethical dilemmas. The man ponders what is right with due hesitation. He has an existential angst or anxiety surrounding the weight of the ethical decisions he must make.

denial of an ethical sphere. Because there are mandates both from God and *Sittlichkeit*, Abraham and the father are angst-ridden; they are stuck between the "'old' ethic he lived by and his 'new' faith-based religious ethic" (Rae 79). Abraham's faith led him to a point where he was willing to sacrifice his son because God commanded it. However, he felt angst over doing it. Abraham knew that murder was a sin and that would go against the ethical, but he is also compelled by God to do just that. Kierkegaard writes, "The ethical expression of what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac, the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac. But precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet Abraham is not who he is without this anxiety" (*Fear* 24). If we apply this same idea to *The Road*, we can see that the ethical expression of what the father does is akin to causing undo suffering, leading his son to an eventual and inevitable horrifying and painful death (whether by starvation or murder). Yet, the religious expression is that the father is propelling his son toward a future into which he is the savior of humanity. Nevertheless, the contradiction between these two ideals causes great angst for the father.

The father has a revolver that only has two bullets. However, after being discovered by a marauder, the father uses one to shoot the attacker, leaving one bullet. Noble asserts, "The gun is a constant source of anxiety for the father" (107). As far as human comprehension and understanding can take him, the father cannot imagine a world that would be safe and provide his son with a better life. Should this be true, the ethical thing to do is to kill his son to spare him the pain and torment of the world. After using the bullet on the marauder, the father ruminates, "A single round left in the revolver. You will not face the truth. You will not" (McCarthy, *The Road* 68). The truth to

Commented [BB17]: This reality is evident in the father's consistent efforts to either possess the gun or instruct the boy to do so. On one occasion, in which the boy loses the firearm on the beach, the man refers to safekeeping the gun as one of the man's key responsibilities.

which he refers is that he should use the remaining bullet to kill his son. The ethical argument that the father should spare his son suffering (valuing humanity) rather than hold him hostage to his own personal hopes (valuing the individual) echo through the father's mind in the voice of his dead wife: "I'd take him with me if it werent for you…it's the right thing to do…you have no argument because there is none" (McCarthy, *The Road* 56-57). When they hear a group of cannibals roving through the woods, the father realizes the son is incapable of committing the necessary suicide if caught. The father wonders:

> Can you do it? When the time comes. When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly. (114)

The father muses on his ability to kill his son if need be, which causes him great anxiety. He also realizes that to kill his son would be to "curse God and die." This is precisely the anxiety that Abraham experiences. All logic says that the father should "curse God and die"; however, the faith that he has in God fulfilling his promise stays his hand, choosing instead to "hold him in [his] arms." The father's refusal to kill his son is the absurd act of faith. It cannot be explained through ethical reasoning. The father "has no argument" against his suicidal bride because he can never make himself understood. If he could make an argument, it would only be an expression of *Sittlichkeit*, in that he is reasoning at the highest level of human understanding. However, faith, as Kierkegaard has shown,

Commented [BB18]: In my opinion, the father faces no greater moral dilemma than this one. On one hand, this action would spare his son from suffering. On the other, it would surely be an unimaginable sin for the man to murder his own son.

Commented [BB19]: The mother's voice is used as a symbol for valuing humanity within this impossible dilemma that the father considers carefully.

Commented [BB20]: This instance of internal dialogue is indicative of the father's broader tendency to consider a morbid logical conclusion before embarking upon a leap of faith.

transcends the universal; faith recognizes that the individual is higher than the universal.

Throughout the novel, the father is increasingly aware of the inevitability of his death, though he tries to hide it from his son. At the start of *The Road*, he coughs, but only so often. As the brutal cold begins to take its toll on the father's health, the coughing becomes more violent and produces blood. When they reach their destination, the father and son find that their quest gave them neither the warmth nor safety for which they were searching. However, the father has not lost his faith that there is the potential for something better for his son. When the son asks about a little boy that he saw earlier in the novel, the father says, "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (McCarthy, *The Road* 281). The father is not being facetious, nor is he providing false hope to his son. Instead, the father has faith that God will fulfill his promise. Noble writes, "If read in light of Kierkegaard's understanding of Abraham's faith… [the father] is acting on absurd faith, trusting in the goodness of God without denying the evidence of the world's end" (107). The father succumbs to his illness, urging his son to "find the good guys" and to continue "carrying the fire" (278). Shortly after, the father dies. The son holds a vigil for his father for three days before being found by a man, his wife, and their two children who convinces the boy that he is one of the "good guys." Though the father is dead, the son continues to talk with him, keeping the memory of his father with him.

The novel concludes on an optimistically high note, and it does so rather abruptly. The father dies, three days pass, and then the boy finds another family of "good guys," including children, with whom to travel. For this very reason, many have found the ending of *The Road* to be irreconcilable with the rest of the novel's somber and

pessimistic tone. Shelley Rambo states that *The Road* "does not give way to a happy ending"; instead, the end is more of "a call to witness suffering and death rather than the assurance of victory over suffering and death" (113). Gary Adelman claims, "*The Road* undoubtedly will be thought of as an exquisite Christian parable…But I feel slapstick by the end" (72). The common complaint against McCarthy's ending is that it is *deus ex machina*, that the novel ending with the child being saved by a family of "good guys" is incompatible with hopelessness and bedlam McCarthy has provided throughout the novel. However, read in a Kierkegaardian sense, the novel concludes exactly as it should.

The novel ends with the son being saved by a family, which is indeed *deus ex machina*. In "What's at the End of *The Road*?" Allen Josephs explains how *The Road* makes the case for faith, which ultimately explains the novels optimistic and hopeful ending. Joseph writes, "The critics who say that Parka-man is a *deus ex machina* are right, and that is precisely the point" (27). Those who see *The Road's* ending as incompatible with the rest of the novel are missing the greater Kierkegaardian themes in the book. Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah takes the better part of three days before he is miraculously spared the torment of sacrificing his son (Kierkegaard, *Fear* 53). Similarly, the son "stayed three days and then walked out to the road" where he saw that "someone was coming" (McCarthy, *The Road* 281). The ending, then, represents God's fulfillment of his promise to the father. It is miraculous that in a world full of depraved cannibals, the son finds a family of "good guys." Noble writes, "The father's absurd faith in the future is validated" (111). For the novel to end in any other way would be incompatible with the Kierkegaardian allusions McCarthy makes. *The Road* is a book about faith in that despite the absurdity of existence, there can still be meaning and value

Commented [BB21]: Though some critics have not been fond of *The Road's* sudden and abruptly optimistic ending, I personally find it to be an important component of the novel. True to what we have learnt about "carrying the fire", a glimmer of hope must be found in spite of grim realities. The boy must believe that he has encountered other good guys because he maintain faith in humanity and in the eventual renewal of the world. Meaning must be found in the presence of insurmountable challenges.

Commented [BB22]: Both Abraham and the boy miraculously come upon a hopeful change in events. This connection is supported by the author's previous statements interweaving the two tales. The similarity in timeline, though not essential to the Kierkegaardian reference, is certainly noteworthy.

in the world just as *Fear and Trembling* is a book about faith in that despite the absurdity of being asked to kill his son, Abraham believed God would fulfill his promise. Should *The Road* end with the boy being murdered, then perhaps the novel could be considered as nihilistic as McCarthy's previous novels. However, this is not the case. *The Road*, like McCarthy's previous work, is not nihilistic, and McCarthy rewards the reader's hope that the father's faith in God and the future is not in vain.

McCarthy's *The Road* is a testament to faith analogous to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. It is a story that attempts to understand the nature of faith by putting a father and son in the most harrowing circumstances. In this sense, the father is linked to Abraham in that he is commanded by God to do the unethical. Whereas Abraham is commanded to sacrifice the very son that God promised Abraham would be the father of nations, the father is commanded to keep his son alive in a world that promises no future and no hope. However, both Abraham and the father have faith by "virtue of the absurd." They both understand that they cannot intelligibly understand God's purpose or plans, but believe that God is good and will fulfill his promises. By making this leap of faith, Abraham and the father experience the anxiety of satisfying God's will while opposing the social norms (*Sittlichkeit*) of their society. As a result, God rewards Abraham and the father for their faith. Abraham is miraculously freed from sacrificing his son while holding the dagger of the child. Though dead, the father's faith is rewarded when the son finds a family with other children, a family who also recognizes that "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time" (McCarthy, *The Road* 286). And perhaps it is for this very precise reason that *The Road* was so unanimously well received. In the face of such a nihilistic visage, a world in which the

Commented [BB23]: The father's continued faith proves to be significant, as it results in a miracle within a hopeless world. *The Road's* main characters persevere through a desolate landscape as they "carry the fire". In return, God rewards them at last as a virtuous duty has been fulfilled.

very demons of hell are released from their crematoria to burn and savage and cannibalize, a father and son can make a "leap to faith" to "carry the fire," to be the bastions of faith and of God.

Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy's writing is often as enigmatic as the man himself. His work is intertwined with biblical imagery, philosophical allusions, and predilection for the macabre. Because his writing often portrays a stark, pessimistic view of humanity and life itself, critics and scholars alike have concluded that McCarthy's work is nihilistic. But does a predilection for the darker aspects of society warrant such a label? If we define nihilism as having only one truth, "namely, the truth that ultimately Nothingness prevails and the world is meaningless" (Thielicke 27), then McCarthy's writing does not deserve to be written off as nihilistic. In fact, to do so ignores the deeper existential implications that his novels seem to promote. Throughout the course of this thesis, I have shown that McCarthy's writing is not nihilistic and instead parallels the works of three of the most influential existential philosophers: Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Soren Kierkegaard.

In *Child of God*, we see how Lester Ballard is abandoned in a Sartrean sense and how, from of that abandonment, he is condemned to freedom. Whereas Sartre suggests that once we recognize our freedom, we must then carry the burden of our choices and actions and, thus, represent humanity through our actions, we see Ballard flee from his freedom into bad faith. In the literal sense, Ballard is a murderer and a necrophile. However, Ballard's madness reflects Sartrean bad faith. Ballard flees from his reality, one in which he is ostracized by society and murders to create a family of the dead. He

attempts to create a reality for himself and, in this sense, refuses to accept his freedom. It is not until the end of the novel that he can acknowledge that he has been living in bad faith. Certainly, McCarthy does not present much in the way of morality in *Child of God*. However, this novel in many ways anticipates further existential allusions that are found in McCarthy's following novels.

In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy seems to pick up where he left of with Lester Ballard. Like *Child of God*, *Blood Meridian's* protagonist seems to embody the philosophy of Sartre. Sartre emphatically emphasizes, "Existence precedes essence." McCarthy provides the reader with an unnamed, young protagonist who, for all intents and purposes, lacks an identifiable essence. Through the kid we can see Sartre's philosophy come to life. Just as Sartre explains that an essence is only defined through actions, we are introduced to an essence-less individual who, despite the barbarous company he keeps, formulates an essence in good faith through the authenticity of his actions. Unlike Ballard, the kid recognizes his freedom and, instead of fleeing, acts so that his actions represent all of humanity. When he chooses, he recognizes that he is choosing for all men, and he does so even when his own death is the inevitable outcome. *Blood Meridian* also engages the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, albeit loosely. Much of the scholarly criticism on *Blood Meridian* has focused on the sadistic antagonist Judge Holden, and many of those scholars and critics have compared Holden to Nietzsche. Both, it would appear, argue against morality and seek to force their indomitable will against the world. While these comparisons are not completely unfounded, Holden's attachment to Nietzsche is loose. Certainly, Nietzsche was against some forms of morality (those that seek to universalize morals or those that seek to place

the "herd" above the individual), but he was not altogether against morality. Holden, on the other hand, does not believe in morality of any kind. Moreover, he abhors the freedom of things, which in its very essence is an anti-existentialist sentiment. Nevertheless, Holden in some ways resembles Nietzschean thought. However, it is nothing more than an extreme caricature of Nietzsche's philosophy, one that is either a parody or an outright critique of Nietzsche.

In the final chapter of this thesis, McCarthy explores Christian-existential thought through the parabolic novel, *The Road*. In the only novel in which there is direct evidence linking McCarthy's work to existential philosophy, we see how *The Road* corresponds to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. In both books, a father is asked by God to do the unthinkable. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard examines Abraham's faith when asked by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Kierkegaard claims that faith is only possible in the face of the absurd. For Abraham, it is absurd for God to ask for the sacrifice of Isaac because God has promised that Isaac will be the father of nations. McCarthy's protagonist believes that God has asked him to keep his son alive in the face of a postapocalyptic world where being murdered to be food is always an imminent threat. Both Abraham and the father experience moments of despair during their quests; similarly, both are rewarded for their faith by an unexpected intervention that grants them a reprieve from God's command. Abraham is spared the sacrifice of his son and, while the father dies, his son is spared from death (either from starvation or cannibalism) by the appearance of a family who takes the boy in and cares for him.

Reading McCarthy's writing can be taxing. Cooper writes, "The ethically minded reader may consider certain texts too dark, too resistant to any attempts at finding an

edifying interpretations" (*Heroes* 3). Because of the brute and senseless violence and the general ambiguity of God, is easy to see how many could reduce his work to being nihilistic. McCarthy makes the reader question the existence of God and, if not the existence, then the nature of God. What type of God would allow the necrophile Lester Ballard to exist? How could God allow the blasphemy of Judge Holden's statement "War is God" (*Blood Meridian* 249) to go unpunished? What kind of God allows the world of *The Road* to exist? However, a Godless world is not a nihilistic world. If God is not necessary for meaning to exist (that is to say, knowledge or certainty of God's existence), then the absence of God does not imply nihilism. Instead, it implies that meaning is dependent on the individual. We must create our own meaning for existence.

Each of the existential philosophers presented in this thesis emphasized the nature of our freedom to choose. While they each ultimately come to different conclusions, they would agree that the basis of our existence is freedom. Sartre proposes that our freedom requires us to bear the responsibility of our choices and actions. When we choose, we are choosing for all of humanity. In this sense, we are willing that, whatever we are, all of humanity be the same. In this sense, Sartre claims that we all aim toward the good because we recognize that what is good for one must be good for all of humanity. Nietzsche, on the other hand, believes that freedom grants us a right to radical individualism. As a result, he rejects universal views of morality; instead, Nietzsche emphasizes the idea that we should seek to master ourselves and free ourselves from "slave morality." Kierkegaard proposes that in our freedom to choose, we are able to find God. Faith, he suggests, is absurd. We cannot logically explain faith in God, nor can it be ascertained through reason. He suggests that the ethical exists, but at times it may be

suspended in duty of God. But how can we know if our duty to God is actually a command from God and not from some other eternal voice? Kierkegaard suggests that we take a "leap to faith."

With three very different existential philosophies present in the works of Cormac McCarthy, what is it that McCarthy suggesting? We have already determined that, contrary to some criticism, McCarthy is not saying that existence is meaningless. That is to say, his writing is not preaching nihilism. But what is it saying? *Child of God* shows how one can live in bad faith when Ballard rejects his freedom. *Blood Meridian* presents us with the idea that acting authentically, living in good faith, allows us to accept our freedom and, therefore, have a form of morality. Similarly, *Blood Meridian* shows an alternative view that suggests that morality is simply a system that favors the weak over the strong – that, if we hold true to the Nietzschean view, we should favor individualism over "herd morality." Then, in a radical departure from atheistic existentialism, *The Road* insinuates that there is an ethical standard, humanity, which can be suspended by a duty to God, but that the only way to know God's commands is through an absurd faith.

It is possible that McCarthy's writing shows his evolution philosophically. Perhaps he experienced the abandonment of Lester Ballard, channeling his own existential angst into *Child of God*. Like Ballard, we can imagine McCarthy coming out of his bad faith and accepting the responsibility of his freedom. Perhaps McCarthy wrestled between the idea of Sartre's idea of morality and Nietzsche's individualism, pitting the ideas against one another in *Blood Meridian*. And, at the age of seventy-four, perhaps McCarthy found a degree of faith, if not in God, then in the idea that there is some good in humanity and it is worth saving. Considering that McCarthy is notoriously

reclusive and that he refuses to talk about his books publicly, we will never know for certain if this exploration in existentialism marks the philosophical evolution of an author or if these philosophical ideas are merely playthings, dolls to wind up, set down, and watch them move. However, if I were to guess, I would say that McCarthy is simply suggesting that meaning and morality exists, but we are free to choose what they are.

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