

# Anything That Eats: Animal Symbolism Communicating Violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates Cormac McCarthy's use of animal symbolism to construct a system of violence in *Blood Meridian* (1985). These animal signifiers are inextricable from the novel's portrayal of violence as a misanthropic, anti-communal, and imperialist affair that frequently echoes Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). Thus, *Blood Meridian* is a novel that is suited to symbolic analysis, as well as a stylistic continuation of *Moby Dick*'s themes.

In his introduction to the Oxford edition of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1998), Tony Tanner states that, with regards to the titular whale, "Moby Dick may be seen—and felt [. . .] as simply Nature itself[. . .] It is the wholeness of Nature in all its beauty, danger, and mystery. Ahab's insane violence is turned against the all-parenting, all-potentiating power of Nature" (XX). In Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* (1985), the villainous Judge Holden identifies this "all-potentiating power" when he claims that "only nature can enslave man" (207). In both works, the relationship between humans and animals is rife with thematic connections to a history of violence, and the animals themselves can be interpreted as textual signifiers that denote the social, material, and psychic conditions of the humans. In particular, the violence depicted in *Blood Meridian* can be interpreted through systems of signification involving the countless animals mentioned and alluded to within the narrative. In this essay, I identify three systems of literary symbols and their significance to the plot of *Blood Meridian*: images of domesticated beasts of burden as symbols of

peaceful innocence and corruptive violence; wolves, bears, and buzzards as reflections of the Glanton gang's insatiable, primal desire for death; and—owing to McCarthy's use of Melville as inspiration—the spectre of Moby Dick as a symbol of American imperialism's broader continental violence, exemplified in the depiction of Judge Holden and the landscapes of the Western frontier. When examined as portions of a larger narrative, these examples of animal symbolism frame *Blood Meridian* not as a tale of humanity struggling with nature, but rather weaponizing and being weaponized by it.

The first point of symbolic significance is communicated primarily through images of the mule and the horse. In *Blood Meridian*, beasts of burden signify crucial information regarding innocence—or lack thereof—and the degeneration into violence. The contrast in signification between mules and horses demarcates the narrative's portrayal of humanity and savagery. Mules denote amiable communal exchange and tranquility, qualities made apparent when the Kid—McCarthy's protagonist—acquires his own from a farmer in exchange for his labour: a nonviolent, mutually beneficial trade. The Kid's mule is later retrieved from a peaceable family, portraying it as a symbol of humanity and belonging. This mule is "aged" (McCarthy 5) and—like the many cats, pigs, herds of cattle, and small wildlife portrayed in the narrative—docile in a manner that distinguishes it from the warlike horses with which the Glanton gang later prove codependent. When the Kid ventures out to exchange the mule for a horse's saddle and other filibustering gear, one of the corporals serving as his companion exclaims: "Wait till you get one of these [horses . . .] You ain't never had no fun" (40). This quote is as much a warning to the reader as it is to the Kid: horses in *Blood Meridian* are not docile, gentle travelling companions, but rather signifiers that denote humanity's warlike impulses and the animalistic manner in which they are acted upon. The filibustering mission is punctuated early by the foreboding image of a mule carcass arranged next to dead infants: the Kid is no longer in a territory tolerant of innocence. When the fili-

bustering expedition is attacked by Comanche, the scene is preceded by waves of successive animal images that communicate the Kid's imminent descent into a realm of war:

The first of the herd began to swing past them in a pall of yellow dust, rangy slatribbed cattle with horns that grew agoggle and no two alike and small thin mules coalblack that shouldered one another and reared their malletshaped heads above the backs of the others and then more cattle and finally the first of the herders riding up the outer side and keeping the stock between themselves and the mounted company. Behind them came a herd of several hundred ponies [. . .] Already you could see through the dust on the ponies' hides the painted chevrons and the hands and rising suns and birds and fish of every device like the shade of old work through sizing on a canvas and now too you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena. (54)

Included in this quote is the description of a docile and gentle environment evolving into a warlike one, as ponies are gradually exchanged for horses. The fleeing herd begins with images of cattle and the humble mule: the emblems of peace and mutual good are the first to be evacuated.

The arrival of ponies adorned with warpaint is a visual metaphor for youth and innocence stained with warlike impulse, which gives way to the horde of warriors on horseback. Later in the narrative, McCarthy presents a newborn foal roasted and eaten by the Delawares, an image of innocence forcibly removed, perverted, and consumed (167). On the Texas–Mexico border, the horse can only exist as an evolved machine of war, an extension and representation of the Glanton gang's material capacity for slaughter. This bilateral relationship between symbols—mules and ponies as purity and innocence, horses as warlike evolution—is at its most evident when the gang needlessly murders a mass of mules, sending dozens of the animals, and their keepers, into the abyss in an instance of border-

line Biblical violence. The image of "half a hundred" (204) dead mules stands in stark contrast to that of the gang and their horses, posturing triumphantly above their slaughter of community and docility. In addition, McCarthy's repeated use of the phrase "They rode on" formally reinforces the Glanton gang's equine codependence. Thus, *Blood Meridian's* equine symbolism allows the reader a clear vision of the thematic difference between opportunistic, warlike violence and peaceful exchange. When a member of the Glanton gang attaches a Mexican flag to a mule's tail, it functions as visual association of the villagers with the mule, and the whole of Mexico with a repeated victim (201). Beyond the domesticated beasts of burden, the wild animals in *Blood Meridian* operate as symbols in another system, one that maps McCarthy's exploration of the Glanton gang's identity to the behaviour of violent carnivores.

Wolves are introduced to the narrative before the Glanton gang. Arriving in Mexico, Captain White's filibustering mission is monitored by a band of wolves that "sack[s] [their] camp for meat scraps" (47). Where McCarthy uses horses and mules to signify a broader narrative contrast between violence and docility, examples of non-equine wildlife serve as secondary symbols that portray Western expansion—that of the Glanton gang in particular—as a conquest, coded within the imagery of aggressive or feral animals. This system is most noticeable in McCarthy's use of wolves and stray dogs. When the Glanton gang comes across an aggressive dog in a hovel, Glanton "[speaks] to it" before giving it jerky, claiming he "can man anything that eats" (155). Glanton's remark is more than a hint at some supernatural ability to communicate with animals (though both he and the Judge demonstrate such a skill): it is a confirmation that the Glanton gang is textured as a collection of pack animals, aligned in their base need for hunting and feeding while maintaining a minimum amount of social organization. Earlier in the narrative, when Tobin recounts the Judge's self-introduction and creation of gunpowder, he describes a moment when the starving gang encounters a pack of wolves. The confrontation produces both food and

further evidence that the gang is analogous to their lupine peers:

Twas a young buck antelope new killed the evenin before. It was about half consumed and we set upon it with our knives and took the rest of the meat with us and we ate it raw in the saddle and it was the first meat we'd seen in six days. Froze for it we were. Foragin on the mountain for piñon nuts like bears and glad to get them. We left little more than bones for the lobos, but I would never shoot a wolf and I know other men of the same sentiments. (135)

Beyond the primal, animalistic consumption of carrion, the reluctance to harm a wolf speaks to a narrative positioning of the Glanton gang as denotatively compatible with certain violent wildlife. Later in the novel, McCarthy includes a small scene wherein Glanton's dog hears wolves "call out to [the Glanton gang] as if they were friends to man" (196).

As the gang continues south, their destruction of villages often leaves wolves, stray dogs, and buzzards preying on the corpses, the wilderness preying on the death the protagonists use as impetus. Conspicuous is the fact that Glanton's corpse is immolated whilst tied to his dog, a rather stark visual metaphor for the end of an intersubjective soul (287). McCarthy employs canines to mirror the Glanton gang's particular construction of community—a collection of mercenaries marginally partnered to a leader bearing noted animus for others—and other vicious or opportunistic animals to buttress the visual connection between the Glanton gang and a capacity for violence only matched by the wilderness. Indeed, when Glanton kills a group of wounded strays in the aftermath of one of the gang's slaughters, the immediate arrival of more dogs "muttering at the spits" (McCarthy 211) and feasting on the dead is a reinforcement of John Sepich's argument that "the wolf may be emblematic of the amoral rapacity, in McCarthy's terms, necessary for a dancer to take center stage" (155). While wolves, mutts, buzzards, and the occasional grizzly oper-

ate as signifiers of such rapacity, McCarthy employs a third, broader symbolism that relies on allusions to the titular whale from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) to portray both Judge Holden and the Western landscape as symbols denoting animal's—and nature's—cosmic battle with man.

McCarthy implies Holden has a special relationship to animal life. Like Glanton, Holden whispers to his horse to calm the animal down with noted ease, and Tobin describes him as having "ears like a fox" (McCarthy 141). At one point, Holden, sitting "pale and naked" (154) on sandstone, is seen exhibiting some psychic control over a swarm of bats feasting in the dead of night. McCarthy's frequent decision to depict the Judge, a large hairless albino, as naked and surrounded by images of whiteness such as the sandstone or the "white blossoms of flowering Yuccas" (154) is indicative of a distinct effort to remind the reader of the similarities that both he and natural landscapes of the West have to Melville's whale. This association of the whale's whiteness with the Judge and the earth, Holden's "claim" (207) implies a connection between American imperialism and the spirit of *Moby Dick*.

If the Judge's albinism contains within it all the signified meaning that belonged to Melville's whale (i.e. natural whiteness presented as a false and violent purity), then what is the reader to make of the fact that this "pale and bloated manatee" (175) is the travelling companion and spiritual guide to Glanton who, serving as leader of a multi-ethnic collection of travellers on a violent quest, is the novel's analogue for Ahab? In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy transforms the whale from a narrative objective into a visual framework for identifying America's westward expansion. The image of the whale in *Blood Meridian* is not exclusive to the novel's subtext, but instead permeates the natural imagery: when McCarthy describes the Glanton gang crossing a volcanic lake, he notes "a lone albino ridge, sand or gypsum, like the back of some pale seabeast surfaced among the dark archipelagos" (262). This description is a direct attribution of *Moby Dick*'s monumental scale to the landscape: the beast's spirit is inhabiting the land, and the desert be-

comes a waterless sea.

Indeed, when this observation is combined with the fascination various members of the Glanton gang have for bringing their conquest to the Pacific Ocean, it appears that McCarthy seeks to compare American imperialism to the primal, cosmic evil represented by Moby Dick. As the Kid reaches San Diego, his encounter with the Pacific is punctuated by the thought of "whales [ferrying] their vast souls through the black and seamless sea" (316), and contained within those "vast souls" (316) is all of the denoted violence that is historically inextricable from the colour white in the history of American westward expansion. This symbolism can be tied to McCarthy's exploration of Gnosticism. Images of the moon, the ocean, and the whale are in direct thematic opposition to those of the sun, fires, and sparks he employs to represent immateriality, as though the Glanton gang's imperialism is in cosmic opposition to an immaterial God (Mundik 80). Thus, the landscape's whiteness—borrowing symbolically from Moby Dick—is intended to denote the same evil and falseness in the material world that is hiding within the whale's complexion. While in the company of a collection of wildlife, the Kid witnesses a theocracy that recalls Moses and the bush in Exodus:

The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had traveled far to be here and he knelt in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended companies of lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day, small owls that crouched silently and stood from foot to foot and tarantulas and solpugas and vinegarroons and the vicious mygale spiders and beaded lizards with mouths black as a chowdog's, deadly to man, and the little desert basilisks that jet blood from their eyes and the small sandvipers like seemly gods, silent and the same, in Jedda, in Babylon. A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets. (McCarthy224)

Surrounded by a white snowiness and gazing at the fire appearing before them with equal subservience, these "lesser auxiliaries" (224) are compared to idols and esoteric deities within an Abrahamic framework, further confirming their narrative position as the opposition to a true, immaterial deity in the fire.

To conclude, in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy engages with violence through a reckoning with nature. As symbols depicting the various manifestations of violence in the novel, animals communicate multiple interconnected narrative relationships. First, they present a shift from innocence, exchange, and communal support to warlike destruction. This is followed by a demonstration of imperialist rapacity for animalistic violence within a single community. Finally, the whale becomes the ultimate symbol of a cosmic, manifestly material evil at the centre of imperialist destruction. Unlike Melville's *Moby Dick*, *Blood Meridian* is not a novel about the violence between man and nature, but the violence man and nature share between themselves. Thus, analyzing animal symbolism in *Blood Meridian* provides an effective method of parsing the themes within McCarthy's elaborate exploration of violence, be they social, religious, or historical.



## Works Cited

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