

8-2013

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Burning on the Shore of an Unknowable Void:
Nature as Mystical Reality in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

English Literature

August 2013

Abstract

Language, spirituality, and the natural world are all prominent themes in the novels of Cormac McCarthy. This thesis examines the relationship between the three themes, arguing that McCarthy empowers the natural world with a spiritual significance that may be experienced by humanity, but not completely understood or expressed. Man, being what Kenneth Burke describes as the “symbol-using” animal, cannot express reality through language without distorting it. Language also leads to the commodification of the natural world by allowing man to reevaluate the reality around him based on factors of his own devising. Many of McCarthy’s protagonists struggle against the rapid urbanization taking place in the majority of his novels in order to find truth not in the words of man but in the animals and landscape of the natural world, rediscovering a spiritual reality that is mystical, powerful, and true.

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Introduction

Cormac McCarthy is a writer with a staunch, unwavering focus on violence, evil, and immorality. He thrusts his readers into the darkest recesses of the human condition, leaving them to stumble through its depths unaided and without guidance. McCarthy's writing is full of questions and mystery, but answers are sparse. However, at the same time, it is not void of light in the forms of hope and humor. These serve to bring readers back out of the recesses to discover that, confronted with the reality of such evil and despair, they reemerge more thoughtful and aware of the actuality around them.

McCarthy's search for truth and meaning invariably leads him to address spirituality and the supernatural. In *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye writes, "When reading even the most disturbing of McCarthy's works, one must understand that the author seeks truth and value" (5-6), and posits that one of the most important questions that McCarthy asks in his works is "the question of God's existence and nature, his presence in the world, and his role in steering the course of human lives and world history" (111). While these are certainly questions central to his novels, McCarthy refuses to adhere to a particular worldview, leaving readers with more questions than definitive answers. This has understandably caused some readers and critics to cast McCarthy in a postmodern, humanist light, despite his spiritual themes. In the introduction of his book, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, John Cant writes, "McCarthy's depiction of man in an absurdist universe is the product of a consciousness that has lost its religious belief but retained a religious cast of mind" (15). The presence of spirituality in the dismal worlds of McCarthy's work, then, would seem a paradox. Spirituality and religious questions exist—even manage to remain relevant—among grotesque postmodern absurdity. Cant's assertion that McCarthy retains a "religious cast of mind" only scratches the surface of

what the author is accomplishing with his purposeful use of religion, spirituality, and nature. The religious flavor and themes of McCarthy's works are not simply residue caked on his writing, left over from a faith abandoned; rather, spirituality and mysticism are core concepts McCarthy uses to explore the idea of God and the darker areas of the human condition, and are found to be decisively adhered to the natural world that plays an important role in the majority of his novels.

The natural world and animals are exalted throughout the fiction of McCarthy, both through the style of writing chosen to describe nature and the unyielding presence nature has in the novels. A contrast is drawn between the natural world and humanity, a separation that endows nature with a mysterious and sacred "otherness" that man cannot completely grasp, not only due to man's limited understanding, but also his ability to understand at all. The fact that man operates within the symbolic system of language causes his understanding to always be a step removed from the actual or the true. Nature, however, does not rely on language, but represents only what is. In this way, nature is reality, the warder of truth, and man can only access truth through experience in nature. McCarthy is not a nihilist, but a mystic unwilling to define and confine spirituality through religion and language, instead finding truth and spirituality not through the words and revelation of men or gods, but through the individual, mystical experience of the natural world.

McCarthy's treatment of nature and the relationship he creates between nature and man are similar to Gerard Manley Hopkins' famous poem, "God's Grandeur." In the poem, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" which "will flame out, like shining from shook foil" and "gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil/Crushed" (1-4). These lines evoke both power and mystery. There is a power "fueling" the world, moving and gathering in ways that can only be described through simile. While McCarthy does not definitively attribute the power to God,

he too evokes a grandeur that moves in the natural world of his novels. Through his writing style, word usage, and beautiful descriptions of landscapes and wildlife, McCarthy makes the natural world a sacred mystery filled with animals that embody a certain wisdom all their own.

However, the natural world in Cormac McCarthy's novels is not *always* beautiful, with some locations polluted or encroached upon by mankind. The words of "God's Grandeur" elegantly relate mankind's negative effect on the world around him: "And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;/and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell" (6-7). Hopkins is selective in describing man's effect on the world and nature: "seared," "bleared," "smeared," and "smudged" all describe the interaction between two separate entities without an intermixing taking place. Although "trade" has "smudged" the world and the world bears man's smell, man and the world are still distinct and separate, like oil in a pool of water or—in imagery more suitable to discussing McCarthy—trash in a flowing river. Despite the power flowing through the natural world, parts of it are found to be dirty and "used." Mankind has claimed portions of nature, and the damage is irreversible, as suggested by "seared" and "man's smell." A branding is not easily removed, and the "man's smell" may refer to the idea that nature views the smell of human as an absolute "other," exemplified in the Old Wives' Tale that a mother bird will reject a baby bird that a human has touched. Mankind is often depicted as destructive of nature in McCarthy's work, selfishly using the world for its own gain through trade and commerce. Again, McCarthy and Hopkins agree, with trade playing a fundamental role in the "smudging" of the world. In McCarthy's novels animals are killed for personal gain, land translated into money and power, and urbanization disconnects man from the natural world.

Despite the contrasts and complicated relationship that both Hopkins and McCarthy draw between the natural world and the world of man, both also allow for the opportunity of

reconciliation. Hopkins claims that even with all the damage mankind does, “nature is never spent;/There lives the dearest freshness deep down things” (9-10). He uses the image of a coming morning to describe nature’s unending abundance, and uses the rising of the sun as the affirmation of the renewing power of the Holy Spirit (12-3). Nature’s power still resonates, and rebirth is possible. The grandeur that charges the world is still present, and the image of the Holy Spirit bent over the world suggests a coming together, a union that recreates and renews. In McCarthy’s novels, characters experience such union with the world and have encounters that can only be described as spiritual and supernatural. When characters choose to commune with the natural world, they are rewarded with a glimpse into a world that they can only experience without completely comprehending, and they often emerge changed or enlightened. “Return to nature” is a theme throughout McCarthy’s work, with his characters sometimes even taking on the sacred role of guardian of nature and animals. Nature is both blessed and burdened with truth; men, being language- and—therefore—symbol-based animals, cannot inherit absolute truth, because we work and live within symbolic languages and constantly reevaluate the world.

The natural world’s inability to distort truth causes Cormac McCarthy to describe nature as spiritual and trust it with administering truth; if God exists, then nature is the only thing righteous enough to reflect Him. These particular ideas are better articulated in the writings of an ancient Christian Father, St. Gregory of Nyssa. His views on the essence of evil and nature are in line with both McCarthy’s and Hopkins: “There is no such thing in the world as evil irrespective of a will,” and evil is not even a “discoverable substance” (12). He claimed that everything made by God is good, but it is the will of man—apart from God’s will—that brought upon evil (12). The depravity of humanity is met with the sacred of the natural world within McCarthy’s novels and his protagonists find kernels of truth within the mystery of the natural world that surrounds

them. By relying on experience, man can transcend the distortion of rhetorical language and find shards of reality in the world. In the McCarthy universe, it is only through interaction with and a desire to understand the natural world that an understanding of truth (and, therefore, a God) is possible.

Analyzing the roles that nature, animals, and landscape play throughout the body of Cormac McCarthy's work—as well as their relationship to humanity—reveals how McCarthy is a spiritually charged storyteller, and not simply a “religious writer in a Godless world,” as John Cant believes. Although his novels are fraught with violence, depravity, and greed, these things are rooted in the materialism of human commerce; a seed of mystical truth can always be found in the natural world that is—despite man's inability to completely understand it—always renewing, and enough to overcome the distorted rhetoric of humanity in order to redeem the deeds of the individual and allow mankind to reunite with a deeper reality than it is accustomed to, albeit one both terrible and awesome.

The Spiritual Significance of Nature

Nature and landscape take on a life of their own in McCarthy's novels. The author's unique style and language often push the backdrops of his novels into the forefront, allowing them to shape the themes and situations of the story as much (if not more) than the characters. Particular writing techniques, such as the frequent use of archaic and esoteric word choices, bestows nature with power. Much of the power is endowed by McCarthy's style, and the use of certain writing techniques, such as a heavy use of archaic and rarely used words. Some characteristics of his writing—especially the implementation of many conjunctions within a sentence, a rhetorical device known as polysyndeton—are shared with those found in the Christian Bible, giving McCarthy's descriptions of nature a religious and spiritual tenor to any Western reader. These style choices are coupled with vivid, mystical descriptions of the world through which characters move, and these descriptions often infuse the natural world with a spirituality and otherworldliness absent in the city landscapes of the novel. This combination of style and descriptions makes nature a window through which man can glimpse truth, a conduit that can spark a spirituality not based on knowing and human ritual, but on a primal mystery that must be experienced instead of understood.

The stylistic techniques that McCarthy most often uses follow him throughout his career, molding and shaping the landscapes whether it be the Tennessee valleys, the Mexican borderlands, or the dystopian east coast. Only those with the most robust vocabularies can read a McCarthy novel without having a dictionary close by. Words such as “atterdemalion,” “lazarous,” and “enfilade” intermingle seamlessly with more common language and particularly create a stark contrast to the simplistic, regional dialect observed in the character dialogue. Use of such words has divided critics into two camps: those who see the use of these obscure words

as a gimmick, a quirk, or pretentious, and those who view them as an element that creates an additional, meaningful layer to the text. It is difficult, however, to not acknowledge that these words are extremely purposeful and well-executed, masterfully altering the reader's perception to see in a new light what may seem commonplace and mundane. In relation to nature and landscape, the use of these obscure and archaic words certainly heightens the allure and mystery of nature, and the words themselves practically become a fixture of the worlds McCarthy creates.

In a pragmatic fashion, the use of words that most readers will not know adds a factor of inaccessibility to the world being described; these words, if unknown to the reader, either require them to try to understand the meaning through the context and their knowledge of etymology, or to consult a dictionary. Regardless, mystery still is present. If readers try to speculate on the meaning based on context or etymology, they will be only making an educated assumption, and the whole of the definition and meaning will still remain beyond them. The same is true for the readers who consult a dictionary; if they find the word in the dictionary, the definition is sure to be complex and multi-layered. These reactions create a tension within the very fabric of sentences, creating dark places in paragraphs that the reader must stumble or feel his or her way through, a purposeful vacuum of meaning that gets at the mystery of nature in a tangible and interactive way.

The words themselves embody aspects of what McCarthy perceives in nature as well. These words are out of use and archaic, parts of vocabularies that have been stripped away. Partly this is because they are deemed to no longer hold a function in everyday speech: other, more familiar words and combinations have taken their place as the quantity of words in registers and vocabularies shrinks. As humankind becomes more urbanized, the proximity to the natural world is diminished, and nature is no longer as valued or so frequently thought of.

However, McCarthy values these forgotten words, much as his novels value the idea that nature is sacred and meant to be learned from and respected. Just as his archaic words are specific while at the same time endowed with a certain mysticism, so too is nature “the thing,” “the creation,” a reality man is incapable of knowing and understanding in its entirety. Both the archaic words and the mystery of nature take work and perseverance to understand. The archaic words of the novels are tangible grains of salt sprinkled throughout McCarthy’s novels, familiarizing the reader with the taste of mystery and truth that McCarthy weaves into nature.

Less tangible (but equally powerful) is the archaic words’ ability to take the usual and ordinary and transform it into something mystical and supernatural. Steven Frye claims that a feature of McCarthy’s style is the “selective placement of obscure, specialized, or archaic words, which serve the purpose of heightening the mysteries of the natural world” (26). Such words create a persona for the elements and animals of nature, providing them with characteristics that differentiate them from the world of man. For example, after Uncle Ather wakes from being knocked unconscious by a falling tree, McCarthy writes that he “heard the rain mendicant-voiced, soft chanting in that dark gramarye that summons the earth to bridehood” (184). “Mendicant”—meaning a beggar or a friar without property—makes the rain something more destitute and spiritual, and provides a more defined role or position for the rain than merely describing the rain as “a beggar” or a “homeless friar” would. “Gramarye”—occult learning or grammar—injects literal supernaturalism into the scene, adds a layer of ancient and Pagan mysticism and magic to the scene, as if Uncle Anther awoke in some fairy world. “Mendicant-voiced” and “gramarye” personify the rain in a way that paradoxically defines the rain’s relationship with its “bride,” the earth, but at the same time shrouds and confuses the rain’s intentions. This single sentence works to create an unknowable truth in the elements of nature: in

this passage, within the rain. The rain is not merely a process, but something more, something interconnected with the ground in a ceremonial, religious way. The use of specialized words gives the natural world a soul, makes it and its elements distinct beings with purposes far greater than simply being understood and controlled by man. Instead, their purposes are unknowable, ancient, and true.

Along with his word choices, McCarthy's rhetorical style serves to define nature as spiritual and enlightened. This style is heavily defined by the narrative voice in his novels. In his examination of the narrative voice in *The Crossing*, Alan Noble distinguishes the narrative voice with two registers: a lower register and a higher register. The lower register is used to "simply describe action," while the higher register is composed of fantastic or alien similes that mark McCarthy's "vatic style" (241). Both of these narrative registers use their unique characteristics to elevate the natural world and infuse it with spiritual and mystical connotations.

The lower narrative register is often used in passages of description. Descriptions of the landscape receive the most Biblical rhetorical treatment from the author, leaving the natural world charged with a quiet power, much like the world in "God's Grandeur." In his overview of the writing styles apparent in *All the Pretty Horses*, William Spencer claims that the "one overriding, ultimate rhetorical goal" of McCarthy's writing is to "establish a pervasively mystical style" ("On the Range of Styles" 58). Spencer is referring to "not only [McCarthy's] repetitions," but also "the way he combines words and sentences" (59). McCarthy relies heavily on the style techniques of polysyndeton and parataxis in most of his writing, which are respectively the use of several conjunctions used in succession and the placing of clauses one after another. Noble also addresses these techniques in his analysis of the narrative lower register, positing that they tend to distance the narrator from the story and characters and create a

narrative that is “sparse, sterile, and empirical, focusing on the details of the action without passing any judgment on them” (241). These techniques—repetition, polysyndeton, and parataxis— are familiar to any Western reader, because they are common techniques used in the Bible. Genesis 7:22-24 provides an example: “And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark” (*New American Standard Bible*). McCarthy writes many sentences that mimic this style, such as this one from *Suttree*: “All the weeds were frozen up in little ice pipettes, dry husks of seedpods, burdock hulls, all sheathed in glass and vanes and shells of ice that webbed old leaves and held in frozen colloid specks of grit or soot or blacking” (164). The connections between these phrases create what Hebrew scholar Robert Alter labels as “discrete events,” and are a window into the “way the ancient Hebrew writers saw the world, linked events in it, artfully ordered it, and narrated it” (*Genesis xvii*). This ordering and synthesizing of discrete micro-events contributes to the mystical style of McCarthy’s writing. The writing becomes always moving and connecting, creating an almost unconscious and unnoticeable significance to everything, right down to the frozen weeds.

Fluidly connecting events and descriptions of nature not only connotes a mystical “oneness” within the natural world, but also allows McCarthy to refocus language on the reality of nature, to speak of it in its own language. Alter, writing in *Pen of Iron* specifically about McCarthy’s *The Road*, proposes that “the basic challenge for [*The Road*] is this: how do you use language to represent an order of reality fundamentally alien to the reality in which and for which our shared language has been framed?” (172). While the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* is certainly foreign and unlike anything mankind has seen before, the challenge can be

applied to most of McCarthy's novels as they attempt to describe the reality and spirituality within nature that is alien and lost to urbanized mankind. Alter observes that "the stylistic affinity with the language of the Bible, 'that old tongue, with its clang and its flavor,' is never entirely separable from an engagement with the ideas and the imperative values of the Bible" (178). The language and style of the Christian Bible inherently invokes ideas of God, spirituality, morality, and the afterlife. McCarthy uses the higher register of the narrative voice to push his style beyond its limits and channel it into the mystic vein of the Bible, thus infusing his writing with both the supernatural and the immortal. The natural world of his novels becomes connected, timeless, and vast, like a bridge between the supernatural and mankind.

McCarthy's treatment of animals especially attests to the idea that nature possesses a spiritual "otherness" that separates it from mankind. These sections are often written in the higher register, which Noble claims is used to suggest "some profound meaning" underlying otherwise mundane action (241). It is as if animals stem from a world set apart from the depravity of the human world, a plane of existence outside the realm of human understanding. One of the most prominent examples is in *All the Pretty Horses*. As John Grady begins to break a wild stallion, McCarthy writes that John Grady could feel "the hot sweet breath of it flooding up from the dark wells of its nostrils over his face and neck like news from another world" (103). "News from another world" is both mysterious and spiritual; the essence of the horse comes from some other place, and that the breath is described as "news" suggests that it has some purpose for John Grady, that it is something to share with mankind. The spiritual nature of the horse is specifically the subject of several passages within the novel. Luis tells John Grady and the *vaqueros* that the soul of a horse "could be seen under certain circumstances attending to the death of a horse because the horse shares a common soul and its separate life only forms it out of

all horses and makes it mortal” (111). He says that the soul of the horse is “a terrible thing to see” (111), perhaps meaning “terrible” as in invoking fear upon coming in contact with something so unknowable and beyond man. When John Grady asks if the same is true for the souls of men, Luis states that “among men there was no such communion as among horses” (111). This contrast between the souls of horses and the souls of men is essential to understanding the spiritual truth within horses; there is a connection within the natural world that man does not share in and cannot access. Luis’ use of the word “communion” suggests Holy Communion, which adds a sacred aspect to the souls of horses and further strengthens the idea of a spiritual ritual that takes place between horses that is not practiced between men.

Not surprisingly, a similar theme is found in *The Crossing*, the sequel to *All the Pretty Horses*. As the novel opens, Billy Parham leaves his bed to witness wolves hunting antelope. The scene is fraught with spiritual significance, as the antelopes’ breath “smoked palely in the cold as if they burned with some inner fire and the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in the silence such that they seemed of another world entire” (4). “Inner fire” suggests a divine spark or breath is within the animal, and is reminiscent of the otherworldly breath of the horse in *All the Pretty Horses*. That the wolves seem of another world only reinforces the supernatural intonation of this scene, and the language serves to make this hunt a noble and sacred practice, one that has gone on since the dawn of time. Billy’s intrusion upon the scene makes it seem even more sacred. It is as if he stumbled on a new plane of existence and experienced something beyond his normal reality, and it is telling that when he returns home he does not tell his brother what he saw, and McCarthy makes it a point to say that he will never tell anyone (5). Perhaps Billy knows he would not be able to explain the event properly, or believes that the scene was only for him to witness.

Billy experiences the otherworldly nature of the wolf again later on in the novel. He wakes one night as he is taking the she-wolf to Mexico, and she watches him as he tends the fire: “When the flames came up her eyes burned out there like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of an unknowable void” (73). McCarthy invents the word “gatelamps” to describe the eyes, combining the boundary and admission of a gate with the enlightening and guardian characteristics of a lamp. The she-wolf is a signpost for a world that Billy experienced the night the wolves hunted antelope, a world at the fringe of an “unknowable void”—the dark, primal mystery of the universe. This primal mystery is inherent in the world Billy sees in the eye of the wolf, “a world construed out of blood and blood’s alkahest and blood in its core and in its integument because it was that nothing save blood had power to resonate against that void which threatened hourly to devour it” (73-74). Blood represents everything in this other world. Blood is what holds it together, is the answer to everything, and is the only thing there really is. Although this is a rather dark and violent image, in the realm of animals (especially carnivores), blood is existence. It is the essence of life. Blood has always had mystical characteristics throughout the history of man, a fluid long associated with magic, power, mystery, and spirituality. McCarthy writes that blood is the only thing with the power to hold back “the void,” whether it is death, eternity, or something utterly unknowable, and the invocation of the Christian idea of sacrificial blood paying for sin and thwarting death cannot be denied. By looking into the eyes of the wolf, Billy sees into another world, the simple reality by which nature still abides.

Billy’s vision of the world within the eye of the she-wolf hints at the complex role nature plays within McCarthy’s work. The use of specific archaic words adds mystery and depth to the natural world. Through his writing style nature is elevated to a spiritual and supernatural level, endowed with the weight, scope, and fluidity of Biblical language. As in “God’s Grandeur,”

there is a mystical power at work behind the scenes of the natural world, hinted at through the breath and the eyes of animals. However, just as Hopkins' poem asks the question, "Why do men now not reckon his rod?" (4), Cormac McCarthy addresses the relationship between nature and contemporary man. Although his style and descriptions make nature a sacred mystery, the societies within his novels and most of the characters do not see it that way. McCarthy's novels suggest that there is a growing disconnection between nature and humankind. Humans cannot fully grasp the reality that is found in nature and animals, but most people have turned away from being able to even experience it, blinded by city streets, trade, and individual concerns.

The Commodification of Nature

Just as in “God’s Grandeur,” McCarthy’s fiction answers the question of why men do not “reck the rod” of God—or, in other terms, to respect and acknowledge the truth and reality within nature—with “trade.” The landscape may be beautiful and sacred, but it is also being encroached upon by civilization. Many of McCarthy’s novels, such as the aptly named *Border Trilogy*, take place in “border” locations and time periods that are transitioning from the rural to the urban, or feature locations that are on the border of a city and the wilderness, such as Knoxville in *Suttree*. The building of cities and fences in itself is not necessarily “evil,” or an affront to the natural world, however; nature, in its immensity and timelessness, is not threatened by the works of man. With urbanization, the party in danger is mankind, whose cities and fences disconnect individuals from the natural world. The food of the individual no longer comes from the land, but the grocer; water, through a faucet; clothing from a tailor. This is all accomplished through trade, and a byproduct of this convenience and efficiency of an urbanized society is that the natural world—although the primary source for all these things—is not acknowledged as such, and man becomes wrapped up in a comforting yet skewed worldview that prevents man from even experiencing or searching for the reality of the natural world.

The specific process of trade that causes man to skew reality and reassign values to the goods and resources around him is commodification. Commodification in its simplest definition is the transformation of an entity into a good. Marx defines commodities as “products of labour,” and explains that this quality is an abstraction; commodities are not viewed as the materials that make up the commodity, such as the parts of the chair, or even for its use-value, such as the chair being a comfortable place to sit (38). Instead, the existence of a commodity “as a material thing” is “out of sight,” and all commodities are “reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human

labour in the abstract” (38). Commodification, therefore, is an anthropocentric abstraction, reestablishing value based on its tradability with humans in the “currency” of labor.

How an entity is commodified is not a universal process, but when it comes to commodifying nature, some processes are more common and heavily relied upon. Geologist and professor Noel Castree, for instance, argues that there is no “single path” to commoditization, that commodification is some combination of six aspects: privatization, alienability, individuation, abstraction, valuation, and displacement (279-82). Of these, individualization, abstraction, and displacement all play a role in severing man’s connection with and understanding of the natural world as a whole by replacing it with a connection and understanding to compartmentalized “pieces” of nature that, without being interconnected to other parts, are not necessarily viewed as part of the natural world by the consumer. Individualization is the act, both representational and physical, “of separating an entity from its supporting context” (280). This allows for the entity to be bought and sold after stripping it of its status as a natural phenomenon and applying “qualitative specificities” to make exchange and the act of assigning monetary value possible (280). Abstraction is the process of taking this now individualized entity and assimilating it to the “qualitative homogeneity of a broader type or process” (281). The individual entity, stripped of its context, is now categorized in a category based on the qualities it has been assigned, which makes it “the same” as anything else within that broad category.

Castree exemplifies abstraction with a report about the United States government using the generic category of “wetlands” to label practically every wetland in the country and thus treating them all the same, ignoring much of their unique characteristics and locations (qtd. in Castree 281). An individual wetland is now considered interchangeable with any other, even to

the point that the government begins trading off wetlands in some locations for the creation of man-made wetlands elsewhere, “a tradeoff that can be monetarily costed” (qtd. in Castree 281). While individualization strips entities of their context, abstraction strips them of their uniqueness, leaving them only quantifiable by designated characteristics. Displacement Castree defines as “something appearing, phenomenally, as something other than itself,” involving a set of phenomena “manifesting themselves in a way that, paradoxically, occludes them” (282). Displacement is similar to Marx’s idea that the material and physical dimensions of a commodity are “out of sight,” the context of it replaced by its value in human labor. When a commodity is sold by a commodity producer to a commodity consumer, the consumer is “blind” to the connections, context, and individuality that the entity possessed before commodification, and to the effects that producing the commodity may have caused (282). For example, a man buying a diamond ring from a jeweler based on its low price likely will have no idea that that low price is because it is a blood diamond extracted through means harmful both to the environment and to workers. Displacement not only allows but also demands that the consumer be oblivious to the context, individualization, and production of commodities; in relation to the natural world, this means that the natural world either becomes a resource to mine or, more often, is not even considered in daily life since one no longer must rely on it to live, instead relying on society and economics.

Mankind’s unique ability to skew and reevaluate the natural world stems from the use of language. This is not simply “communication”; animals besides humans communicate, but in limited and literal terms, generally very simple signals for danger or for food. Language, on the other hand, is complicated and sophisticated enough to allow human beings to reorder events and recalibrate values. This is depicted when the captain in *All the Pretty Horses* tells John Grady

that the Mexican police have the “power to make truth” (168). John Grady’s answer is his mantra throughout the novel: “There aint but one truth,” he says, “The truth is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody’s mouth” (168). He makes a similar point when Mary Catherine asks, “Everything’s talk isn’t it?” and he replies, “Not everything” (28). John Grady’s view of truth being “what happened” is representative of all McCarthy’s novels. As each explores the idea of truth, truth is elevated as something not only rare and fragile, but sacred; the question of whether truth can be articulated or represented becomes an issue not of good or evil, but of man or nature: to distill it further, of symbol or reality. Language may aid man in ordering and explaining the world around him to himself and his fellow man, but it is an articulation that distorts and manipulates that world.

The connection between language and truth can be better understood through the work of Michel Foucault and his idea of “the will to truth.” In his lecture “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault finds that the Western world has historically understood the concept of discourse and language as having preexisting meaning by being grounded in nature. He writes, “I am thinking of the way Western literature has, for centuries, sought to base itself in nature, in the plausible, upon sincerity and science—in short, upon true discourse” (219). However, Foucault states that “true discourse” cannot recognize the “will to truth which pervades it” and that “the will to truth, having imposed itself upon us for so long, is such that the truth it seeks to reveal cannot fail to mask it” (219). No matter the purity or basis of the discourse, it must be processed through humanity’s will to truth, which is always and inescapably fueled by desire and power. “Thus,” writes Foucault, “only one truth appears before our eyes: wealth, fertility and sweet strength in all its insidious universality” (220). The “will to truth” turns out not to be the will to *the* truth, but the will to *a* truth, a truth that man inevitably makes for his own comfort and gain. Even if

nature is the source of discourse, man cannot utter words without them being driven by desire or power. Therefore, the masking of truth in discourse is inevitable. This does not necessarily mean that there is no truth, but that it must be sought through some method other than language.

Foucault's short posits about power, truth, and language connect well with Kenneth Burke's writing on language and man. Burke perceives language as a rhetorical function, "symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 43). Burke also saw language as the separating factor between humanity and nature, describing man using the tongue-in-cheek definition of "the symbol-using, (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection" ("Definition of Man" 507). Burke highlights the negative effects language has on humanity; man alone has the ability to "misuse instruments of his own making" in order to reinvent truth and value. Since man is a "symbol-using" animal and the symbols cannot accurately represent the thing they signify despite man's "perfectionist principles," man's understanding of truth can be (in fact, must be) skewed.

If the inherent subjectivity and symbolic nature of language are the great distorters of truth and value that Foucault and Burke make them out to be, then the natural world—being without language—holds the only definitive truth. What is, is, regardless of man's inability to articulate it in its completeness. Earlier in "Definition of Man" Burke uses the clause "separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making" to describe man (503). Burke cites inventions and devices as what allows man to somewhat depart from the animalistic/survivalist needs of food, shelter, and sex. However it is language's role as the backbone of the society that

allows for this departure. The languages man has created separate him from “his natural condition,” which can be taken as separation from nature itself. In this way, it is a separation from reality in favor of a “pseudo-reality,” created through the processes of commodification.

Trade and commodification are the root of all evil in Cormac McCarthy novels and the cause of much of the violence for which McCarthy is so well known. In *The Orchard Keeper* and *Suttree*, hawks and bats are killed simply for the bounty that has been put on them by the government. In *Blood Meridian*, Native Americans are hunted down for the price their scalps bring. *Blood Meridian* is notorious for being McCarthy’s most mindlessly violent novel, and it is not a coincidence that it is also the novel that centers most on commerce. In *Notes on Blood Meridian*, John Sepich’s excellent guide to McCarthy’s most historical and difficult novel, Sepich describes the Ganton Gang as a “group of businessmen, in this novel of businessmen” (10). Trade is the vehicle of greed and violence in *Blood Meridian*, commodifying the scalps of Native Americans and, in turn, the Native Americans themselves through abstraction and valuation, the redistribution of value and worth. Commodification creates such a powerful contrast between humanity and the natural world because commoditization only exists in the human world. Animals only understand objects, situations, and other animals by their inherent or practical value. As morbid an example as this may seem (and one akin to *Blood Meridian*), a bird could not understand the value of a scalp beyond its practical use, such as the hair being good material for making a nest. There is no recalibration of values, so there is a certain constant “truth” in the workings of the natural world that makes it sacred compared to the arbitrary commodification of human society.

This inability of contemporary man to recognize nature as a sacred truth is a theme throughout McCarthy’s fiction, but is most directly addressed in *The Crossing*. Early in the novel

Billy learns how to trap wolves from Don Arnulfo. Although the woman tending Don Arnulfo calls him a *brujo*—a warlock—he is better described as a mystic. After Billy explains that he wants to learn a trapping strategy from the old man, they fall into a spiritual and philosophical discussion of the wolf. “*El lobo es una cosa incognoscible,*” Don Arnulfo tells him (45). The wolf is an unknowable thing, and the thing that is caught in the trap is no more than “*dientes y forro*”—teeth and fur (45). There is an essence to the wolf that cannot be accessed, a wolf soul that is more than the sum of its parts, something man forgets or does not know. Arnulfo continues to say that neither the wolf nor what the wolf knows can be realized by man, and that it is like asking to know what the stones know, or the trees, or the world (45). Don Arnulfo is making the point that the world and man operate on different planes of understanding. He is not saying that the wolves know nothing and to ask what they know is like asking what a stone knows. Instead, he is saying that what the wolf knows is as incomprehensible to man as any other element of the world—that nature holds an understanding of truth unknown to man. As Billy struggles to understand, the old man elaborates: McCarthy writes, “[Arnulfo] said the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death put there” (45). The wolf understands the reality of the world; there is death and death only to order it. Life is simply the holding back of death and, as Billy will see within the eyes of the she-wolf, it is blood that staves off death and brings meaning to all things.

Unlike the wolf, man is preoccupied with other things—elements exclusive to mankind—and misses the literal reality that the natural world holds. Man is distracted by what he perceives and how he perceives it in relation to other men; there is no interspecies communion as there is between the wolf, the stones, and the trees. Don Arnulfo tells Billy that men “see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is

invisible to them” (46). In man’s focus on his tangible actions—what he does in the world—and the intangible language he uses, the precise actuality of the world is lost to him. The essences and reality of the world are lost to the “things” of the world, labeled with the language of man, becoming containable and understandable but also becoming something entirely diminished. Arnulfo is aware of this tendency in man, saying to Billy, “Maybe you want the skin so you can get some money. Maybe you can buy some boots or something like that. You can do that. Where is the wolf?” (46). Arnulfo supposes that Billy only sees the wolf in relation to himself, probably as a source of income. In so doing, Billy is not concerning himself with the actual wolf but its defined, commodified parts—parts that he views as valuable because society has deemed them so—and the wolf in its entirety is lost through this commodification. Don Arnulfo suggests here that it is trade and commodification that keeps man from seeing the invisible world of nature; as Marx wrote, the wolf is “out of sight.”

Man has difficulty seeing the true reality in nature because he works in a revaluated reality in which nature is redefined in its relation and use to mankind. Don Arnulfo says that the wolf is like a snowflake, and that if Billy catches it, he loses it; he may be able to glimpse the “*dechado*”—the design, or paragon—but he will not see it in its entirety (46). He may be suggesting that freedom is an essential characteristic of the wolf’s design, but his words also suggest that by trapping the wolf, Billy will “own” the wolf, and by doing so will only be able to see the wolf defined within the “acts of his own hands” or “that which he names”—essentially, within the abstraction and valuation aspects of commodification. In doing so, he misses the “paragon,” or optimal characteristic, of the wolf. The commodification of the natural world essentially reduces it to its components and blinds man from seeing it in its actuality.

Although the natural world is too immense for man's commodification to damage it on the whole, man's commodification of individual, natural entities surely impacts the entities negatively. When man infringes on nature, something decays on both sides. The orchard in *The Orchard Keeper* is a representation of this: the neat, organized rows of trees are dying; it is abandoned and in shambles, the limbs of the trees barren of fruit. The workers and owners abandoned the orchard when it was no longer profitable, and with the trees' fruit taken away and sold there are no seeds to continue the generations of trees. Not only are the trees dead, but there is also a human body in the orchard's pit, embalmed in water and covered with cedar plank. Nature and man cannot exist together in this environment harmoniously when man only views nature in light of its use value. However, McCarthy takes this point even farther, suggesting that man somehow corrupts nature and has a dark influence upon it.

This dark influence is most apparent in the animals of McCarthy's novels, especially when comparing domesticated and wild. In *Animals in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy*, Wallis Sanborn identifies a common formula to organize animals into a hierarchy based on "proximity to and dependence upon man, in conjunction with locus in the natural world" (28). *The Orchard Keeper* has one of the most prominent: a feline hierarchy. The order is based on how closely tied to humans is each cat, ranging from the domestic housecat to the supernatural wampus cat. What Sanborn finds is that the housecats—which are closest to humans and completely dependent on them—are the sickest, most helpless and suffering of the cats (27). The panther, on the other hand, is the cat that has somehow usurped "a deterministic world where man is the most corrupting influence" (28). The "deterministic world" of man is related to commodification, since part of its process is determining the worth of an entity, and then that worth determining that entity's fate. This idea is strengthened by the fact that the box of kittens Mr. Eller has in his

store represents the most polluted and corrupted feline group in the hierarchy. These kittens—new-borns, surrounded by people the entirety of their short lives—are described as “tottering aimlessly” with “stub legs” and having eyes “closed and festered with mucus as if they might have been struck simultaneously with some biblical blight” (180). They are certainly not healthy, but Mr. Eller alludes to kittens that are even worse off, “ones back in the back propped up with sticks” (180).

Sanborn speculates that these propped cats are on display and, therefore, dead, and the lack of a specific modifier suggests that these dead cats are in fact domestic cats, not lynx or bobcats (34). Likely a product of inbreeding, these cats are completely dependent upon humans, and have pitiful, aimless lives. They are described as “lost” and one, slipping in a puddle of tobacco, “offered up to the world his thin wails” (182). This is the epitome of pitiful, an impotent and empty sound the only response this blind animal has to the world that shaped him—the world of humanity. Through this cry, however, Mr. Eller sleeps. Of all the cats they are the most closely associated with trade and commodification, living in Mr. Eller’s store, but the old man is ambivalent about them, and seems to forget they are even there; when Sylder remarks that “A Christian’d of drowned em,” Mr. Eller replies, “What’s that?” even though they were just discussing the kittens. The cats do not claim his interest and are not worth his time. Although it is not apparent whether these cats are for sale or not (the girl coming in and taking them suggests not), they are still treated like a commodity, and a rather worthless one at that; one could imagine Mr. Eller treating in the same way an old rusty trap or a trinket that has been in his store for a long time and not sold.

The domestic cat that is periodically mentioned throughout the novel represents the next tier in the feline hierarchy. Her genes impart a history of being close to humans, but she is

obviously damaged and unwanted, fending for herself. She finds herself on the brink between humanity and nature, sheltering herself in a dirty outhouse and gnawing at any food she can find. She has a “hunted” look, suggesting an existence of mere running and existing, an unfit life indeed. Not as helpless as the sickly housecats, she manages to make a living for a while. McCarthy’s writing treats her more like a human character in the story, giving her her own sections of narration and even glimpses into her thinking, such as when she gnaws on the side of pork-ribs, “pausing now and again to listen to the silence” (174). As she ekes out a living within the realm of humanity, she also finds her assigned position within nature as the owl swoops down and takes her. It is a sudden and natural end of the cat: prey for a predator. It might not seem fair, but it is the way of nature.

Next in the hierarchy is the lynx and the bobcat, free and powerful cats that are completely independent of man. They are, however, not at the top of this hierarchy because although they are independent of man, they are not removed from him. Sanborn acknowledges that they are sought after by men for their coats, which have commodity value. Although they are feral felines, the commodification of the animals makes them prey to men, allowing men to revalue them and dismiss them as cats to be sought only for gain. Unlike the housecats, the bobcat and lynx have not been genetically weakened by man, but instead have lost much of their population and territory to humans.

The feline that stands apart from the rest in this hierarchy is undoubtedly the panther. The men in *The Orchard Keeper* are terrified of the panther, a dangerous cat whose coat is too coarse to be worth the trouble of killing it. Without being able to dominate or commodify the panther, the men are unable to “own” the animal, to diminish it to something less than what it is. It is this inability that causes them to feel such fear for the animal and, instead of diminish it, inflate it

into something more than it actually is in order to validate their fears. Uncle Ather tells a story of when an owl's screeching was mistaken by half the town for the howl of a panther, bringing much fear and worry to many. He says that he knew it was an owl and fooled a few men in the bar, saying that he'd seen the animal, and it was nothing more than "a kitten" (149). They find Uncle Ather's confidence and lack of fear off-putting. Through their fear, the panther is injected with the supernatural and becomes the wampus cat mentioned throughout the novel, a legendary feline of Anglo and Indian lore (Sanborn 28). Unable to reestablish the inherent value of the panther, man uses language to create a false superstition around the cat. The feline is still made into something that is not, which allows the townsmen to cope with having a predator that they cannot control within their sphere of influence. The folklore does not serve to further separate the natural world from man, but instead creates a closer link between them. One variation of the wampus cat myth explains the cat as "the product of feline and woman," and there is perhaps no greater connection than sex and offspring. This explanation makes the wampus cat even more sinister, yet at the same time more sympathetic. It serves to fit the panther into a predefined relationship with humanity that the men can understand; they fear the panther not because it is a big dangerous cat, but because there is something supernatural about it. Their fear is validated through their mythmaking.

Uncle Ather, however, is immune to this mythmaking due to his respect for and understanding of the panther. This is because Ather not only respects the natural world in general, but he also has had several personal experiences with the panther that have allowed him to see through the myths of the animal and gain an understanding of the animal based on the actual "thing" as opposed to the myth. Ather's understanding of panthers is foreshadowed by an occurrence that happens in Ather's younger days, an occurrence that encourages him to view

nature as a sacred mystery. He meets a black woman on the road who chants over him and tells him about the wampus cats, that “the night mountains” were walked by them and that they have “great burning eyes” and leave no tracks in the snow. “Aint no signs with wampus cats, she told him, but if you has the vision you can read where common folks ain’t able” (59-60). The description of the cat is something powerful and supernatural, but not necessarily something to be feared. In fact, the woman appears to encourage Ather to seek out the cat with a special vision he either has or she has endowed upon him. This encounter sets Ather up to be somehow connected to the legendary wampus cat and its literal counterpart, the panther, and to view them as something spiritual and awful but, at the same time, real and tangible.

Ather’s dreams and nocturnal encounters with panthers is proof that the woman’s prophesy has been fulfilled. The wampus cat is something spiritual and mystic, a supernatural being that roams the hills and haunts Ather’s dreams. It is a knowing specter that watches the old man sleep. The wampus cat represents the mystical spirituality of the natural world. The “painter” is a truth: a terrifying truth, but truth all the same. Sanborn puts the panther on top of his hierarchy not because it is the dominant predator of the southeastern United States, but because it is the only cat that “strikes fear into man” (28). Therefore, the panther is not commodified, and the panther is placed within folklore and legend in order to validate man’s fears of the animal. Even though he cannot commodify the panther, man still reevaluates it and views it as something it is not in an anthropocentric attempt to reorder the world around him.

While all humankind is guilty of unintentionally skewing the world around him due to his symbolic interaction with it, the embracing of the power to pervert and reorder the world as one sees fit is perhaps the root of all evil. Indeed, in many myths and religions—including The Fall in Genesis—it is knowledge and the taking upon of wisdom and free will that is the curse of

mankind. In the Genesis story, it is the literal taking and devouring of the fruit that—for some mystical reason—was forbidden and led to the eternal human condition. Not only that, but Eve was led astray by the fork-tongued serpent as he convinced her that the apple was not as it seemed. “You will not die,” says the serpent, “for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:4-5). The serpent is lying, a deceit exclusive to language. He is attempting to persuade her that taking this mystery that is not hers to take will empower her to “be like God,” to “know good and evil”; essentially, to be able to recreate, redefine, and revalue reality. It is the perverting power of language that convinces Eve to sin, to take the apple and in so doing to take her own will as her own and fall into the first lie of humanity. In this way, language is endowed with all the creative power of God, while at the same time tainted with the illusionary ability of Satan.

One of the most controversial and studied characters in McCarthy’s fiction—if not *the* most controversial and studied character—perfectly embodies the dichotomy of creator and deceiver that is found in language. Judge Holden, the antagonist of *Blood Meridian*, has been critiqued in all kinds of ways, from being the true absurd hero of the novel to being Satan incarnate himself. The reason that he is able to put on so many different roles and be read in such varying ways is that he stands for a complex theme: the human condition. Judge Holden is a larger-than-life character that McCarthy uses to play out what would happen if we as humans completely embraced the fall of our race, to not just take a bite or taste of the fruit of knowledge, but to devour and embody what it represented: the yearning for the ability of God to create a reality, but only grasping the ability of Satan to use language and symbol to distort the natural world.

The reader is introduced to the judge's mastery of deceit in the first chapter of *Blood Meridian*, when Judge Holden stands up during a revival and tells the congregation that he knows the reverend preaching and that the reverend is a fraud, imposter, child molester, and guilty of bestiality (7). The reverend denies all this, but the congregation turns on him and presumably shoots him. Afterwards Judge Holden and the gang go to the bar, where after he buys everyone drinks, the Judge is questioned about his relationship to the reverend. "I never laid eyes on the man before today," he replies. "Never heard of him" (9). In response, the men laugh and buy the judge a drink. The judge is introduced as a ruthless scoundrel, ruining an innocent man's life for no reason other than that he can. His weapon of choice is simply language; he takes no action other than getting in front of everyone and talking. Of course, this is what the reverend was doing before the judge entered, and the implication of this scene is that words are not only powerful, but manipulative. The revival becomes a battle between two rhetoricians: one a man of God attempting to persuade the people in the tent to see his views, the other a stranger that slanders the reverend out of some form of spite or power-mongering. In this battle of language, it is obvious who the winner is. The judge's slander easily sways the crowd, even though he has no reputation with those in the revival tent. His false testimony is all that is needed to undo the reputation of the reverend. This is evidence that deceit in language is often more powerful than truth; the snake easily overpowers the word of God.

This scene also sets the judge up as an adversary to truth and to God, a theme that follows throughout the novel. This, in turn, makes him an adversary to nature and the reality of the natural world. The judge wants to control the reality around him, to create a reality that exists only through his actions and his words. In order to do this, he attempts to subdue nature and conform it to his own liking. In doing so, the judge becomes one of McCarthy's most evil and

sinister characters, interfering with the only real truth to be found in the McCarthy universe. The judge is not a skeptic attempting to understand the world; he is a cynic who is aware of the reality and immense truth that the natural world has, but instead of attempting to experience this truth, he wishes to manipulate the people around him and indoctrinate them into his manipulative and skewed worldview in a vain effort to “enslave” nature to his own devices.

What makes Holden so heinous is his conscious, driven goal toward deceit and manipulation. While Judge Holden’s initial use of lies is to ruin the life of a complete stranger, he knows the power words have, and uses deceit purposefully throughout the novel. As he introduces Jackson to Spanish-speaking Sergeant Aguilar, he pulls the sergeant aside and quickly tells him a false history of Jackson. The story spans references to Ham and the Israelites, Greek poets, anthropology, and geography (88-9). When Jackson demands that Holden tells him what Holden told the sergeant, the judge simply smiles and tells Jackson that he does not need to “be in possession of the facts” concerning his case, that “his acts will accommodate history” regardless of his understanding what he told the sergeant (89). He goes on to say that Sergeant Aguilar will serve as a third-party witness to “these facts” that Holden has relayed. “Words are things,” the judge claims. “The words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning” (89). Although the words may not be true, they hold power over the sergeant. Even if he cannot comprehend them, somehow they will live on, disconnected from the actions and reality of Jackson himself; it seems that, in the judge’s mind, this makes them more true than the truth, for it is what this “third party” has been led to believe, and will never have any reason not to believe. Through convincing lies, the judge has altered reality and history and implanted his own variation of truth.

Not only is the judge driven to pervert truth and create his own, but also he knows that the source of truth is nature, and manipulates it accordingly. He is not absurdist or faithless: he knows there is an absolute truth, and in knowing this truth means to circumvent it. In a way, he must believe in truth in order to achieve his goal: this makes him perhaps more of a believer than a knower. Tobin recalls a “sermon” that the judge gave at a lava bed: “he concluded with the telling us that our mother the earth as he said was round like an egg and contained all good things within her” (136). The combination of scientific statement—the Earth being round—and mythical statement—the use of “Mother Earth”—is a great representation of the inner workings of the judge who, although a very scientific, educated, and skeptical man, still sees the world through a mystical lens: mother earth still has goodness within her. The twist is that his whole purpose appears to be to undermine that goodness, and to do so with the help of those around him. Tobin says that after the sermon the judge led his horse over the terrain “and us behind him like the disciples of a new faith” (136). The judge is the messiah of a new religion, a new truth he is both a believer and unbeliever in.

The judge gives another “sermon” that mixes the scientific and the religious into a mystical understanding of nature that proves that Judge Holden holds nature to be the very pinnacle of truth and reality. After breaking ore samples and talking about geology and the origins of Earth, those around him quote the Bible to refute his “ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos” (122), and he responds:

Books lie, he said.

God don't lie.

No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.

He held up a chunk of rock.

He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.

The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, in this the judge encouraged until they were proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools. (122-3)

The judge may be talking about geology and evolution, but what is really being discussed in this scene is the origin of truth and how it is defined. By saying that books lie, the judge is not specifically talking just about the Bible which the squatters are quoting; he means books in general, compilations of the symbolic words of men, the books of history that—as posited by the aforementioned scene with Jackson—are written by men whose versions of truth and history are easily blemished. The word of man cannot be trusted. However, the unnamed man refutes Holden with the fact that God doesn't lie, an attempt to give the Bible authority. Holden does not dispute the fact that God does not lie, but instead shifts the word of God from the written pages of the Bible to the rocks on the ground in front of him. God speaks through the natural world, the ever-tangible and experiential world. Fossils and rock serve as evidence of what has come before, and natural laws tell of what is; the ability to experience these things firsthand allows one to experience God and truth, and these things are therefore more of an authority than the words of dead men.

This sly manipulation of the judge is effective, and its results are proof of how easily language can steer men toward a comfortable worldview that, while it may not be true, allows them to believe that they have an understanding of the world around them. The squatters change their mind rather quickly and agree with Holden after some encouragement from him, but there is something heinous acting under the surface. After these men become a part of the judge's

“new order,” he laughs at them and thinks them fools for falling for his rhetoric. The judge is not a harbinger of truth, but of lies. He is not interested in bringing enlightenment and truth to anyone, but instead is on a self-proclaimed mission to pull men out of their worldviews and indoctrinate them into his. He did not open the eyes of the squatters and allow them to think for themselves; he expertly pulled them from one worldview based on the words of men into another, based on his own words. He may have argued that God and truth are in the natural world, but that is not what convinced the squatters. The judge’s words—not the experience of nature—are what the men cling to now. The judge knows the inherent truth that can be found in nature, but uses it to his advantage, disproving the views of others with it while indoctrinating them with his own “learned” views. He is not in the business of enlightening men and allowing them to think for themselves. Instead, he indoctrinates them into believing in *his* words, *his* religion, thus commanding a power over them that is not as practical as it is metaphysical, an egoistical grasp for symbolic power over those around him.

Judge Holden’s desire for symbolic power does not stop at the thoughts of men. He wishes to control the understanding of the world as well. Several times throughout the novel the judge sketches relics into his leather book. He sketches with “a practiced ease,” in “profile and perspective,” pieces of pottery, a scrap of old armor (146). Afterwards, he destroys what he has just sketched. The artifact is no longer part of the natural world, existing only as a two-dimensional symbol kept within the possession of Judge Holden, a part of his collection of knowledge that is not only exclusively his, but also only exists because of him. After sketching several objects then pitching them all in the campfire, the judge “seemed much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation” (146). This statement harkens to Genesis 2:19, in which God brings every animal to man “to see what he would call them; and whatever

the man called a living creature, that was its name.” However, it is a perverted reenactment of this ritual. It is not a collaboration with God; Judge Holden’s counsel was *not* sought. Nor is it an act of creation; instead, it is a self-determined reevaluation of the world, a destruction of “the thing” to leave only a lesser, man-made shadow of “the thing” for the judge’s exclusive knowledge. When asked what he is going to do with the sketches, the judge replies that he intends to “expunge them from the memory of man” (147). He is not going to share the sketches, submit them to a museum. The opposite: His book is a graveyard for the history of mankind, where symbols created by the judge are the closest to reality they will get, but they will still not enter the stream of human history.

The judge is satisfied with the world because he is actively dismantling and recreating it with his own hand, in his own image, less for his own benefit and more for the rebellious defiance that the cataloging stands for. He is McCarthy’s most notorious villain because he so strongly represents and embraces the evil that is found in all of McCarthy’s work: man’s commodification and reevaluation of the natural world. After pressing leaves and taking notations in his book about local fauna, the judge says that “only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth” (207). He places his hands on the earth saying that it is his “claim” and for it to be his, nothing can live or occur on it without his permission, and that “the man that believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear,” but the man that tries to see the order in the world and take charge of it can “dictate the terms of his own fate (207-208). The judge views mankind and the natural world in a “enslave or be enslaved” relationship, a struggle of knowledge and influence. Existence outside of the judge’s consent is an insult to him, his authority, and the “claim” he holds on the earth. He does not

believe in the sacred mystery that McCarthy endows the natural world with, and that the only option of anyone who does believe in it is to fall into the stupor of superstition. Instead, he believes that everything can be known, the tapestry of life can be unraveled, and it is the responsibility of man to do so.

However, the method Judge Holden employs to take control of nature and unravel the tapestry actually proves his method's fallibility. His ledger is full of shades and symbols created by himself; although he sees this as a triumph over the natural world, in reality it is his downfall. Although he believes he is avoiding the slavery of the natural world by enslaving it, he is actually enslaving himself through his own worldview. He is reordering the world through his own thought, using natural artifacts to create an artificial narrative and then destroying the artifact to make his artificial narrative reality. He is not unraveling the world's tapestry as much as he is destroying it and weaving his own, consciously embracing the symbolic nature of the human animal. The judge views knowledge as power and the ability to explain and understand is an act of dominance; the belief in mystery and unknowable secrets in the natural world is a sign of ignorance and weakness to him.

Judge Holden's obsession blinds him to another way to interact with nature, one that some of McCarthy's protagonists—including John Grady, Billy Parham, and Suttree—discover and experience. Instead of viewing the mysteries of nature as completely unknowable and sinking into superstition or treating nature as a powerful enemy that must be overcome through egocentric understanding, these characters experience the mysteries of nature as reality and resist the urge to try to apply manmade meaning or understanding to them. By reveling in the natural world they discover a sacred, almost spiritual truth that they are unable to completely "know" or

articulate, yet it still leaves them with an impression of truth and a “oneness” with the natural world that is otherwise lost on humanity.

The Experiential Power of Nature

Despite mankind's commodification of the natural world, reconciliation and respect are possible to a certain degree through individuals and their experiences. In fact, people's relationship with and attitude towards nature may determine how they view and understand themselves more than how they experience the natural world. In *What Is Nature?: Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*, Kate Soper defines the term "nature" as "everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity" (15). While this definition may seem rather common and intuitive, the implication is that nature is therefore "opposed to culture, to history, to convention, to what is artificially worked or produced, in short, to everything which is defining of the order of humanity" (15). Nature is not simply an "other" to humanity: it is a force beyond the confines of human order. As Soper points out, components essential to understanding humanity's story—culture, history, convention—are irrelevant to the story of nature.

Although they are separate entities, nature and humanity still interact, however. The defining characteristic of "nature," being what is void of man and his works, is exactly what man depends on to conceptualize what is "other" to himself and, thus, to define himself. If nature is what humanity uses to conceptualize the other, an individual's or society's interpretation of the natural world has a bearing on the individual's or society's identity and worldview. Perhaps the most fundamental and influential belief of a society is whether nature should inform humanity or vice versa. In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth defends his choice of everyday situations and rural life as the subjects of his poetry by claiming that in them "the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (265). Wordsworth perceived these subjects as being opposed to "the great national events," industrial urbanization, and the uniformity of the occupations of city dwellers, all which "blunt the discriminating

powers of the mind” and “reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor” (266). Wordsworth believed that the direction society was taking was the wrong one and that poems praising the rural life—a life still connected to the beauty of nature—could redeem humanity and turn it from this path. The Romantics treated nature as a spiritual and redemptive other to mankind. Appearing near the end of the Romantic period, philosopher John Stuart Mill maintained a very different worldview than the Romantics. Embracing utilitarianism, Mill took a detached, scientific approach to nature. Mill defines nature as “what takes place without the voluntary and intentional agency of man,” a definition similar to the one Sofer provides (*Three Essays on Religion*, 8). However, Mill regarded nature in a negative light, full of irrational, unbridled spontaneity and horrible acts: “[A]ny one who endeavored in his actions to imitate the natural course of things,” writes Mill, “would be universally seen and acknowledged to be the wickedest of men” (65). Inefficient and unruly, nature is not an “other” to imitate or return to, for Mill; instead, it is an other to avoid, and the capable ordering of mankind is what should be embraced. Wordsworth, Mill, and their respective philosophies represent what Sofer labels “nature-endorsing” and “nature-skeptical” responses. Sofer defines the “nature-endorsing” response as viewing nature as what should be sought to bring about in place of “existing actuality” (34). The “nature-skeptical” response promotes cultural determination and views the endorsement of nature as “a dubious move designed to limit and circumscribe the possibilities of human culture” (34). The response that an individual or society subscribes to determines how nature is valued and treated, and whether nature as other is to be emulated or alienated.

McCarthy is an author who is acutely aware of how humanity’s response to nature shapes both humanity and nature. His characters can easily be divided by their response to nature. Harrogate and Judge Holden, for example, are representations of the nature-skeptical response,

one a selfish and literal rapist of the natural world, representing the ultimate commodification of it, and the other a liar and a prankster, attempting to enslave the natural reality around him. Both characters apply human order to the world, approaching it anthropocentrically, conceptualizing themselves as above nature and the other, losing touch with nature to the point where they do not even interact with nature, let alone experience it. This is also the attitude of the communities in most of McCarthy's work, illustrated best by the world of *The Border Trilogy*—one of fences and diminishing wilderness, with nearly all the wolves hunted out of the United States and the cowboy an endangered species. Likewise, the slums of McAnally Flats in *Suttree* are torn down to put in an expressway as urbanization continues to detach people from the natural world. The mystery and spirituality that nature possesses is lost on the masses as the “nature-skeptical” response is embraced.

Despite the overwhelming push of society against the natural world, McCarthy's characters still manage to find spirituality and truth within nature, proving that McCarthy subscribes to the nature-endorsing response. Yet again, a parallel can be drawn between McCarthy and Hopkins; the second stanza of “God's Grandeur” begins “And for all this, nature is never spent” (9). Nature is resilient and abundant, with “dearest freshness” and “deep down things,” invoking a mysterious power of rejuvenation (10). Despite the negative effects of man's trade and toil, the natural world in Hopkins' poem is always renewing, thanks to a hidden source of power and the guardian presence of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, nature never loses its mystery and spirituality in McCarthy's writing, and the truth is always there for individuals to experience it.

How exactly the mystery within nature is experienced is, by its very definition, difficult to describe. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram claims that civilizations have always had

individuals who specialize in connecting with nature on a spiritual level, but Western anthropologists have not always realized the “ecological dimension of the shaman’s craft” (8). Anthropologists, unable to overcome the modern assumption that nature is for the most part determinate, knowable, and methodical, overlooked the possibility that spiritual mystery could be believed to exist in the natural world instead of a supernatural, nonphysical realm (8). If spirituality can be found in nature, then the ability to connect with the spiritual can be a voluntary act of an individual. Abram asserts that the traditional magician “cultivates an ability to shift out of his or her common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined” (9). This parallels what McCarthy describes: in order to glimpse the mystery of nature, man must temporarily shed his own perspectives and come in contact with an element of the natural world. Abram elaborates, writing that not only does the magician slip out of the common state of consciousness, but also out of the boundaries of his or her particular culture (9). In cultures dominated by anti-nature sentiments, McCarthy’s characters certainly fit this definition: Suttree’s spiritual visions in the Smoky Mountains and Uncle Ather’s appreciation for the natural world through his exposure to panthers are examples. The ability to experience the spiritual reality behind nature requires one to view human intelligence as just one of many methods for understanding the world around him or her. Personal, experiential knowledge can provide a proximity to spirituality and truth that is impossible if simply relayed through faulty human language.

Not only does language provide the means for commodification and the reevaluation of reality, but it also hinders mankind’s ability to view the mystery of nature and see it as a reflection of spirituality. Abram stresses that the development of the alphabet in particular causes

trees to “fall silent” and animals to no longer be viewed as “emissaries from alien zones of intelligence” (130). Mankind no longer experiences nature as expressive or alive because the senses have been “transferred to another medium, another locus of participation” (131). Abram argues that this locus is written text. Mankind finds reality in the written word, in a symbolic alphabet and manmade knowledge. The “magic” that Abram describes is transferred to written text: reading creates visions, voices in one’s head, and vivid experiences. No longer must these visions and experiences come from the reality of the natural world; they are now readily available within the reader’s mind via the ingenuity of mankind.

Again, despite this, McCarthy’s characters still find a way to tap in to the spiritual mystery of nature. Usually these characters are cultural and social outsiders, if not outcasts, so the influence of society has little sway on them or is outright rejected. This can be as subtle as Billy catching glimpses of wolves hunting at night or as drastic as Suttree’s striking and immediate connection with the earth and landscape in the Smoky Mountains. Whenever this happens the character has his or her perspectives changed, or is put in a vulnerable state wherein nature can break through the character’s state of consciousness and reveal itself.

Of McCarthy’s protagonists, John Grady Cole is the most attuned with nature and exemplifies the spiritual experience that can be found in the natural world. It is immediately apparent when reading *All the Pretty Horses* that John Grady has a way with horses: he talks with them; understands their feelings; is talented at breaking in wild ones. John Grady is also able to sense and appreciate the spiritual quality of horses and the sacredness to be found within them. In his article “In Conflict with Himself: John Grady's Quest in *All the Pretty Horses*,” Terrell Tebbetts states that for John Grady horses “provide a sanctuary from dispossession and abandonment” (42). Tebbett stresses how important John Grady’s relationship with horses is and

how it contrasts with the boy's human relationships, which only seem to cause him trouble and pain. John Grady possesses the unique ability to not only connect with a non-human animal on a deep level, but to find sanctuary in it, to experience a dark mystery that exists within the natural world.

John Grady makes it a priority to stay connected to nature from the very beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*. After his grandfather's death, John Grady wishes to stay on the ranch and work the land. Unfortunately he is forced off of the ranch because his mother wants to sell it (17). It appears that the time of the Texan rancher has passed; his mother's lawyer tells John Grady that "not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and going to heaven," and that it is not a "payin proposition" (17). Nature is not valued at this time in American history, with industrialization blunting society's view of nature. The way of life John Grady has come to find meaningful and fulfilling is taken from him and fading away, much like the life and legacy of his grandfather: "The Grady name was buried with that old man" (7). Although he cannot completely resurrect the legacy of his grandfather, John Grady still does carry "Grady" as his middle name. Similarly, John Grady carries the legacy of the cowboy and the "nature-endorsing" mentality Soper describes, desiring to remain connected with the land and animals of nature despite the changing world around him. His human relationships have left him wanting. His mother works in San Antonio with little intention of making him part of her life, while his depressed and impotent father is shattered and cannot do anything for him (23). John Grady is heartbroken over Mary Catherine, a girl who apparently chose another boy over John Grady (28). The human world has let him down and he is dispossessed, with no place to call his own anymore, so he decides to leave. When Rawlins asks John Grady if he is really going to run away, he replies, "I'm already gone" (27). John Grady is a social outsider, refusing to give in to

the pressures of the present culture, preferring the natural wilderness to the disappointment of human society.

John Grady is one of McCarthy's most sympathetic protagonists, but his dispossession is only part of what makes him so sympathetic. Tebbetts claims that John Grady is "a new kind of McCarthy protagonist" because although he is an uprooted stranger like his predecessors, he is also a "lover" (Tebbetts 37). John Grady has a genuine love for life, people, and animals. McCarthy writes, "What [John Grady] loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise" (6). In the beginning of the novel, though, it is difficult to describe anyone in John Grady's life as ardent. In this context, John Grady's flight to Mexico can be interpreted as a spiritual quest to reclaim and reestablish his connection with "the ardenthearted," the true and the real that he experiences in nature and those who appreciate it. The use of the word "blood" to describe what John Grady loves in animals and man is a testament to how connected John Grady is to nature. In *The Crossing*, when Billy looks into the eyes of the she-wolf, he sees an "other world, construed out of blood with blood at its core" (73). Blood is the dark mystery of life, a powerful symbol of what is true yet unknowable in nature and in life. Not only can John Grady sense the "blood" and truth within horses and men alike, but he is also drawn to it and appreciates it for the reality that it is, and loves this reality without being concerned with attempting to completely understand it.

It is no coincidence, then, that John Grady is drawn to the wilderness of Mexico. Mexico, in contrast to Texas, is not as developed or established. Upon studying a map of Mexico, Rawlins tells John Grady that "there aint shit down here" (34). This isn't true, however. What

Rawlins means is there are not many cities, towns, and roads. There are vast tracts of wilderness and very large ranches. The wide-open and untamed landscape of Mexico is exactly what John Grady yearns for and greatly contrasts the confining urbanization of the United States, both physicality and the social mindset. John Grady's journey is a pilgrimage through a raw country where there is room for him to be a cowboy, tend to horses, reconnect with the natural world, and realize his true self; it is a world still dominated by the wild, true spirit of nature.

An excerpt from the beginning of the novel sets the tone for the natural spirituality John Grady hopes to find again in Mexico. After his grandfather's funeral, John Grady rides his horse "where he would always choose to ride," out where the western fork of the old Comanche road passed through a section of the ranch (5). He would choose to ride "when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past. . . . When the wind was in the north you could hear them, the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses' hooves . . . and above all the low chant of their song which the riders sang as they rode" (5). John Grady chooses to ride along the ancient paths of the Comanche, a people who had a similar affinity and respect for horses, and experienced a similar dispossession. There is also a spiritual aspect to the scene, a harkening to an ancient past and dead people still somehow more alive to John Grady than the living people around him. Edwin Arnold points out in his article "Go to Sleep: Dreams and Visions in *The Border Trilogy*" that this passage describes "a thing both ancient and otherworldly, and yet McCarthy suggests that this vision is not imagined by the boy or present to him only" (50). Even though John Grady must "turn the pony up onto the plain and homeward," the "warriors would ride on in that darkness they'd become, rattling past . . . and singing softly in blood and longing south across the plains of Mexico" (McCarthy 6). Again, the use of the word "blood" draws a parallel between John Grady

and the Comanche people that came before him. Arnold claims that this passage proves that the vision of the Comanche “exists independent of the boy—these ghostly figures out of the past are still a very real part of the world, whether seen or not, whether ‘alive’ or not. At the moment the boy has the eyes and the spirit to witness them, but they do not depend on his witnessing them for their existence” (Arnold 50). The Comanche have become part of the landscape, part of the nature they communed with, and John Grady is able to connect to them through their mutual love for blood and admiration for the natural world. John Grady’s relationship to the memory of the Comanche in this passage is identical with his relationship to the spirituality of the horses throughout the novel. He possesses the ability to sense what Arnold and *All the Pretty Horses* describe as “ancient and otherworldly,” a reality within the horses and the natural world that is true and independent of John Grady.

John Grady experiences this spiritual reality near the end of the novel, in a dream that is as mystic and supernatural as his Comanche vision, but focuses on the differences between nature and humanity. The destiny awaiting mankind is realized:

The horses in his dream moved gravely among the tilted stones like horses come upon an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed and if anything had been written on the stones the weathers had taken it away again.... Finally what he saw in his dream was that the order in the horse’s heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it. (281)

This dream suggests that the horse is more permanent than man because it is from or exists in a different place than man. The live horses move among the worn gravestones of deceased men, a site of a failed order of the world; there is not even a trace of it on the writing on the gravestones. This failure of the written word to last is the failure of language, the thing that separates mankind

from nature. John Grady realizes that the horse's heart is "more durable" because it was "written in a place where no rain could erase it," a mystical way of conveying the spiritual truth that the natural world holds and pointing to the failure of mankind to embrace a reality that will last. The true and the ardent are primarily found in nature, which will endure long after man is gone.

As this dream and realization proves, John Grady has a special connection with and understanding of horses and the natural world. He finds connection with the rest of nature through the animal, allowing him to experience the spiritual mystery of the world in a real and emotional way. In his critical essay titled "A Note on Horses in *All the Pretty Horses*," Jianqing Zheng writes, "To John Grady, the wild horses symbolize the unfallen spirit in nature that he desires. The description of John Grady's close relationship with the horses reveals his affinity with nature and the philosophical notion of an essential unity of human beings with the universe that connects the external world and internal emotion." Zheng's strong assumptions about John Grady's connection with horses are supported by a passage near the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*. McCarthy describes John Grady by saying that "if he were begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway" (23). It is as if John Grady's affection for horses is supernatural: "[He] would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been" (23). While McCarthy uses this passage to describe just how powerfully John Grady is connected to horses, he leaves as a mystery the reason John Grady would have the ability to sense something was "missing" in a horseless world. Terrell Tebbetts argues that John Grady's connection with horses "stems from his drive to find something in this world adequate to his love" (43). To search for something to pour one's

heart and love into is indeed a spiritual quest, and the fact that nothing but horses is adequate embellishes the idea that the souls of horses and the spirituality of nature are something pure, truthful, and mystical, especially compared to the human depravity that has let John Grady down. Horses are a reflection of distilled goodness, and John Grady has difficulty finding such a reflection in humanity. To John Grady, a world without horses is a world without God, or at least a world without any connection to something higher than man.

John Grady's profound connection with horses is most powerfully apparent after he and Rawlins begin working at Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. He often talks to the horses he rides, reassuring them or calming them. Whether he is aware of it or not, John Grady's interaction with horses cannot be described as anything less than mystic and supernatural. McCarthy rarely writes what John Grady says to the horses, but it is clear that it is effective and something out of the ordinary. As John Grady begins breaking a colt after arriving at Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion, he holds it and tells it "all that he intended to do" and strokes "the terror out" of it (103-4). Although the reader does not know the words that John Grady speaks, their effect is powerful, calming the horse in a way that nobody has seen before, his efforts at breaking the horse drawing a large crowd of onlookers (105). Even on a large Mexican ranch, John Grady's way with horses and his connection with them are considered extraordinary. Instead of breaking horses through domination, he does so through a deep understanding of and respect for the animal, as if the horse is a partner in this rite.

By not allowing the reader to know exactly what John Grady is saying to the horses, McCarthy makes John Grady's "horsetalk" somewhat of a sacred mystery. The way McCarthy describes John Grady's horsetalk is similar to Chapter 8 of The Gospel of John. The chapter begins with the story of the Pharisees bringing a woman caught in adultery to Jesus in order to

ensnare him in a moral and theological trap. In response, Jesus begins writing on the ground and “when they kept on questioning Him, He straightened up and said to them, ‘Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground” (*New International Version*, John 8.7). What Jesus wrote was not recorded, but the fact that He was writing something was; therefore, the act of writing itself is what has an effect on the Pharisees. Although it appears to be Jesus’ spoken words that cause the Pharisees to leave (8.9), the words written played a part as well; perhaps Jesus was writing down their transgressions, something only God could know. The description of John Grady’s horsetalk is similar to Jesus’ writing on the ground. Since the actual words are not recorded, the reader is only allowed to see the results of the act, not the means, and this makes the act something mysterious and supernatural.

Although not nearly on the same level as Jesus’ spiritual connection with the people He interacted with, there is a spiritual connection and understanding between John Grady and horses that borders on the supernatural. John Grady does not squander this talent that he possesses for his own gain. He does not talk to horses just to make it easier for them to be broken by men; he views them as having inherent worth as the “ardenthearted” creatures that he loves and respects. Zheng goes so far to say that horses are “like a spiritual bridge between John Grady and nature.” Through the horse John Grady can experience a reality uncontrived by humanity and incomprehensible by humankind.

Although John Grady cannot *comprehend* the truth he loves in horses, he *experiences* it by breaking, riding, and caring for horses. There are several instances within the novel where John Grady receives a glimpse of the raw spirituality of the natural world through his interactions with horses. After being jailed with Rawlins and Blevins, John Grady has another

dream, a dream “of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wild-flowers out of the ground and the flowers ran all blue and yellow far as the eye could see” (161). This idyllic setting, even though it is purely a natural world, has the feeling of being otherworldly. “A high plain” has a heavenly connotation to it, and “as far as the eye could see” suggests that this is a world that goes on into eternity. This is John Grady’s vision of the “other world,” the purely natural world that he only gets glimpses and “news” of through his prophetic experiences with horses. McCarthy writes that “[John Grady] was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses” (161). John Grady is not a spectator in this dream world: He is a participant, uninhibited, completely integrated into it. It is a scene of perfection: “. . .and there was nothing else at all in that high world and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised” (161-2). This is a natural world without the blight of humanity, physically and spiritually in tune with itself. This dream represents what John Grady longs for: oneness with the mysterious truth of the natural world. Although he cannot completely understand or speak of it, he seeks after it and praises it through his connection with and love of horses, and in this particular time of distress, he finds solace in it.

Although this dream is ethereal and idyllic, John Grady also has a very down-to-earth and personal connection with the horses he encounters. As he rides away from the ranch for the last time, he talks to his horse and “told it things about the world that were true in his experience and he told it things he thought could be true to see how they would sound if they were said” (242). John Grady is not merely making “conversation” with a horse to pass the time; he is treating the horse as a sounding board to find the truth in his experiences and weed out things that may not

be true. John Grady is actively defining himself and his beliefs, conceptualizing himself and using the horse as “the other,” just as Soper’s definition of “Nature” warrants. Instead of commodifying the horse and therefore considering it only based on its value and use to him, John Grady considers the horse as an individual and unique being, a touchstone to help him better understand himself.

This idea of the horse as individual may seem to contradict Luis’s proposition of the “common soul” of the horse, but—in actuality—it strengthens it. Luis says, “if a person understood the soul of the horse then he would understand all horses that ever were” (111). He is not suggesting that all horses are identical and if a person understands one, he understands them all; he is saying that they share a *soul*, and to understand that fact is to understand all horses. There is a truth that is shared in all horses and reflected in each individual, much like Plato’s idea of material and ideal “Forms,” in which the non-material, abstract and perfect Forms are more of a reality than the material forms, which are essentially imperfect or lesser copies of the ideal. The horse is both individual and collective, representing the material, physical horse along with the ideal concept of the horse as a Form, and this “Form” is the collective soul, a mystery that John Grady seems to intuitively sense and experience.

The spiritual connection between John Grady and horses is one of the more beautiful aspects of *All the Pretty Horses*. Despite the upheaval of John Grady’s life by his jaded family, the young boy manages to pursue the truth and reality he has come to know in horses. Through his affection for the animals, he is allowed a glimpse of the “ardenthearted” world that he longs to be a part of. The spiritual and the sacred permeate much deeper than the vocabulary and style of the novel. McCarthy expertly uses the horse to philosophize, contrasting the natural world with the human world in a way that portrays the horse as a true and beautiful thing; the novel

lives up to its name. Despite the amount of violence, dispossession, and pain that fills John Grady's world, he is always able to experience spirituality and truth through horses.

Like John Grady, Cornelius Suttree is a McCarthy protagonist who experiences social displacement, turns to a more rural/pastoral lifestyle, and finds truth within the natural world. Unlike John Grady Cole, Suttree is not much of an innocent "lover" who stands up for ideals of justice. Instead, Suttree is a guilt-ridden alcoholic who has willfully alienated himself from his family and is spiritually jaded. Most of the natural world in *Suttree* reflects Suttree's disposition as well, polluted and dirty; the Tennessee River and surrounding valley pale in comparison to what they were before the urbanization of Knoxville. Because of the fallen disposition of both Suttree and nature, the spiritual quest that Suttree undergoes is one not only to rediscover something true and beautiful in the mystery of nature, but also to overcome his own demons and rekindle a love for life and the spiritual. For Suttree, the natural world is redemptive, pulling him out of the mire of his own shame and guilt, back into the world of living mystery.

Although Suttree's past is rather shadowy and vague, the decision to alienate himself stems primarily from his family relationships. His choice to leave an upper-crust lifestyle for the poorer, simpler existence of a fisherman on an abandoned houseboat alienates him from his wealthy father. Beyond simple disapproval, his father cannot understand why Suttree would leave. In a letter to Suttree his father writes that if he feels like he's missing life he can find it "in the law courts, in business, in government" (14). This suggests that Suttree forsook his prestigious upbringing in order to find "life," to find something more real and meaningful than what he would inherit. Suttree's reason to hold contempt for his father is apparent when he is talking to his uncle, pointing out that his father "married beneath him," and therefore Suttree is beneath him as well (19). He believes his father is contemptuous of him because of his mother

and her family, that Suttree “was expected to turn out badly” (19). Suttree’s estrangement with and alienation from his father was a complex act of rebellion, a willful search for something “more” in life, and an embrace of the low expectations his father apparently had for him.

Suttree’s abandonment of his wife and his son appears to have been a result of similar motives and a source of much shame. A dream Suttree has proves that the contempt and humiliation he feels is shared and intermixed within his relationship to his father and his son. He dreams that a man he took to be his father grabs him in passing, brandishing a knife, but Suttree concludes that “it was not my father but my son who accosted me with such rancorless intent” (28). That the intent was “rancorless” implies that perhaps it is not the son or father that hold power over him, but the guilt and humiliation he feels about abandoning them that makes them accost him in his dreams. There are no details about the circumstances of his leaving his wife and child, however. Only the aftermath is knowable: that he loved his wife and that she and her family hold much grief, pain, and anger over his leaving, expressed when he returns for his son’s funeral. After watching the funeral from a distance, Suttree makes a point to fill in his son’s grave, a meager attempt to do one last thing for his son and the guilt he feels for what he has done. Suttree’s abandonment of his wife and child are a constant weight upon his life and conscience, a weight that causes him embrace the alienation he feels by living in poverty in McAnally Flats.

The last familial relationship that causes Suttree guilt is the relationship with someone he never met: his twin brother, who, a breech birth, supposedly died as Suttree kicked him in the head during birth. Already battered by the strained and guilt-ridden relationships with his father, wife, and son, Suttree must ask himself why it was he who unintentionally murdered his “mirror image” (14). The dead twin is another family member whom Suttree betrayed by not living a life

worthy of the life given to him. Suttree describes that his brother was the “the ordinary of the second son,” that Suttree “followed him into the world” (14). Suttree grapples with the idea that fate allowed him to live and his brother to die, that perhaps death had chosen incorrectly. The still-born twin still holds so much power over Suttree’s psyche that it is perhaps the shame Suttree feels in simply living that causes him to turn from the prosperous upbringing of his father and seemingly happy marriage with his wife for a life of lonely destitution on the Tennessee River.

Although Suttree lives on the river and is routinely traveling into the natural world, his disposition prevents him from having anything resembling a mystical experience. Unlike John Grady’s rancher life that is chosen because of his love for horses, Suttree’s poor fisherman life is one of self-inflicted exile; being an upper-class college boy did not prepare him well for the life he has chosen in the old houseboat. He often catches fewer fish than he would like and has trouble finding buyers in Knoxville. Early in the novel he lies awake and says to himself that in another life he might have been “a fisher of men,” but that “these fish now seemed task enough for him” (14). He is a broken man, out of his element. This fact is apparent to Michael the Indian, who is an excellent fisherman and trapper. Michael tells Suttree that Suttree “won’t stay” on the river (a true prophesy), and when Michael asks Suttree what got him into fishing, Suttree tells him “I sort of inherited my line from another man,” a man that said “not to look for him back” (240). Suttree is living a life of penance in a vocation handed down to him, one not of his choosing. He is not yet seeking truth or pursuing anything within nature; instead, he meagerly subsists off of it, unable to see anything beyond what it can supply to him.

However, Suttree’s relationship with the natural world does not remain shallow and stagnant. His spiritual quest begins shortly after he reluctantly helps Leonard perform a burial at

sea for Leonard's father. The fact that Leonard doesn't even want to "say a few words" over the body bothers Suttree, and after they shove "the thing" into the river, Suttree refuses to make conversation with Leonard (251-252). This death seems to be the grim reminder of mortality that breaks Suttree. The next chapter finds Suttree drunk, stumbling through the Catholic church he attended as a boy. This visit not only provides background for Suttree's spiritual life, but also serves as the springboard for his spiritual quest, making him restless and reawakening a need for something more than the life he is living.

The description of the Church of the Immaculate Conception provides an indication of the spirituality Suttree grew up with and abandoned, a spirituality in stark contrast with the mystical and mysterious spirituality with which McCarthy endows the natural world. McCarthy describes the church as a cold, dead thing: "Beyond the chancel gate three garish altars rose like gothic wedding cakes in carven marble. Crocketed and gargoyle, the steeples iced with rows of marble frogs ascending" (253). The foliage of the crocket and the frogs are images of nature, but they are part of a showy altar and carved in cold marble, caricatures of the life they represent. The Crucifix is described as "a sallow plaster Christ," and Mary "treads a snake with her chipped and naked feet" (253). Both descriptions emphasize the hollowness of the statues, mere shadows of the people and the stories they depict. They are worn, manmade icons in a worn, manmade building, with a tabernacle "where the wise high God himself lies sleeping in his golden cup" (253). Even God is a caricature here, dormant, resting in luxury within the church, a deity encompassed by the knowledge of men. He is not a larger-than-life mystery, but a known thing living in space and time, domesticated by man. As Suttree slips into his memories of growing up within this church, he is reminded of the teachers, "grim and tireless in their orthopedic moralizing," "filled with tales of sin and unrepentant deaths and visions of hell" (254). Suttree

associates this church and his religious upbringing with sin, guilt, and hell. Despite the efforts of the priests and teachers, Suttree says that most of the students only managed to learn to read and write, “and that was all”; the religion taught apparently did not take hold, and many, like Suttree, fell away from faith (254).

In *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Vereen Bell writes that Suttree is “left impaled upon the wrong end of a coherent theological dogma in which the world can only be a place of death and suffering and, at best, a dangerous obstacle to salvation” (69). Suttree was taught that the world works in a revealed, logical, and understandable code that leads to redemption, but due to what Bell calls “militant religious instruction,” the redemption is lost in a world of guilt and sin that has imprisoned Suttree. Suttree’s reaction to his schooling has essentially reduced God to the knowable, stripping Suttree’s religion of mystery, leaving only an oppressive shell of regulations and consequences. Despite his drunken state, Suttree’s disdain for his upbringing and the religion that was pushed on him are clear. After a priest wakes Suttree and tells him God’s house is no place for a nap, Suttree responds with the razor-sharp “it’s not God’s house” (255). When the priest begs his pardon, Suttree again states resolutely, “It’s not God’s house” (255). Suttree is aware that the deity sleeping in the golden cup is not God. Spiritually broken and guilt-ridden, Suttree is yearning for some form of redemption, some answer to his life that his past cannot help him with.

Shortly after this visit to the church, Suttree goes in search of answers in the present, detaching himself from his life in Knoxville and journeys on a desperate spiritual pilgrimage. He takes a bus to Gatlingburg in late October and hikes into the surrounding Smoky Mountains. This is a different journey than John Grady’s. Although the novel is not explicit, from Suttree’s drunken visit to the church and his wandering of the streets it can be surmised that the guilt,

shame, anger and emptiness Suttree feels have intensified to a fever pitch and he is looking for a reprieve, whether it be something that orders his life or something that completely unravels it; Gary Adelman describes Suttree's mentality well in *Sorrow's Rigging*, writing that Suttree goes into the mountains "desiring pain, cleansing pain, mortification, to be alone, lost . . . purged of memories, purged of identity" (32). What Suttree needs at this point in the novel is complex and difficult to describe; it could be one or all of the desires Adelman lists. A cleansing and purging of himself is indeed a spiritual and existential desire, and the fact that he leaves human society and treks into the wilderness of the natural world suggests that he is instinctively drawn to it or believes nature will play an essential part in the cleansing process.

Suttree's quest into the mountains is a gradual one, with his perspective shifting as he leaves first the roads and then the trails, making his way deeper into the heart of the mountains. At first he attempts to catch fish to no avail and builds fires where he can, but soon he is starving, eating roots, mushrooms, and whatever he can find. In his starvation, however, his senses begin to awaken. He is surprised to find some small flowers in the woods and "fell into silent studies over the delicate loomwork in the moss" (284). He is beginning to notice the fine, beautiful details in nature—even the fungi on rotting logs—and meditate on them. Thomas Young writes that Suttree "purposefully courts the primitive realms of being" and that the time spent alone puts him in "a state of visionary power that allows him to see the world as it is" (78). Suttree's state is a shift in perception similar to the ability of the magician that Abram describes, allowing him to experience the natural world outside of societal and human constructs and in a less subjective (albeit not totally objective) light.

Despite his newfound reverence for nature, Suttree does not yet feel connected to it. At first he feels alone in the mountains, especially at night: "The cold indifferent dark, the blind

stars beaded on their tracks and mitered satellites and geared and pinioned planets all reeling through the black of space” (284). This is the description of an aloof, uncaring world with nothing sentient behind it. The satellites and mechanical word choices of “geared” and “pinioned” make this a world tainted by man and his influence. This bleak outlook on the world does not last, however. After Suttree goes days without food and wrapped only in a shoddy blanket, he stops by a stream for a drink and then slumps down:

He looked at a world of incredible loveliness. Old distaff Celt’s blood in some back chamber of his brain moved him to discourse with the birches, with the oaks. A cool green fire kept breaking in the woods and he could hear the footsteps of the dead. Everything had fallen from him. He scarce could tell where his being ended or the world began nor did he care. (286)

This is a significant experience for Suttree, one that will prove to be a turning point for his relationship not only with the world around him, but also with his own guilt and shame. Blood again plays a key role in the bridging of the natural and human world, moving Suttree to an even deeper state of visionary power. The Celt blood from his mother’s side is credited with invoking this experience (possibly a reference to Celtic tree worship), connecting Suttree to a tradition ancient and lost, one that—as Abram puts it—still found spirituality and “alien zones of intelligence” within nature. The spiritual, freeing, and whimsical act of speaking with trees comes from his mother and strongly contrasts with the cold, logical, and orderly disposition of Suttree’s father. Suttree thought he was rebelliously embracing his mother’s heritage by being a poor fisherman, but now her true heritage has overcome him, allowing him to connect with the reality of the natural world the way his ancestors did. Divisions dissolve: the division between man and tree; the living and the dead; between Suttree and the world. He lies on the ground, “the

earth's core sucking his bones," the world pulling him to itself but at the same time giving him the sensation of "falling outward through blue and windy space" (286). Everything in nature has become heightened and more experiential; the woods "looked too green for the season," and later he envisions a war happening during a storm, with the lightning and smoke "more palpable than wortled bone or plate or pauldron shelled with rot" (287). However, his senses are also confused and indescribable—surely starvation and exposure are at work, but at the same time, Suttree seems insightful throughout this experience, even being able to "feel the oilless turning of the earth beneath him" (286). The word "oilless" is an odd choice here; one would think that the turning of the earth ought be described as "oiled," fluid and consistent. However, a possible definition may be "not requiring oil," separating the earth from things mechanical and manmade, which often require oil as lubricant to work. Suttree's sense of the world turning not only proves how enveloped and in tune he is with the natural world at this point, but also reveals that there is not a "mechanism" operating the world, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. The world turns and it seems it will turn forever, and while the reasons behind it are a mystery, the effect can be felt.

The eternal mystery of the ever-turning world is emphasized even more when contrasted with the image of impermanence that Suttree comes upon later that evening: a children's cemetery next to the ruins of a church. "The stone footings of a church nearby was all the church there was," writes McCarthy (286). After the previous church scene, it is likely that in this passage "church" signifies "the Church," and all organized religion, for that matter. The stone footings aren't just all of the church building there was, it is all of the Church there was; for Suttree, the Catholic Church is not "God's house," but an empty façade that, like everything manmade, breaks down and wears away in time. This idea is strengthened by Suttree walking

among the children's graves, "the naked headboards all but perished in the weathers of seasons past," a precursor to the description of the dream John Grady has with the horses walking among the worn graves of men (286). The lives and works of men—even the revealed theology and work related to the supernatural—all fade away, while the spirituality of nature lasts and endures. As Suttree leaves this scene, the storm that has followed him begins to break and "a drop of rain sang on a stone. Bell loud in the wild silence" (286). Just as the trees "speak," the rain "sings." It is not the church bell that tolls for these children anymore, but the "bell" of nature that will forever remember them, much like the horses visiting the graves of men. Although the novel is not explicit, this scene affirms Suttree's negative views and doubt of organized religion, suggesting that the guilt forced upon him during his childhood was indeed unfounded and that spirituality and truth resides elsewhere, yet everywhere: in the world around him.

Along with addressing Suttree's guilt associated with religion, Suttree's experience in the wilderness of the natural world also makes him face the existential crisis associated with the death of his twin that he has dealt with all his life. After the children's graveyard scene, Suttree's trek in the mountains takes a strange turn, with Suttree seeing extraordinary apparitions including monks, warring armies, and a grotesque carnival. However, the most important apparition is "some othersuttree" that he begins to sense going before him, and fears that if they ended up meeting he would not be "mended or made whole," but "set mindless to dodder drooling with his ghostly clone" (287). This is not simply a part of Suttree himself, but an eerie doppelganger that clearly represents his dead older brother. The power relationship between Suttree and the doppelganger and Suttree and his dead twin are the same; in both relationships Suttree is the "younger" or the "one behind." Suttree is also the one without power in the relationship; the doppelganger is the one moving and allowing Suttree to avoid meeting him and making him go

mad and, although it is Suttree that kicks his twin to death, the twin now holds power over Suttree in ways unimaginable, through insurmountable guilt, existential crisis, and psychological anguish. Although this doppelganger is an apparition, Suttree's psyche is manifesting a psychological reality into the natural world, and in doing so reveals a truth that Suttree knows yet has not been able to confront and overcome on a rational, logical level. By manifesting his twin into the natural world Suttree is able to see his problem in a different perspective and to get it out of himself and separate it from himself which, as this scene proves, is extremely important. This is a part of him that needs to be separate; otherwise, he will continue to be driven into madness. Only through isolating himself in the wilderness of the natural world was this possible.

The natural world also provides another meaningful vision to Suttree, albeit one less personal. After a storm moves off, he sees a grotesque carnival of trolls and fantasy creatures parading in the rain with an assortment of imprisoned or killed mythical creatures: a caged wivern, skewered chimeras and cacodemons, and "other alchemical game" (287). This vision seems fantastic and nonsensical—and it certainly is—but although Suttree watches it go by "with a half grin of wry doubt," there is a meaning to the carnival that connects with the spirituality of the natural world and the commodification of nature. The trolls' casual killing and parading of animals that the average human would consider extraordinary is a satire of Knoxville and, more tangibly, the antics of Harrogate; the killing of dozens and dozens of bats for the sake of coin should hold the same weight as the skewered chimera. Humanity has lost reverence and awe for the natural world, and in that respect, this ghastly carnival is not so fantastical after all; it actually resembles a Mexican carnival McCarthy will later describe in *The Crossing*, in which the shewolf is killed.

Just as the eternity of the natural world was heightened by contrasting it with the proceeding scene of the children's graveyard, the meaning of the carnival is heightened by comparing it with the scene that follows, in which Suttree passes a hunter in a tree stand. The hunter is hunting out of season with a crossbow, a weapon likely illegal to hunt with at all. The hunter waiting in his tree stand to poach deer with an overpowered bow shows little reverence for the animal, and his commodification is made clear when he tells Suttree that the crossbow has "killed more *meat* than you could bear [emphasis added]," as opposed to "more deer" or "more animals" (289). The hunter also serves as a transition from the mystic natural world that Suttree is leaving to the town that Suttree is about to enter. Suttree thinks that this hunter is just like the carnival: an apparition. Comically, the hunter is not sure what to make of the starved, haggard, half-naked Suttree, either: "What are you?" he asks, to which Suttree laughs and asks his own question: "Are you real?" (288). These questions of identity and reality are the questions that led Suttree into the mountains in the first place, and although they have not been answered, his perspective has been altered as he comes down from the mountain. Self-conceptualization and reality continue to be themes of McCarthy's novels and are directly linked to first-hand exposure to the natural world.

This change in perspective is even more apparent when Suttree finally reaches the town and returns to the things of civilization. What should be the familiar are foreign and unintelligible to him, especially writing. The newspaper is "a rash of incomprehensible events" (292), and the words in a copy of the Book of Mormon he reads "swam off the page eerily" (294). With his perspective still shifted from his time in the mountains, his "sense" for reading and writing has been lost, temporarily transferred to the "language" of the trees and the wilderness. In addition, he comprehends images of nature within society much differently than

before. Upon entering a diner he hears “the dull tocking of applewood clockworks,” and he sees a “blackened trout” on a board and an old “naked leather squirrel” taxidermy with “vitreous eyebulbs,” saying that both of these animals “knew not” (292). These are natural elements—both plant and animal—commodified and altered: the tree for function, the trout likely for pride and posterity, and the squirrel for curiosity. All of them are a hybrid of animal and man, and Suttree understands these things as grotesque, and his pointing out that the animals “knew not” insinuates that these animals are nothing now, or gave no consent in their current fates. “From this perspective all nature seems misshapen,” Young states, “reduced to incomprehensible relics by the human appropriation of it” (79). Society’s views of the natural world are misshapen, but Suttree could not see this from his perspective within society; it is only after venturing out, diminishing himself, and experiencing the mystery of nature that he is able to not only see nature for what it is, but also to see how irreverent and disassociated mankind has become with the natural world, symbolized by these human-appropriated “relics.”

Suttree’s change in perspective subtly remains throughout the rest of the novel, with him unable to find his way in human society but also struggling to connect with nature again. This change in perspective is the seed of a psychological transformation, but it even has physical ramifications, ramifications not lost on Suttree. At the diner, he cannot eat the food; it gums up in his mouth and he cannot taste anything. “Is there something wrong with me?” he demands, then mutters, “The imago does not eat” (292). “Imago” could either refer to the image of God or the final stage of an insect’s development. The theological definition implies that Suttree either sees himself as a thing false and artificial, unable to perform the natural act of eating and sustaining itself, or that it is as if he has had a supernatural transformation that has made food unnecessary; this is a fitting revelation after a time spent in the reality of the natural world. The biological

definition of “imago” acknowledges that Suttree has developed somehow into another stage of being, as if his revelation has led to a psychological and spiritual transfiguration.

Despite this acknowledgement, Suttree struggles to live up to such a state throughout the rest of the novel. He eventually reenters human society, joining a family in a musseling business that fails, and having a foray with a prostitute that ends very badly. He fears that these interactions in society have pushed him away from what he found in the wilderness of the Smoky Mountains. At the beginning of his musseling job, he sleeps out in the woods and wakes feeling “alien and tainted” camped out in the wilderness: “As if the city had marked him. So that no eldritch daemon would speak him secrets in this wood” (316). This is an important statement because Suttree not only admits to feeling a duality between the city and nature, but also that he wants to experience that mystical spirituality of the natural world, to again hear the secrets of the wood. Unfortunately, Suttree does not realize that the work he is about to do will be the opposite of communion with nature. In fact, what he experiences is the worst side of commodification and human labor; the camp he works at is incredibly impoverished, the work is hard and unrewarding, and Reese’s management is comically abysmal.

One night after a few weeks of work, Reese takes Suttree into town to drink away the little money that they have made. It would be expected that Suttree, a man known to appreciate alcohol, would have at least enjoyed himself that night. Instead, after stumbling into his camp he lies down, too tired to even bathe. Before falling asleep, he looks at the ground he is sleeping on: “My life is ghastly, he told the grass” (348). Suttree is aware that he has fallen into a terrible existence, and looks not to another human being for solace, but to the grass, to nature itself. If his mark prevents the daemon from speaking to him, perhaps his initiation of the conversation—especially in the form of a confession—will be at least a step in the right direction to ridding

himself of the city mark. Of course, this mark is really an invention of Suttree's; it is not an external force alienating him from nature, but his slipping back into his old frame of mind before being able to reconcile the perspective and true vision he experienced in the mountains with the workings of human society that he has returned to.

Fortunately Suttree does not remain in this state of irreconcilable limbo; by the end of the novel he has not only overcome much of the guilt and shame from his past but has found an equilibrium between the human world and the natural world. This is all brought about by his return to the houseboat, his own space in the world. The journey Suttree goes on turns out to be a circular one, and it is not until he arrives home and is alone in his riverside house that the experiences he has had come to fruition. He repairs the houseboat, which he finds vandalized and pillaged, and in returning order to his home (or the place he can most call home) he appears to order his thoughts as well. After setting his fishing lines, he eats supper and sits "listening to the river, the newspaper open across his lap, and an uneasy peace came over him, a strange kind of contentment" (413). Here, a symbol of nature (the river) and man (the newspaper) come together, but it produces a good feeling for Suttree, and puts him in a state of mind to come to terms with reality. He leans back in his chair, a calm and leisurely posture, and starts a question-and-answer session with the orb of lamplight on the ceiling, a stand-in for the world, and possibly God. It is a conversation about death—a subject that has haunted Suttree—and about belief. When he asks himself if he repents of anything, he says he repents for speaking "with bitterness" about his life and for saying he would rally against the "monstrous facelessness" of oblivion and "stand a stone in the very void" so others "would read my name" (414). He repents of trying to fight against the world, to understand it and overcome the immensity of the universe and be remembered for doing so. His journey into the wilderness has proven to him that there is more to the void; there

is a mystical spirituality in the natural world, and although the universe is an immense, unfathomable vacuum, it is a reality that can be experienced. The journey also revealed to him that human history and society are temporal compared to nature, and that any headstone erected for him in “the void” would wear and disappear, just like the stones of the children’s graveyard and the stones the horses walk amongst. He has come to terms with these facts, and in so doing, has reconciled himself: “He leaned and blew away the flame, his double, the image overhead” (414). The “othersuttree”—whether it is his twin brother, or the duality that manifested in his mind due to guilt and shame—is gone, finally overcome as Suttree comes to terms with the world.

In addition to reconciling with himself and the world, Suttree takes another journey of self-discovery, a more permanent one that ends the novel. After a dead man found in his houseboat is mistaken for Suttree—a strange event that not only conveniently allows Suttree to slip away, but also symbolizes the “death” of his old self—Suttree leaves Knoxville. As he walks down the streets for the last time, “he felt everything fall away from him,” much the way his clothes began to fall from him during his journey into the Smoky Mountains: “There was nothing left of him to shed. It was all gone. No trail, no track” (468). He has “shed” everything to again reach the “imago” stage he experienced in the mountains, but this time it was not an involuntary metamorphosis achieved through starvation and isolation. If the city had left a mark on Suttree, it was gone now, along with everything else he has rid himself of: the sin, the guilt, and the shame. Suttree has also reconciled himself with the city, just as he has with the natural world. As he waits on the side of the road to hitchhike, a construction gang works on the other side of the road, and a young boy with a pail of water offers some to each of the workers. The act is a clear symbol of Communion; McCarthy writes that the workers’ “hands come up from below the rim

of the pit in parched supplication” (470). The boy approaches Suttree of his own volition and offers Suttree the dipper, “bright and dripping,” with “water beading coldly on the tin” and drops steaming as they hit the road (470). This is an icy cold cup of water, similar to the cup of water Suttree drinks before his strongest experience in the mountains, water that “lay in his stomach as cold as when he drank it” (286). This water is truth and life: earlier Suttree concludes, “The color of this life is water” (415). Suttree takes and drinks, and then a car is waiting for him, stopped without Suttree’s bidding: similar to the boy approaching Suttree voluntarily. Suttree didn’t even lift a hand for it to stop for him; it is as if fate or something supernatural is watching over him, unfolding this journey for Suttree.

It is clear that Suttree is leaving behind the city, the “sad purlieus of the dead immured with the bones of friends and forbearers,” possibly for the less-urbanized west (471). Seeking out the wilderness of the west also coincides with everything that Suttree has experienced in the natural world and what he longs to be a part of. However, where Suttree is going and what he will find there is ultimately a mystery. Young speculates that “Suttree clearly has learned the precept that the outer world is beautiful and real. Whether this can truly be more than precept for him, however, must remain in doubt” (91). While Young’s doubt is certainly understandable during most of the second half of the novel, the ending seems rather hopeful in this regard. It is true that Suttree’s powerful perception wanes after his Smoky Mountains trek, but in the end he learns to accept himself and the world for what it is, a result certainly driven by his experiences and visions in the natural world. This is emphasized by the hound that comes out from the woods and sniffs the spot where Suttree stood, just missing him; the huntsman and his hounds are a symbol of death, and Suttree has just literally escaped death and reconciled himself with the idea of death and the death of his twin. His spiritual experience in the natural world has allowed him

to shed his past preoccupation with death for good, to live in the “world of incredible loveliness,” in the psychological sense and—more than likely—the literal sense.

The Redemptive Truth of Nature

The radical impact nature has on the characters and the plot of McCarthy's fiction is why examining its role within the novels is essential to understanding the consistent yet ever-evolving philosophical and spiritual questions of his texts and the relationship between man and his "other," nature. John Grady and Suttree have contrasting—yet complementary—experiences with the natural world. In certain respects, these two protagonists are distinctively different. John Grady is a young, rather innocent youth, especially compared to the baggage the older and jaded Suttree carries with him. John Grady is initially much closer to the natural world, and his abilities and history with horses provide him with a connection to nature; he is already acclimated to it, primed to experience it. Suttree, on the other hand, has no such connection, and his journey towards mystically experiencing nature is a longer, more complicated one. However, what both protagonists do share is a feeling of alienation and a desire for truth—both a glimpse at the "truth of the universe" and the ability stand for what is true and not be complacent with anything else. Despite their different backgrounds and journeys, the natural world helps them both get closer to a true, experiential spirituality.

There are several other characters who have similar experiences with and insight into the natural world, and all their journeys fall somewhere between John Grady's and Suttree's. Billy Parham's journey with the shewolf he captures in *The Crossing* is an example of naïve innocence that allows for insight and a reverence for the natural world. He makes a conscious decision to help the pregnant wolf and return it to "the mountains"—the human-free wilderness—and is asked several times to sell the wolf, but refuses. The shewolf serves as an image of the savage beauty of the natural world, and it is this being isolated with this beauty that causes Billy to decide to release the wolf to the natural world instead of selling her. Unfortunately, he must

shoot the wolf out of mercy, as she is painfully and brutally attacked by dogs for the entertainment of a carnival circus. Commodification will take more from him, as he returns home to find his parents murdered for their horses. Billy's second crossing of the border is again motivated by "doing right" for animals, to retrieve the horses. Although Billy never reaches as personal a connection with the natural world as John Grady or Suttree, he gathers a respect and pity for animals and attempts to right the wrongs of his fellow men.

Arthur Ownby is another character that takes on the stewardship role and has a great respect for the natural world. He is the orchard keeper, but also the keeper of a time that is expiring or has expired, before urbanization and industrialization clashed with the natural world. Steven Frye describes this time as "an old order, a time when survival, human happiness, even spiritual sustenance came from cultivating a synergistic relationship with the untamed wilderness" (24). Arthur is the forbearer of what the protagonists of McCarthy's later novels must rediscover through direct experience with the mystery of the natural world. Arthur relates a past experience with panthers, an animal that he endows with a mystic and supernatural otherness: "They's painters [panthers] and they's painters. Some of em is jest that, and then others is right uncommon. That old she-painter, she never left a track one. She wadn't no common kind of painter" (157). Although this could be discredited as an old man telling tales, the general uneasiness of the men in the town when they mistake the sound of an owl for a panther is telling. Arthur teases them, his personal experience enough to know that it is an owl. The natural world still holds mystery and secrets, regardless of man's inability to realize it consciously, and this mystery is terrifying and dangerous to those that do not understand it for what it is—a mystery. Arthur embraces nature for its mystery and spirituality, and although he suffers greatly for it, the passing on of his insight to John Rattner—exemplified in Rattner's

attempt to get back the dead hawk he sold to the county—not only makes his suffering for aught, but also sets the stage for the experiential insight and suffering that many of McCarthy’s protagonists will experience in the novels following *The Orchard Keeper*.

Like Arthur, there are several secondary characters that are close to the natural world and experience it for what it is. Suttree’s friend Michael, “the Indian,” is one with nature in a way Suttree finds difficult to be, symbolized by the bait Michael uses to catch enormous fish that Suttree cannot stand because of its strong odor (222). Michael lives on a hill in a cave with “a natural terrace,” a home in the very heart of the natural world (239). After he kills a turtle to prepare for dinner, Michael is described as swinging the turtle before him “like a censor,” an image that gives both Michael and his relationship with the natural world a spiritual connotation (234). Later he “crouched like an icon and began to ladle the stew into his jaws”—“icon” is another religious and spiritual image, and the use of “jaws” as opposed to “mouth” is more animalistic than human (240). This is also when he makes the true prophesy that Suttree “wont stay” on the river, making Michael a mystic of the natural world (240). Don Arnulfo is another such mystic, whose life of trapping wolves has made him only respect the wolf and view it as something otherworldly, separate from humans. Although *The Crossing* does not divulge much about Don Arnulfo’s past, the fact that he tells Billy that he “should find the place where acts of God and those of man are of a piece” and has such insight into the differences between nature and man suggests experiential knowledge of the divine and of nature (47). And, like Arthur, Don Arnulfo’s time is past and he is being forgotten: “No one comes to see him,” his caretaker says (47). The industrialized world moves on and leaves men like Don Arnulfo behind, bestowing wisdom and insight on a single member of the next generation.

Although the “time” for many of these characters is past as urbanized society loses reverence and connection with the natural world, nature is still there to be experienced—nature is never spent. There is freshness in “deep down things,” things eternal and otherworldly that cannot be completely understood. Despite the coming urbanization of America—ironically and iconically symbolized by the nuclear flash in *The Crossing*—and man’s ability to discern mystery and awe in the natural world as “the last lights off the black West” go, there is something larger than man, animal, or plant at work. Whether McCarthy’s fiction follows parallel with the rest of Hopkins’ poem—that behind the world is the Holy Ghost raising the sun again, issuing in the rejuvenation of nature with “ah! Bright wings”—is an issue that is not answerable (13-14). McCarthy’s novels avoid naming the force behind nature and its mystical “otherworld,” so whether it is the Christian God or not is a mystery; even if it is, the term “Christian God” cannot completely describe or encapsulate this force. Over and over again, McCarthy hints at the mystical otherworld of blood and death, but does not define it; in fact, he often discredits preachers, priests, and laymen that claim with a definite level of exactitude to understand how the spiritual realm operates. However, while this allows for a multitude of possibilities as to what has structured the world, this does not discredit the idea of the Christian God being behind the world as a one of those possibilities. As there are many discredited Christian clergy, so are there many mystical Christian “clergy”—often unofficial, or ex-clergy—that are portrayed as wise and knowing, such as Tobin the ex-priest, the “church custodian” Billy meets in *The Crossing*, and the goatman in *Suttree*. Don Arnulfo and the ragman Suttree befriends also believe in God, albeit untraditionally; the ragman says that although he “always figured” there was a God, he “just never did like him” (147). Even if it is the Holy Ghost that breaths life into nature, that death is inevitable is a fact that plagues the characters in the

McCarthy universe, regardless of their experiences with the natural world and tapping into the mystical spirituality of it.

Regardless, the natural world is still endowed with a spiritual truth in McCarthy novels, and it is a spiritual truth that can be experienced and learned from by man. Several critics, including Jay Ellis and Edwin Arnold, agree that despite the fact of death that is explored in McCarthy's work, McCarthy cannot be read as a fundamental nihilist because of the insight that his protagonists acquire through experiencing the natural world and the rare charity of other people. Indeed, when the "otherworld" that is charged with blood and death is glimpsed at by man, it is terrifying and awful in the archaic sense of the word, and death does not seem something to be feared but instead a truth that is powerful and mysterious. In addition, this glimpse is usually paired with a glimpse into the beauty of the world—such as it is with Suttree and his "world of incredible loveliness"—that is so immediately transformational it is as if scales have fallen from the eyes of the man. It is religious in the sense that it is something supernatural that is revealed, and this revelation demands to be acknowledged and enacts change in the individual's actions or thinking. Although following this revelation often translates into following ideals that lead to imprisonment or death—as is the case with Arthur Ownby, John Grady, and Billy—standing up for these ideals, for the truth found in the natural world, is always described as the correct and heroic thing to do.

The nature-endorsing mentality is passed down from generation to generation, from novel to novel, amidst a society of ever-increasing urbanization. The commodification that comes with urbanization is dangerous not only to the natural world but to those without power and wealth, as exemplified by the demolition of the slums in *Suttree* and the scalping and raiding of innocent Native Americans in *Blood Meridian*. The protagonists generally attempt to fight against these

forces, or show empathy to the plights of those without power; in the case of Suttree, he gives up a life of wealth to live among the poor and homeless, and the judge labels the kid as mutinous because he reserved “clemency for the heathen” and did not fall in line with the judge’s wishes and worldview (312). Those characters that experience the reality of nature rebel against the commodification and egotistical worldviews of the societies and company they find themselves in. Unfortunately, this rebellion usually leads to suffering and, at times, death for standing up for ideals and morals no longer held sacred.

Nature is both reality and mystery to McCarthy, a question that cannot be answered without assuming too much or oversimplifying it, which only results in a pseudo-reality: a lie. From this, more questions are brought about by McCarthy’s work: How mankind can live and remain grounded in the reality of nature that one cannot fathom, and why would man even choose the unanswerable spiritual reality of nature over a smaller, more comfortable worldview—alternatively, how can mankind be content to live in the Garden with the mystery of the forbidden fruit left untasted, undetermined? Steven Frye proposes that the word “mystery” expresses McCarthy’s vision of the human condition as well, with “his renderings of death, fear of cosmic annihilation, and even the confusion that emerges from the diversity of the twentieth-century intellectual climate” (12). The mystery of nature makes the human condition a mystery as well, with death and the immensity of the cosmos the great unknowns behind the “gatelamps” of the natural world, and mankind’s role in all this unknowable on this plane. Frye also articulates well the collision of worldviews apparent in the texts as commoditization and urbanization pull men away from the reality and spirituality of nature and allow them to construct their own realities that ultimately lead to complacent anthropocentrism.

Despite its frightening immensity, nature still holds promise in the McCarthy universe for those willing to experience its reality. Without the symbolic nature of language confining reality, man is exposed to the unfathomable mystery of the world but is always driven towards enlightenment and an experiential understanding of the mysterious order of things. Nature is a reality in which the immensity of gods may be fully realized and undistorted, and the spirituality of animals can be rediscovered and intuitively held sacred. As Hopkins beautifully illustrates, nature is the never-ending source of truth and spirituality, charged with a supernatural power beyond the smudging power of mankind and its trade. If God exists, then surely He exists in the realm beyond nature, in the terrifying and awesome vastness that man can only glimpse in the loveliness of a glade, the power of a lightning strike, and the deep, dark eyes of a wolf.

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