

## CHOOSING MEANING IN A MEANINGLESS WORLD: EXISTENTIALISM AND THE BURDEN OF FREEDOM IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S CHARACTERS

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**Abstract:** The novels written by Cormac McCarthy are frequently distinguished by their desolate settings, terrible events, and characters who are open to moral interpretation. The purpose of this article is to investigate the creative expression of existentialism that can be found in McCarthy's writings. More specifically, the essay will concentrate on the subject matter of characters struggling with the weight of freedom in a world that is empty of any inherent value. The purpose of this essay is to show that McCarthy's characters exemplify the existential battle to create meaning and express individual agency in the face of nihilism and the ludicrous. This is accomplished by analyzing the decisions and actions of significant figures in the novels *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. In this analysis, we will look into the ways in which the characters come face to face with the ideas of freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and the hunt for worth in a society where traditional moral frameworks have been destroyed. Furthermore, the essay will discuss how McCarthy's distinctive narrative style and stark portrayal of the human condition work to stress the existential aspects of his characters' travels. This will be done by analyzing how McCarthy presents the human situation.

**Keywords:** Cormac McCarthy, existentialism, freedom, responsibility, meaning, nihilism, absurd, "Blood Meridian", "No Country for Old Men", "The Road", choice, authenticity.

**Introduction:** Cormac McCarthy, a towering presence in contemporary American literature, has created a body of work that is both renowned and controversial. His works, which are frequently set in barren and violent locations, depict a stripped-down version of humanity confronted with the harsh truths of life. McCarthy's work has been analyzed by critics and historians from a variety of viewpoints, including historical settings, interaction with American mythology, and investigation of ecological concerns. Existentialism, on the other hand, provides a very useful prism through which to view McCarthy's work<sup>1</sup>.

Existentialism, a philosophical philosophy popularized in the twentieth century, emphasizes the individual's freedom, responsibility, and search for meaning in a world devoid of inherent purpose. Key thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir articulated the idea that existence precedes essence; that is, humans are born into the world with no predetermined nature or destiny, and it is through their choices and actions that they create their own meaning and values. This viewpoint resonates strongly with the topics and people in Cormac McCarthy's works. This essay contends that McCarthy's characters are typically shown as existential beings grappling with the burden of freedom in a world devoid of fundamental meaning. This article will examine how McCarthy's characters symbolize the

<sup>1</sup> Webber, J. (2018). Rethinking existentialism. In *Oxford University Press eBooks*.  
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existential battle to create meaning and express individual agency in the face of nihilism and the ludicrous, concentrating on the notions of choice, responsibility, and the search for authenticity. The analysis will concentrate focus on three of McCarthy's most celebrated novels: *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*<sup>2</sup>. These works are intriguing examples of characters grappling with fundamental concerns about existence, and they demonstrate McCarthy's peculiar storytelling style, which emphasizes the existential implications of their journeys. The goal is not to present a thorough summary of existentialism in McCarthy's writings, but rather to delve deeply into the issue of the weight of freedom and its consequences for the characters that occupy these ethically ambiguous environments. Finally, this article aims to demonstrate how McCarthy's artistic vision reflects the intricacies of the human condition and provides a poignant reflection on the challenges and opportunities of seeking meaning in a meaningless world.

**The Absurdity of Violence and the Freedom to Choose in “Blood Meridian”** “Blood Meridian”, often hailed as McCarthy’s masterpiece, presents a brutal and unflinching vision of the American West. The novel follows the Kid, a young man who joins a gang of scalp hunters on a violent and merciless campaign across the borderlands between the United States and Mexico in the mid-19th century. The landscape is harsh, the violence is pervasive, and the characters are often driven by primal instincts rather than moral principles. Within this context, the concept of existential freedom becomes particularly fraught.

The character of Judge Holden, the enigmatic and terrifying figure who dominates much of the novel, embodies the nihilistic underpinnings of this world. He is a scholar, a musician, a linguist, and a skilled fighter, but he is also a force of pure destruction. Holden believes that war is the ultimate game, and he sees no inherent value in human life or any moral constraint on his actions. He declares, "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn." This statement reflects a radical form of moral relativism that aligns with existentialist thought, questioning the existence of objective moral values.

In “Blood Meridian”, the Kid is consistently confronted with choices that test his moral boundaries. He is free to participate in the violence, to embrace the nihilistic worldview espoused by Judge Holden, or to resist. His initial innocence is gradually eroded as he witnesses and participates in acts of extreme brutality. The novel suggests that even in a world defined by violence and lawlessness, individuals retain the freedom to choose, even if that choice is merely whether to participate in or resist the prevailing brutality.

However, the burden of this freedom is immense. The Kid is haunted by his experiences and struggles to find meaning in a world that seems inherently meaningless. The landscape itself reflects this existential void. As critic Leo Daugherty notes, "The desert is a landscape without center, without boundary, without reference point. It is a space that challenges the very notion of

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<sup>2</sup> Wierschem, M. (2013). The other end of “The Road”: Re-Reading McCarthy in light of thermodynamics and information theory. *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, 11(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/42909447>

meaning." In this context, the Kid's journey becomes a metaphor for the existential quest to create meaning in the absence of pre-existing values.

The novel's relentless violence also underscores the absurdity of human existence. As Albert Camus argued in "The Myth of Sisyphus", the absurd arises from the conflict between humanity's innate desire for meaning and the universe's indifferent silence<sup>3</sup>. In "Blood Meridian", the violence seems to serve no higher purpose; it is simply a manifestation of human nature and the chaotic forces that govern the world. The characters are free to inflict violence, but this freedom does not lead to any sense of fulfillment or meaning; rather, it reinforces the inherent absurdity of existence.

Ultimately, "Blood Meridian" presents a stark portrayal of existential freedom in a world devoid of inherent meaning. The characters are free to choose their actions, but they are also burdened by the consequences of those choices and the realization that their existence is ultimately finite and without inherent purpose. The novel challenges readers to confront the difficult questions of existence and to consider the possibility that meaning must be created, not discovered.

**The Weight of Choice and the Erosion of Morality in "No Country for Old Men"** "No Country for Old Men" takes place in a more contemporary environment, yet it nevertheless explores themes of existential freedom and the burden of decision. The novel, set in 1980s West Texas, follows Llewelyn Moss, a Vietnam War veteran who discovers a failed drug deal and is hunted by Anton Chigurh, a violent and enigmatic hitman. The story delves on the decline of traditional moral ideals, as well as the rise of violence and nihilism in American society.

It is the decisions that Llewelyn Moss makes that determine his character. He takes the calamitous choice to take the money that he discovers at the location of the drug trade, which sets in motion a series of events that finally result in his demise. The fact that he is motivated by the desire to provide for himself and his wife causes him to make a choice that is not necessarily sinful. However, the decision he made has significant repercussions, and he rapidly discovers that the forces he has unleashed are more powerful than he initially thought.

Anton Chigurh is an extreme example of existential freedom and moral relativism. Chigurh, like Judge Holden, follows his own internal code, which lacks compassion and humanity. He regards himself as a tool of fate, and he frequently bases life-or-death decisions on the flip of a coin. Chigurh's acts demonstrate the potential for violence and destruction when people reject traditional moral frameworks in favor of a totally subjective sense of value. Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, the aged and disillusioned lawman who provides as a moral counterpart to Chigurh, is also dealing with the cost of liberty. Bell is perplexed by the growing violence and nihilism in his surroundings. He laments the decline of traditional values and community spirit. He puts it: "It starts when you begin to compromise, when you begin to see that the end justifies the means." Bell acknowledges that individuals' decisions, particularly those in positions of authority, can have far-reaching implications for society as a whole. "No Country for Old Men" implies<sup>4</sup> that the weight of choice can be crushing, especially in a world when old moral guideposts have vanished. The characters have the freedom to make their own decisions, but those actions come with repercussions. The tale encourages readers to think

<sup>3</sup> Sagi, A. (2002). *Albert Camus and the philosophy of the Absurd*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004493452>

<sup>4</sup> Docherty, T., & Simpson, D. (1999). The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A report on Half-Knowledge. *The Modern Language Review*, 94(1), 294. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3736124>



on the responsibilities that come with freedom, as well as the ideals that influence their own decisions.

The novel's denouement, which leaves many questions unresolved, reinforces its existential themes. Llewelyn Moss is killed, Anton Chigurh flees, and Sheriff Bell retires, dissatisfied with the state of the world. The lack of a clear resolution emphasizes the notion that life is frequently chaotic and unpredictable, and that individuals must seek their own meaning and purpose in the midst of uncertainty.

### **Bearing the Fire: Love and Responsibility in “The Road”**

Unlike the moral ambiguity and violence of "Blood Meridian" and "No Country for Old Men," "The Road" offers a more intimate and emotionally powerful study of existential concerns. The novel, set in a post-apocalyptic environment wrecked by an unidentified calamity, centers on the bond between a father and son as they travel south in search of warmth and nutrition. The tale demonstrates the power of love, hope, and the determination to endure in the face of incredible adversity.

The dad, the father, is driven by a strong desire to protect his son and inculcate in him moral values and compassion. He understands that in this harsh and brutal world, it is up to them to define their own meaning and values. He tells his kid, "We need to attempt to make things better. We have to try." This remark highlights the existential stress on individual responsibility and the determination to create a better future, especially in the face of no assurance of success. The boy, the son, represents the potential for hope and restoration in this destroyed planet. He is polite, empathetic, and sincerely concerned for the well-being of others, including those who threaten his and his father's survival. The guy frequently refers to the youngster as "carrying the fire," a metaphor for the flame of goodness and humanity that must be safeguarded and developed.

The father and son in "The Road" are continuously confronted with decisions that put their morals to the test. They meet other survivors, some of whom are friendly and helpful, but others are violent and predatory. The man must make difficult choices about when to trust and when to protect himself and his son. These decisions highlight the cost of freedom in a world where old moral rules have been abandoned. The novel's austere, minimalist writing style accentuates its existential themes. McCarthy eliminates superfluous details, focusing on the core elements of the human experience: love, loss, survival, and the search for meaning. The environment itself serves as a metaphor for the existential abyss, a barren and bleak space that represents the lack of fundamental purpose.

Despite the gloomy environment, "The Road" delivers a compelling message of hope and persistence. The father and son's steadfast love for each other and commitment to carrying the fire demonstrate the enduring strength of the human spirit. Even in the darkest of times, the novel argues that human connection and the pursuit of goodness can provide purpose and value. The novel's denouement, however uncertain, provides a ray of optimism. Following the man's death, the youngster is taken in by a family of survivors who represent a chance for community and rejuvenation. This implies that, even in a post-apocalyptic world, the flame of humanity can be reignited, and new forms of meaning and worth can arise<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Spurgeon, S. L. (2010). *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472542380>

**McCarthy's Narrative Style as an Existential Tool:** Throughout his career, Cormac McCarthy<sup>6</sup> has used a particular narrative style to accentuate the existential themes covered in his writing. His writing style is distinguished by its brevity, dependence on vivid imagery, and willingness to disregard established grammatical and punctuation rules. These literary choices contribute to the novel's overarching sense of isolation, ambiguity, and breakdown in communication.

McCarthy's use of spare prose reflects the existential emphasis on stripping away illusions and confronting the raw realities of existence; he avoids unnecessary details and focuses on the essential elements of the human experience. This minimalist style forces readers to actively engage with the text and confront the difficult questions that it raises.

McCarthy's use of vivid imagery creates a powerful sense of place and emphasizes the harshness of the landscapes in which his characters operate. The stark descriptions of violence, desolation, and decay heighten the reader's awareness of the fragility of human life and the precariousness of existence. Additionally, McCarthy's unconventional use of grammar and punctuation adds to the novel's sense of alienation and uncertainty.

In addition to these stylistic features, McCarthy also employs a number of recurring motifs and symbols that reinforce the existential themes of his works. The motif of the journey, for example, is central to many of his novels, and it often serves as a metaphor for the existential quest to find meaning and purpose in life. The symbols of fire, water, and darkness also carry significant weight, representing the forces of creation, destruction, and the unknown.

Overall, McCarthy's narrative style is not merely a matter of aesthetic preference; it is an integral part of his artistic vision<sup>7</sup>. His unique use of language and narrative technique serves to amplify the existential themes of his works and to create a deeply immersive and thought-provoking reading experience.

## Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy's works offer a profound and often frightening investigation of the human condition. By focusing on characters wrestling with the burden of freedom in a world devoid of fundamental meaning, McCarthy's works provide a compelling and enduring reflection on the challenges and possibilities of existence.

This essay analyzes "Blood Meridian", "No Country for Old Men", and "The Road" to show how McCarthy's characters reflect the existential struggle to establish meaning and assert individual agency in the face of nihilism and the ludicrous. His characters face difficult decisions, often with disastrous repercussions, yet they are ultimately accountable for their actions. The emphasis on individual responsibility is a fundamental principle of existentialist philosophy.

McCarthy's works also ask readers to consider challenging questions about morality, violence, and the meaning of human existence. His morally ambiguous characters urge readers to evaluate

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold, E. T., & Luce, D. C. (1999). Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy. In *University Press of Mississippi eBooks*. <http://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/673332>

<sup>7</sup> Cerf, W., & Kaufmann, W. (1957). Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 18(2), 279. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2104403>

their own preconceptions and ponder the idea that standard moral frameworks may not always provide obvious answers.

Furthermore, McCarthy's storytelling approach adds greatly to the existential aspects of his writings. His minimalist prose, vivid imagery, and unique use of words evoke a sense of isolation and uncertainty, reinforcing the themes of choice, responsibility, and the search for meaning.

To summarize, the artistic manifestation of existentialism in Cormac McCarthy's books is more than just philosophical inquiry; it is an essential component of his artistic vision. His works provide a strong and enduring reflection on the human condition, asking readers to confront difficult existential problems and ponder the idea that meaning must be chosen rather than discovered. McCarthy's writings remind us of the value of individual agency, the burden of freedom, and the persistent capacity of the human spirit to create meaning and hope in the face of hardship. His investigation of existential topics makes his work not only engaging literature, but also a significant and timely addition to modern intellectual discourse.

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