



English Studies in Latin America

The Judge, the Idiot, and Cormac McCarthy's Critique of Violence in *Blood Meridian*

Author: Rodrigo Zamorano Muñoz

Source: *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 4 (December 2012)

ISSN: 0719-0921

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.





The Judge, the Idiot, and Cormac McCarthy's Critique of Violence in *Blood Meridian*

Rodrigo Zamorano Muñoz¹

The following paper examines the relation between the couple made up by Judge Holden and the Idiot in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West*. Set in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands during the mid-nineteenth century, McCarthy's novel is an exploration of the violence underlying the march of American colonial westward expansion in which Judge Holden is a symbol of the desire to dominate others through the use of violence. As such, Holden is confronted and complemented by the figure of the Idiot. The latter works as a degraded, helpless and even more grotesque version of the Judge, and throughout the novel parallelisms and contrasts are established between the two characters. In many passages one mirrors the other; at other times, both make up a unity that reveals the full extent of Holden's brutal ideology, with the idiot as its mute critic. Finally, the relations that this paper aims to expose may be read as a commentary on the irrationality of a philosophy that celebrates and legitimizes violence not only as a goal in itself, but also as the only way in which human beings can relate to one another.

KEYWORDS: VIOLENCE, THE JUDGE, THE IDIOT, BLOOD MERIDIAN

Based on historical accounts, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* fictionalizes the story of the Glanton gang, a group of filibusters hired by the Mexican government to hunt and scalp Indians in the mid-nineteenth-century U.S.-Mexico borderlands. First as a paramilitary force serving the official administration, and then as an out-of-control "caravan of death," the gang engages in an irrational

¹ Rodrigo Zamorano Muñoz is a senior student of the English Teacher Training Program at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso.

killing spree in the frontier, murdering, plundering, and terrorizing the civil population as well as the Indians they had originally been commissioned to hunt. The novel revolves around its nameless main character, the Kid, and his sustained and silent confrontation with the sadistic Judge Holden, who eventually becomes the spiritual leader of the band. The end of the novel is marked by the final encounter of the Kid and Holden, twenty-eight years after the disastrous disbanding of the gang. *Blood Meridian* has been widely read as a revisionist appreciation of American history and the role that manifest destiny has played in it, through the depiction of the violence that characterized the westward expansion of the U.S. in the eighteenth century. In a more general way, it has also been interpreted as an examination of the atrocities inherent to colonial ideology and methods.

Judge Holden is a complex figure that embodies problematic philosophical notions about human nature and history that have become very influential in Western culture. The Judge is portrayed as an enigmatic and almost supernatural figure, with otherworldly strength and an incredible cosmopolitan culture. He speaks many languages and has a thorough knowledge of different modern scientific and philosophical disciplines. His uncanny appearance is described just before he slanders a local reverend and provokes his lynching: “an enormous man ... bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them He was close on to seven feet in height ... His face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small” (McCarthy 6). Significantly, the way he looks is not the most strange and puzzling of Holden’s features, but the circumstances in which the gang encounters him are just as inexplicable as everything about him. While running away from the Indians after a disastrous battle, the gang finds the Judge sitting on a rock in the middle of the desert, seemingly waiting for them. No sooner does Holden join the company, than he leads them to the victory by providing them with the gunpowder they had run dry of; he shows and instructs them on how to make gunpowder out of the raw materials he finds in the mountain and their own urine. This anecdote, told by one of the member of the gang to the Kid, proves true Holden’s self-proclaimed status as the master of nature.

The numerous similarities between Holden’s ideas and the ideas found in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* make it possible to think of him as a Nietzschean superman. Nietzsche proposed the ideal of the superman as a rejection of what he understood as a degrading, ascetic morality that denied human nature and prevented humans from developing their full potential. This morality, which he identified with Christianity, was the product of resentment and denied the “the strongest, most life affirming impulse” and the motor of history: the will to power

(52). This ground-breaking understanding of human nature stresses the importance of radical individualism and describes history in terms of domination and violence. This conception of history is highly problematic, since it naturalizes and justifies the differences between what Nietzsche called noblemen and the men of resentment.

In the heuristic allegory he uses to explain the origin of moral values in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche characterizes the noblemen, or “‘the mighty’, ‘the masters’, ‘the rulers’,” (17) as the “the high-placed and the high-minded, who saw and judged themselves and their actions as good.” (11) In other words, they are the ones who fully exercise their will to power and that, consequently, regard themselves naturally as “men of higher rank.” (14) Conversely, the men of resentment, or slaves, are the ones incapable, because of their physical weakness, of living in this self-affirmative fashion; for this reason, they fear and resent the uninhibited way of living of the masters. Also, Nietzsche considered truth and morality in pragmatic terms, as historical products whose relevance depends on the utility they have for the men of resentment, and his aim in *On the Genealogy of Morality* is the “revaluation of all values,” for the preparation of the ideal of the superman (17).

The Idiot, an intellectually and physically disabled man whom the gang finds along the way in its journey through the frontier, resembles Holden in a peculiar way that set both of them apart from all the other characters in the novel: both of them remain undecipherable for the members of the gang. But the bond that unites these characters is far from being simple; indeed, the relation between Holden and the Idiot moves between the poles of complementation and victimization of the latter by the former. The effect of this ambiguity is that the Idiot serves as counterpoint to Holden while simultaneously mirroring him.

The most compelling evidence of the parallelism between Judge Holden and the Idiot is shown when they are chasing Tobin and the Kid through the desert after the Yuma massacre. The Idiot follows Holden as a mute witness that has been dragged there against his will; the description of his behaviour and Holden’s attitude towards him resemble a helpless animal, at the same time partner and enslaved victim. Even though the Idiot does not do much more than just observing, his movements and actions are placed at the foreground throughout the whole scene, serving simultaneously as counterpoint and company to Holden’s menacing presence.

Significantly throughout this scene, and as a way of running away from the Judge, Tobin repeatedly advises the Kid to shoot the harmless Idiot instead of Holden, as if killing him would somehow hurt Holden as well. Thus Tobin's advice exposes the contradictory bonds that unite the two characters, namely those of master and slave and complementing partners. Interestingly, the only occasion in which Holden assists a member of the Glanton gang without employing violence is when he prevents the Idiot from drowning at the river:

he [Judge Holden] stepped into the river and seized up the drowning Idiot, snatching it aloft by the heels like a great midwife and slapping it on the back to let the water out. A birth scene or a baptism or some ritual not yet inaugurated into any canon. He twisted the water from its hair and he gathered the naked and sobbing fool into his arms and carried it up into the camp and restored it among its fellows. (McCarthy 259)

The uncanny baptism Holden performs and the unusual delicacy with which he treats the Idiot show some kind of recognition, as if he, and only he among the members of the Glanton gang, had decided that the Idiot deserved some interest. In fact, not until when the gang has disbanded after the Yuma massacre some of its members, namely Tobin and the Kid, pay attention to him, most of the time Holden being the only one concerned with his fortune. Needless to say, this twisted recognition is far from being the recognition of an equal. Moreover, Holden sexually abuses the Idiot: "when they [the Yumas] entered the judge's quarters they found the Idiot and a girl of perhaps twelve years cowering naked in the floor. Behind them also naked stood the judge" (McCarthy 275). Thus, Holden reinforces his role as the master of the Idiot and his total control over him; notably, while he kills the children he abuses in the towns the gang ravages, he keeps the Idiot as his slave/partner until the end of the band's wanderings, somehow turning him into an ominous living sign of his power for the other members of the gang to read.

A crucial point in the understanding of the relation between Holden and the Idiot is that, while Holden is well aware of his power to shape *his* world, the world in which the Idiot lives is, and has always been, shaped by other people. Holden is a loquacious character, a feature that clearly distinguishes him from all the other laconic filibusters, including Tobin, who, in spite of never having been convinced by Holden's arguments, is unable to confront or defeat them successfully.

On the contrary, the Idiot is unable to speak and can only articulate unintelligible sounds, most of the time sobs and howls, which do not make possible communication of any kind.

The contrast between Holden's eloquence and the Idiot's erratic, child-like behaviour shows the differences between a free will that consciously shapes the world he lives in and a character whose capacity to act upon reality is practically inexistent. The numerous speeches Holden delivers to the ignorant members of the Glanton gang, who listen with mixed incredulity and astonishment, prove that Holden's narcissistic self-image is not only built up by his supernatural physical strength, but also, and perhaps even more important, by his use of language, through which he creates a narrative of unlimited power and self-generation that distinguishes him from the other filibusters:

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. [...] Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. 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.
(198)

If Holden conceives the relation between men and nature as a confrontation in which men's role is to dominate and exploit in order not to be "enslaved," then the Idiot would be the living proof of Holden's theory, since he has always been "enslaved" by and in his disabilities, being the victim par excellence: "Has he always been like that? said the judge. Yessir. He was born that way" (239).

Holden's speeches, which are delivered throughout the novel, are not only important for the construction of an identity that sets him apart from the people that surround him, but they also reveal his philosophy regarding the nature of human beings and the world in general. As mentioned before, his philosophy constantly echoes Nietzsche's ideas developed in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. When discussing with Tobin, the ex-priest, the nature of men, Holden's answer to his remark that "Might does not make right ... The man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally" (250) concisely restates the main argument of the first essay in Nietzsche's *Genealogy*: "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favour of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by ultimate test" (McCarthy 250). Later, Holden laughs at the filibusters' perplexity in reaction to the palaeontology lesson he delivers in the desert, contemptuously dismissing their desire to be told a supernatural,

metaphysical truth about the animal remains he has found, thus stressing the profound difference between himself and all other men: “Your heart’s desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery” (McCarthy 252).

Thus the strange recognition that Holden receives from the puzzled members of the gang is the counterpoint to the mute Idiot’s seemingly inexistent consciousness, willingness or agency upon the world that surrounds him. In the set of dichotomies victim/victimizer, passivity/agency, powerless/powerful, silence/speech, the Idiot always occupies the position of the one suffering somebody else’s violence, symbolic or physical. He is denied recognition as an equal and is relegated to a place from which his power to act upon the world is practically inexistent.

On the contrary, when explaining to Toadvine the reason why he carries a book to collect and register the animals, plants and whatever he finds along the way, Holden paraphrases the concept of genealogy and explains the way he assesses his position in the world as a constructor of his own reality:

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down ... But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (McCarthy 199)

Holden’s nihilistic philosophy, his exaltation of violence as *the* ultimate end of all human action, his identification of war as a kind of ideal, and his conception of men’s role in the world as dominators and exploiters of nature create a character that summarizes in broad and hyperbolic terms an ideology whose scope goes beyond the U.S.-Mexico borderlands during the mid-nineteenth century, and that would contribute to lay the foundations not only of colonial violence, but also of Nazism and Fascism. In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire argues that colonialism does not put cultures in contact, but it is a form of social order in which there is “no human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into ... a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production” (42). Holden and the gang take the dehumanization of the other that Césaire called “thingification” even further, since they trade with

the scalps of the Indians, and, later on, not even money serves as the justification of the killing spree they engage in.

Holden embodies and puts into practice a set of beliefs whose disastrous consequences, for victims and victimizers as well, prove the irrationality of his ideas. This commentary on the potentially catastrophic effects of the apology of violence Holden represents is reinforced by the figure of the Idiot, who through a series of contrasts and identifications expose in its full extent the grotesque ideology of the Judge. McCarthy problematizes the official narrative of the American westward expansion, reexamining it and showing the vicious philosophy and the overwhelming violence that made it possible. If, for the most part, he leaves the reader the task of deciding what to make of Holden's indecipherable nature, perhaps the Idiot is a reminder of the Judge's limitations and a pitiable mirror to his monstrosity.

Works Cited

Césaire, A. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000. Print.

McCarthy, C. *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: The Modern Library, 2001. Print.

Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson. Cambridge University Press, 2006. Web. 10 July 2012.