

# Deconstruction and Subversion: Postmodern Narrative of Blood Meridian

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Cormac McCarthy's classic postmodern novel *Blood Meridian* from three dimensions, that is, deconstruction of western expansion, subversion of religious myths, and anti-hero narrative. It unearths how the writer through interaction between history and text decomposes the grand narrative of western myths and Manifest Destiny established in American westward movement, and unmasks the imperialist truth of violence neglected or even intentionally concealed in the historical process. The paper provides a new observation perspective to comprehend the current acts that America is suppressing resistance from middle and lower classes domestically and carrying out hegemonism internationally.

**Keywords:** *Blood Meridian, postmodernism, deconstruction, war, religion, hero*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The main characteristics of postmodern literature lie in deconstructing the grand narrative and flattening the depth of meaning, so as to remove the binary opposition between phenomenon and essence, dominance and recessiveness, and signifier and signified. In particular, the criticism of deconstructionism to classical metaphysics makes people question the nature of history, self and language. Deconstructionists hold that history is not the manifestation of reason, nor the process of continuous display of unified meaning, but a complex of various contending and interrelated discourses. The truth of history is not objective existence, but the creation of theorists, which is determined by the power of discourse. [1] In the view of postmodernism, not only God is dead, but also man is dead, which dispels the power of religious protection and redemption, as well as the enlightenment significance of morality. Before postmodernism, British and American literature especially advocates heroism, but the protagonists of postmodern works either flatten the image or display the characteristics of anti-hero. [2]

Cormac McCarthy is a celebrated contemporary American writer and Pulitzer Prize winner. His masterpieces include "The Border Trilogy", "Blood Meridian", "No Country for Old Men" and "The Road". McCarthy's works are full of elements of postmodern deconstructionism. For example, the reverse growth of Ballard, the protagonist of *Son of God*, is a typical anti-hero narrative. At the same time, the title of the novel is also a pungent irony to Christianity. "The Border Trilogy" deconstructs the cowboy dream in people's hearts by describing the story that the last cowboys in the west of the United States were gradually getting old in the process of crossing and wandering.

*Blood Meridian*, a typical post-modernist work McCarthy, reproduces the bloody history of American westward expansion through a parody of history context based on the

Glanton Gang scalp-hunters' slaughtering of Indians at the America-Mexico borderland. The novel deconstructs the religious myth of American Manifest Destiny by depicting Glanton Gang's wanton slaughtering in the dilapidated religious space and the protagonist judge's defiance of religions. In terms of character portraying, the protagonist "the kid" is depicted as a typical post-modernist flattened image, free of traditional heroic peculiarities expected in a western cowboy. Such an image reflects the true experiences of common people in the westward expansion. As such, McCarthy subverts the image of a national hero rooted in the mainstream ideology of America.

## 2. DECONSTRUCTION OF WESTWARD EXPANSION

As a parody of Samuel Chamberlain's autobiographic memoir *My Confessions*, the novel is about the history of the scalp-hunters "Granton Gang" committing crimes and slaughtering Indians for their scalps at the America-Mexico borderland in the full-swing westward expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. The novel reproduces the real history of westward expansion, exposes the original sins of America in eliminating dissidents in an organized and planned manner under the national will, launching wars to occupy land and clearing the "obstacles" to its westward expansion--Indians and deconstructs the Western myth in the official narrative of America.

At the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century when Britain and France, two major powers of the world at that time, were fighting for maritime supremacy, the newly founded nation of America remained neutral rather than involved. Yet it suffered double sanctions from both countries, and its foreign trade and international connection were seriously threatened. Besides, the narrow territory alongside the Atlantic was already insufficient to support the quickly-growing desire for interests of America. Therefore, America had to seek development in the west and kick off its westward expansion. [3] By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the vast land of North America that lied between Canada and Mexico was entirely occupied by America. As a result, it grew from a

small country at the coast of Atlantic to a world's power with a territory overtaking that of old Europe. The period of westward expansion also witnessed the explosive development of American literature. The romantic writing of writers, in turn, boosted the westward expansion. Washington Irving, the father of American literature, created a lot of works to describe the wonderful landscapes and abundant animal, plant and mineral resources of the west and encourage people to seek development westwards.<sup>[4]</sup> However, under the national narratives, the other side of the coin has been neglected or covered deliberately, which includes squeezing, tricks, wars and even genocide. Externally by launching wars successively with France, Spain and Mexico to expand its territory, America quickly became a big country whose territory stretched across the continent between Pacific and Atlantic. Internally, facing the resistance from the aborigines living on the newly occupied land, the American government launched extremely cruel genocide under the guide of Social Darwinism. Therefore, the history of America is one of colonizing the west where the white people kept migrating westwards in frequent warfare, "free" land kept shrinking and even vanished and the number of Indians was decreasing sharply to the verge of extinction.

In the novel, the captain that led the first "expedition" of the scalp-hunting team was a veteran of the America-Mexico war. In dealing with the America-Mexico war, he was filled with racism and alienated Mexico by saying, "What we are dealing with is a degenerate race. A hybrid race, no better than the niggers. And maybe that's more like it. There is not a government in Mexico. Hell, there is no God in Mexico. Never there will be."<sup>[5]</sup> The captain completely and thoroughly denied the people, government and religious faiths of Mexico and justified from the perspectives of morality, society and religion the aggressive war well planned and prepared by the American government on the basis of American white supremacy and the Puritan religious consciousness. However, while the spirit of "patriotism" was infused to the protagonist boy of the novel, the nature of the war was exposed, "Unless we act, Mexico--I mean the whole of the country--will one day fly a European flag. Monroe adopted or blow."<sup>[6]</sup> As a country born out of colony and expansion, America has inherited the aggressiveness of European imperialism since its foundation, which perhaps is the "Manifest Destiny" in the eyes of McCarthy.

As the key figure of the second "expedition" of the scalp-hunters, the judge is more a war peddler, spokesperson and advocate. He is a firm supporter of a realistic view of wars and is obsessed with solving all problems through wars. "Wars are as lasting as the stones...wars have never stopped. Wars have been waiting before the humans exist. The ultimate profession is awaiting for the ultimate practitioner. It was so in the past, and this won't change in the future."<sup>[7]</sup> "Only this man has been fully dedicated to the blood of wars--the sound of wars is the voice of him (the judge)."<sup>[8]</sup> Meanwhile, the judge's strong intention in the doctrine of Social Darwinism tries to demoralize the wars. "The law of morality is the invention of people, with an attempt to help the weak deprive the strong of their rights. At each turning point, the law of morality has been overturned by the law of history. Whatever kind of ultimate tests cannot prove whether the view of morality is correct or wrong."<sup>[9]</sup> In his view, wars mean survival of the fittest in the social jungle and any moral restraint on wars violates the law of evolution of the human society and hinders the evolution pace of the humans. Therefore, according to the logic of

the judge, by eliminating the "inferior race", it is not only an extension of the human's ancient cause of wars, but also a contribution to the overall progress of the humans, let alone any moral guilt. Whether racism or Social Darwinism, whether the eternity theory or demoralization of wars, all are attempts to justify the unjust wars. The captain is an operator of the machine of national violence, while the judge is a defender of the national ideology. Both of them are presenting an official narrative for the wars, simply to cover the truth behind the government's systematic violence in the American westward expansion. Even though in the contemporary world, the realistic view of wars and Social Darwinism have been abandoned by the academia, yet America is still obsessed with wars and violence and the American ideology of hegemony is still rampant in different forms at home and abroad.

Born in 1930, the writer Cormac McCarthy has witnessed different wars since his childhood, including the World War II in which America was deeply involved and the Korean War and Vietnam War which were started by America. He has a profound cognition and understanding of the cruelty of wars, the absurd logic of political ideology behind wars and the hypocrisy, greed and cold-blooded violence of invaders in the wars. As a writer who is concerned by social reality, filled with a critical spirit and stands by the scientists, the reason and calmness of McCarthy enables him to ruthlessly expose and criticize the wars and violence, racism and white supremacy, and have a clear awareness of the persistence of wars and violence. During the 30-odd years since the novel *Blood Meridian* was published in 1985, America has started or dominated Panama War, Libya War, Gulf War, Iraq War, Afghanistan War, Syria War and various Color Revolutions around the world, all of which have become footnotes of McCarthy's narrative of wars and violence.

### 3. SUBVERSION OF RELIGIOUS MYTH

During the Middle Ages, in order to safeguard its holy faith and dictatorship, the Catholic Church colluded with the secular regime and incited the wild craze of the general public to cruelly persecute other religious sects, which resulted in the confrontation and hatred among the peoples with different faiths.<sup>[10]</sup> In the pre-modern society, religions have always defended the inverted realistic world in the name of holiness, providing the ruling order with a moral support and justifying the political institution. Therefore, religions are essentially a holy discourse hegemony, behind which are the strong desire to control and special interests of the ruling class. Marx and Engels criticized the social functions of religions to serve the ruling class and pointed out that religions are tools and devices with which the ruling class maintains a ruling order among the underclass and force them to remain obedient.<sup>[11]</sup> The novel *Blood Meridian* has incisively depicted the exclusiveness and instrumentality of religions. Manifest Destiny was extremely popular in the 1940s and 50s, became a symbol of American westward expansion of territory in the history and covered the expansion of America with religious legitimacy. This period highly coincides with the period when the kid in the novel joined the scalp-hunters to wantonly slaughter Indians. To a certain extent, the scalp-hunters played the role as the vanguard of American westward expansion, who were responsible for eradicating and cleaning the Indians who were considered as barbarians, heretics and even demons along the road to the west. In this process, religions

became a protective umbrella for genocide and a gee-string for the violent orgy.

In order to hunt and kill more Indians, get their scalps and enhance the fighting capacity, the Glanton Gang called Indians heretic and cleared the obstacles for their violence via religious faith, which had resulted in an abrupt decline of the number of Indians. Later as the number of Indians was decreasing and it was difficult to continue with the scalp-hunting business, the Glanton Gang even began to hunt and kill Mexicans. This indicates that the religion is no more than a disguise of the evildoers whose actual purpose is to pursue economic benefits. Several church scenes are depicted in the novel. The churches as a symbol of religions, which should have been lofty and towering, holy and solemn, were broken and shabby. The religious sculptures and portraits which should have been exquisite were fragmented and mottled. The judge recklessly denounced and ridiculed the God, and religious sites were deserted everywhere. The Glanton Gang, claiming to be the chosen people of the God, did not glorify Christian. Instead, it caused the declining of religions in reality and the vanishing of spiritual religions. The Glanton Gang directly slaughtered people in the church without worrying that their action might profane the holy land of religion. They even killed an Indian woman when she was pleading hard to the God for mercy. The judge even once himself as the God, holding a power over the life and properties of others. The religion itself had become a source of violence. As American nationals came from varied sources, after the foundation of the country, the mainstream narrative of American society has been oriented around the establishment of a unified national identity and the expansion of its territory. Driven by this ideology and national will and interests, religions has been playing an instrumental role. When the kid witnessed all kinds of violence that hit his moral bottom line, he hesitated, which indicates that his humanity had not completely vanished. When he was facing the repeated brainwashing cry of the judge for wars, he doubted, which indicates that he had a certain reflection on the social reality at that time. He was eager to find the exits of spirit and reality, so he resorted to religious salvation. In the final part of the novel, the kid carried a Bible with him everywhere he went. He went to the wild in search for something, which symbolizes that he was converted to the religion. Yet how could the instrumental religion get him out of his mental confusion and earthly perplexity? But as he grew increasingly mature from a child to a kid to a man, his attitude towards violence changed by degrees. Previously he treated violence without hesitation, and then he treated it with prudence. He gradually realized the hypocrisy and fraudulence of the official narrative represented by the judge. Therefore, he took a rejective attitude towards the judge and sought for a way out in the religion. Yet the kid could never realize that the religion was the very tool and accomplice of the official narrative. With an insight in the nature of violence and an attempt to escape from the evil, the kid was inevitably eliminated. The death of the kid reveals that the God is no longer the ultimate goal pursued by the humans. The other world fabricated by the Christianity has collapsed. In this way, the hypocrisy of benevolence and blessing of Christianity has been removed to expose its bloody cruelty and naked obscurantism. Coerced by the national will, the religious ideology is falling like a torrent. Any resistance or contradiction will be eradicated in the name of heretic, which exposes the absurd and deceptive nature of Manifest Destiny.

#### 4. ANTI-HEROIC NARRATIVE

During the pre-modernist period, the antagonists of novels either display a good personal image or excellent inner quality, or have various heroic deeds which cannot be accomplished by the average people, or get sublimation in their inner spirit. In American Western literature, heroic figures are usually depicted to include the above characteristics, among which the classical image is a heroic cowboy. Beautified and rendered by a vast body of literary works in Western films and TV programs, etc. over more than a century, the western cowboys of America which were originally homeless, depressive, lonely and unrestrained are gradually portrayed into figures with heroism and romance. <sup>[12]</sup> They become increasingly popular for their heroic romance of riding a horse on the vast grassland, among the galloping cattle and under the starry sky, their love stories and their independent, firm and adventurous chivalry. Such a highly beautified image embodying various ideal qualities has aroused limitless imagination and passion, which is interpreted as an important part of the independent national identity and spiritual core of America which is different from that of Europeans.

*Blood Meridian* is a typical Western work of America, yet its protagonist is portrayed as a flat image typical to postmodernism and free of any heroic quality found in a western cowboy. Without even a name, the child was addressed as the man in the novel after he became an adult. One's name implies a lot of social and cultural elements. In addition to the function of identification, one's name also carries profound connotations such as living environment, family's expectations, social status and even religious imagination. The fact that the kid has not a name reflects his humble origin and lack of family care and love. More importantly, the fact erases his identity symbol and cancels or weakens the significance of social existence of the character. Compared with the great names of heroes in a lot of good novels, the kid was congenitally deficient from the moment of his birth in the writing of Cormac McCarthy.

The novel does not describe the appearance of the kid, as a result of which the readers have no way to know the specific image of the kid and thus it is difficult for them to form a solid heroic image of the character in their brain. The kid seldom spoke, who was lonely and depressive, leaving an impression of alienation on the readers. Western heroes are usually associated with expressions of heroism, romance and nostalgia such as natural, gallant and righteous. Feng Xing argues that the American spirit mainly shows five characteristics, namely independence, opportunities, innovation, inclusiveness and philanthropy.<sup>[13]</sup> Besides, American people are also adventurous, egoistic, open-minded and liberty-pursuing. The protagonist, the kid was a scalp hunter who was engaged in wicked deeds of hunting and slaughtering American Indians and earning money with their scalps. As a result, the readers are at a loss as their impression of a Western hero is completely denied. By a parody of history, the novel reveals that the American spirit is not built on a solid foundation. There are few specific dates in the novel, except that the author mentions that the kid was born in 1830. The time the kid was living was almost contemporaneous with the development and flourishing of American cowboys and the full-swing Westward Movement under the Manifest Destiny. The purposely time juxtaposition is a great irony to the official narrative structure.

Thomas Carlyle, a literature and history expert of Britain, ever said, "The society is established on the basis of hero worship...However whenever and wherever it is, as long as the humans exist, there will be hero worship."<sup>[14]</sup> Yet in the post-modern literature, hero worship has collapsed. Character portraying in the post-modernism is mostly anti-hero and a deconstruction of the traditional hero image. In the novel *Blood Meridian*, "the kid" overturns the traditional heroic image of western cowboys and deconstructs the image of national heroes "created" for the national interests. Meanwhile, it restores the truth of history. In fact, the heroic figures born out of the mainstream ideology of America, like the kid, also cannot get themselves out of the filthy mire of the modern civilization. They were living in violence, deception, loss, trauma and desperation, which is the real picture of their life.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Benedetto Croce, a renowned literary and art critic of Italy, argued, "Any history is contemporary."<sup>[15]</sup> After the World War II, the wraith of the war was not far away, but the terror of the Cold War was coming. The American society successively underwent the endless wars and violence such as McCarthyism, the African-American Civil Rights Movement, the Cuba Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the Assassination of Kennedy and the Watergate Affair, which inflicted a bitter pain on the American people. Meanwhile, the explosive economic growth resulted in the rampage of materialism and a spiritual wasteland. The American society fell into a gloomy state under the context of economic expansion, political pressure and cultural decadence, which deeply influenced the creation of litterateurs and even gave rise to the post-war Beat Generation literature. Cormac McCarthy is a lonely traveller, who has been wandering alone in a pursuit of his own literary purport. Like an undercurrent, he is resisting the tough new cultural order of the authorities. He re-depicts the westward expansion in the history of America with his in-depth narrative and post-modernist writing techniques, revealed the violent nature of westward expansion, hypocrisy and instrumentality of Christianity and the anti-heroism of protagonists and subverted the Western myth of official narratives, the illusion of Manifest Destiny of Christianity and the American dream. Thirty years has passed, yet the problems revealed by McCarthy in the novel *Blood Meridian* still present a strong realistic and warning significance to today's America.

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