Blood Meridian

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

Though born in Rhode Island, Cormac McCarthy grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, where as a young man he attended Catholic schools and even served as as an altar boy at the Church of Immaculate Conception. He would later incorporate the sights and sounds of Tennessee into his novels, especially *Suttree* (1979), and many of his works treat what might be called a Catholic nostalgia. McCarthy attended the University of Tennessee on and off throughout the 1950s, where he published his first short stories, although he never completed his degree; he also served four years in the Air Force in this decade. The 1960s and 70s saw the blossoming of McCarthy's career in fiction. He wrote both novels and screenplays throughout this period, living on fellowships and grants. In 1981 McCarthy won his highest honor to date, the MacArthur Fellowship, which he lived on while writing *Blood Meridian*, conducting extensive research for the novel by traveling in Texas and Mexico. *Blood Meridian* marked something of a turn in McCarthy's work, away from the Southern Gothic subgenre in favor of the Western. This turn is evident, for example, in *The Border Trilogy* and *No Country for No Men*, famously adapted for the screen by Joel and Ethan Coen. McCarthy continues to live (albeit reclusively) and write to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Blood Meridian takes place against the backdrop of Manifest Destiny—a nineteenth century program of American territorial expansion and imperialism, especially into regions where the local populations were deemed incapable of self-government. It might be said that the American commitment to Manifest Destiny in part motivated the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), a central event in the novel through which McCarthy dramatizes the hypocrisy and viciousness of Manifest Destiny and imperialism in general. Indeed, the novel suggests that the truest embodiment of imperialist ideology is not what Captain White calls "the instrument of liberation" but in fact the ruthless, murderous Glanton Gang. What's more, McCarthy grounds his treatment of the Glanton Gang itself in the historical record: in 1849 a gang led by a man named John Joel Glanton and seconded by a man named Judge Holden was indeed contracted to massacre the Apaches in Mexico, and after instead murdering Mexicans for their scalps the gang was indeed forced to flee to Arizona where in 1850 they seized the Yuma Crossing of the Colorado River. McCarthy's primary source on the Glanton Gang is a nineteenth-century memoir by Samuel Chamberlain, entitled *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*. There—and accompanying his text with lush watercolors—Chamberlain recalls his adventures and misadventures as a soldier in the Mexican-American War, as well as his participation in the Glanton Gang's scalp-hunting expeditions. Chamberlain even describes Judge Holden: he was Glanton's "second in command," "a gigantic man," a "cool-blooded villain," "destitute of hair," whose "hog-like eyes would gleam with a sullen ferocity worthy of the countenance of a fiend" whenever blood was shed (McCarthy, slightly altering Chamberlain's phrase, gives the Judge "small and lashless pig's eyes"). By grounding his novel in the historical record, McCarthy evades the charge that the violence and atrocities he depicts are merely pessimistic or theatrical: human beings are truly capable of such acts, and, McCarthy implies, always will be.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Blood Meridian is perhaps most deeply indebted to the great epic written during the American Renaissance, Henry Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Both *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* are about fiery hunts, perpetrated by whalers and scalp hunters, respectively. Melville's anti-hero, the fatally willful Captain Ahab, also bears a striking resemblance to McCarthy's Judge Holden: both men are self-reliant and wish to dictate the terms of their fate. Ahab is characterized as an "ungodly god-like man" who worships his malignant god through defiance, and the Judge would become a god himself by serving the god of war. However, *Blood Meridian* also owes something to the Dime Westerns of the nineteenth century and later, more sophisticated Westerns like those written by Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour. However, McCarthy resists the romanticization of American activity in the Wild West as presented in such novels, and instead depicts American pioneers and cowboys as being just as, if not more, "savage" than the Native Americans whom they hunted and were hunted by.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*
- **When Written:** Mid-1970s to 1985
- **Where Written:** Knoxville, Tennessee and El Paso, Texas
- **When Published:** 1985
- **Genre:** Western (sometimes also categorized as an anti-Western) / epic
- **Setting:** The Texas-Mexico borderlands
- **Climax:** Yuma Indians besiege the ferry on the Colorado River where Glanton and his gang have taken control, killing Glanton and most of the gang members

- **Antagonist:** Judge Holden
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Visions and Revisions. In a letter sent around 1979, McCarthy wrote to a friend that, out of frustration, he had not worked on *Blood Meridian* in six months. To inspire himself, he wrote down quotes in his notebooks from Flaubert, Wagner, William James, and Martin Luther King, Jr., among others. Early in the writing process, he also toyed with the idea of including lithographs and woodcuts throughout the novel to illustrate the Glanton Gang's course, though he later abandoned this idea.

Allusions. Though McCarthy has a reputation for being a primordial and anti-intellectual writer, his novels are steeped in the Western literary tradition. For example, the story that Tobin tells about how the Judge confected gunpowder from guano, among other natural resources, is a direct allusion to the episode in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which Satan and the rebel angels likewise find "Deep under ground, materials dark and crude," which they in turn fashion into firearms.

PLOT SUMMARY

The kid is born in Tennessee in 1833, but by the age of fourteen he already has "a taste for mindless violence" and runs away from home. By 1849, he rides into the town of Nacogdoches. There, the kid encounters a giant charismatic man named Judge Holden who incites a crowd to violence against a preacher. The kid also meets Louis Toadvine. Toadvine and the kid fight at first, only to work together a day later in burning down a hotel. As the kid rides out of Nacogdoches, past the fire he's helped to start, the Judge smiles at him.

The kid rides his mule over the prairie, where he meets a hermit who shows him a black man's shriveled heart. After more days on the trail, the kid arrives in Bexar, also in Texas, where he goes to a cantina to work in exchange for a drink but ends up brutalizing the bartender. A soldier named Sergeant Trammel, serving under Captain White, finds the kid at a river and tells him that the Captain was impressed by how badly the bartender in Bexar was beaten. What's more, he wants to recruit the man who did it into his army. After an interview with Captain White himself, who is intent on reclaiming Mexican territories for the U.S. (against U.S. policy), the kid enlists.

Despite a Mennonite's warning that they'll awake God's wrath, Captain White's army of filibusters (people engaging in unauthorized warfare against a foreign country) ride into Mexico, through barren, hostile terrain. Within days they are set upon by a war party of Comanche Indians and massacred—only eight filibusters escape, including the kid, Captain White, and a man named Sproule whose arm is badly wounded. The kid and Sproule set out through the desert together. After a wagon carries them to a town, Sproule dies, and the kid is placed under arrest by Mexican soldiers, presumably for being part of Captain White's army. The soldiers lead the kid through town, past a jar with Captain White's head floating in it. Then, over the next few days, they escort him and other prisoners to Chihuahua City.

In the prison in Chihuahua City, the kid meets up with Toadvine, also incarcerated, along with a Kentuckian called Grannyrat. Toadvine soon arranges for the three of them to be released from prison to join a gang of scalp hunters, newly arrived in the city, in whose company rides none other than the Judge. The gang's leader is a dark-haired, small man named Captain John Joel Glanton.

After arming themselves, the gang sets out, first for the town of Janos where Glanton takes the gang's first scalp, then north. At camp one night, one member of the gang, the black Jackson, kills another, the white Jackson, who had told him not to sit with the white men around their campfire. Later, while riding, the gang is ambushed by Apaches, but manage to ward them off and take a scalp. Some nights later, the gang camps with a group of squatters, and around the campfire the Judge delivers the first of his many lectures, this one on how nature is the word of God.

Some nights later, a member of the gang, an ex-priest named Tobin, explains to the kid how the gang came to ride with the Judge, whom they found sitting on a rock in the desert. He helped them to manufacture gunpowder from natural resources which they used to massacre the Apaches pursuing them; the Judge has been Glanton's second-in-command ever since.

One night, as the scalp hunters camp amid the ruins of the Anasazi, an ancient Native American people, the Judge sketches the artifacts he finds and claims that all people exist as representations in the minds of others. He also tells a story which suggests that the children of both bad and ideal fathers are doomed to lives of desperation and emptiness.

A little more than two weeks pass before the gang discovers and massacres a village of Gileños, a group of Indians. None are left alive, the dead are scalped, but Glanton is disappointed to learn that Gomez, the leader of the Apaches on whose scalp is placed a very high price, was not in the village. Nonetheless, the gang rides back to Chihuahua City to receive payment for the scalps they took. They are welcomed as heroes, paid handsomely with gold, and banquet drunkenly and debauchedly for several nights before riding out of the city on August 15.

The gang goes on to massacre a band of peaceful Tigua Indians, and even ride into a mountain village where they murder Mexican villagers after an altercation at a cantina as well as Mexican soldiers. They take the scalps even of these non-

Indians; but though the gang manages to exchange the Tigua and even Mexican scalps to the Chihuahuan government for gold, their crimes soon come to light, their contract with the Chihuahuan government is rescinded, and a sizable bounty is posted on Glanton's head.

In response, the gang rides to Sonora, another Mexican state, and the government there also contracts them to hunt the Apaches and take scalps. After massacring a village on the Nacozari River, however, the gang encounters an army of Sonoran cavalry led by General Elias. The Sonorans must have become aware of the gang's acts of savagery, or the bounty on Glanton's head, because Elias's army skirmishes with the gang, then pursues them north. During the firefight, some of the gang members are wounded, and the kid is left behind to kill one of them, Dick Shelby. However, and despite personal risk, the kid decides to let Shelby live. After many brutal days and nights of trekking thereafter, the kid reunites with the gang, who have burnt and discarded the scalps taken on the Nacozari.

The gang members who have survived Elias's pursuit ride into Santa Cruz, then into Tucson, Arizona. There black Jackson murders the proprietor of a restaurant, but the Judge manages to have any charges against him dropped. There the gang also meets a man named Cloyce Bell who owns and exhibits in a cage his imbecilic brother, James Robert Bell, more often referred to as the idiot. The gang agrees to escort the Bell brothers to California for a fee.

The gangs end up riding to the Colorado River. On the way the Judge lectures on how warfare is eternal, the ultimate trade. "War is God," he concludes. At the Colorado River, the gang meets Dr. Lincoln, who runs a ferry there. The gang also meets a band of Yuma Indians, with whom Glanton conspires to seize the ferry. However, when the Yumas advance on the ferry, Glanton violently betrays them so that the gang can appropriate the ferry for itself. When the Yumas attempt to operate another ferry downriver, Glanton's men murder the rival ferry operator. The gang quickly grows rich exploiting and robbing their passengers. However, the Yumas in time organize a counterattack against the gang, which results in the death of most of its members, including the black Jackson and Glanton himself.

Among the surviving gang members are the kid and Tobin, both seriously wounded, along with Toadvine, the Judge, and the idiot. These men are scattered in the desert but eventually meet back up with one another at a well. The Judge attempts to buy the only pistol among them, that belonging to the kid, but the kid refuses. Tobin advises the kid to kill the Judge, whom he fears will kill them all, but the kid declines this also.

Tobin and the kid set off together. However, they are soon pursued by the Judge, now dressed in Toadvine's clothing as well as that of David Brown, one of Glanton's former deputies (not present during the Yuma massacre) who found the Judge in the desert. The Judge is also armed with Brown's rifle and has the idiot on a leash. After several encounters with the Judge, the kid and Tobin escape him and make it to San Diego, where Tobin goes to find a doctor and the kid is jailed. The kid is visited by the Judge in jail, who tells him that he would have loved him like a son had he not poisoned the gang's enterprise by having some mercy in his heart for those the gang murdered. After this visit, the kid tells a corporal in charge of the jail where the gang has hidden gold in the mountain. He is released soon after and provided medical attention.

After recovering, the kid goes to Los Angeles, where he witnesses the public execution of Toadvine and Brown. He spends his subsequent years doing various jobs and traveling. By 1878, at the age of forty-five, he finds himself in a saloon in Fort Griffin, Texas. There, after so many years, he meets the Judge one last time. The Judge informs the kid (now referred to as the man) that the two of them are the last survivors of Glanton's gang, and he lectures on fate, will, and rituals. The kid tells the Judge, "I aint with you," and parts ways with him. However, when he enters the saloon outhouse that same night, the Judge is waiting for him and takes him into his "immense and terrible flesh," presumably murdering him. The Judge then takes to the dance floor, where he dances and fiddles expertly before the men and prostitutes assembled, announcing that he never sleeps and will never die.

Blood Meridian concludes with an epilogue, in which an anonymous man makes holes in the earth and uses a steel instrument to strike fire in them, behind whom people mechanically follow.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The kid – The novel's protagonist, if it can be said to have one, is the kid, but McCarthy shows us very little of the kid's actions and thoughts. Born in 1833 to a poor family in Tennessee, the kid has an innate "taste for mindless violence," and by the age of fourteen runs away from home to lead a dissolute and vicious life. Early on he falls in with Captain White's army during its unauthorized invasion of Mexico, which results in the army's destruction and the kid's imprisonment in Chihuahua City. However, he is soon set free to ride with Captain Glanton's gang of scalp hunters, contracted by the Chihuahuan government to hunt the Apaches. The kid proves himself an effective killer, yet, unlike his fellow scalp hunters, he also retains a shred of his humanity. He endangers his own life on several occasions to help and accommodate his comrades-in-arms, as when he removes the arrow from David Brown's thigh when none else would, or spares Dick Shelby's life in defiance of Glanton's orders. For these small acts of mercy, the Judge accuses the kid of violating the gang's amoral spirit of war for war's sake, of poisoning its enterprise. In 1878, at the age of 45,

the kid (by then called the man), is discovered brutally murdered in a Texas outhouse after an encounter with the Judge.

Judge Holden – Often called "the Judge", a totally bald, toweringly gigantic, supernaturally strong, demonically violent, and profoundly learned deputy in Glanton's gang, second in command to none but Glanton himself. The Judge fell in with the scalp hunters after he helped them to massacre their Apache pursuers with gunpowder he manufactured utilizing little more than bat guano and human urine. He is a studious anthropologist and naturalist, a polyglot, an eloquent lecturer in fields as diverse as biological evolution and jurisprudence. He is an expert fiddler and nimble **dancer**. He is also a liar, a sadistic killer, and very possibly a rapist and murderer of young children. The Judge has pledged himself absolutely to the god of war, going so far as to claim that war itself *is* God. Fatally severe on those who break partisanship with the god of war, the Judge finds his wayward yet antagonistic spiritual son in the kid, whom he accuses of poisoning the gang's enterprise by reserving a measure of mercy in his heart. The Judge is the only member of Glanton's gang to survive the novel; he claims that he will never die.

John Joel Glanton – The leader of the gang of scalp hunters featured in the novel, Glanton is a small dark-haired man who has left his wife and daughter for a life of bloodshed and debauchery. After the Judge saved his gang from the Apaches, Glanton entered into something of a terrible covenant with the Judge, who became his foremost deputy. Obsessed with the inexorable workings of fate, Glanton claims agency over his own end by self-destructively embracing it; after a bounty is posted on his head in Mexico, he becomes more and more possessed by a mad and explosive intensity, leading his gang on to the Colorado River where they violently betray Yuma Indians with whom they've conspired and seize Dr. Lincoln's ferry. The Yumas respond in kind, massacring the gang; Glanton dies at the hands of the Yuma leader Caballo en Pelo, and his corpse is hurled onto a bonfire.

Louis Toadvine – A branded fugitive, Toadvine first appears in Nacogdoches, Texas, where he almost murders the kid after a petty altercation, though they soon become compatriots and burn down a hotel together. The two find themselves in one another's company again while imprisoned in Chihuahua City along with Grannyrat. Toadvine secures their freedom by enlisting them all in Glanton's gang of scalp hunters. Toadvine is a somewhat complex character: he is a capricious murderer who goes so far as to kill a prison overseer and macabrely fashion his golden teeth into a necklace, yet he nonetheless violently objects when the Judge plays with, only to slaughter and scalp, an Apache infant. Some time after the Yuma massacre on the Colorado River and its aftermath, Toadvine, along with David Brown, is executed by hanging in Los Angeles.

The John Jacksons – Two members of Glanton's gang are named John Jackson, one white, the other black. Bathcat bets that the black will kill the white, which does indeed come to pass when the white drives the black away from a campfire around which are seated only white men. Although the family of magicians foretells that the black Jackson can begin his life anew and change his fate—and despite a failed attempt to desert the gang—the black Jackson stays the course of ruthless violence. He murders the proprietor of an eating-house in Tucson, Owens, and seems to have become something of a disciple of the Judge toward the end of his life, even imitating the Judge's garb, "a mantle of freeflowing cloth." The black Jackson is killed by the Yumas who raid the gang's ferry and nearby fortifications on the Colorado River.

Ben Tobin – A member of Glanton's gang, Tobin is often called the ex-priest, but he later tells the Judge that he was merely "a novitiate to the order." To some extent, he and the Judge compete with one another for spiritual influence over the kid. Indeed, after the Yuma massacre Tobin and the kid informally ally themselves against the Judge while all of them are destitute in the desert—but though Tobin repeatedly tells the kid that he must kill the Judge, the kid declines for whatever reason to do so. Shot by the Judge while bearing a makeshift cross, Tobin nonetheless escapes with the kid to San Diego where he seeks medical attention. His fate is unknown.

David Brown – Often called Davy Brown, an especially violent deputy in Glanton's gang and Charlie Brown's brother; he comes to wear a necklace of human ears, perhaps recovered from Bathcat's corpse. When the gang first came upon the Judge in the desert, David Brown wanted to leave him but was overruled. Brown later dismisses the Judge's lecture on order and purpose in the universe as "craziness," and calls the Judge crazy again when the giant declares that war is God. In San Diego, Brown is jailed for lighting a soldier on fire with his cigar but bribes one of his jailers to free him, only to murder the jailer and take his ears to add to his necklace. Thereafter he seems intent on defecting from Glanton's gang. Some time after the Yuma massacre on the Colorado River and its aftermath, Brown, along with Toadvine, is executed by hanging in Los Angeles. The kid buys the dead Brown's necklace of ears for two dollars.

Grannyrat Chambers – A Kentuckian whom the kid meets while the two are incarcerated, along with Toadvine, in the prison in Chihuahua City, Grannyrat served in the Mexico-American War and was part of the force that sacked Chihuahua City during that conflict. Grannyrat joins Glanton's gang, only to disappear from the gang soon after arriving in Janos. He is probably murdered by the Delawares as a deserter.

Bathcat – A native of Wales, Bathcat later traveled to Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania) to hunt aborigines; he wears a necklace of human ears. Like Toadvine, he is a fugitive from the law. During the gang's flight from General Elias's army, Bathcat is sent out as a scout, never to return. He is found

along with the other scouts days later dead and hideously mutilated, hanging from a tree.

Marcus "Long" Webster – A member of Glanton's gang who sometimes serves as a scout. One night around the campfire Webster asks the Judge what he intends to do with his sketches, and insists that the Judge not sketch him. Later, Webster is assigned by lottery to kill one of the four men wounded by General Elias's army, but a Delaware does Webster's killing in his place.

The Delawares – Native American members of Glanton's gang who often serve as scouts. One is carried off by a bear in the mountains. Two other Delawares are seriously wounded while the gang is fleeing from General Elias's army, and a third kills them so that they are spared a more torturous fate at Elias's hands.

Juan "McGill" Miguel – The only Mexican member of Glanton's gang, called McGill throughout the novel, an American mispronunciation of his name. McGill takes an old Apache woman's scalp in Janos. When McGill is lanced during the gang's massacre of the Gileños Indians, the kid attempts to help him, but Glanton orders him not to and shoots McGill in the head. The gang then takes McGill's scalp because they might as well profit from it.

Frank Carroll – Runs the bodega that Glanton and his men drink in while staying in the town of Jesús María. After townspeople burn down his bodega, Carroll along with a man named Sanford, leaves town to join Glanton's gang. However, by the time the gang reaches Ures, the capital of the Mexican state of Sonora, both Carroll and Sanford have deserted.

Sam Tate – A member of Glanton's gang, from Kentucky. Along with Tobin and other gang members, Tate served with McCulloch's Rangers during the Mexican-American War. He is assigned by lottery to kill one of the four men wounded by General Elias's army, but the kid excuses him from this bad duty. While trying to catch up with Glanton's gang, the kid and Tate are ambushed by five of Elias's scouts. The kid escapes, but Tate is probably captured and worse.

Dick Shelby – A member of Glanton's gang, Shelby is wounded during a skirmish with General Elias's army and Glanton orders that he be killed. Although assigned by lottery to do the killing, the kid spares Shelby's life and accommodates his wish to be hidden under a bush; even after Shelby attempts to steal his pistol, the kid gives him water from his own canteen. Shelby is probably captured and worse by Elias's army.

Doc Irving – A member of Glanton's gang and presumably a medical doctor at one time, Irving refuses to help David Brown when he takes an arrow to the thigh, knowing that if he doesn't get the arrow out cleanly Brown will kill him. He also claims, in disagreement with the Judge, that might doesn't make right.

Captain White – The racist leader of an army of filibusters—government soldiers operating outside the limits of the law—with which the kid rides and a staunch advocate for American imperialism, White is embittered by the aftermath of the Mexican-American War and becomes hell-bent on invading and seizing Mexican territory. He claims to be an American patriot, yet he hypocritically breaks American law in invading Mexico. He claims to be delivering justice and liberation to "a dark and troubled land," yet he hypocritically plans on pillaging the country of its resources. White survives the Comanches' destruction of his army, but dies at the hands of Mexican bandits. The last the kid sees of Captain White is his head floating in a jar of mescal.

Sergeant Trammel – A sergeant in Captain White's army of filibusters, Trammel seeks out on the Captain's orders the man who so brutally attacked a bartender in Bexar, Texas. That attacker turns out to be the kid. After Trammel promises the kid that joining the filibusters will raise him in the world, the kid agrees to interview with Captain White. Trammel probably dies when the Comanches massacre White's army.

Sproule – A member of Captain White's army, Sproule is, along with the kid, one of the few survivors of the massacre inflicted by the Comanches on White's army. Though wounded in the arm, Sproule manages to trek through the desert alongside the kid. The two encounter merciful Mexican bandits, but one night Sproule is attacked by a vampire bat. He dies in a wagon en route to an unnamed Mexican town, and the kid is arrested by Mexican soldiers soon after.

Angel Trias – The Governor of Chihuahua, Trias was sent abroad for his education as a young man and is well read in the Classics, second in erudition only to the Judge, with whom he converses at length during a banquet held in the scalp hunters' honor. Trias contracts Glanton's gang to hunt the warlike and despotic Apaches in Sonora, and to pay the men for each Apache scalp they return with. However, when the scalp hunters begin slaughtering Mexican citizens, Trias rescinds the contract and places a bounty on Glanton's head.

Sergeant Aguilar – A Mexican sergeant, Aguilar and his men investigate when Glanton creates a disturbance while testing the revolvers delivered by Speyer. The Judge warmly introduces Aguilar to each of the gang members and explains how one of the just-delivered revolvers works. After receiving some money and a handshake from the Judge, Sergeant Aguilar and his men ride off, leaving the scalp hunters to their business.

Colonel Garcia – The leader of a legion of one hundred Sonoran troops, on the hunt for a band of Apaches led by Pablo. Glanton exchanges rudimentary civilities with Garcia while leading his gang to California (though the gang as a unit never makes it farther than the ferry crossing on the Colorado River).

Reverend Green – Reverend Green, a representative of the Christian religion which is depicted as decaying in the novel, has set up a revival tent in Nacogdoches, Texas, sometime around the time of the kid's arrival there. While an audience,

including the kid, listens to the Reverend's sermon against sinfulness, the Judge enters the tent and falsely accuses Green of child molestation and of having sexual intercourse with a goat. Outraged, members of Green's congregation break out into violence and form a posse to hunt Green down. The Judge later reveals that he had never seen or heard of Green before in his life.

The hermit – While riding out of Nacogdoches, the kid comes upon a hovel belonging to the hermit, a man both filthy and half mad. The hermit accommodates the kid and his mule, going so far as to provide the kid with shelter during a stormy night. The hermit was once a slaver in Mississippi who keeps as a memento of those days a dried and blackened human heart. He tells the kid that whiskey, women, money, and black people have the power to destroy the world, and prophecies that human beings will create an evil that can sustain itself for a thousand years.

The Mennonite – A prophet whom the kid, Earl, and second corporal encounter while drinking in a bar in Bexar, the Mennonite warns the three men against joining Captain White on his undertaking, for he fears that White's invasion of Mexico will wake the wrath of God. The kid and his companions berate the Mennonite and swear at him; but his prophecy comes true nonetheless.

The Family of Magicians – A family consisting of an old man and a woman, as well as their son (called Casimero) and daughter. Each member of the family can do tricks, e.g., Casimero juggles dogs. Glanton's gang escorts the family safely from the town of Corralitos to Janos. While camping in the night, the old man and woman read some of the gang members' fortunes using Tarot cards; the woman foresees a calamitous end for Glanton, which does indeed come to pass.

The idiot – The intellectually and developmentally disabled brother of Cloyce Bell, kept in a filthy cage and treated like a freak-show attraction. His real name is James Robert Bell. The Judge rescues the fool from drowning in the Colorado River, and in the aftermath of the Yuma massacre leashes him like a dog, leading him along as the Judge pursues Tobin and the kid. The idiot's fate is unknown.

Owens – The proprietor of an eating-house in Tucson. After Owens asks Glanton's gang to move to a table reserved for "people of color" because of the presence of the black Jackson, David Brown pitches a gun to him and tells him to shoot the black Jackson. In turn, the black Jackson blows Owens's brains out.

Doctor Lincoln – Owns and runs a ferry on the Colorado River, for which he charges a fee to cross. Glanton and the Judge later deceive Lincoln and appropriate the ferry for the gang's purpose and profit, to Lincoln's horror. He is killed and mutilated by the Yumas who later raid the ferry and nearby fortifications.

Elrod – A fifteen-year-old boy who works as a bonepicker on the plains of Texas. When the man tells Elrod and his companions how he came to be in possession of David Brown's necklace of ears, Elrod accuses him of being a liar. Elrod returns to the man's camp later that night armed with a rifle, and the man kills him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

John Dorsey – A member of Glanton's gang, from Missouri. Along with Henderson Smith, he is the first to exit the Nacori cantina after a rocket explodes in the street outside.

Henderson Smith – A member of Glanton's gang, from Missouri. Along with John Dorsey, he is the first to exit the Nacori cantina after a rocket explodes in the street outside. He is later killed by the Yumas who raid the gang's ferry on the Colorado River.

Grimley – A member of Glanton's gang, Grimley is stabbed by a drunk in the Nacori cantina.

John Gunn – A member of Glanton's gang, Gunn helps Glanton in coordinating the gang's escape from the town of Jesús María. He is later killed by the Yumas who raid the gang's ferry on the Colorado River.

Sanford – Along with Frank Carroll, leaves the town of Jesús María to join Glanton's gang, only to desert by the time the gang reaches Ures.

Sloat – After falling ill and being left behind in Ures by his gold-seeking companions, Sloat joins Glanton's gang. He dies soon thereafter, as a consequence of one of the gang's skirmishes with General Elias's army.

Tommy Harlan – A member of Glanton's gang, Harlan is assigned by lottery to kill one of the four men wounded by General Elias's army, but a Delaware does Harlan's killing in his place.

John Prewett – A member of Glanton's gang, he shoots one of the two hermits the gang encounters in the church at San José de Tumacacori.

James Miller – A member of Glanton's gang. Miller's horse is gored by a wild bull living on a ruined estate at San Bernardino. Disgusted, Miller shoots both animals.

Gilchrist – A member of Glanton's gang. During the gang's flight from General Elias's army, Gilchrist is sent out as a scout, never to return. He is found along with the other scouts days later dead and hideously mutilated, hanging from a tree.

Billy Carr – A member of Glanton's gang, Carr accompanies Toadvine and the kid across the Colorado River to cut willow poles.

Charlie Brown – A member of Glanton's gang and David Brown's brother.

Wilson – A member of Glanton's gang,he is killed by the Yumas

who raid the gang's ferry on the Colorado River.

Earl – A Missourian and member of Captain White's army, Earl goes out into Bexar with the kid and a second corporal for a night of drinking. That night Earl gets into drunken quarrels, and the next morning he is found dead in a courtyard.

Hayward – A member of Captain White's army, Hayward prays for rain in the desert. He probably dies when the Comanches massacre White's army.

Candelario – The translator in Captain White's army, probably Mexican. Candelario probably dies when the Comanches massacre White's army.

General Zuloaga – A Mexican general and Conservative leader in the War of Reform, General Zuloaga receives Glanton, the Judge, and the brothers David and Charlie Brown at his hacienda outside of the town of Corralitos, where they all dine together and pass the night without incident.

General Elias – A Mexican general, probably dispatched by the Governor of Sonora, Elias leads an army consisting of some five hundred units of Sonoran cavalry against Glanton's gang. Elias succeeds in driving the gang out of Mexico for good.

Gómez – The leader of the Apaches who are plaguing Chihuahua. Though Governor Trias offers Glanton's gang one thousand dollars for Gómez's head, the scalp hunters fail to kill him.

Mangas Colorado – An Apache tribal chief. After Glanton's horse bites the ear of an Apache's horse outside of Tucson, Mangas demands that the gang provide restitution in the form of a barrel of whiskey. The gang does so, albeit rather cheatingly.

Caballo en Pelo – The one-eyed leader of the Yumas. He conspires with Glanton's gang to seize Lincoln's ferry, but is betrayed by the gang. In retribution, he orchestrates a raid on the ferry, resulting in the gang's destruction; Caballo en Pelo slaughters Glanton personally.

Pascual – One of the three Yuma leaders who conspire with Glanton's gang to seize Lincoln's ferry

Pablo – The leader of a band of Apaches being hunted by the Sonoran Colonel Garcia; also one of the three Yuma leaders who conspire with Glanton's gang to seize Lincoln's ferry.

Lieutenant Couts – The commander of the garrison in Tucson. After Owens is murdered in his eating-house, Couts attempts to arrest the wrongdoer, whom he knows to be a member of Glanton's gang. However, the Judge successfully defends the gang from all charges of wrongdoing.

General Patterson – Leads a company of U.S. soldiers from Kentucky. After refusing to barter with Glanton for ferried passage over the Colorado River, Patterson has a ferry constructed downriver, later appropriated by the Yumas.

Sidney – A man staying in the hotel in Nacogdoches, Texas, and an enemy of Louis Toadvine for reasons not explained. Toadvine and the kid team up to smoke Sidney out of his room and pulverize him, burning down the hotel in the process.

Speyer – A Jewish arms dealer from Prussia, Speyer sells Glanton some four-dozen Colt revolvers on the outskirts of Chihuahua City.

Cloyce Bell – A man whom Glanton's gang encounters in Tucson, Cloyce keeps his imbecilic brother, generally called the idiot, in a filthy cage and exhibits him for money.

Pacheco – A farrier in Tucson, Pacheco uses for his anvil an "enormous iron meteorite" on which the Judge tests his strength. The judge successfully throws it.

Sarah Borginnis – A woman who, at Lincoln's ferry crossing, shames Cloyce Bell for keeping his brother, the idiot, in a cage. She bathes the idiot in the Colorado River and orders that his cage be burnt.

Callaghan – Operates the ferry appropriated by the Yumas after General Patterson builds and abandons it. Murdered and decapitated, probably by Glanton's gang.

Petit – A soldier in San Diego who brings the jailed David Brown supper. Brown bribes Petit to free him, and with some hesitation Petit does so. As the two men ride out of San Diego, Brown shoots Petit in the back of the head.

The Digger – The anonymous and mysterious man in the epilogue who uses a steel instrument to make holes in the ground and strike fire in them. Is he a hero rising up with fire against the Judge's dream of eternal night rife with war?

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WARFARE AND DOMINATION

Blood Meridian is a tragic procession of bloody violent acts, from barroom brawls to great and terrible massacres on the plains; even the landscapes of the novel—barren, alien, indifferent—seem to be at war with the forms of life that traverse them.

The central theoretician and advocate for warfare in the novel is Judge Holden, who hails war itself as the ultimate trade, and humankind as its ultimate practitioner. The Judge says very simply that war endures because young men love it and old men love it in them, a claim borne out by the kid's almost native taste for mindless violence and by the eagerness of so many men to join Glanton's gang of scalp hunters as they spread

carnage and terror throughout the borderlands of the United States and Mexico. In his most grandiose lecture, the Judge goes on to make an even larger claim. War is essentially a battle of wills, he says, and the outcome is determined by a "larger will," namely fate. In the sense that it determines the course of the universe, "war is God" in the Judge's formulation.

What's more, all true servants of war become gods themselves with dominion over the earth. So it is that Glanton holds dominion over his gang, or the Judge holds dominion over almost everything he encounters, from the bat guano he converts into gunpowder to the children he violates and murders to the idiot whom he puts on a leash. Indeed, throughout their expeditions, the scalp hunters are not so much interested in turning a profit—they squander their money wantonly on debauchery—so much as in dominating the lives of those around them, whether they're demanding drink or running a ferry as though it were a medieval fiefdom. All those who fail to truly serve war fall out of such dominion and into oblivion, the Judge says, and by the end of the novel, it would seem that only he is destined to live forever, dancing **the dance** of war.

WITNESS AND MERCY

The Judge affirms to Tobin that nothing can exist without a witness, and later, when the black Jackson murders Owens in Tucson, the Judge secures Jackson's freedom by explaining that without a witness willing to come forward, there are no grounds for arrest; it is as if no crime has been committed at all. The scalp hunters exploit this principle: to protect their true image as ruthless indiscriminate traitorous murderers, they often go so far as to kill those who witness their acts of brutality.

However, there are witnesses that the scalp hunters cannot eradicate: the novel and its readers. It is a fitting irony that the Judge, who takes notes and sketches copiously in a ledger book, should himself be but a sketch in a book whom we witness from a jurisdiction higher than his own. (One might argue that the Judge bears witness to the world, nicely sketching it and studying it as he does; but he does not so much bear witness as *survey*, with the object of domination. The true witness, in contrast, desires no power over what they see, but only to testify to *having seen*.) In witnessing, the novel also gives life and voice to human suffering which would otherwise be lost to history.

Intimately connected with the act of witnessing are self-judgment and, more importantly, mercy. Though only faintly, the kid, more than any of his fellow scalp hunters, is capable of witnessing what is cruel in his own actions, and of standing in judgment on them. It is perhaps this quality in the kid, this odd innocence, which accounts for his small acts of kindness, as when he accompanies the wounded Sproule through the desert, or spares Dick Shelby's life in defiance of Glanton's order. Such acts are small consolation next to the Judge's vision of eternal, nameless night, but it is all that the novel offers.

FATE

The narrator of *Blood Meridian* says that people involved in hazardous enterprises like warfare often become preoccupied with the idea of fate, which is certainly the case in the novel. The kid encounters several prophets on his journey, all of whom rightly foretell doom and destruction. More uncannily, when Glanton is having his fortune told early on he draws a card from a Tarot deck depicting a cart without wheels adrift on a dark river, which the fortuneteller reads as a portent of war, vengeance, and loss. And sure enough, Glanton loses his life at the hands of vengeful Yuma Indians after having betrayed them to secure control over a ferry on the Colorado River.

The narrator is also something of a fortuneteller: several times the reader is told when and how a certain character will die long before the death comes to pass, as is the case with both Bathcat and Sloat. However, these fortunes are complicated by the possibility that such characters are not so much fated to die as they are agents who choose to lead violent lives rife with danger—and how else can a person who spends their life violently die but violently? At one point, when the gang murders a group of placid muleteers and drives their livestock off a cliff, the narrator attributes the meeting not to fate but to sheer "bad luck."

The characters of the novel also have conflicting perspectives on the idea of fate. The Judge, for one, understands war to be both a revealer of fate's preference as well as the ultimate fate of the world. He tells a parable about two sons, one born to a wicked father and one born to an absent and therefore idealized father. Both sons become wicked themselves. The moral seems to be that, regardless of how a person is nurtured, he or she is fated for a life of emptiness, despair, and violence. The Judge himself at one point suggests that it's only by understanding all of creation, while at the same time having the power to destroy those parts of creation of which one doesn't approve, that one can dictate the terms of one's own fate. Glanton, on the other hand, believes that a person's fate is inalterable and absolute, although he nonetheless claims agency by hurling himself relentlessly into his fated course. The kid seems somewhat skeptical of the idea of fate. At a saloon in Texas, he tells the Judge, "Everybody dont have to have a reason to be someplace." *Blood Meridian* as a whole is finally ambiguous as to whether or not the world is governed absolutely by fate.

RELIGION AND RITUAL

In the world of *Blood Meridian*, Christianity is decaying. Early on the kid sleeps in an abandoned

church littered with feces and shot up by American soldiers, and the gang encounters many such ruins on their travels, including a church in which the kid and Sproule discover forty human corpses, slain and scalped by the Apaches. Traditional Christian doctrine is also in tatters in the novel, and the idea of a benevolent God would certainly be hard-pressed to account for the hellish world the novel depicts. A hermit tells the kid that the devil was at God's elbow when He made man. A dying squatter sings hymns and curses God alternately.

It is in such a spiritual climate that the Judge's religion of "War is God" thrives. At the beginning of the novel, the Judge enters a tent where the Reverend Green is holding a Christian revival, and by slandering the Reverend he quickly converts religious experience into a shootout. Indeed, the Judge himself acknowledges that there are "strange affinities" between priests and warriors, exemplified in the novel by the connection between religious and military rituals, especially sacrifice. Throughout the novel, an ironic comparison is implied between the rebirth of a soul into God through baptism with the rebirth of a warrior through the shedding of blood. Moreover, the Judge explicitly characterizes warfare as a ritual, a deadly **dance** of fate and wills—one that in the world of *Blood Meridian* has come to supplant the rituals of Christian worship.

While the Judge's god is one of wrath, though, there are also flickers in the novel of more moral centers of worship. For example, when the Judge gives his sermon on war, one of the scalp hunters listening insists that might does not make right. The kid faintly but uniquely adheres to this code by refusing once in a while to brutalize his fellow travelers. A woman named Sarah Borginnis justly shames Cloyce Bell for keeping his imbecilic brother in a filthy cage, and she and the other women in her company deliver the idiot from his bondage, take him to the Colorado River while singing Christian hymns, **bathe** him, and in a small way restore his humanity. This is perhaps the gentlest act that McCarthy reveals to us, but it would seem that, even if the majority of the characters in the novel act more like the Judge than Sarah, the characters at least in theory recognize that love and mercy are more solid foundations for ceremony and right worship than hatred and violence.

RACISM AND PARTISANSHIP

Many killers in the novel justify their violence in large part by demonizing their enemy, and this demonization is very often race-based. The racist and therefore all the more aptly named Captain White, for example, justifies his invasion of Mexico by denouncing the Mexican people as "barbarians." Glanton and his men refer derogatorily to the Indians they hunt and whom they are hunted by as "savages" and "heathens." The white John Jackson antagonizes the black John Jackson solely because he is black. However, the novel explodes these race-based, us-vs.-them distinctions with its irony. Captain White's true motive for invading Mexico seems to be barbaric pillaging and plundering for profit, and Governor Trias of Mexico proves to be a far more civilized man than White. Glanton's gang is just as savage a pack of murderers as the Indians they hunt for profit. And, as their sharing of a name would suggest, the two John Jacksons might as well be identical to one another.

Given that the differences between races, between the savage and the civilized in the novel, are so arbitrary and flimsy, how do characters determine which causes to support? How do they figure out which party to join? The novel suggests that partisanship is really established by a combination of opportunism and pragmatism: how can I get what I want *now*. It's because he's promised the spoils of war that the kid joins up with Captain White, and it's because doing so secures his freedom that he later joins up with Captain Glanton. To maximize the number of scalps they take, Glanton's gang betrays their alliance with Mexico by beginning to prey on the Mexican citizenry. The gang hunts the Apaches one week, only to sell them whiskey the next. It is ultimately this haphazard and changeable mode of making and breaking party ties that leads to the gang's destruction at the hands of the Yuma Indians.

Yet while the gang plays fast and loose with its alliances, the gang, and especially the Judge, allow no defections. When Grannyrat disappears from the gang's ranks, for example, the Delawares are dispatched and probably murder him for a deserter. The black Jackson also attempts to desert, it would seem, only to be ridden down on the Judge's orders and restored to the gang naked (he later becomes one of the Judge's more committed disciples). Toward the end of the novel, the Judge accuses the kid of having poisoned the gang's enterprise by reserving "in [his] soul some corner of clemency for the heathen," which is a capital crime in the Judge's court, if only because the act of defection and desertion, even spiritual, is sufficient to challenge what the Judge alleges to be war's unifying power.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE DANCE

Characters dance throughout *Blood Meridian*: the black Jackson dances along with the family of magicians in Janos, the scalp hunters dance debauchedly at a feast Governor Trias holds in their honor, and even the idiot dances "with great gravity" while drunk on the shore of the Colorado River. However, it is the Judge who most loves the dance and most excels at it; and it is also the Judge for whom the dance symbolizes warfare as a ritual. (It is worth pointing out here that the connection between dancing and warfare is

ancient—for example, Mars, the Greek god of war, is often characterized as a light-footed and nimble dancer.) Specifically, the Judge tells the kid in Fort Griffin that the dance is a ritual in the sense that it is a strictly ordered activity where each participant has a specific role to play, a role through which a given participant can transcend merely personal emptiness and despair. He also claims that any ritual which does not involve bloodletting is in fact a false ritual. It might seem counterintuitive that a dance must involve bloodletting, but indeed most dancing in the novel takes place against the backdrop of carnage, like the taking of scalps and the shooting of the dancing bear in the novel's final chapter, and most dancing also tends to degenerate into drunken debauchery and violence. Of course, warfare as the Judge understands it, also constitutes a ritual, in which combatants advance through the stations of fate and transcend their own wills by submitting them to the judgment of fate. That the idiot and even a bear can dance suggests that the need to participate in ritual is a primordial and essential animal need, which perhaps explains why human beings have always engaged in warfare and, the novel prophesies, always will. At the end of the novel, the Judge makes another prophecy: that people will more and more dishonor warfare, turn to lesser trades, and be forgotten, while he alone dances the dance, an immortal god of war.

BATHING

While **the dance** symbolizes a ritual of violent motion that seeks to perpetuate itself, bathing is a symbol in the novel, often explicitly, for baptism—a ritual of serenity, radical transformation, and redemption. However, most of the baptisms in the novel are in fact failed or perverted baptisms, reflective of a dark and troubled world in which the atrocities and horrors of history repeat themselves without end. The day after he savagely beats a bartender in Bexar, the kid wades into a nearby river, the narrator tells us, "like some wholly wretched baptismal candidate," as though this were an opportunity for him to cleanse himself of his life of crime and begin anew. However, the kid does not then change his life, but only hurls himself all the more relentlessly into acts of blood. Later come the perverted baptisms. For example, after the successful massacre of the Gileños, Glanton's scalp hunters return to Chihuahua City as heroes and make straight for the public baths to wash from their bodies the filth and gore that result from their trade; but the scalp hunters are so contaminated, literally and morally, that they turn the bathwater to bloody filth. From this blood, the men are reborn higher in the eyes of the world, neatly dressed and loaded with gold, but also men more dedicated than ever to making a debauched bloodbath of the world.

While these are examples of a failed and a perverted baptism, respectively, the novel also presents successful baptisms. The most notable is that in which the upstanding and gentle Sarah Borginnis wades out into the Colorado River with the grossly misused idiot—and, further, reclaims for the idiot his rightful name, James Robert Bell—to clean him, demanding also that his filthy cage be burnt. Albeit momentarily—for the Judge soon indentures him thereafter—James Robert is reborn with human dignity and liberty. More obscurely is what we might call the kid's spiritual baptism while he looks out over the Pacific Ocean for the first time in his life. The sea physically marks the limit of the American frontier where violence reigns supreme, it is the ultimate challenge to the Manifest Destiny that drives the United States and its people to dominate the land, and as such it takes on a serenely moral quality. Although the kid does not wade out into the sea in body, he seems to do so in spirit, for it is soon after his encounter with this great baptismal font that he gives up his life of gratuitous violence and transforms himself into someone who ceases to live by the sword and instead bears with him, despite his illiteracy, a copy of the Bible, the ultimate foundation for the efficacy of baptism.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Blood Meridian* published in 1992.

Chapter 1 Quotes

He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man.

Related Characters: The kid

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is among the earliest descriptions of the Kid presented in the novel. Although born to a schoolmaster in Tennessee, the Kid is, ironically, illiterate, which suggests the extent to which culture has decayed in the novel's America by the time of the Kid's birth in 1833. The Kid cannot even read the Bible, and indeed throughout the novel McCarthy suggests that spiritual ignorance has in large part given rise to the world of rampant cruelty and violence represented throughout the book.

The Kid, with his "taste for mindless violence," is little more than a beast in a man's skin. The Kid's "visage" is his facial expression, and based on that expression one could predict that he will lead a spiritually empty, violent life. In that sense, the Kid's history is "present in that visage," and the violent child he is will metaphorically give birth to the

violent man the Kid grows up to be.

Surprising as it may sound, this one little quotation holds three allusions: one to Milton's *Paradise Lost* where God "dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss"; one to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where Lady Macbeth tells her violent husband, "Your face, my thane, is as a book where Men / May read strange matters"; and one to Wordsworth's little poem "My heart leaps up when I behold," where we find the line, "The Child is father of the Man." The first two allusions, to the war in heaven and fall from grace depicted in Milton, the violence, betrayal and revenge in *Macbeth*, have natural connections to the themes of the novel. Thepious hopefulness and love of beauty in Wordsworth's poem seem to be connected to the novel more by their almost complete absence rather than their presence. It's worth noting, also, that McCarthy'ssupreme knowledge in being able to make such allusions as an author stands in stark contrast to the Kid's intellectual and spiritual degeneracy, and therefore serves as a kind of emphasis of all that has been lost in that degeneracy.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it.

Related Characters: The hermit (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

After setting fire to the hotel in Nacogdoches with Toadvine, the Kid flees and begins a life of begging and theft on the prairies. One night, he sees smoke rising from among the hills, and riding toward it discovers a hut where a character called the hermit dwells. The Kid stays the night at the hermit's hut and the two talk.

The hermit used to be a slaver in Mississippi, and therefore knows from personal experience a good deal about the "meanness," or cruelty, that every animal exhibits in nature. However, the hermit holds that the cruelest animal in the world –whose creation the devil must have had a hand in – is man himself. The novel does not contradict this claim. Other animals fight and kill to survive – but men like Judge Holden fight for the sheer pleasure of fighting.

Blood Meridian is set in the mid 1800s, toward the end of the Industrial Revolution when manual labor was being replaced by machines. Although we don't see any factories, for example, in the novel, the hermit reminds us that the same spirit of dominating nature which the Judge sermonizes on is also at work in American industry. Moreover, the hermit's prophecy suggests that industrialization will lead to an evil that can run itself for a thousand years, but no more: an economy that can provide the weapons for mass warfare and also the incentive to use them. Through the hermit's "prophecy" McCarthy, then, connects the shocking brutality on display in the novel to the present world, suggesting that such brutality still exists all around us.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them.

Related Characters: Captain White (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

After getting into a vicious bar-fight in Bexar, the Kid is recruited into Captain White's army. In conversation with the Kid, Captain White announces that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which formally ended the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), was a betrayal of Americans who fought in that war. He believes that it would have been better had the United States simply conquered Mexico and absorbed it into U.S. rule, because, he says, the people of Mexico are lawless, godless, and barbaric. His plan is to take his own army into Mexico, without authorization from the American government, and to finish what the Mexican-American War started.

The Captain's justifications for conquering Mexico are both racist and merely a pretense: it would seem that he is ultimately less interested in "governing" Mexico than in plundering the country. Moreover, the rest of the novel challenges Captain White's view of Mexico. The leaders of Mexico whom we meet, like Governor Trias of Chihuahua, are very cultured and sophisticated, and the citizens of Mexico are relatively peaceful. Far more barbaric than Trias

is Captain White himself, or the anarchic gang of scalp-hunters led by Glanton. However, perhaps the most cultured, sophisticated character in the novel, Judge Holden, is also the cruelest and most bloodthirsty. He introduces a God into Mexico – but it is the god of war.

❝ The wrath of God lies sleeping. It was hid a million years before men were and only men have power to wake it. Hell aint half full. Hear me. Ye carry war of a madman's making onto a foreign land. Ye'll wake more than the dogs.

Related Characters: The Mennonite (speaker), Captain White

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

After being contracted into Captain White's army, the Kid celebrates by going into Bexar to drink with some of his comrades-in-arms. There, they meet a Mennonite – a Christian sect of strong moral and religious beliefs and a refusal to engage with modern culture. The Mennonite is one of several prophets in the novel who foretells death and destruction.

Specifically, the Mennonite gives an account of God's Creation of the universe which holds that God created not just with love but also wrath, and that the wrath of God has been merely sleeping, to be awoken by the evil acts of human beings themselves. This account is an allusion to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, where the narrator thinks, "Though in many of its aspects the visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright." In other words, Love and Wrath are not distinct, but bound to one another. We will see just how frightful our universe is if we persist in our evil ways, the Mennonite implies.

One of the ironies underlying this passage is that Captain White claims to be bringing God and good government into Mexico by making war there. He, like many Americans of his time, are intoxicated with a myth of progress, the idea that human beings can master nature and spread civilization and perfect themselves. The Mennonite sees, however, that unchecked, ruthless progress, far from bringing paradise to earth, will bring a hell instead.

Of course, no one heeds the Mennonite's words.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ The survivors lay quietly in that cratered void and watched the whitehot stars go rifling down the dark. Or slept with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted on the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night.

Related Characters: The kid

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Many days into Captain White's march through the Sonoran Desert, as part of his mad plot to conquer Mexico, his soldiers begin to fall ill with cholera and die. The landscape becomes more hostile and alien; wolves come to lope behind the army.

This quote gives a description of the soldiers as they lie down at night, as well as the desert around them. The landscape is at once empty – what we'd expect of a "void" – but also deeply menacing, with stars moving hot and swift as bullets spinning (or "rifling") through the barrel of a gun. This is nature at its most hostile, terrifying, and meaningless.

It is ironic that the narrator refers to the soldiers as "pilgrims," because pilgrims are people on journeys to holy places, while the soldiers ride out to death and destruction. The novel often associates war and religion, as though to suggest that man has indeed made war into a religion, as the Judge would wish for us. The soldiers' hearts are alien in two ways. First, they are alien because the soldiers are more and more coming to fear death, so that they see their hearts not only as a source of life but also as a vulnerability, something that puts them at risk. Second, the soldiers are alienated from their hearts in a spiritual sense: they can no longer hear the call of conscience and follow their hearts, so to speak.

Anareta is from the Greek meaning "destroyer," and it is an astrological term for any planet that portends doom. This is appropriate, considering that most of the soldiers sleeping in this passage will be soon slaughtered by the Comanches.

Chapter 7 Quotes

In this company there rode two men named Jackson, one black, one white, both forenamed John. Bad blood lay between them and as they rode up under the barren mountains the white man would fall back alongside the other and take his shadow for the shade that was in it and whisper to him. The black would check or start his horse to shake him off. As if the white man were in violation of his person, had stumbled onto some ritual dormant in his dark blood or his dark soul whereby the shape he stood the sun from on that rocky ground bore something of the man himself and in so doing lay imperiled.

Related Characters: The John Jacksons

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

As the Glanton gang proceeds out of Chihuahua City on its first scalp-hunting expedition, the narrator introduces us to the two John Jacksons. There is animosity between the Jacksons, which is ironic: but for the fact that one is black and the other white, the two men are virtually indistinguishable from one another.

Here the white Jackson is bothering the black by riding beside him in his shadow and whispering to him. He is presumably motivated by racial prejudice, but also, perhaps, by a more complicated feeling. In some ways, the two Jackson's are one another's shadows and doubles – figuratively speaking, they are the same man. The white Jackson, then, is forced to confront the fact, in confronting his black double, that the social privileges he enjoys as a white man have nothing to do with him as an individual, that these privileges are fragile figments of culture and nothing more. The black Jackson is forced to confront the fact, in confronting his white double, that society's racism is an absurdity, but one firmly upheld nonetheless, as though it were a fact of the world.

The narrator speculates that the black Jackson shakes off the white to protect his own shadow, as though the shadow were part of the man who cast it and endangered by the white Jackson riding on it. In one sense, the shadow here represents the authentic part of oneself, which exists outside of social categories like race or class. In driving off the white, the black Jackson is metaphorically protecting the inmost part of himself.

The judge smiled. It is not necessary, he said, that the principals here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding. But it is consistent with notions of right principle that these facts...should find a repository in the witness of some third party. Sergeant Aguilar is just such a party and any slight to his office is but a secondary consideration when compared to divergences in that larger protocol exacted by the formal agenda of an absolute destiny. Words are things. The words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning.

Related Characters: Judge Holden (speaker), The John Jacksons, Sergeant Aguilar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

When the Judge introduces the Mexican Sergeant Aguilar to the gang on the outskirts of Chihuahua, heexplains in Spanish the black Jackson's racial heritage at length—drawing on racist, false accounts of the inferiority of the black race presented in the Bible, Greek poetry, anthropology, and science. The black Jackson demands to know what's been said of him, and the Judge responds with the quote discussed here.

The Judge is saying, using legal terminology, that the black Jackson, one of "the principals" of the case at hand, doesn't himself need to know the facts of his own racial heritage, because his actions will be consistent with his alleged inferiority as a black man. However, the Judge also says that the facts need to find "a repository in the witness of some third party," that third party being Aguilar. For the Judge, truth must have witnesses before it can be truth at all; but the witnesses don't need to understand the truth for it to contribute to destiny.

However, doesn't the so-called truth of black Jackson's inferiority to whites already have a third-party witness – namely, the Judge? Why does some random sergeant need to bear witness to it, too? It would seem that the Judge is merely trying to antagonize the black Jackson. The bigger irony here is that the so-called truth the Judge is propagating here isn't a truth at all, and so it has no authority outside of a merely *social* authority – a myth of Western society that nonetheless is held up by Western society as fact.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ The nearest man to him [the white Jackson] was Tobin and when the black stepped out of the darkness bearing the bowieknife in both hands like some instrument of ceremony Tobin started to rise. The white man looked up drunkenly and the black stepped forward and with a single stroke swapt off his head.

Related Characters: The John Jacksons, Ben Tobin

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

One night at camp, the gang sets up two campfires, one around which the whites sit, and one around which all the other men sit. When the black Jackson attempts to sit with the whites, the white Jackson drives him off, going so far as to draw and cock his pistol. The black Jackson avenges himself by cutting, or "swapping," off the white Jackson's head.

Later in the novel, the Judge will announce that war is god. This seems to be the case for the gang members in general and for the black Jackson in particular who, after all, handles his knife "like some instrument of ceremony." Now it is one of the effects of a ceremony, often performed in worship of a god, to bring people together and solidify their group identity. Black Jackson's killing of the white seems to do just that. The other white gang members do not rise to avenge the white Jackson but accept his death without so much as a word. That is because they are men of war first, and members of racial categories second. War and violence really do make these men closer, then, but only by pitting them against the whole world.

Significantly, Tobin rises here just as the black Jackson offers a sacrifice to the god of war, so to speak. Tobin was once a novitiate to a religious order, and he alone questions, however faintly, the Judge's religion of total war.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ And so these parties divided upon that midnight plain, each passing back the way the other had come, pursuing as all travelers must inversions without end upon other men's journeys.

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

The night after riding away from the squatters' camp near the Mexican copper mine, the gang members come upon a party that is like the mirror-image of their own. The two parties talk — about what we never learn, perhaps what to expect on the roads ahead of them — and then move on.

The idea that travelers merely pursue "inversions" of others' journeys — that they are just taking different versions of journeys already made by others — implies that human desires and their endeavors to dominate are inherently wayward, backwards, senseless, and yet the same as they've always been. It also implies that the horrific events of the novel are fated to repeat themselves, that the brutality on display in the story has always existed and still exists, today.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ For let it go how it will, he said, God speaks in the least of creatures.

Related Characters: Ben Tobin (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

One night, while sitting around a campfire, Tobin and the Kid discuss in hushed tones the Judge. Tobin, one of the only gang members with a shred of humanity intact, acknowledges that the Judge is profoundly gifted and immensely learned. This leads him to speculate that God doesn't much care about learnedness – if He cared about it, Tobin implies, He wouldn't have given it to such a devil-man as the Judge.

Instead, Tobin believes that God doesn't speak to the great like the Judge, but rather to the silent, the meek, "the least of creatures." This is in keeping with the Christian value of humility that Tobin would have been familiar with as a novitiate to a religious order; for it was Jesus Christ himself who said that the meek "shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Contrast this belief with the hermit's, who says that there's "meanness in the least of creatures." The hermit is referring to the cruelty that is a part of the order of nature, whereas Tobin is referring to the divine grace that belongs to the order of divinity.

Tobin's belief is borne out in the case of the Kid. The Kid is virtually silent throughout the novel, and he is a very small

creature in its pages indeed, little more than a name on a page. But it is precisely in the Kid that the novel sees some grace in the world of war. He holds mercy in his heart, unlike almost every other gang member. The Judge eventually kills the Kid, but it is the insistent voice of God that speaks through the Kid which more deeply impresses us.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now? Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet? The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night… This you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons.

Related Characters: Judge Holden (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

While the gang camps amid the Anasazi Indian ruins, the Judge tells the story of the harness maker, in which the sons of both a good father and a bad father come equally to spiritual ruin. So, Tobin asks, how should a father raise his son?

The Judge responds that children should be forced to undergo deadly trials. This is a form of eugenic "culling," or getting rid of the so-called weak members of a species to promote the breeding of the strong. This idea owes something to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by the process of natural selection, but the Judge couldn't have known about this theory, since it is 1849 when he delivers the speech quoted here and Darwin's *Origin of Species* wasn't published until 1859.

According to the Judge, it is because human beings can cull themselves through warfare and the like that we can make cultural progress and achieve great things. He contrasts this progress – in which "there is no waning" – with the waxing and waning cycle of death and birth in the natural world. However, we can't take the Judge at his word: for he himself shows that there is waning in the affairs of men, namely when a culture collapses at the height of its greatness, "the noon of [its] expression," as Rome collapsed, or the Anasazi culture in whose ruins the gang is camping. The Judge wants us to believe that human progress is limitless, precisely because such a belief will lead us into "the onset of night," and the Judge desires to bring about a bloody night that does not end.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ They rode on. They rode like men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote.

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

While riding in pursuit of the first Indians they've had any sign of for days, theGileños, the gang crosses into Mexico, through a forbidding landscape. This quote describes the men as they ride through a swallowing darkness.

The narrator says that the origins of the men's purpose seemed "antecedent" to the men themselves – that is, the men's purpose existed before the men themselves existed. In other words, the men are instruments of fate, and they do what they do because they are fated to do it. This is a point of view verging on fatalism, the belief that all events are predetermined and inevitable. But predetermined by what or whom? The physical laws of the universe? God?

Furthermore, the narrator compares the men of Glanton's gang to "blood legatees," that is, people who have inherited their bad blood and their penchant for spilling blood from a will. This will was signed, so to speak, by the same fate that gives the men (or forces upon the men) their purpose. Although we cannot see the order the men descend from – one of anarchic warfare and ritual violence – because it is "remote," the will of this order must be executed, for it is "imperative."

Simply put, then, the men ride as though they are fated by a higher power to commit acts of violence, with the implication that men ride to commit such acts because men are inherently violent and always have been.

The trailing of the argonauts terminated in ashes and...the expriest asked if some might not see the hand of a cynical god conducting with what austerity and what mock surprise so lethal a congruence. The posting of witnesses by a third and other path altogether might also be called in evidence as appearing to beggar chance, yet the judge...said that in this was expressed the very nature of the witness and that his proximity was no third thing but rather the prime, for what could be said to occur unobserved?

Related Characters: Ben Tobin, Judge Holden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly before slaughtering theGileños, the gang comes upon five wagons burning in the desert, surrounded by mutilated corpses. "Argonauts" refers to the mythical band of Greek heroes led by Jason who successfully recovered the Golden Fleece after overcoming many trials and monsters; this is an ironic allusion here, given that Jason's Argonauts were heroic, god-like men, whereas "the argonauts" in McCarthy's text are merely the anonymous dead.

Tobin sees the mutilated dead and wreckage, and he speculates that god must be "cynical" and even malignant. After all, what other kind of god would bring together killer and victim, despite all odds, to one little place amid an immense desert? The "congruence," or meeting of the two parties, was "fatal" in the sense of "deadly" and "fated." Moreover, Tobin says, the very fact that there are people to witness the resulting carnage further suggests that what happens is notcoincidental, that is, it "beggar[s] chance," and therefore must have been determined by fate.

The Judge's response implies that before anything can be said to exist, it must first be witnessed or observed. Witness, then, is "the prime," or the thing that comes first, before an event can be said to have taken place. The Judge himself wants to witness everything so that its existence depends on him, yet he himself would go unobserved so as to remain free. Of course, though, the Judge *is* observed – by the novel's readers.

Chapter 13 Quotes

Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

Glanton's gang has exchanged their first batch of scalps for gold in Chihuahua and they've just ridden out of Coyame, a little Mexican village. They're now seeking signs of the Apaches along the Texas border. This quote describes the men as they ride.

Although the gang members have a mission – to kill Apaches on behalf of the Mexican government – they ironically appear "at venture," that is, as if they were just where they are at random. These men have no respect for the promises they make to other people, nor do they respect the social order. The men are so "devoid of order" they more closely resemble "absolute rock" than human beings –in this, they are like the mythological monsters that appeared in the chaos out of which the world began. Indeed, the narrator calls them "gorgons," or monsters in Greek mythology with snakes for hair and who turn anyone who beholds them to stone.

The men are "at no remove from their own looming," that is, they are incapable of intellectually distancing themselves from, and self-consciously reflected on, what they are and what they do.

One of the arguments this passage is making is that mindless violence is universal. It existed in "Gondwanaland," one of the supercontinents that existed on earth millions of years ago, and as then, so now. People think we live in an ordered world, but this passage suggests that language-less chaos, where "each was all," exists everywhere, even to this day.

They entered the city haggard and filthy and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted. The scalps of the slain villagers were strung from the windows of the governor's house and the partisans were paid out of the all but exhausted coffers and the Sociedad was disbanded and the bounty rescinded. Within a week of their quitting the city there would be a price of eight thousand pesos posted for Glanton's head.

Related Characters: John Joel Glanton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

Glanton's gang returns to Chihuahua City in triumph the first time, because they bear with them many Indian scalps. The second time they return, however, they bring with them the scalps not of the Indians they were contracted to kill, but the scalps of Mexican citizens, the very people the gang was hired to protect. The government in Chihuahua does not yet know this, however, and so it pays Glanton's men for "the scalps of the slain villagers" – which is what the gang was counting on.

McCarthy's description of the gang's second return to the city is at once anticlimactic and grisly. The gang is no longer greeted with fanfare, it would seem, after they so abused Chihuahua's hospitality the last time. They are paid from the public funds, or "coffers," and that's it. "The bounty rescinded" means that the government of Chihuahua ended its offer to pay for Indian scalps.

The gang's betrayal of the Mexicans is nowhere more hideously represented than in the detail that slain Mexicans' scalps "were stung from the windows of the governor's house." This goes beyond irony – the governor's house decorated with the skin of those he's supposed to govern – into abject horror.

The government of Chihuahua must eventually discover Glanton's betrayal, for a week after he and his men ride out, the governor offers money to whomever kills Glanton. The hunters have become the hunted.

Chapter 14 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Judge Holden (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

While riding with the gang through a jungle toward Sonora, the Judge shoots birds to stuff and study. He also collects leaves, sketching them in his notebook at camp at night. Toadvine asks him why he does so, and the Judge responds with the quote given here.

The Judge thinks of nature as a great brutal force, a vicious cycle of birth and death, the stern necessity of surviving in the face of terrible hardship. It is because nature can overpower us that it "can enslave man." The Judge, however, refuses to be the slave of nature. He wants to "rout out," or find and expose, all of the different "entities" or things in nature: every animal, plant, mineral, and phenomenon. As he sees it, only when we have all the facts can we be "properly suzerain of the earth," – that is, the absolute ruler of the earth. This is an allusion to the Bible, where God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26).

The Judge's vision of nature derives from the Enlightenment, a historical period in which reason, science, and technology came to be valued over all other domains of human knowledge. The Judge is confident that science can unravel entirely the mystery of nature, to the extent that human beings can control nature as they see fit. But whereas many Enlightenment thinkers thought that reason and science would lead to freer human societies, the Judge wants to understand nature only to use it in perpetuating warfare and in killing more effectively.

The 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.

Related Characters: Judge Holden (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the same conversation between the Judge and Toadvine as the quote above. The Judge is contrasting the superstitious man who thinks the world's mystery is forever hidden to the scientific man who finds order in the world.

In the Judge's metaphor, the world is a "tapestry," or an image woven out of colored threads, and the scientific man is he who finds "the thread of order." This sounds compelling at first, but we might respond that a tapestry is a work of art, something that has order built into it, while the natural world is the very opposite of a work of art. To single out a thread in a tapestry is to miss the whole of which that thread is part. To put it bluntly, the things the Judge compares here – the tapestry and nature – are not really comparable.

However, the Judge himself seems to know this. Later, in Chapter 17, he will say that there is no mystery or order in the world save for what we put there, and that order is "like a string in a maze." This doesn't seem to reflect a change in the Judge's philosophy, but is like a more advanced presentation of the same topic, just as a math student learns calculus only after learning algebra. The Judge is giving the gang a devil's education, and they need to believe they can *find* order before they can believe that our own minds *make* order. The logical conclusion of the education offered by the Judge is nihilism and total war.

❝ The judge emerged from the darkness. Evening, Lieutenant, he said. Are these men the witnesses?
Couts looked at his corporal. No, he said. They aint witnesses. Hell, Captain. You all were seen to enter the premises and seen to leave after the shot was fired. Are you going to deny that you and your men took your dinner there?
Deny ever goddamned word of it, said Glanton.

Related Characters: Judge Holden, John Joel Glanton, Lieutenant Couts (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

While eating with the gang in Tucson, the black Jackson murders the racist proprietor of the place, a man named Owens. Lieutenant Couts confronts the gang and announces that he needs to arrest Jackson. However, the Judge complicates what should be a rather clear-cut case by pointing out that nobody actually witnessed the shooting (or at least nobody outside the gang...).

The fact that the Judge emerges "from the darkness" has a faint symbolic charge here. The Judge himself avoids being seen, because when one goes unobserved, one can act freely without consequences. He is also someone who muddies and darkens what should be clear. Couts appeals to a very commonsense understanding of Owens's murder: the gang went into his premises with no one else there, a shot was heard, and the gang was seen to leave. But the Judge, and under his influence Glanton, explode this commonsense understanding by appealing to extreme skepticism. Without witnesses, they suggest, no one can really know what actually happened in Owens's place. By undermining the plain sense of things like this, the Judge gets the gang off of many hooks.

The novel, though, as a whole seems sympathetic to Couts's point of view; after all, *it* bears witness to the fact that Jackson killed Owens.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ War is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within the larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.

Related Characters: Judge Holden (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

One night, as they try to escape from from Colonel Garcia and his troops, the gang makes camp and the Judge discourses at length on the nature of warfare. He says that war always has and always will exist because people love it. He also says, in the quote at hand, that war is the truest way of seeing into the future and the unknown ("divination" is defined as "foretelling of future events or discovery of what is hidden by supernatural means").

How is war a form of divination, according to the Judge? When two parties fight, one has to win and one has to lose. We might think that this is just a test of brute strength and strategy, without anything to do with fate. But the Judge thinks otherwise. Specifically, he thinks that the victor in warfare is determined precisely by "the larger will" of fate, which brings warriors together and then decides who lives and who dies. By resolving the contradiction of conflicting wills (i.e. having one army defeat another), war forces unity

into existence, and in this sense war is god. If this sounds like metaphysical nonsense, loaded with tenuous assumptions and logical gaps, that's because it is – McCarthy is testing his reader's critical power here, and inviting us to find the holes in the Judge's powerful rhetoric.

Also note that the Judge implies here he wants to be at war forever, in an endless night of battle – not, as he says earlier, to be the lord of the earth. He usesideas of omniscience and absolute rulership as pretenses to help bring into reality his real, more insane vision of constant, total war.

Chapter 18 Quotes

The Borginnis woman waded out with her dress ballooning about her and took him deeper and swirled him about grown man that he was in her great stout arms. She held him up, she crooned to him. Her pale hair floated on the water.

Related Characters: The idiot, Sarah Borginnis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

In Tucson, the gang agrees to escort Cloyce Bell and his brother James Robert, referred to throughout the novel as the idiot because of his severe disability, to California. The idiot travels in a filthy cage. One morning, on the banks of a river, a group of women sees the idiot, and they resolve to clean him and burn his cage. Sarah Borginnis is one of these women.

Women are a rare sight in the novel; they are usually mourners or prostitutes, and are very seldom named. As such, Sarah stands out. She achieves high moral dignity when she rebukes Cloyce for mistreating his brother, and with strength of character she takes charge of James Robert's care. McCarthy is careful in his diction to point both to Sarah's power and her tenderness. She has "great stout arms," but these arms don't do violence, like the Judge's massive arms, but rather they cradle. Her dress delicately balloons on the water. She has delicately "pale hair." Sarah is also something of a maternal figure – she even tucks James Robert in to bed later – and as such she acts as a strong foil to both the war-monger judge and to Mother Nature, who is painted as alien and bloodthirsty in the novel.

The bathing of the idiot is also, symbolically, a baptism. This is a physical and a spiritual cleansing, and for one brief moment in this novel strewn with abominations we see what a good society might look like: selfless, with a respect for human dignity and liberty.

Chapter 19 Quotes

All else was heaped on the flames and while the sun rose and glistened on their [the Yuma Indians'] gaudy faces they sat upon the ground each with his new goods before him and watched the fire and smoked their pipes as might some painted troupe of mimefolk recruiting themselves in such a wayplace far from the towns and the rabble hooting at them across the smoking footlamps, contemplating towns to come and the poor fanfare of trumpet and drum and the rude boards upon which their destinies were inscribed for these people were no less bound and indentured and they watched like the prefiguration of their own ends the carbonized skulls of their enemies incandescing before them bright as blood among the coals.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268-269

Explanation and Analysis

Glanton's gang conspires with a band of Yuma Indians to seize Dr. Lincoln's ferry on the Colorado River, but Glanton swiftly betrays his Indian allies. In revenge, the Yumas launch a surprise attack on Glanton's gang, which results in the gang's decimation. The Yumas celebrate with a bonfire fueled by their enemies' corpses.

The violence of the Yumas' attack is starkly contrasted with the calm of the morning after, full of domestic touches: the fire itself, the pipes, the comparison of the Indians to "mimefolk," or mimes who earn their living through public performances. Were it not for the faces "gaudy" with blood and the burning, "carbonized skulls," this scene might strike us as downright picturesque.Mayhem and carnage are business as usual in the borderlands McCarthy depicts, a part of the daily routine. Of course, this makes the violence all the more shocking for us.

The comparison of the Indians to the mimes accomplishes a few things. It transforms a group of violent men to peaceful performers. This is an eerie transformation, because it is so at odds with the massacre we've just witnessed these people commit. Second, it suggests that what these men did was part of a script, as though in accordance with fate, to which the narrator says the Indians are as much slaves as anybody else is. Indeed, the burning skulls are a "prefiguration," or an image foretelling the violent deaths of

the Indians themselves. Finally, the comparison suggests how surreal this violence is, and how swiftly its traces will disappear, like a performance ending.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen.

Related Characters: Judge Holden (speaker), The kid

Related Themes:

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

After the surviving gang members flee from the Yuma Indians into the desert, the quiet antagonism between the Kid and the Judge becomes explicit. The Judge hunts the Kid; the Kid hides from the Judge. While searching for his quarry, the Judge cries out that the Kid was "mutinous," or rebellious, against the gang by having "clemency," or mercy in his heart, for the "heathen," or the Indians and Mexicans the gang hunted.

The Kid is mutinous in the sense that, in his meager mercy, he could not commit himself wholly to the gang's rampantly destructive cause, could not give himself to war the way the Judge himself does and, perhaps, the way the judge thought the Kid might be able to. The Judge was hoping that the Kid might be a spiritual son to him, a god of war, but the Kid's mercy prevents this.That he couldn't absolutely support the gang in its mass murdering is for us, the reader, the only unflawed aspect of the Kid's heart. This shows how perverted the Judge's judgment of human character can be, as he condemns the Kid for the one thing for which the reader can (slightly) admire him.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end.

Related Characters: Judge Holden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 303

Explanation and Analysis

After being released from jail in San Diego, the Kid finds a surgeon to remove the arrow lodged in his leg. Under the influence of the surgeon's ether, a kind of painkiller, the Kid in his delirium has a dream of the Judge in which a "moneyer," or person who mints money, forges coins with the Judge's image on them, all of which the Judge determines to be inadequate. This moneyer uses "gravers and burins," chisel-like tools for engraving in metal, and a "crucible," a container for melting metals down.

This passage is the first in which we get any idea of what, exactly, Judge Holden is a judge of. The fact that it comes in a dream suggests on the one hand that we can never really know – but also that this account of the Judge is in some way inspired, or closer to the truth than any waking account could be.

Generally, the face of a ruler is impressed into a coin. Earlier the Judge claims that he desires to be a supreme ruler, and yet in this dream he never approves of the moneyer's representation of him. It is as though the Judge's true aim is not to be a ruler after all, for this would mean the end of the eternal night of warfare, a shift from warfare into rulership via economic power, suitable for the "markets where men barter." The Judge wants no part of that shift. Further, The Judge does not want to be understood and seen, he does not want to be witnessed, for he can more effectively remain completely free to wage war when shrouded in mystery and darkness.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ The judge watched him. Was it always your idea, he said, that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?
You seen me.
The judge ignored this. I recognized when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me. Then and now. Even so at the last I find you here with me.
I aint with you.

Related Characters: The kid, Judge Holden (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

The Kid grows up and becomes the Man. In Fort Griffin, he

goes into a local saloon where he meets, after all these years and for the last time, the Judge. The Judge approaches the Man, and it is during their conversation that we find the exchange quoted here.

The Kid is silent in the face of the Judge's questions. He knows that the Judge can out-talk anyone, and that silence is the only viable form of resistance to his powerful rhetoric.The Judge, after all, wants everything to stand naked before him; he wants to understand in order to control. The Kid defies him by concealing his mind in silence, rendering himself unknowable.

The Judge claims to have always recognized the Kid as "a disappointment," someone who could not entirely serve the god of war. The Kid again defies the Judge. "I aint with you" means something like, "I don't want to have anything to do with you, we're not in any way related, and I don't support your cause." This is the ultimate declaration of the Kid's independence from the Judge's party of war, and it echoes his claim earlier in the novel that he is in no way kin to the mad Captain White.

❝ He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die.

Related Characters: Judge Holden

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 327

Explanation and Analysis

After the Judge presumably murders the Kid in the Fort Griffin saloon's outhouse, he deftly takes to the dance floor. The dance is a symbol in the novel for warfare as a ritual that enables individuals to transcend their own feelings of emptiness and despair. The Judge, of course, is as great a dancer as he is a killer, and he is also "a great favorite" of the people watching him dance, which is ironic because he wants to see their world plunged into perpetual warfare. Perhaps, though, people do subconsciously desire either the "glory" or brutality of war or even their own deaths, as Freud theorized, which would help explain the Judge's mass appeal.

Throughout the novel, it is implied that the Judge isn't quite mortal, or even human; there is something malignantly supernatural about him. This implication finds some confirmation here when the Judge announces that he never sleeps and will never die. If we believe the Judge, we might think that he is indeed an immortal, a god of war like the Greek Ares or Roman Mars. However, we might instead take the Judge to be merely a man who embodies the spirit of warfare, such that his claim never to sleep and never to die is really a claim that war will always exist. McCarthy never conclusively resolves the question of the Judge's mortality for us.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there.

Related Characters: The Digger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

The novel's epilogue is a mystery, even to scholars. Who is the "man progressing over the plain"? Does he come in the name of the machine of death which the Judge hopes to build, or is he an anonymous hero bringing life out of death, living fire from dead stone? And what is he doing, literally, with his two-handled implement? Building a fence, perhaps, or laying a railroad track? Perhaps he is helping to settle the Wild West, with the effect that crimes like the Judge's can no longer go unobserved. Perhaps he is an agent of industry, someone whose work will make America more effective in waging its wars abroad.

We suspect that the digger is heroic, and maybe even a metaphor for the historical novelist like McCarthy who cuts into history so that he can turn dead records into a luminous work of art. We should also point out that some critics think the "implement with two handles" is an allusion to Milton's poem "Lycidas," in which someone with a vague "two-handed engine" stands ready to strike down the corruption of the world.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The novel's protagonist, if it can be said to have one, is the kid, born in 1833 during the Leonid meteor shower. His mother died in childbirth, and he was raised by his father, formerly a schoolmaster, now a drunk who quotes from forgotten poets. Even at the age of fourteen, the kid, thin, ragged, and illiterate, has "a taste for mindless violence," which the narrator claims will define his whole life.

The kid's birth is littered with portents of his violent nature. First, an astrological portent: the meteor shower he is born during, named for Leo, the bloodthirsty lion. Second, the kid's very life begins with his mother's death; as his life begins in blood, so too shall it end in blood.

At the age of fourteen years, the kid runs away from his family, never again to see his father, sister, or his childhood home in Tennessee. He wanders west. Within a year, he is on a steamboat bound for New Orleans, where he soon takes up residence. At night, he descends from his room to fight with sailors from all over the world. Despite this, his eyes remain "oddly innocent."

Throughout Blood Meridian, *the west presents opportunities for freedom (or anarchy, as the case may be) as well as getting rich quick. Even though the kid is already violent, he nonetheless has eyes that remain "innocent," foreshadowing his acts of mercy unique in the novel.*

One night, a Maltese boatswain shoots the kid in the back during a tavern brawl, then in the heart. Even as the kid bleeds, those around him in the tavern look away, save for the tavernkeeper's wife, who tends to the kid for a couple of weeks. Once he is healed, the kid, moneyless, slips away in the night, and boards a boat bound for Galveston, Texas.

Like the people in the tavern, most characters in the novel refuse to witness the bloodshed around them, or, even more perversely, they revel in it. The tavernkeeper's wife is a rarity: someone who witnesses suffering and intervenes.

By now, the kid has lost almost all memory of his childhood and his youthful state of innocence. In Galveston, he earns some money and wanders through nearby marshlands. He manually labors by day, wandering from settlement to settlement. One day he sees a man who killed his father hanged at a crossroads. He goes on to work in a sawmill and a pesthouse where people sick with diphtheria are quarantined. He works for a farmer and earns an old mule, which in 1849 he rides into the town of Nacogdoches.

The kid falls from the merciful world of innocence into the brutal world of experience. The hanged man at the crossroads symbolically reflects this fall: he killed his own father and so ceased to be a son, a child. Once he violated the rules of the family and created disorder in this way, an authority even more powerful than the father, the law of the community, asserted itself by hanging him.

In Nacogdoches, the Reverend Green is delivering a sermon in a ratty, rain-pelted tent. The kid ducks in and stands in the back, listening; he is the only person unarmed in the tent. The Reverend denounces the hellholes of the world and claims that, wherever we go, Jesus Christ follows us. He asks his congregation if they'd be willing to drag the son of God into a hellhole. A mustachioed man standing next to the kid makes small talk with the kid about the rain.

The Reverend Green suggests that most people would not be willing to force Jesus to witness their sins, given how disgusting those sins are. However, this moral doesn't seem important to the kid, because instead of listening he makes small talk about the weather. Throughout the novel, such messages go unheeded, to the characters' detriment.

A giant man, later revealed to be Judge Holden, enters the tent; he has a serene, childlike face and small hands. Addressing the congregation, the Judge announces that Reverend Green is an impostor, without any qualifications to sermonize, who is totally illiterate and wanted by the law in multiple states. The Judge claims that Green sexually assaulted a girl of eleven. The crowd moans; a woman sinks to her knees. The Reverend, sobbing, cries that the Judge is none other than the devil.

Unlike the kid, who grows up too fast because of his viciousness, the Judge seems forever young, as though his eminent viciousness doesn't age so much as rejuvenate him. Perhaps this is because, as it will be revealed, the Judge revels and believes in viciousness and war so completely. Here he bears false witness, claiming Green committed crimes that he didn't. Green denounces the Judge as the devil, a notion that the novel does not accept outright—nor does it reject it.

An ugly thug in the back of the tent proposes that the crowd hang Green. Judge Holden, playing on the increasingly violent mob mentality, levels another accusation at Green, that he had sex with a goat. Disgusted with Green, a man in the tent draws his pistol and fires. Violence breaks out. The man the kid spoke to earlier cuts an opening in the tent and the kid follows him out into the rain. They make for a nearby hotel, from the gallery of which they watch Green's tent sway and collapse, people screaming and stampeding.

That the Judge so efficiently perverts a moral ceremony into a violent frenzy suggests not only his bloodthirsty cunning, but also a deep affinity between religious and violent experience. The fervor of one can easily become the fervor of the other. The fallen tent is one of many indices in the novel for how Christianity and its doctrines of mercy and redemption have decayed.

The Judge is already at the bar of the hotel drinking when the kid and his companion enter. The two order drinks, and the bartender tells them that the Judge has paid for them. Men pile into the bar; a posse is being assembled to hunt down Reverend Green. One of the men asks the Judge how he knew about Green's crimes. The Judge announces that he had never seen Green in his life before today, and had never even heard of him. Eventually someone laughs, then everyone begins to laugh. Someone buys the Judge a drink.

Though ready to shoot at Green, the men in the bar don't prosecute the Judge for his deception. It would seem that it was not so much moral outrage that motivated them in the tent as an appetite for violence, which has been temporarily sated. Most characters in the novel are happy to be of the devil's party, so long as they get to enjoy the ritual of bloodshed.

Days later, the kid finds himself in the same bar, having spent all of his money on drink. He sees a man, later identified as Louis Toadvine, coming up from the jakes, or outhouse. The kid goes out, and, when the two cross paths, Toadvine tells the kid to get out of the way. The kid kicks Toadvine in the face. The two begin fighting in the mud and the dark. Toadvine is chanting the word "kill" over and over. Another man approaches and strikes the kid with a club; the kid falls facedown in the mud.

Like much of the violence in the novel, the murderous fight between Toadvine and the kid is absurdly disproportionate to its occasion; the two fight over nothing more than yielding the path to and from the outhouse. The narrator underscores the ritualized nature of violence by comparing Toadvine's repetition of the word "kill" to a "crazed chant."

The kid wakes in the hotel to find Toadvine's branded face looking over him. The two agree to quit fighting. The kid recovers his boots and his knife, which he addresses affectionately. The two go downstairs together, where Toadvine asks the bartender which room a man named Sidney is staying in. A hotel clerk warns Toadvine that Sidney intends to kill him, but Toadvine and the kid go to the room anyway.

As absurd as their fight was, the alliance between Toadvine and the kid is even more absurd. Why join up with someone who hours before tried to kill you? The answer seems to be that people have more strength in numbers—the strength to do more damage. Ironically, the knife is the first and last entity in the novel for which the kid has a kind word.

Toadvine lights some tinder on fire and pushes it under Sidney's door. Sidney emerges; Toadvine attempts to gouge his eye out and, at Toadvine's urging, the kid also begins to attack Sidney. By now a large part of Sidney's room is on fire. The hotel clerk comes upstairs cursing at Toadvine, but Toadvine kicks him in the throat. The kid follows Toadvine downstairs, hitting the clerk in the side of the head as he passes.

The narrator doesn't explain why Toadvine wants to fight with Sidney, but this hardly matters, since doing violence seems to be desirable in itself for many of the novel's characters. The kid joins in with Toadvine ruthlessly, even though he ironically has more reason to fight against Toadvine at this point than anyone else.

Toadvine and the kid escape into the Texas morning while the hotel continues to burn. Toadvine runs through the street, laughing. The kid goes to a house at the edge of town, where a Mexican family is stabling his mule. He takes it without paying and heads out of town. As he passes the burning hotel one last time, he sees Judge Holden watching the flames. The Judge meets the kid's eyes and smiles.

Toadvine's laughter here demonstrates just how much he enjoys "mindless violence," and how little human suffering means to him. When the Judge smiles on the kid, it is as though he is acknowledging a deep affinity between the two, namely, a desire to participate in warfare and violence for war's sake.

CHAPTER 2

The kid begins to live by begging and theft. He rides across a barren prairie, where the wind makes the weeds rattle like gnashing teeth. At night, the kid sleeps outside under a sky full of falling stars while wolves cry. The sun is the color of steel when it rises. The kid wears a hat made from leaves.

Throughout Blood Meridian, *nature is markedly hostile, full of empty space and predators. One must be at war with it just to survive, converting raw materials like leaves into useful resources, like the kid's hat.*

One day, the kid sees smoke rising from among the hills and rides toward it. He finds a hut where a hermit lives, half mad and filthy. The kid requests water; the two enter the hermit's gloomy hut, where the hermit points to a bucket of salty water. The kid drinks. He then goes out to a nearby well and draws up water in a rawhide bucket for his mule to drink.

The hermit's degradation demonstrates just how hostile nature can be. However, his small act of kindness toward the kid shows that the world of the novel is not entirely corrupt and belligerent.

The kid thanks the hermit, but the hermit predicts that a storm is coming and tells the kid that he ought to stay in the hut for the night. The kid reluctantly agrees. He leaves his leather saddle outside, but the hermit tells the kid to bring it in lest something eat it.

It is because the resources necessary for life are so scarce in nature that the kid can't leave his saddle out, lest it be eaten. In contrast, the acts of human violence committed later in the novel are not only gratuitous, but serve no practical purpose at all.

Inside, the hermit asks the kid if he lost his way, and the kid responds in the affirmative. The two begin talking, and the kid learns that the hermit was once a slaver in Mississippi. The hermit rummages through his belongings and produces a dried and blackened human heart. He says that four things can destroy the world: women, whiskey, money, and black people. He goes on to say that he paid $200 for the human heart, or rather for the black slave the heart "hung inside of." The hermit says again that the kid has lost his way in the dark.

The kid has lost his way, both geographically and morally. The hermit himself did too, involved as he was in the cruelties of the slave trade. Of the four things that the hermit says can destroy the world, the novel repeatedly points to two as motivating violence: alcohol and money. However, the novel does not endorse the hermit's indictment of women and black people, included by the hermit, it would seem, out of bigotry.

The hermit begins speaking of religious matters: how it is difficult and painful to live in sin, how the world God made doesn't suit everybody. He claims that we cannot know what we ourselves think and that we don't want to know what we feel in our hearts. This is so, he concludes, because, though we have the capacity to do anything, we are fundamentally evil, and so use our power to make evil machines, and machines that make those machines. This amounts, in the hermit's view, to evil "that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it."

The hermit says we don't want to know what we feel in our hearts, and indeed the characters in Blood Meridian *very rarely consider why they do what they do. Only the Judge does so, and he claims that our deepest desire is to engage in unending warfare. The hermit may well agree, given his prophecy that we are in the process of creating self-perpetuating evil.*

The kid and the hermit eat together while thunder booms overhead. Eventually the kid makes his bed and falls asleep, only to wake in the night to find the hermit looking over him, almost in the kid's bed with him. The kid asks what the hermit wants, but the hermit only crawls away into the darkness.

Why the hermit looks at the kid like this is unclear—perhaps he senses that the kid has a unique role to play in evil events. Note that the Judge also looked upon the kid as he rode out of Nacogdoches, perhaps with a similar sense. Though it could also be that the hermit wants to sexually molest the kid.

In the morning, the kid gathers his things and leaves, riding out through a forest at first, and a day later the prairie again. He meets a party of cattle drovers, or cowboys, whom he camps and eats with as they tell stories. The drovers tell him about two of their party who have parted ways and gone to the town of Bexar for a spree of drinking and sleeping with prostitutes, with the ultimate intention of going to Mexico. The kid expresses interest in going that way himself.

Like the tavernkeeper's wife and the hermit, these drovers are kind to the kid. However, the two who left their company from Bexar do so for reasons the hermit identified as destructive: intoxication and bodily pleasure. The temptations in the west exert a strong pull, and later on the kid succumbs readily.

In the morning, the kid breakfasts with the cattle drovers before saddling up his skinny, sore, and balding mule. The drovers have tied a bag containing food and a knife to the mule's neck, a gift for the kid. Once again, the kid and his mule ride out across the endless prairie.

Even acts of mercy can ironically enable acts of war; such is the case with the knife gifted to the kid.

Four days later, the kid arrives in Bexar, a town of adobe houses and a wagon-filled plaza. The sun is setting on the town, and swallows fly about "like fugitives from some great fire at the earth's end." As the kid rides into town, he sees a cart heading out, loaded with human corpses. The kid finds a well and draws up water for his mule to drink. He hears horns and guitars, and sees people **dancing** in the street gaudily dressed and speaking Spanish.

The "great fire at the earth's end" alludes to the apocalyptic fire that the Bible holds will destroy the earth, or else to the fires of hell. This allusion reminds us that, even in the picturesque town of Bexar, destruction and punishment are imminent. It is also fitting that a cart of corpses foregrounds the first instance of dancing in the novel.

The kid ties up his mule and enters a cafe. He tells the bartender that he would like a drink though he has no money, but the bartender doesn't understand and asks an old man, seated nearby playing dominoes, to translate. The kid asks if the old man speaks American and tells him that he'll work in exchange for a drink. The old man translates this, and the men in the bar begin to laugh. The kid offers to sweep; the bartender says in Spanish that the floor isn't dirty, but gives the kid a broom anyway. The kid proceeds to sweep the floor.

Throughout the novel, meaning is lost in translation, as here with the kid's request. Appropriately, the illiterate kid also misunderstands his language; he refers to it as "American" but that is his nationality, whereas the language he speaks is English. Misunderstanding and jingoistic ignorance both contribute as the scene unfolds to an outbreak of violence.

After sweeping, the kid re-approaches the bartender for his drink. The bartender ignores the kid, then shoos him away. The kid becomes aggressive, only for the bartender to calmly draw and cock a pistol. The old man stands up, says something in Spanish, and leaves the bar. The bartender's face turns pale. He sets down his pistol and grabs instead a bungstarter, a club-like tool used to open barrels. He and the kid proceed to fight. The kid deftly breaks two bottles over the bartender's head before stabbing his eye with a glass shard. He then steals another full bottle and leaves the cafe, taking his mule with him.

When a character's will is frustrated in the novel, bloodshed tends to ensue; here the kid exerts his will to a drink by becoming combative. Whatever the old man said to the bartender, it seems to scare him into deescalating the violence, for he puts down his pistol for a less deadly tool instead; he seems less interested in doing harm than protecting his interests. But the kid pulverizes him nonetheless.

The kid wakes up the next morning in a ruined church, the floor filthy with animal feces and bones. He is tormented and parched from his night of heavy drinking, but drinks more liquor immediately upon waking. He can't find his mule, however, and goes out searching for it, coming across buzzards, domed buildings, and, in the sacristy of the church, decayed human corpses. While searching, he finishes the rest of his liquor and outside the church sees statues of saints as well as the baby Jesus, all shot to pieces by American soldiers.

The ruined church where the kid wakes up—one of many in the novel—suggests that Christianity not only goes unobserved in the novel's world, but is also actively disrespected. Instead of being centers for human redemption and eternal life, they are the sites of death. The kid himself seems bent on self-destruction, drinking as heavily as he does.

Very faintly in the dust, the kid discerns the tracks of his mule and follows them down to a ford. There, several black people are washing a carriage, and the kid asks one of them if they've seen his mule. The black person responds that he saw something with long ears come down the road toward the nearby **river** a while ago; and, at the river, the kid does indeed find his mule, grazing among lush grass. The kid ties up the animal and kicks it halfheartedly, but it only shifts away and continues to graze. After realizing that he's lost his hat made from leaves, the kid wades out into the river "like some wholly wretched baptismal candidate."

Blood Meridian *can be a darkly humorous novel, as is the case here, where the kid's mule has been so misused that it is not recognizable as a mule, only something with long ears. But the mule's condition also reflects how ruthlessly the kid exploits the animal in asserting his will over nature. The narrator compares the kid's swim to a Christian baptism, but ironically the kid is only physically cleaned here and not spiritually cleaned.*

CHAPTER 3

The kid is lying naked under some trees when a man on horseback, later identified as Sergeant Trammel, approaches him. The kid takes up his knife; the man greets him. He asks if the kid is the one who mauled the Mexican bartender the day before, because, if he is, Captain White wants him to join an army of irregulars going to war against the Mexicans. The kid says that the war (presumably the Mexican-American War) is over, but the man replies that Captain White says otherwise, and promises the kid, at this point fully dressed, that war will give him the opportunity to rise in the world.

The kid reaches for his knife instinctually when approached, as though he works under the assumption that violence is a serviceable first response to any situation (an assumption not entirely unwarranted in the swiftly murderous world of the novel). It is ironic that, far from being punished for attacking the bartender, the kid is rewarded.

While the kid studies the Trammel's white horse, beautifully equipped with fine leather and silver, the sergeant goes on to tell the kid that he himself used to be in straits as dire as the kid's. He was poor, a drunkard, a frequenter of prostitutes. Then he met Captain White, who helped him rise like Lazarus and walk the path of righteousness. The kid agrees to meet the Captain, so long as he's promised that if he joins the army he'll receive a horse and rifle.

Beautiful expensive things, like Trammel's equipment, impress the kid. Indeed, Trammel himself, in alluding to the story of Lazarus whom Jesus brought back from the dead, suggests that acquiring riches is the path to redemption and salvation. However, this is contrary to Jesus's actual message that we should renounce worldly goods.

Together, the kid and Sergeant Trammel ride back into Bexar, to the pretty hotel where Captain White keeps quarters. After completing and rereading a letter, the gray-haired and mustachioed Captain holds an interview with the kid. He asks how the kid came to be so wretched, and the kid lies, claiming that robbers set upon him.

Based on the fact that he feels compelled to lie to the Captain, it would seem that the kid is embarrassed of his poverty. Ironically, much that he undertakes in the novel to acquire wealth ends up making him even more wretched than he is here.

Captain White then asks the kid what he thinks of "the treaty" (presumably the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which formally ended the Spanish-American War), but the kid knows nothing about it. The Captain airs his view that the treaty represents the U.S.'s betrayal of the soldiers who fought and died in Mexico during the war. He also expresses a hatred for Mexicans in general, whom he thinks of as barbarians with no idea of justice or government. When people can't govern their own country, the Captain asserts, then others must intervene to govern it for them.

The Captain justifies further warfare against Mexico by making the racist claim that the Mexicans are barbarians who can't govern their own country. This is not borne out by the novel, which depicts Mexico as being both governed by knowledgeable civil men like Angel Trias and relatively peaceful—at least until the American scalp hunters show up and wreak havoc.


Captain White then turns to his plans. He tells the kid that the U.S. will eventually take the Mexican state of Sonora as part of its own territory. The kid looks uneasy, so the Captain assures him that his army will liberate "a dark and troubled land," that he has support from Governor Burnett of California, and that the soldiers in the army will enjoy the spoils of war, from rich grassland to gold and silver. After the Captain promises the kid not only a horse and rifle, but also a saddle and some clothes, the kid enlists in Captain White's army.

The Captain's supposed motive for war—liberating Mexico—and the promise of spoils he makes to the kid, are contradictory. After all, one can't be both a liberator and a pillager. Significantly, the kid is not willing to fight for an abstract cause like liberty, only for profit. Most parties in the novel, including Glanton's gang later, assemble around self-interested opportunism like this and not around any sort of ideals (though the Judge does espouse a kind of "ideal of violence").


The army is camped at the edge of town. After bathing, shaving, and dressing in his new clothes there, the kid looks like a new man. Later that night, he on his mule and two other soldiers (the Missourian Earl and a Texan called the second corporal), riding on horses that forty days ago had been wild, ride back into Bexar. They anticipate a night of heavy drinking and lovemaking, although the narrator notes that such plans have led many young men to their deaths. The kid trades his mule for a saddle, other necessaries, and a small gold coin, which he proposes the three spend on liquor.

The breaking of horses to be ridden into war exemplifies human beings' exploitation of natural resources to violent ends. Although he is apparently going to war for the spoils, the kid tends to squander his money, as he proposes to do here on liquor. Acquire wealth though he might, the kid wastes what value he has on mindless bodily pleasures.

The kid and his two comrades wander the streets before entering a cantina. They order whiskey, drink, order more. A Mennonite at the bar shakes his head and speaks to them, warning that the United States Army under General Worth will jail all of Captain White's army at the river. In fact, he tells the three recruits *to pray* that they'll be jailed, because if they do cross the river with Captain White they'll wake the wrath of God, and they won't cross the river back.

The Mennonite, one of several prophets in the book, foresees Captain White's expedition awaking God's wrath. Whether he can read fate or simply correlates violent beginnings with violent ends, his prophecy comes true: Captain White's army is indeed massacred by a legion of Apaches.

The kid and his two companions berate the Mennonite who moves away, muttering. The three drink and drunkenly quarrel with other patrons. In the morning, one of the three young men, Earl, is found dead in a courtyard, murdered for reasons unknown. The kid and the second corporal look down at Earl's broken skull. The Mennonite also enters the courtyard; he says that there's more joy on the road to the tavern than in the tavern itself. Then he takes his leave.

Though prophecies of doom and destruction consistently come to pass in the novel, the characters tend to ignore them, as if they desire calamity and death. The Mennonite suggests that this is because people enjoy the course that brings them to their ruin, as one enjoys the road to the tavern; but at the tavern itself, vice and death await, as Earl's fate exemplifies.

CHAPTER 4

Five days later, mounted on Earl's horse, the kid rides out with Captain White's army of filibusters (people engaging in unauthorized warfare against a foreign country). They ride through the town of Castroville where coyotes have dug up the dead and scattered their bones. Captain White hunts little wild pigs and antelope. All of the filibusters are armed to the teeth. The rifle the kid bears has no scabbard, so he rides with it on his saddlebow, as many others have carried it. The men eat skinned and gutted antelope at nights, laughing and jesting despite all of the gore.

Throughout Blood Meridian, *the living warriors inherit the equipment of the dead, as the kid inherits Earl's horse and a rifle. But the warriors who inherit will also be outlived by the same equipment, in a seemingly unending cycle of violence in which the tools of violence survive past their wielders. On the path to war, White's filibusters are in high spirits, laughing and jesting despite the blood they wallow in. The war itself will see them reduced to blood.*

Six days pass in similar manner. The filibuster's horses kick up dust that vanishes in the immensity of the landscape. The narrator says that death, personified as a merchant, drives the army on. Two of the filibusters fall ill with cholera and one dies before dark. The next morning another falls ill. Both die, and their comrades dig their graves with antelope bones, bury them, and ride on. The sun rises over them, suffusing the sky with the color of blood. After marching on further, yet another soldier dies. Wolves begin to follow the army as they travel through the alien land.

The narrator personifies war as a merchant, and the filibusters are bartering for the opportunity to acquire the spoils of war with their lives. Indeed, before White's army can make war on the Mexicans, nature first makes war against them with sickness. That the living bury the dead using the bones of the dead, emphasizes the ubiquity of death in this wasteland where the sunrise portends bloodshed.

The wagons of the army begin to break down, slouching with dryness and ground down by sand. The men manage only makeshift repairs. Ten days out of Bexar, the army reaches a plain of barren pumice stone. One man in the ranks says that it "looks like the high road to hell." Another wonders what the horses will eat. Two days onto the pumice plain, the men come upon white bones in the sand, and they themselves have come to look like soldiers in a ghost army, they are so pale from the dust covering them. The wolves continue to follow them, but no one else falls ill.

Nature eats away at the men's health and also their equipment. The hermit earlier claims that men are inventing an evil that can mechanically sustain itself, but White's army is a machine breaking down. Compare it with Glanton's gang, much more the self-sustaining machine of death. Even in life White's soldiers seem already dead, ghostlike, buried; for White, it seems, is not as devoted to the god of war as Glanton and his scalp hunters are.

The army begins to travel only by night, in a silence broken only by the wagons' trundle and the horses' wheezing. The men study the stars and come to know their positions in the night sky well. Sand gets into everything the men have, including their food. The horses begin to fail. The men rest, then resume their trek; during an electrical storm one night, it seems as though fire is running over the metal of the horse's equipment and the wagon wheels. All night, thunder and lightning. It is as though, the narrator says, the army is riding through "some demon kingdom," or an ever-shifting land of nightmares.

Although it could be argued that the lightning gives the desert the appearance of being a hell, it seems more accurate to say that the lightning reveals that what appears to be a hell is in fact a demon kingdom, populated by the damned, like Captain White's soldiers. Indeed, the world of the novel at large is a kind of hell. This hell-scape also foreshadows the punishment of White's army at the hands of the Apaches.

The army halts its progress; the men put away their weapons, fearful that the lightning might strike it. A man named Hayward prays for rain, asking God to deliver it if it's not too much trouble for Him. Hayward says that the men are as dry as jerky and asks for just a few drops. Then the army moves on. Within the hour, the wind cools and raindrops fall as though shot by an artillery piece. Even so, by the next day their kegs of water are empty and some of their horses have perished.

Although a nostalgia for the observance of Christian doctrine permeates the novel, so too does the idea that the god of this world is malignant. Hayward's prayer is answered, but ironically the rain comes down not gently but shot-like; and it does not satisfy long, but soon dries up. It would be a cruel god indeed who answers prayers in this way.

The men come upon a hut along with a stable and enclosure. Although the hut is empty, they know from the hot coals inside that people must be near. Captain White instructs a sergeant to find them, as well as any food or water that may be nearby, to be provided to the horses. Water is soon found in an enclosure, and soon after two soldiers find an old man in the stable. They drag him to the Captain's feet; the old man moans and urinates in his pants. One man asks if the Captain wants the army's translator, Candelario, to speak with the old man in Spanish, but the Captain dismisses the old man as a halfwit. By the next morning, the old man has fled.

Although Captain White claims to come to Mexico as a liberator, he is hypocritically barbarous to the people he encounters, here pillaging a hut and terrorizing its remaining inhabitant. The old man's urinating in his pants emphasizes the terrible unnaturalness of the encounter. Without any reason save perhaps for ones born in bigotry, the Captain dismisses the old man as a halfwit. Glanton would not be so impractical, nor as merciful as to let the man live.

The men camp in the area for the night, care for their horses and mules, and make repairs to their wagons by firelight. In the morning, they depart into the vast desert, under the endless void of the sky. The terrain seems uncertain, slanted, veering. They march over stony ridges. They pass through a village and leave it in ruins. They camp in a church and use its fallen timbers to make a fire.

At this point, White's army has encountered no spoils of war, which casts doubt on the practicality of their enterprise. Indeed, even though they sack a village, the narrator says nothing about how they profit. The misuse of church timbers shows just how far White and his men have fallen from a more moral way of life.

The next day, Captain White surveys the desert with a brass telescope and spies what he thinks is a large herd of horses. He orders that the translator Candelario come forward to explain the meaning of the herd. Candelario doesn't know. The army moves on. As they approach, they see that the herd is composed of several thousand cattle, mules, and horses, tended to by a dozen drovers or so, Indians and perhaps Mexicans. The Captain assumes that the livestock have been stolen and notes that the drovers don't seem very concerned about the army's presence. With a grim smile, he suspects that a skirmish may ensue.

It is characteristic of the racist Captain White to assume that the non-white drovers stole their cattle (which, hypocritically enough, may very well be his object in engaging in combat here—stealing the cattle for himself). White is strikingly casual in his prediction that violence will soon break out, suggesting just how terrifyingly commonplace bloodshed is in his world.

As the filibusters approaches the herd, they see that the ponies are painted with chevrons, hands, suns, and other devices. Suddenly, from a nearby hillside, there emerge thousands of mounted Comanche Indians, like something out of a fevered dream. Some riders wear animal skins, one wears a stovepipe hat and has an umbrella, another wears a bloodstained wedding veil, and another yet wears the armor of a long-dead conquistador.

As the desert seemed feverishly nightmarish during the electrical storm, so too do the Indians as they ride down on the filibusters. Some wear mundane Western costumes, suggesting the flimsiness of civilization; others wear armor from ancient wars, suggesting the ubiquity of bloodshed, and that wars or battles such as these have gone on for hundreds if not thousands of years.

The riders howl like a horde from hell and rain down arrows on the army of filibusters. The filibusters fire back. The kid's horse sinks down underneath him with a sigh, and the kid finds himself next to a soldier with an arrow hanging out of his neck. The kid would have removed the arrow had he not noticed that the man had also taken an arrow to the chest and was, in fact, dead. Horses fall; men scramble, bleed, are shot or lanced. One prepares to shoot his rifle even as blood comes out of his ears. A pony bites at the kid from out of the murk and disappears.

In the midst of frenzy and fury, the kid is compelled to an act of mercy—helping the wounded soldier—despite the fact that, in shifting his attention away from the battle, he might expose himself to yet more danger. The kid is violent, but it is acts like these that distinguish him from the vicious company he keeps.

The Comanches have won the day. They circle the company, cut their ranks, strip the dead of their clothes and scalp both the living and the dead. They hack and chop at the naked bodies, dismember and gut them, hold up viscera and genitals, slathered with gore. Some of the victors fall upon the surviving but defeated filibusters and begin to sodomize them. Dust clings to the bloody heads of the scalped who lay "like maimed and naked monks" while the dying groan and gibber and scream.

The Indians here and Glanton's gang later both commit heinous atrocities. The novel seems to hold that all men, regardless of race, are capable of doing so. The simile comparing the scalped men to monks foreshadows the Judge's argument that war is God, and that all warriors serve Him.

CHAPTER 5

The kid "wondrously" survives the massacre; at night he rises and steals away under the moonlight, even while the Comanches celebrate their victory from higher ground. When day comes, the kid sees some outcroppings of rock about a mile away and he heads toward them.

McCarthy does not explain the kid's survival of the massacre; we might attribute it either to his special talent for violence, or else luck or fate. The word "wondrously" suggests that the latter interpretation is more fitting.

As he climbs the tumbled boulders of the Bolson de Mapimi (a drainage basin in Mexico), the kid hears a voice call to him. At first he can't see who is calling, but later learns that it is a man named Sproule, one of eight survivors of the massacre including Captain White. Sproule and the kid rest and discuss their injuries—Sproule has a wounded arm—before resuming their trek over the rocks. Toward evening, they drink from a small spring they find and rest in a shallow cave littered with beads, shells, polished bones, and the charcoal of ancient fires.

There is no rest for the weary: having survived the massacre, albeit wounded, the kid and Sproule are nonetheless confronted again with rocky barren terrain. They are lucky to find water, but the evidence of a past culture that they find in the cave is a reminder of how temporary and fragile human life is.

The next morning, the kid and Sproule take to the plain again. They come upon turf trampled by the Indian war party, mules killed in the massacre the day before, and a bush on the branches of which are impaled seven or eight dead human infants. The two men begin to move on, look back at the bush, and then move on.

The bush of dead babies is one of the novel's most haunting images for human depravity. Perhaps the kid and Sproule are overwhelmed by it; perhaps they are desensitized. Had the kid and Sproule not seen this, would anyone have known of the atrocity done?

In the afternoon the kid and Sproule reach a village in smoking ruins, all of its inhabitants dead. The men wander the mud streets where livestock lay slain, and in the mud hovels they see murdered people. At the end of the street, in a plaza, vultures huddle and chickens peck at the ground. In the doorway of a church stands a donkey.

The kid and Sproule witness more destruction wrought by the Comanches. The vultures are a reminder that soon the dead will disappear, taken back into nature; the chickens and donkey are reminders that, despite horror, life banally goes on.

The kid and Sproule sit in the plaza and decide what to do next. Sproule tells the kid that he has tuberculosis and came to Mexico for his health. The kid decides to scout the remains of the village for provisions and a place to sleep. Going from house to house, he finds things as various as a loom, figures of saints dressed in doll's clothes, and pictures cut from a journal pasted to a wall.

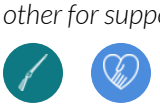
Given that he has been fatally wounded in the country, it is ironic that Sproule traveled to Mexico for his health: nowhere, it would seem, ideally accommodates life. While the kid wanders alone, he witnesses the remains of industrious, religious lives now extinguished senselessly.

The kid returns to find Sproule in a church where forty scalped, naked, and partly eaten corpses lay heaped. Flies walk on the eyeballs of the dead. The two go out into the square as the sun sets and see a dead child with two vultures sitting on it. Sproule attempts to shoo them away, but they just hiss at him and stand their ground.

The second ruined church in the novel, like the first, is now a house of death, where the villagers presumably made their last, unsuccessful stand against the Comanches. The persistence of the vultures dramatizes nature's indifference to human pain.

Come morning, the kid and Sproule leave the ruined village and set out across cruel terrain littered with "slag." They spend the night sleeping, then continue traveling through the blistering heat of the day. Exhausted, the two rest under a wagon in the afternoon and sleep till night. Then they move on. Sproule says that his wounded arm has begun to stink. The kid offers to look at it, even though he can't do anything about it. Sproule declines. After hiking all night and the following day, the two see in the distance an immense lake and a white city. The two fall asleep that night like dead men.

The slag over which the kid and Sproule traverse is a waste product of the refinement of the earth's raw materials into metal. Produced by people who dominated the landscape, its presence foregrounds just how frail and subject to the elements Sproule and the kid are. The kid offers to do a kindness, however futile, by looking at Sproule's wound: vulnerable in the desert, people only have each other for support.



Come morning, Sproule's health has taken a turn for the worse. He collapses; his lips are blistered and a foul fluid has seeped from his now swollen arm. The kid sees someone in the distance, and as he and Sproule discuss what to do they come to the realization that the lake they saw the day before was just a mirage. The kid spits and a lizard drinks his saliva. He and Sproule wait all day for the men in the distance to come nearer.

Sproule's health deteriorates rapidly, intimating his death. That he and the kid took the mirage for a reality indicates their exhaustion and desperation for relief. Only the lizard finds relief, though, by drinking the kid's saliva, which disappears so quickly it might as well have been a mirage. Animals must be resourceful to survive in this infernal world.

The people the kid saw earlier in the day turn out to be Mexican men on horseback, seven or eight of them. Sproule tells the kid to save himself, but the kid doesn't respond. As they pass, the Mexicans nod at the American castaways but continue to ride on. The kid calls out to them, Sproule trots after them. The apparent leader of the Mexicans, mounted on Captain White's horse, asks if the two are looking for the Indians, upon which several of the Mexican men dismount, hug one another, and weep.

Throughout the novel, characters tell the kid to leave them and save himself, but he tends to stick by them, one small sign of his willingness to deviate from a course of strict selfishness, rare in the novel's world. Given the kid and Sproule's stoicism, it is surprising and refreshing to witness the Mexicans hug and cry, lamenting the murder of their people.

The kid asks the leader of the Mexicans for water, which is granted. A canteen is produced, and the kid drinks greedily, even after the leader of the Mexicans says that he's had enough. The leader kicks the canteen from the kid's hands, at which point Sproule gets ahold of it and drinks. But the kid steps over and takes it from him—only for the leader to draw his sword and once more secure the canteen. The Mexicans hoot at the spectacle. The leader warns the kid that sometimes the lost lamb cries and its mother comes—but sometimes, the wolf (indeed, we learn in the chapter heading that these Mexicans are bandits). The Mexicans trot off.

McCarthy does not present the kid as a rigidly selfless character: here he abuses the Mexican leader's act of kindness by drinking selfishly from the canteen, going so far as to take it from the dying Sproule. Indeed, the kid tends to be more merciful when one-on-one with another character than when surrounded by many, as here—it's as though the mere presence of a group of men is enough to bring out his most brutal.

The kid and Sproule descend the mountain and reach the valley floor by dusk. There they march on in the dark, then sleep. In the night, Sproule is attacked by a vampire bat, which bites him on the neck and begins to suck his blood. Sproule wakes and shrieks. The kid rises, grabs a rock, but before he can strike the bat disappears into the darkness. Sproule howls out and looks at the kid accusingly. The kid tells Sproule that what's wrong with him is wrong all the way through him.

The desert is full of predators like the vampire bat, sucking dry other animals (not unlike the way in which the kid attempted to suck dry the bandit's canteen). Sproule seems to think that the kid attempted to drink his blood, and the kid tells Sproule that Sproule has something wrong at his core—but what? Perhaps a dysfunctional mistrust of other people, a lack of fellow feeling.

In the morning, the kid and Sproule find a seep of water. The kid absorbs water into his shirt and sucks on it, and he tells Sproule to do likewise. But Sproule's shirt sticks to his skin; pus runs out, and his arm is swollen to the size of a thigh, with worms working in the wound.

The vultures and worms in this chapter are both animals that live by feeding on what is already dead and dying; they are suggestive of nature's bleak economy, the way death feeds life, and vice versa.

In the afternoon, Sproule and the kid come to a crossroads. From there, they follow what seems to be the path most traveled. After traveling about two miles, they see to the north a wagon lumbering over the plain. Sproule and the kid intercept it, forcibly board, and ride with the family inside it into a nearby town after drinking a jar of the family's precious water.

Another act of vampire-like exploitation here, as the kid and Sproule selfishly drink a jar of this family's water. Their sense of community extends only to one another, perhaps because they served in arms together, perhaps out of mere convenience.

In the morning, the kid wakes to find Sproule dead in the wagon. He exits to urinate, but as he does so Mexican soldiers ride up and arrest him. They lead him through the streets of the town and past a traveling medicine show which features strange reptiles, a leper, and a liquor-filled jar in which is floating the head of Captain White. The kid looks at the head, spits, and says that the Captain was no kin to him.

Presumably for his involvement with the invading Captain White, the kid is arrested, which, as the Mennonite prophesied, is the better fate when compared to what befell most of the other filibusters. The kid denies partisanship with Captain White, perhaps because he no longer has anything to gain by doing otherwise.

The kid is imprisoned in a stone corral with three other refugees from the filibustering mission. He befriends a boy from Georgia, and together they talk about their plight, and Captain White's. The kid calls the Captain a fool. From the Georgian, the kid learns that the Captain's body was partially eaten by pigs, and that the Mexicans intend to transport their prisoners to Chihuahua City.

Based on his willingness to join the Glanton gang, it seems that the kid calls White a fool not for waging illegal warfare, but for doing so rather dismally. The pigs join the vultures and worms as another scavenger: White wanted Mexican land; instead he will be turned into manure for the land.

Children from the village try to urinate on, and throw rocks at, the prisoners, but the kid retaliates and with a stone drops a child from the wall. The Georgian warns that the Mexicans will whip the prisoners, but the kid says they wouldn't "come in here and eat no whips," and he's right. Later, a Mexican woman brings food to the prisoners, including sweets and meat she's smuggled in for them.

The kid is indiscriminate in whom he harms, be his victim bartender or Apache or child. It may be the Judge's sense of this capacity for broad violence that leads him later to tell the kid that he regarded him as a son. Contrast this with the woman's indiscriminate kindness in feeding the prisoners.

Three days later, the Mexicans mount up with their prisoners and ride through desert, mountain, and village. At night, the Mexicans talk about witches. When the party reaches Chihuahua City, the prisoners are paraded through a town full of government buildings and churches, vultures, and meat hanging from hooks. Once deposited in a prison there, the kid sees a fellow prisoner walk to a bucket on the floor and urinate—it is Louis Toadvine.

Underlying the Mexicans' discussion of witches is a belief in some supernatural evil in the world, not unjustified based on the horrors encountered thus far. In the city, McCarthy contrasts the buildings of civic order and salvation with the brute carnal needs they're founded on, meat and, by extension, death.

CHAPTER 6

During the day, the prisoners work in the city streets gathering up filth. Their overseer is a "goldtoothed pervert" whom Toadvine wants to kill personally. Toadvine assures the kid that they'll get out of the prison. During the day, a cart passes in the street, led by a fat priest who is delivering sacramental bread to someone (presumably someone dying); the guards forcibly remove their prisoners' hats as a sign of respect to the priest and his holy office.

The opening of this chapter presents two figures of authority, the overseer and the priest. The former is a pervert, which undercuts his moral authority. The priest, the first religious figure afforded respect in the novel, does his office, but his fatness suggests an inappropriate investment in worldly interests. Even in the city, authority seems unjustly earned.

In the prison, the kid sleeps next to Toadvine and a man from Kentucky called Grannyrat Chambers who had served in the Mexican-American War and came back to Mexico to reunite with his beloved. The Kentuckian had also fought at Mier (where a battle between a Texian militia and Mexicans occurred in 1842); there gallons of blood flowed and his own leg was shattered. He'd also been part of the threadbare force, wearing only underwear and rags, which took Chihuahua during the Mexican-American War while women picnicked on the hills above the city.

Like many characters in the novel, Grannyrat's life has been one fight after another, despite his having suffered debilitating wounds. Men can't seem to get enough of warfare. His description of the taking of Chihuahua deflates the idea that war is glorious, however, waged not so much by heroes as desperate ragged men. The picnicking women treat death like a banal entertainment.

The kid tells the two men about the massacre of the filibusters at the hands of the Indians, who the men identify as members of the Comanche tribe. Grannyrat tells about how he saw a man once who had been robbed by the Comanche; he came crawling into Fredericksburg on his hands and knees because the robbers had cut the bottoms of his feet off.

Grannyrat's story sheds light on the nature of violence in general: people don't necessarily perpetrate violence out of a sense of practicality or perverse justice, but almost as an end in itself: inflicting pain for pain's sake, because they enjoy it.

Grannyrat tells a final story, about a cave that also served as a burial ground for the Lipan Apache people. He says that the Mexicans robbed the grave of weapons and finery, and that Americans scalped the dead, some of them dead for perhaps a century, and attempted to sell the scalps in Durango. At story's end, Toadvine asks the kid how much money they could get for their prison overseer's gold teeth.

Grannyrat's final story reveals that even the sacredness of death has been dishonored. Death is not the end of, but just a new occasion for, outrageous exploitation. Toadvine's mention of the overseer's teeth develops the subplot in which he murders the overseer and takes his teeth as a trophy.

While doing forced labor in the streets, the prisoners see people off to hunt for gold, young girls who gaze at them brazenly, the governor of the city, and a horde of men half drunk, dressed in animal skins, and packing weapons of every description. Riding foremost among them is the giant and childlike Judge Holden. The men go to the governor's palace, where their small black-haired leader, later identified as John Joel Glanton, gains entry.

The gold hunters epitomize the get-rich-quick self-interest treated in the novel, contrasted with Glanton's gang, which uses the prospect of profiteering only as a pretense to go to war for war's sake. The Judge uncannily always ends up where the kid is, as though their paths are fated to cross (a suggestion later made by the Judge himself).

The next day, the Judge studies the prisoners while they work. He seems to smile at the kid. Toadvine explains later that night that the Governor of Chihuahua, Angel Trias, is paying Glanton and his gang to kill Apaches, a hundred dollars per scalp, one thousand dollars for their leader Gómez. Toadvine also tells the kid and Grannyrat that he has secured them positions in the gang, which will result in their freedom from prison.

These scenes mark the end of the kid's expositional wanderings and the beginning of his involvement with Glanton's gang, which takes up most of the novel. Ironically, Trias will later come to regret hiring the scalp hunters. With his newfound freedom the kid will only commit crimes for which he'll later be jailed again.

Three days later, Glanton and his gang, which now includes the kid, Toadvine, and Grannyrat, ride out of Chihuahua, led by Governor Trias. Girls throw flowers to them and blow kisses, boys run alongside their horses, and old men celebrate. At the edge of the city, Trias gives the scalp hunters his blessing and drinks to their fortune. Then the gang set out on the road.

In contrast to White's filibusters, Glanton's gang is indeed recognized by the Mexicans as an instrument of liberation, driving out the brutal Indians. However, the people's fanfare will soon become lamentation, when the Mexicans realize that the scalp hunters are not protectors but monstrous predators out to commit their violence against everyone.

CHAPTER 7

In the gang there are two men named John Jackson, one black, the other white. They have bad blood between them. As they ride under the mountains the white Jackson pulls up next to the black and whispers to him, and the black Jackson shakes the white off. Everyone in the gang watches, but no one cautions the Jacksons to hold off in their antagonism.

By naming both John Jacksons just that, McCarthy suggests that they would be virtually identical were it not for their racial difference. It is this difference alone that generates antagonism between the two.

Earlier in the morning, the gang had met on the outskirts of Chihuahua City to receive a delivery, made by a Jewish arms dealer from Prussia named Speyer. Speyer produces and opens a box for Glanton, who lifts from it a huge pistol. He loads it and levels the pistol at a cat as it walks upon a wall; he fires. No blood, no cry—the cat just disappears. Glanton then fires into a group of birds, which explode into feathers. He then shoots, in quick succession, a goat, a clay container, and a bell. Glanton does not think the pistols are worth the fifty dollars asked for them, and he tells Speyer so.

Glanton and his men are obsessed with the technologies of death, like these pistols. While the world falls to ruin around them, the gang members maintain their often elaborately decorated firearms with an almost religious zeal. Glanton's pistol here is capable of more than killing: it is also capable of obliterating, of making the signs of violence simply disappear, thereby making it impossible to bear witness to that violence.

Suddenly a group of armed Mexican soldiers ride into the courtyard and demand to know what's wrong; Speyer and the Judge assure them, despite the dead animals, that everything is fine. A Mexican sergeant, Aguilar, is not convinced, but Judge Holden converses with him warmly and presents him to each member of the gang. When he comes to the vexed-looking black Jackson, the Judge introduces him to Aguilar very learnedly—drawing on accounts of the inferiority of the black race presented in the Bible, Greek poetry, anthropology, and science.

The Judge proves himself here to be silver-tongued and effective in diminishing the consequences of the gang's actions. His account of the inferiority of the black race also demonstrates wide-ranging (if false) erudition. This account also anticipates Jackson's troubles to come, e.g., with the white Jackson and law enforcement in Tucson, for which he seems fated.

The black Jackson ignores Aguilar's attempts to shake hands, and he asks the Judge what he's told Aguilar. The Judge responds, in quasi-legal terminology, that Jackson doesn't need to know the facts to fulfill his historical destiny, although the facts do require a third-party witness, in this case Aguilar. The Judge concludes that, although Aguilar is too ignorant to understand the meaning of the facts of Jackson's racial heritage, the authority of the words themselves transcends this ignorance.

The Judge argues here that historical facts need to be witnessed before they can contribute to the fulfillment of destiny. But why does Aguilar need to witness them if the Judge already has? Either the Judge is trying to provoke the black Jackson (quite in character), or he is spouting something very close to nonsense (not out of character—many of his fellows denounce the Judge as "crazy").

The Judge's speech is received with silence from the gang, a few smiles, a half-witted guffaw. The black Jackson is sweating. The Judge proceeds to show Aguilar one of the just-delivered pistols and carefully explains how it works. He then presents Aguilar with some money and shakes hands with the soldiers under his (Aguilar's) command. The Mexican soldiers ride into the street, and the scalp hunters, each armed now with a pair of pistols, set off upcountry.

If the Judge intended to provoke the black Jackson, it would seem that he's succeeded, for the black is sweating and will be especially on edge in the scenes that follow. The Judge also demonstrates a thorough practical knowledge of weaponry here—but he seems to know at least something about everything.

After a day of riding, the gang makes camp. The narrator explains that Toadvine, the Kid, and Grannyrat are replacements for three scalp hunters who died earlier in the desert. As these three sit together, they watch the several Delawares, or Delaware Indians, who are part of the gang sitting apart. One crushes a coffee bean with a stone and another searches for a coal with which to light his pipe.

As the kid inherited Earl's horse, so does he inherit a vacancy in Glanton's gang, and so the cycle of warfare spins on. Though Glanton's men hunt Indians, there are Indians in their party, suggesting that membership in the gang is more about opportunism than arbitrary racial divides.

In the morning, the gang sets out. Toadvine becomes friendly with Bathcat, a.k.a. the Vandiemenlander, a fellow fugitive originally from Wales who migrated to Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania) to hunt aborigines. Bathcat offers a bet to Toadvine as to which Jackson will kill the other, but Toadvine declines. Bathcat predicts that black Jackson will kill white. Toadvine turns to his companion and sees that he's wearing a necklace of human ears. The narrator also says that Bathcat has a number tattooed on his arm, which Toadvine will see first in a Chihuahua bathhouse and later within the year when cutting down Bathcat's torso from a tree limb.

Bathcat probably suspects that the black Jackson will kill the white because he holds the racist belief that blacks are morally inferior to, and more savage than, whites. Though Bathcat would have won the bet, the black Jackson kills the white not because he's more savage, but because the white does not treat him like an equal, a brother-in-arms. The narrator's forecast of Bathcat's death suggests that his death is not accidental but fated.

The gang marches on and camps that night in the corral of a hacienda, with watch fires burning all night. The narrator says that, two weeks earlier, a party of campesinos (farmers) had camped in the very same place, only to have been slaughtered by Apaches and then partly eaten by hogs. Glanton orders a goat killed for supper.

Although the murder of the campesinos is not part of the novel's plot, the narrator nonetheless bears witness to that violence, as though it would dishonor the campesinos to let them die without some sort of vigil, some record of their suffering. Their murder also foreshadows the gang's future run-ins with the Apaches.

On the third day, the gang rides into the town of Corralitos. The townspeople come out and watch them pass with wonder. The gang camps in the town plaza. Glanton, the Judge, and two other members of the gang, David Brown and his brother Charlie Brown, ride out to the estate of General Zuloaga (a Mexican general and Conservative leader in the War of Reform), where they dine and pass the night without incident.

Glanton and his deputies have access to some of the most powerful people in Mexico, like General Zuloaga. However, the crimes of the gang will soon make them Mexico's most infamous public enemies. Favor is quickly won and lost, partisanship quickly established and betrayed.

As they prepare to ride out in the morning, the gang is approached by a family of magicians—a father, mother, son, and daughter—seeking safe passage up to the town of Janos. A member of the family, an old man, tries to explain this to Glanton despite not speaking English, going so far as to have the company put on part of the show, with dancing dogs and juggling. Glanton says the family can travel in the rear, but makes no promises as to their safety.

As with the encounter between the kid and the bartender in Bexar, meaning is lost in translation here—action, pantomiming, is the only universal language. Whereas the family of magicians speaks the dialect of entertainment, however, the gang speaks the dialect of violence.

The gang crosses the Casas Grandes River at noon. They pass the scene of a years-old massacre, where Mexican soldiers had slaughtered an encampment of Apaches, including women and children. Bones strew the ground.

This scene suggests the ubiquity of warfare, and foreshadows the encounter between Glanton's gang and the Apaches.

At night, the gang makes camp. The family of magicians set up their tent, but it blows away on a strong wind into the wrathful darkness of the desert. The old magician is deepy saddened by this and sits by the fire while his family unpacks.

Even Glanton's gang can't protect the family from the elements. The image of the tent being sucked into the darkness epitomizes the empty destructiveness of nature.

Glanton asks the old man if he tells fortunes; he does, and produces a pack of Tarot cards. He offers a card to Glanton, who declines; but the black Jackson accepts. Jackson draws a card with a picture of a fool and cat on it. A female magician begins chanting and says something in Spanish. Jackson asks Ben Tobin, an ex-priest in the gang, what the woman is saying, but Tobin dismisses fortune telling as idolatry.

Though the Judge suggests to Aguilar that the black Jackson's fate is already determined, Jackson draws the Fool card, which signifies the potential for new beginnings, self-creation. However, it seems that he declines to realize this potential, perhaps because his fortune is lost in translation. Tobin, meanwhile, a man who failed to enter the priesthood and now is part of a murderous gang, bears judgment on what he considers the blasphemy of the magicians.

Jackson then asks the Judge to tell him what the woman is saying. The Judge is picking "small life" from the folds of his skin and appears to be making a gesture of blessing until he flings something from his fingers to the fire. The Judge tells Jackson that the woman is saying he should avoid rum. Tobin says that this would not constitute a fortune, and the Judge agrees. He assures Jackson that he will, in the fullness of time, know everything, as will every man.

The Judge picks "small life" (i.e. body lice, etc.) from his body because he wants no life to be autonomous or exist without his permission. It may well be that he evades telling Jackson what his fortune means because the fortune suggests the potential for autonomy, and the Judge would rather Jackson think himself fatedly indentured to the trade of war.

The Judge instructs the old magician to offer a card to the kid, who draws the Four of Cups. The Judge smiles. The kid orders the old magician to get away from him, but the magician doesn't understand. A gang member from Kentucky called Tate (his first name is later given as Sam)—who served with Tobin and other gang members with McCulloch's Rangers during the Mexican-American War—whispers to the old magician, who ceases to engage the kid. He asks whose fortune he should tell next.

The Four of Cups signifies that one needs to be introspective to discover truth, and avoid external diversions. Warfare, we might say, is what is diverting the kid from thinking on the state of his soul. Indeed, McCarthy hardly represents the kid as having an interior life, a consciousness, at all: we know only what he does, and very little of what he thinks.

Finally the Judge instructs the old magician to offer a card to Glanton. Glanton accepts, but as the magician reaches for the card drawn that he might see its image, the card vanishes from Glanton's hand. Perhaps Glanton saw the image himself, perhaps he didn't. The older female magician chants in Spanish that Glanton drew the card with an image of a wheelless cart on it that traverses a dark river, a card of war and vengeance, of loss in the night. Glanton tells the woman to shut up and draws his pistol but the Judge prevents him from shooting her.

Glanton, we later learn, is intent on ruthlessly pursuing his fate, which perhaps explains why he is so hesitant to have his fortune read, and why he might be grateful that his card vanishes. Nonetheless, his card the wheelless cart on the dark river does accurately portray his future death.

In the morning, the gang, as well as the family of magicians, resume their journey and reach the crumbling walls of Janos in the afternoon. In the town square, Glanton meets up with two Delawares and a man named Marcus "Long" Webster who had ridden ahead of the gang as outriders. They have with them an old Apache woman, captured at a meat camp which the outrides found, where hunters dress and store animal carcasses. Glanton shoots her in the head, and the single Mexican member of the gang, Juan Miguel (called McGill throughout, an American mispronunciation of his name), scalps her while the family of magicians watch "like witnesses."

Fittingly, the day after the family tells the gang members' fortunes, the gang commits the first in a series of outrageous murders that seal their fates as men doomed to die violently. Like the Delawares, McGill is one of the few non-Americans in the gang, but his partisanship nonetheless goes so deep that eventually he will kill fellow Mexicans in order to sell their scalps. It is as though by witnessing this murder that the magicians submit it to the reckonings of fate; otherwise it would be as though the murder did not occur at all.

The gang leaves the square and makes camp in a nearby grove. From there, Toadvine and the kid watch the family of magicians announce their entertainments to the beat of a drum. Bathcat leans over to them and points out black Jackson, who is in the square with the magicians, standing behind their tent. The old magician gives a signal, and his daughter pushes Jackson onto the stage, as it were, where he strides, strangely posturing, in the torchlight.

It is unclear why the black Jackson joins the family of magicians, but that the daughter pushes him suggests that it was the magicians' idea. Perhaps they are encouraging him to pursue a new beginning, as the Tarot card he drew portended he could. If so, this encouragement fails; the black Jackson soon falls back into a life of violence.

CHAPTER 8

Later, the scalp hunters stop at a cantina in Janos for drinks. In a dark corner, men are playing a confidence game with cards, called Monte. Out of the gloom, an old man shuffles toward Toadvine, Bathcat, and the kid. After some linguistic misunderstanding, the old man makes it clear that he welcomes the scalp hunters for fighting the Apaches; he also grieves for how much blood Mexico has shed, and suggests that war is like a dream you can't wake up from forever. As the old man speaks, another man groans at the table of card players.

Throughout the novel, card games seem connected to the workings of fate. Here, the groaning man has attempted to cheat at cards, metaphorically to cheat fate, and he is severely punished. The old man talking to the gang members laments that his country is fated for nothing but nightmarish war; ironically, he is speaking to men whom he views as heroes, yet who will soon ruthlessly shed yet more Mexican blood.

As the scalp hunters leave the cantina, Bathcat tells the kid that the old man they just spoke with is the father of the man moaning among the Monte players. Apparently, he was cut with a knife while playing cards. The kid asks why the man didn't leave the cantina—but where else would he go? The gang leaves the village, while the local watchman announces from his post that all is well.

The world of Blood Meridian *is so violent and bleak that one can't even find a refuge or quiet place to die after being mortally stabbed. Even though someone's just been stabbed and Mexico is plagued with warfare, the watchman ironically says that all's well; murder and carnage are nothing strange here.*

The next day, the gang makes for the meat camp that the Delawares and Webster found. It has been abandoned: only sheets of meat and hide remain. They ride on. While stopping for supper, the Judge asks Toadvine what's become of Grannyrat Chambers—Toadvine says that he's separated from the gang, and that he can't speak for the missing man. The Judge thinks otherwise, but leaves in silence

The meat camp is the gang's first clue as to the whereabouts of the Apaches they're hunting. The Judge is intent that the gang remain together in their campaign, and is disturbed that Grannyrat may have defected. Later, the Judge will also accuse the kid of defecting from the gang, not physically but in spirit.

In the morning, two of the Delawares are gone. The gang rides on, through mountain and forest. By evening they come to a mesa, from which Glanton looks out before deciding to ride on into the "problematical destruction of darkness."

The Delawares ride off to seek Grannyrat. The decision to ride into the darkness suggests Glanton's self-destructive nature.


That night, there are two campfires set up, without any formal or informal rules governing who can sit where. However, the Delawares and the Mexican McGill are around one fire, the whites around the other. Black Jackson sits with the whites, but the white Jackson drives him off, going so far as to draw and cock his pistol. The black Jackson leaves, only to return moments later with a knife, with which he decapitates the white Jackson, despite the ex-priest Tobin rising to intervene. In the morning, the gang rides on, while the headless body of white Jackson sits, his gun stolen but his boots still where he left them.

The gang members seem conditioned to segregate themselves by race. When the black Jackson attempts to sit with the whites, though, only his antagonistic double, the white Jackson, drives him off. After the black murders the white, none say anything, as though tacitly accepting his action, which does promote the unity of the gang above all else. Partisanship is here imagined as a willingness to wage war with a group of people, nothing more.


CHAPTER 9

The gang doesn't ride an hour before Apaches launch an ambush, riding across a lakebed. The scalp hunters take cover under bushes while arrows fall, and they begin to fire at their attackers, the kid calmly as though he's done this before in a dream. After more shots are exchanged, the Apaches flee.

As anticipated by the discovery of the meat camp, the gang has its first encounter with the Apaches. The kid is so desensitized to violence, its deadly consequences are so unreal to him, that it's as though he's dreamed all this before.

The gang rides down into the lakebed where they find a dead Apache, half naked and with multiple healed war wounds. Toadvine has shot this man in the chest. The Judge searches the dead man's warbag and corpse, taking a madstone (a stony concretion, like a hairball, taken from animal innards and said to counteract poison) as well as a skin bag tied next to the dead man's genitals. At last, the Judge scalps the corpse.

The Judge is an avid anthropologist and naturalist, a characteristic first revealed here when he takes two of the more mysterious of the dead Apache's belongings. He later explains that he seeks to know everything so that nature and all life will be at last absolutely under his control.

The gang rides on through the wasteland, through a lake of gypsum (present-day White Sands National Monument) and past dust spouts that are rumored to sweep men up only to drop them bleeding and broken on the desert floor before dispersing. At night the men camp and gaze rapturously into their campfires. In the morning the men wake to discover that some of their horses have gone blind with sunlight; these are shot, leaving the gang with only three spare horses.

The dust spouts are images for violence: people are brutalized and left for dead while the agent of the violence disappears without witness. The gang will enact this pattern many times, killing then disappearing. However, as much as the men sympathize with the destructive elements, like the fire they gaze into, they are also subject to natural violence, as the blinding of their horses illustrates.


At noon, the two Delawares who had separated from the gang at Janos return, bringing with them the horse that belonged to Grannyrat. Glanton burns Grannyrat's saddle, blanket, and other effects. Then the gang rides on.

Grannyrat is quite likely murdered by the Delawares for deserting the gang. Breaking with the fraternity of warfare has dire consequences, as the kid will learn later.

Two days later, the gang comes across a carriage drawn by six horses. The horses are shy and skitter away when approached, but Glanton eventually gains access to the carriage. Inside he finds two dead men and a dead boy, as well letters and tagged bags of ore samples. He takes the guns and ammunition he finds and orders his men to take two of the six horses that are harnessed to the carriage.

Based on the ore Glanton finds, the three dead people in the carriage seem to have been working for a mine. They also seem to have been murdered by Indians. The Judge would say that, in a contest of wills, fate ruled in the Indians' favor in this case.

After riding up through the mountains, the gang camps; then they resume their trek in the darkness of morning, through a caldera. They pass through what was once a Mexican copper mine, later besieged by the Apaches. There they come across a large triangular building, from which smoke is rising. Glanton knocks on the door and tells whoever's inside to come out if they're white. A man bearing a rifle answers, and Glanton forces entry.

The copper mine is probably that from which the carriage was riding from when the Apaches overtook it. Glanton, like many of his fellows, is a racist who trusts whites over non-whites, as evinced by his request that the building's inhabitants come out if they're white. When his will is challenged, Glanton resorts to force.

Inside the scalp hunters dismount and meet four men whose three other companions have been killed by the Apache. One of the survivors is propped against a wall, wounded beyond care. Though these squatters have been eating nothing but dead, stinking mule, the first things they ask for are whiskey and tobacco.

It is with dark humor that the squatters first request not necessities but the luxury items whiskey and tobacco. Even when in dire straits, people are often controlled more by their vices than anything else.

The four squatters have only two horses between them, one of which has been bitten by a snake, its head now enormously, grotesquely swollen. This poisoned horse totters toward the gang's horses, only to be attacked by one. The four men explain that they haven't killed the horse yet because they aim to eat it and don't want it to rot too quickly. As the sun rises, Glanton sees that there's a young Mexican or multiracial boy in the room, mostly naked. The Judge asks who the boy is, but the four squatters just shrug.

The gang's horses attack the sick horse, a drama of ostracization that plays out among humans too, as when the black Jackson attempted to sit with the whites, or when David Brown is later wounded. The Judge's question about the multiracial boy preludes the boy's coming death, presumably at the Judge's hands.

In the afternoon, the Judge explores the works of the mine and holds an impromptu lecture on geology. He says that natural objects like stones and trees, even more so than the Bible, are the words of God. Although the squatters listening to his lecture at first disagree, by lecture's end they agree with the learned Judge, and he laughs at them for fools.

Contrary to Christian doctrine, the Judge locates the word of God not in the Bible or in Christ, but in brute hostile nature. That he then laughs at the squatters for agreeing with him suggests that he mocks their shallow attachment to their own beliefs, and that his beliefs are both different and more lasting

The gang passes the night around a campfire while outside a storm rages. Someone reports that, despite the lightning and rain, the Judge is standing naked outside reciting or composing aloud in the mode of epic poetry. In the morning, the snakebitten horse is dead, and the sky is clear. Toadvine and the Judge make small talk on the weather. The squatters inform Glanton that they want to join the gang, but Glanton ignores them.

The Judge is frequently naked, reflecting his dismissal of societal norms and drawing attention to his imposing physicality. He recites poetry just as the kid's father did, suggestive not only of the Judge's learnedness but also anticipative of his claim that he loved the kid like a son. Glanton probably turns the squatters down for lack of horses to provide them.

In the meantime, someone finds the young boy dead, his neck broken and flopping. The three unwounded squatters gather around the body and speak of the boy's virtues, while the wounded squatter sings hymns and curses God alternately. The scalp hunters mount and ride away, having left the squatters with some provisions.

Wherever the Judge goes children die; he probably killed this boy. The squatter's singing hymns and cursing God reveal his conflicted response to the world, his hope for good countered by his despair in the face of so much evil.

At dusk, the gang hunts deer and makes camp. Then they move on. That night they come across a party of riders that seems like the mirror image of their own. The two parties parley before riding on, each going in the direction the other just came from. The narrator observes that all travelers just pursue "inversions without end upon other men's journeys."

The idea that travelers merely pursue inversions of others' journeys—that they are just taking different versions of journeys already made by others— implies that human desires and their endeavors to dominate are inherently wayward, backwards, senseless, and yet the same as they've always been. It also implies that the horrific events of the novel are fated to repeat themselves.

CHAPTER 10

Some nights later, Tobin and the kid are sitting together around a campfire, the kid rather efficiently mending a strap. The two begin talking about the Judge, whom Tobin says is very gifted. The Judge even speaks, rather improbably, Dutch, which he claims to have learned from a Dutchman. Tobin spits and says he couldn't have learned the language from ten Dutchmen; he concludes that God's gifts are allocated very unequally. He goes on to say that the Judge is an excellent **dancer** and fiddler, and that he's traveled the world.

The Judge's erudition extends not just to the arts and sciences, but also to human languages. His multilingualism stands in stark contrast with the difficulties his fellow scalp hunters have in communicating with the Mexicans they've encountered thus far. Indeed, the Judge seems to be the foremost of the gang in respect to giftedness, learnedness, and skill—he dominates in whatever he puts his mind to.

Tobin suggests that perhaps the Judge's immense learnedness just goes to show how little God cares about learning. Tobin believes that God may speak most profoundly to those who are silent, and that He also speaks to the least of creatures, including men. The kid says he's never heard the voice of God, but Tobin says that when the voice stops the kid will know he's really heard it all his life.

Given that he is learned yet wicked, the Judge proves to Tobin that God is indifferent to learnedness. Tobin says that God may speak most to those who are silent instead. That great talker, the Judge, later accuses the kid of being silent; Perhaps the kid's small mercies are brought about because he hears the voice of God as the Judge cannot.

Tobin then begins to tell the kid about how the Judge first fell in with Glanton's gang and saved them all. The gang was being pursued by Indians but had run out of powder for their guns, when they found in the middle of the desert the Judge sitting on a rock. He had no canteen, only pistols, gold and silver, and a rifled named *Et In Arcadia Ego* ("Even in Arcadia, I exist").

It does not seem accidental but orchestrated, that the Judge should have encountered the scalp hunters in the midst of a vast desert. His rifle's name comes from the Classics; it means that, even in paradise (Arcadia was a paradise), death exists. For the Judge, the battlefield is ironically paradise.

A deputy in the gang, David Brown, wanted to leave the Judge on his rock, but Glanton overruled him and decided to equip the Judge to travel with the gang. As they rode, Glanton and the Judge began conversing with one another like brothers. The Judge seemed greatly pleased, as though everything had gone according to some plan he had made. The Judge advised that the gang change course for some mountains, and they did so. Tobin wonders aloud how the Judge knew what the mountains held and how to use it.

The Judge's high spirits and his knowledge of what the gang could find in the mountains suggest that his meeting with the gang was somehow orchestrated, planned or fated—but how, if the Judge is not in some way a supernatural entity? However, the narrative does not altogether dismiss the possibility that the Judge is just insane and lucky.

The Indians pursuing the unarmed gang were catching up. Even so, the Judge remained cheerful, taking notes on the bats flying about by night and even collecting plants by day as he rode toward the mountains. At night, the gang arrives at a cave full of the bats the Judge studied earlier. Tobin says that the Judge brought the gang there for the nitre, also known as saltpeter and potassium nitrate, a chemical found in bat guano that is of great importance in gunpowder.

The Judge later argues that war is the ultimate trade, and that all other trades are means to the end of waging war more excellently. That argument is borne out here, where the Judge's geographical and scientific knowledge enable him to find and exploit raw materials in the making of gunpowder with which to kill the gang's pursuers.

Over the next two days, two deserters from the gang were discovered hanging from trees, killed by the pursuing Indians, skinned, and strung up. Because neither deserter had gunpowder on his person, Tobin infers that the Indians must have known by then that the gang in general had no gunpowder. Meanwhile, the Judge and a Delaware had set up a kiln; they distilled nitre from the guano and also manufactured powdered charcoal. This done, the gang rode down the mountain in the dark, not sure where the pursuing Indians were, though they must have been close.

McCarthy reveals the life-and-death stakes of the gang's situation here, and also generates suspense, by including the two murdered deserters. He also reveals that not all of the gang members had absolute faith in the Judge's ability to repel the Indians. Like Grannyrat earlier, and the kid later, those who defect from the Judge's company tend to die violently.

After riding past wolves in the night, the gang reached a malpais, very unforgiving volcanic terrain. There the Judge delivered a sermon about how the earth contains "all good things" in itself, like an egg. Tobin recalls how there were hoof markings in the malpais and speculates that they were created by devils sent out to recapture sinners who had been ejected from Hell.

In this hell-scape, the Judge praises the earth as providing the instruments of domination and pain. It is ironic that he thinks gunpowder, soon to be used in a massacre, a good thing. The hoof prints in the lava heighten the intensity of our suspicion that the Judge himself is a devil.

At the top of the volcanic cone of the malpais, with the pursuing Indians only ten miles away, the Judge began to chip away at the stone with his knife and encouraged others to do the same: it was brimstone, full of pure sulfur. The Judge mixed the nitre, charcoal, and sulfur together, then urinated on the mixture and told the gang to urinate on it too for their very souls. With his bare arms, the Judge kneaded the mass like "foul black dough," then spread it thin to dry.

It is fitting that gunpowder should be in part derivable from bat feces and human urine. This suggests a deep connection between waste and warfare, and renders the exploitation of the earth all the more viscerally disgusting and outrageous. Instead of providing God's daily bread of life, the Judge provides the "black bread" of death.

By then, the pursuing Indians had arrived at the base of the malpais and greedily began to climb up to kill the gang. The Judge told the men to bring their concoction to him, which he chopped to a powder when presented with it. He loaded it into Glanton's pistol, and told Glanton to fire into the cauldron of the volcano: with a strange sound, the gun fired. All the men then loaded their guns with the "queer powder." The Judge pretended to surrender to the Indians as the only survivor, only for the gang to rise up from behind him and butcher every single one of the Indians.

The Judge's feigned surrender reveals that his conception of warfare involves not only strength in exerting the will, but also the use of any tactic, including deception, to ensure victory. Note that, as bloodthirsty as the gang is, the Indian's are just as bloodthirsty. McCarthy is unsparing in his portrait of humankind, regardless of race, as keen to shed blood.

Tobin's story is ended. The kid asks what, exactly, the Judge is a judge of, but Tobin hushes him, explaining that the Judge will hear him because he has ears like a fox.

Why should Tobin be afraid that the Judge hear the kid? Perhaps he senses that the Judge would harm the kid for having knowledge of him.

CHAPTER 11

The gang continues their journey into the mountains. At dusk, a bear rises out of the vegetation and, despite being shot by Glanton, manages to carry off in its jaws one of the Delawares. For three days the other Delawares trail the bear through the forest, but to no avail. They reunite with the gang, and between themselves the scalp hunters divvy up the dead man's property.

After Tobin tells his story about how the Judge exploited nature, nature, in the figure of the bear, proves capable of fighting back. The gang is unceremonious and practical in respect to the death of its members, dividing up the dead man's property without hesitation.

The gang rides onward through hostile terrain, down through a deep gorge. There they find pieces of pottery and Spanish helmets. They make camp among ancient ruins, which the Judge explores, sketching the small artifacts he find till dark. All the next day he continues to sketch, with characteristic excellence, artifacts into his ledger. After sketching the foot piece of a suit of armor originally from Toledo, Spain, the Judge crumples the foot piece into a ball and casts it into the campfire. He sits back, satisfied.

As much as the Judge prizes knowledge for the edge it gives him in combat, he seems d determined to horde knowledge for himself. After "mastering" the foot piece by sketching it, he destroys the original so that none else can acquire and exploit a knowledge equal to his own. He also seems to take satisfaction in having the power to destroy ancient, artifacts. He wants not so much to know the world as to master it, and to be the sole master of it.

Webster asks the Judge what he intends to do with his sketches. The Judge says that he will expunge them from human memory. Webster then requests that the Judge never draw him, for he wouldn't want his image shown to strangers; the Judge responds that each man is already housed in the minds of the men who know him. Webster insists that he doesn't want to be sketched, but the other men begin to heckle him for his vanity—who would want to see an image of Webster anyway?

The Judge sketches so that he can understand the world around him; it is only when he understands the world fully that he may destroy those things in it of which he does not approve. The Judge sympathizes with Webster's desire not to be represented, comprehended, witnessed in the minds of others, perhaps because he views such comprehension as an act of dominion.

The Judge rises to Webster's defense. He tells of an old Hueco Indian whom he drew, who became very fearful that an enemy might deface his portrait. The Judge and the Hueco ended up burying the image in the mountains. Webster says that the Hueco is just ignorant and that their cases aren't at all similar, upon which the Judge reaches for his ledger and asks then if Webster has no objection to being sketched after all. Webster again declines.

Webster has good reason to be afraid of being sketched by the Judge, though he may not know it. After all, it was by presenting a defaced sketch, so to speak, of the Reverend Green that the Judge brought about that man's persecution in Chapter 1. Besides, demonstrably understanding an object makes it easier to manipulate that object.

The men then discuss the Indians who long ago inhabited the ruins they're presently camped in; the Judge tells another story, about a man who owned a harness shop along a road with few travelers. To make extra money, the man would disguise himself as an Indian and beg travelers for money. However, one traveler recognized that the harness maker was actually white and made him feel ashamed, so the harness maker invited the traveler back to his house, where his family—a wife and two children—lived.

The harness maker makes his living by misrepresenting himself, by defacing his own sketch in the world's ledger, which none but the traveler discerns for lack of an image of the original. The harness maker is ashamed that the traveler sees who he really is, a fraud. Perhaps Webster, like the harness maker, doesn't want the Judge to have an image of him, lest that image compromise his freedom.

The Judge goes on to say that the harness maker's family members all regarded him as mad and were waiting to escape from him. This accounts for why they were so welcoming of their guest. During dinner, the harness maker tried to wheedle money from the traveler. The traveler gave the old man two coins, but the old man then asked for even more, upon which the traveler told him that he's a loss to God and humankind alike.

Exposed, the harness maker can no longer make an easy living through his deception. He will be forced to enter the world of economic markets and commerce. He tries to wheedle money from the traveler to stave off this fate, but the traveler implies that someone who so refuses to enter the world of honest exchange is a waste, ungodly and antisocial.

Around this time, a black man came down the road drawing a funeral hearse, the Judge says, then scans his audience for a moment before resuming the tale. The harness maker's son says that the black man is equal to everyone else and asks that a place be made for him at the dinner table. But by this time, the black man had passed from sight.

The son stands up for the equality of all people, regardless of race. He might be moved to say this by the traveler, whose argument suggests that the only way to be of value is to participate in honest exchange, and one can't do so if marginalized like blacks are.

The old harness maker repented upon hearing this and agreed with his son. The traveler announced that it was time for him to depart; the harness maker's wife wept and their daughter clung to the stranger. The harness maker walked the traveler to a crossroads, almost parted ways with him, but called back to walk with him further. Deep in the woods, in the dark, the harness maker picked up a rock with which he beat the traveler to death before stealing his effects and burying him.

Earlier, the Judge tells Webster that once we are witnessed our image becomes arrested, so to speak, in the minds of others. The harness maker perhaps desires to evade this fate, to be free to be whomever he wants. This explains why he kills the traveler, who has witnessed him, thereby chaining the harness maker to his authentic image.

The old man tore his own clothes and bloodied himself before returning home, so that he could deceive his family into believing that he and the traveler were set upon by robbers and the traveler murdered by them. Years later, on his deathbed, the harness maker told his son the truth; the son offered forgiveness, and the father accepted.

After murdering the traveler, the harness maker is free to recreate himself through deceptions—here, as an innocent victim—and there are no witnesses to say otherwise. However, before dying the old man gives his son his true image.

But the son was not sorry, but rather jealous of the dead traveler, whose bones he disinterred and scattered. He himself wandered west and became a murderer. The old woman, however, thought that wild animals had disturbed the grave. She restored as many bones to the grave as she could find and told people that it was actually her son's grave, which, the Judge concludes, perhaps by that time was so.

The son is jealous of the traveler because he alone held in his mind an authentic image of his, the son's, fraudulent, murderous father. The son's role model was a false idealization, and the son, despairing and empty, turns to a life of violence.

Many of the men dispute the facts of the Judge's story, but the Judge says there's more to the story. He says that the murdered traveler had a pregnant wife waiting for him who bore the traveler's son. The Judge concludes that this son is in a bad way, because his father will always be an idol of perfection to which the son can never attain because the son will never have any memory of his father making mistakes or errors.

The men's many versions of the story illustrate just how readily representations can be corrupted and defaced, just as the son's mental representation of his father was. The rest of the story the Judge tells suggests that the father-son relationship, regardless of the father's virtues or vices, dooms sons to be forever wayward and lost.

The Judge then explains that the Indians who lived in the ruins the gang is camping in were the Anasazi, who were fine builders and inventors and sought to altar the structure of the universe by building in stone. The achievements of the Anasazi stand in judgment on all the lesser works of future ages.

The Judge implicitly extends his account of the father-son relationship to the relationship between great civilizations like that of the Anasazi and those lesser civilizations that follow them. As sons are lost, so too the lesser civilizations.

Tobin observes that both the son of the murderous father and of the ideal father came to ruin, and asks the Judge how one should raise a child, then. The Judge earnestly proposes that a child should be put in a pit with wild dogs at a young age, solve deadly puzzles, and run naked in the desert. As wolves cull themselves, so should human beings. At the end of the Judge's speech, the men whisper in his presence as though afraid of waking something dangerous.

The Judge's radical proposal for education implies that fathers, mothers and teachers should be dispensed with altogether. Instead, children should father themselves by overcoming extreme hazards, or else die trying. Note that the kid practically raised himself by traveling, brawling, and soldiering. He seems like the Judge's ideal son.

The next day, while the gang rides, a mule falls down a canyon wall to its death. The men ride on, crossing mesas in the following days, past where Indians cooked mescal, past enormous flowers where bats feed. They camp, and the next day ride through a tattered village where Glanton finds a dog which he tames with a piece of jerky. The gang takes the trail out of the village, with scouts riding ahead. Days later, the scouts return and report seeing fires fifty miles to the south, the first sign of Indians they've seen in many days.

The chapter opens with an animal killing a human; it closes with a natural hazard killing an animal. The world is brutal, and only the fit have a chance of surviving (that's what the Judge might say, anyway). As the Judge tamed bat feces and urine into useful gunpowder, so Glanton tames the dog with meat, thereby claiming dominion over it. The fires foreshadow the bloodshed to come.

CHAPTER 12

For the next two weeks, the gang rides by night, making no campfires, through storms and nights of hail. At one point, they come upon five wagons aflame, surrounded by mutilated human corpses, murdered by white men who disguise their work as that of Indians. The gang uses the wagon flames to boil water for coffee and roast meat. Then they continue riding south.

The gang makes no campfires so that the Indians don't realize they're being pursued. The white men's disguising their acts of violence as that of Indians recalls the harness maker in the Judge's tale, who disguised himself as a black to make easy money. The scalp hunters banally treat burning wreckage as a stove, almost indifferent to death.

The narrator says that men engaging in rash undertakings often become preoccupied with ideas of chance and fate. Tobin comments that it is a cynical god who would lead travelers directly into the path of their murderers, despite all odds, in the middle of an immense wasteland. He wonders if a third party of witnesses diminishes the idea of such a meeting ocurring by chance, but the Judge responds that witness is not some third thing but the very foundation of such a meeting, for nothing occurs unobserved.

Given the low probability that the paths of travelers and their murderers should coincide in an immense desert, Tobin suspects a malignant god at work. The Judge implies that, without witnesses, such coincidences can't even be said to exist. The Judge would witness everything around him so that he can exploit it, but would himself go unwitnessed so as to remain absolutely free.

The Delawares go ahead to scout, and two days later return with the news that the Gileños, a group of Indians, are camped to the south only four hours away. By early morning, the gang has ridden upon them. Glanton tells his men to leave no Indian alive, and to spare their bullets only for Indians who can fight back. The scalp hunters massacre the Gileños, including infants and the Indians' Mexican slaves, hacking at their skulls for scalps. When McGill is lanced, the kid attempts to help him, but Glanton orders him not to and shoots McGill in the head.

The scalp hunters are savage and ruthless, killing as many people as they can, including the Mexicans whom they have been contracted to protect (that scalps are largely unrecognizable as belong to one race or another, the arbitrariness of the wars between these different races is also portrayed here). The gang is also brutally pragmatic in preserving its ammunition. The kid attempts to help McGill, but gang members are only useful to Glanton unwounded. He murders McGill coldly, calculatingly.

Apache warriors appear on a rise overlooking the massacre. Webster shoots their leader from a long distance with his rifle; Glanton whoops and rides forward. After threatening off the remaining Apache warriors with his pistol, Glanton decapitates the Apache leader, whom he thinks is Gómez, and takes his head as a trophy. When he returns to the site of the massacre, his men are taking scalps and stringing them on leather cords; their former comrade-in-arms McGill has also been scalped. The Judge tells Glanton that the head he's taken is not Gómez's.

Glanton is especially invigorated by the murder of the man he thinks is Gómez, because Gómez's scalp is worth ten times that of any other. However, he also seems invigorated by the act of killing itself, evinced by his taking the head as a trophy. The gang is terrifyingly indifferent to death, including the death of one of their own. They go so far as to scalp one of their former fellows for profit.

The gang rides from the villages of the Gileños, which is in ashes. The Judge has taken from the village a live human infant. At night, though pursued by Apaches, the riders halt and make camp. David Brown took an arrow to the thigh during the massacre and asks for help, but none, not even Doc Irving, will help him—none save the kid. The kid succeeds in removing the arrow's point and shaft, but when he returns to his blanket Tobin hisses into his ear that he got lucky, because if he had failed to remove the arrow successfully, Brown would have surely killed him.

The Judge's taking of the infant may seem like an act of mercy but will prove otherwise. Here the kid mercifully helps Brown, as he tried to help Sproule and McGill—an act no one else in the company will undertake. Tobin tells the kid that Brown would have killed him, which, if true, speaks to the murderous despair in Brown's heart, wrath and a fear of dying alone.

The scalp hunters ride on. One night at camp, the Judge is sitting with the Apache infant he took in his lap; the men play with the boy and laugh and give him jerky. The next morning, the child is alive in the Judge's lap one minute, and the next he has killed it and taken its scalp. Toadvine curses the Judge and aims a pistol at his head; the Judge tells him to either shoot or put the gun away, now. Toadvine does the latter. The men ride out, still pursued by the Apaches.

Contrasted with the kid's acts of small mercy are the Judge's acts of huge cruelty. Monstrous though he is, even Toadvine is so outraged by the Judge that he threatens to kill him. Not all members of this hectic gang have entirely lost their sense of humanity.

On the fifth day of riding, the Apaches have caught up and are almost close enough to shoot at the scalp hunters, when in the east the gang sees the white walls of a Mexican estate. The scalp hunters ride there, leading the Apaches onward into the town of Gallego, then through other villages, skirmishing as they go. On July 21, the scalp hunters reach Chihuahua City, where they're greeted as heroes.

Ironically, though the scalp hunters are being paid to kill the warlike and despotic Apaches, they flee from them and murder easier quarry instead, like the Gileños and soon the peaceful Tiguas. They may serve the god of war, but only while minimizing personal risk.

CHAPTER 13

In Chihuahua City, the scalp hunters go to the public **baths** where they strip and submerge themselves, turning the water to bloody filth. Behind them, merchants spread out European clothing and Spanish boots, from whom the scalp hunters buy many goods. The men exit into the square where the scalps they've taken are being hung like decorations.

The scalp hunters' depravity, represented by the gore and filth that covers them, is so absolute that they pollute the very waters they're trying to clean themselves in. The Mexicans hang the scalps, not knowing that among them are the scalps of their own people.

Governor Trias invites Glanton and his officers to dine with him, but Glanton says that he does not dine separately from his men. Trias, accordingly, invites all of the scalp hunters to a great feast. Trias and the Judge sit next to one another and speak in a language no one else there understands.

Though willing to shoot and scalp McGill, Glanton is not willing to eat without his gang—a perverse code of fraternal honor. The Judge is mercurial, infinitely flexible, an educated monster, a child-murderer one moment and the Governor's favorite the next.

When the meal begins, the Mexicans toast American heroes like Washington and Franklin. Ignorant of diplomacy, the scalp hunters toast their own national heroes as well, not even knowing the names of any Mexican heroes.

Captain White claimed that the Mexicans are barbarous, but they prove here to be informed and accommodating. It is the Americans who are ignorant, mindlessly patriotic.

The scalp hunters eat so voraciously that the cook barricades the door to his kitchen. Trias attempts to make a toast, but the men at the table continue to scream out toasts of their own and demand more drinks. Glanton dumps the gold paid to the gang for their scalps out onto the table among the bones and rinds of the feast. The Judge arranges for musicians to play dance music, and while the other scalp hunters lurch and stomp, he skillfully **dances** with two ladies. Soon prostitutes are brought in, and Trias excuses himself while the scalp hunters become wilder and wilder, until they begin firing their pistols, fighting, and lighting furniture on fire.

The scalp hunters wildly exploit the Mexicans' hospitality, and their celebratory mood soon becomes debauched and violent. Trias seems to recognize that he has entered into a deal with the devil. As is characteristic of the novel, dancing—a symbol for warfare as a ritual—preludes gunfire and flame. Also characteristic is that the Judge both orchestrates and excels in the dance, symbolic of his orchestration and excellence in warfare.

Scenes like this are repeated night after night, as the scalp hunters plunge Chihuahua into debauchery. The locals come to distrust their so-called protectors—"better the Indians," people write in charcoal on the city walls. On August 15, the scalp hunters vacate the city, and a week later are reported by cattle drovers to be in the town of Coyame eighty miles away.

The people of Chihuahua come to learn that these debauched and vicious scalp hunters are actually more savage than the Apaches themselves. To protect themselves from monstrosity, the Mexicans have hired a monster yet more dangerous.

Gómez and his Apaches had demanded tribute from the people of Coyame for years, and so the scalp hunters are heartily welcomed there, as saints, even. Three days later, the gang rides out and no one even follows them to the town gates, presumably because the men so abused the hospitality of the village.

The scalp hunters begin to show their true colors as indiscriminate killers who war for war's sake alone, regardless of the alliances they've formed. The Mexican's fanfare sours to lamentation.

The gang rides on toward Texas, where Glanton is wanted by the law. Four hundred miles to the east, in the U.S., live his wife and child, whom he will never see again. The men wander the border for weeks seeking the Apache. At Hueco Tanks (an area of low mountains and boulders with water-collecting fissures), the Judge sets to copying hieroglyphics painted on the wall into his ledger before destroying one of the originals. The next morning, the gang heads south, where in three day's time they'll massacre a band of peaceful Tigua Indians.

In the west as McCarthy imagines it, identities are very unstable: Glanton can be at once a hero and, in nearby country, an outlaw. Bonds as strong as that between man and wife, or father and child, can be easily slipped and shattered irrevocably. And ancient hieroglyphics signifying the worldview of a people, like that which the Judge copies, can be destroyed and lost in an instant.

The day of the massacre comes. Toadvine tells the kid that the Tiguas aren't bothering anyone, but no one responds. Bathcat notices that Toadvine is wearing a necklace of gold teeth. The scalp hunters go on to slaughter the Tiguas. After the massacre, Tigua women who had been upriver return to their camp to find everyone dead and scalped. They mourn through the ruins. The narrator says that every trace of the massacre will be forgotten.

As with the Judge's murder of the Indian infant, here Toadvine objects to the murder of a peaceful people; but he does not have the courage of his conviction. The narrator says that the massacre of the Tiguas will be forgotten, but the novel itself bears witness to it, refusing to let evil deeds fall through the cracks of history.

After riding through the ruined town of Carrizal, bathing in a warm spring, leading their horses through difficult dunes (Los Medanos), and camping on a plain, the gang returns to Chihuahua City, where two soldiers stop Toadvine at the gate and Glanton announces, "I aint got nobody's teeth." Two days later, about a hundred Mexican soldiers escort the gang out of town.

The teeth referred to here belonged to the goldtoothed overseer of the Chihuahua prison (Ch. 6). Toadvine must have murdered him and made a necklace of his teeth. Toadvine is somewhat complex, a capricious murderer who nonetheless violently objects to killing the innocent.

The Americans next ride through the mountains, doffing their hats to the villagers they pass and whom they'll murder within the month. They arrive at a village called Nacori, where they dismount to refresh themselves in a cantina. Tobin guards the horses. A funeral procession passes, and the juggler heading it explodes a rocket, which disturbs the Mexican horses but not the American. The narrator comments that this detail should have warned the Mexicans.

The narrator tells us that the Americans doff their hats now to those they'll soon murder, presenting the future alongside the present as though the future is inevitable, fated. The rocket doesn't disturb the American horses because they're so accustomed to the sounds of warfare, evidence that their riders are seasoned killers.

In the cantina, someone mutters an insult about the Americans. The kid demands to know who issued the insult, but is interrupted when another rocket explodes outside. The Americans, led by gang members John Dorsey and Henderson Smith, soon followed by the Judge and Charlie Brown, rush to the doorway, to be followed by a drunk Mexican with a knife; he stabs a scalp hunter named Grimley. The Judge shoots the drunk in the head, and a melee breaks out. Almost forty Mexicans are killed and scalped. The scalp hunters ride out, abandoning Grimley. A scalped survivor emerges from the cantina and asks to go home.

The Mexicans, understandably outraged with the scalp hunters, insult and attack them. The Americans more than justify both insult and attack by killing and scalping forty of the people they're still being paid to protect. As soon as Grimley is wounded, the gang breaks ties with him and leaves him for dead like a stranger (compare with McGill's fate). The survivor asking to go home adds pathos to the scene.

The scalp hunters ride into another village, unnamed, and lay waste to it while the citizenry run to the church and kneel before the altar. Four days later, the gang returns to the same village, to find the dead still in the streets being eaten by scavengers.

This scene recalls various massacres in the novel that take place in churches—history repeats itself in Blood Meridian, *always calamitously.*

The Americans ride through the mountains into a mountain town where, at night, Mexican soldiers confront them. The Americans fire on them; many Mexicans die, and some retreat into the darkness. Glanton personally kills the Mexican captain, and orders five men to pursue the survivors into the mountains. Two days later the gang reunites, the surviving Mexicans having scattered into the woods and escaped.

The gang's crimes against Mexico's citizenry have at last come to light, and alliances are quickly redrawn: no longer treated as the protectors and heroes of Mexico, the scalp hunters are recognized as enemies and treated accordingly. Glanton orders men to pursue the survivors to kill all witnesses to the gang's crimes.

Glanton discusses with the Judge and David Brown whether the Americans can overtake the Mexican soldiers who escaped before they make it to Chihuahua City. They decide that they better try, and are soon riding onto the plain where the Mexicans were last seen making camp. On the third day, about twenty miles outside of Chihuahua, the Americans catch up with the Mexicans and gun them down, ensuring that all evidence of the slaughter is burned and buried.

Glanton is intent on destroying the witnesses to the gang's crimes so that his freedom and that of his men is not jeopardized. After all, Glanton is already wanted in the U.S., and is running out of county where he's free to be whomever he chooses. The impulse to destroy witnesses recalls the Judge's story about the harness maker who kills the traveler (Ch. 11).

The scalp hunters then ride back into Chihuahua, where the Mexican government pays them unknowingly for the scalps of Mexican citizens. The city's finances are now low, and the city government rescinds the bounty on Apache scalps. Within a week of the gang leaving the city, a bounty of eight thousand pesos is posted for Glanton's head.

The gang members succeed in suppressing evidence of their crimes and enter Chihuahua free men to which the state is obliged. However, the Mexican government soon learns of the gang's atrocities, and Glanton supplants Gómez as Mexico's greatest public enemy.

CHAPTER 14

The gang rides north through furious storms, rain, hail, and more rain for days on end. They ride through meadows and forests, down a mountain trail into the town of Jesús María. Glanton knocks at the door of an inn and the men are permitted to enter. By noon the next day, followed by a sad fiddler, the Americans have found a bodega run by a man named Frank Carroll and are drinking. The Judge throws a coin to the fiddler and begins to **dance** "with a strange precision."

Without a motive or warrant to commit acts of violence, the scalp hunters become wayward, devoid of purpose. As such, they take to drinking heavily. In the bar, the Judge strikes up a dance and, as at the feast Trias held, the dance is a prelude for debauchery.

By that night, the Americans are once again hideously debauched. A priest comes out bearing an icon of Christ but the Americans beat him to the ground and fling gold coins at him as he lies in the street. The priest does not touch the money until some boys come by and begin to pick it up, upon which he orders them to bring the money to him. The Americans cheer and drink a toast to the priest.

The priest, in having boys collect and bring him what is essentially blood money, demonstrates a worldliness and avaricious pragmatism that undercut his moral authority. This corrupt priest and his kind are partially responsible for the decay of Christianity witnessed by the novel.

The next day is the Feast of the Holy Souls, a Christian celebration. A religious parade complete with a carving of Christ borne on a wooden platform winds its way through town, led by the priest. The Judge sits alone in the cantina offering children candy death's heads, but they shy away from him. The scalp hunters spend another night debauched and howling in the streets, driving away very quickly a group of exhausted travelers who arrive en route to California.

The villagers' observance of Christian ritual is disconnected from the world: despite it, the world remains just as wicked as it always has been. The Judge's religion of warfare is much more effective, if disastrously so. The children seem to intuit that the Judge intends to do them harm, foreshadowing the little girl's imminent disappearance.

The next day Glanton is drunk and crazed; he lurches into a courtyard and fires his pistols. He is taken to lie down and is bound to his bed, and the Judge comforts him and cools his forehead with rags doused in water. Meanwhile, the villagers discover that a little girl is missing and they go out looking for her. Later, while Glanton sleeps, the Judge goes out into town.

Without participating in the ritual of warfare, without purpose, Glanton slips into madness. The missing girl recalls the multiracial boy the Judge quite likely killed when the gang camped with the squatters, as well as the Indian infant he did definitively kill.

A young boy approaches the Judge and offers him dogs for sale. The Judge buys two puppies for much more than they're worth, making the coin with which he pays disappear only to pull it from behind the boy's ear. The Judge then walks atop a stone bridge and throws the dogs into the river below. Bathcat is nearby urinating; he draws, and with penis in one hand and pistol in the other he shoots both dogs—the boy who sold the dogs watches the whole time.

The Judge seems to disapprove of rational economic exchange, perhaps because it threatens to overtake warfare as the primary medium in which the human will can act. Here he disrupts trade by overpaying the boy and then destroying the sources of economic value, that is, the dogs. Of course, sadism also underlies this gratuitous act of violence.

In the late afternoon, Glanton wakes and breaks free of his bindings. He cuts down a Mexican flag, ties it to the tail of a mule, and rides the beast around town. A Mexican shoots the mule, and a firefight breaks out. Glanton and a gang member named John Gunn coordinate the Americans' escape from town, and they leave behind six of their own dead in the streets. Later, Frank Carroll and another American, Sanford, catch up with the gang and tell the scalp hunters that the Mexican townspeople burned down the saloon and that the surviving scalp hunters who couldn't escape the town were baptized and shot by the Mexican townspeople.

Glanton, ever self-destructive, seems to cut down the flag and dishonor it precisely to provoke a violent response; he cannot live without shedding blood. While the Mexicans' observance of Christian ritual seems ineffectual, the evil of the scalp hunters seems to persuade the townspeople that more drastic, effective measures are required of them, hence the destruction of their own saloon. Sometimes it is not a saint but the devil who fortifies religious faith and adherence.

Riding up a mountain, the Americans meet a group of men leading mules to a nearby mine. "Bad luck," the narrator observes. Despite being cordially greeted, Glanton rides past a muleteer and almost pushes him off a cliff. The muleteer draws a rifle, but David Brown shoots him first. Another shootout. Many mules fall to their deaths. Carroll and Sanford have become detached from the gang, but join back up with them toward dusk.

Whereas the Judge or Glanton might invoke fate to account for the disastrous encounter between the gang and the muleteers, the narrator instead invokes "bad luck," preserving the possibility that human circumstance and action are not fated but accidental and/or at the command of people's own will. If people have such free will, people might also be able to choose to lead less wicked lives.

Away from the scene of carnage, the Americans dismount. The Judge asks where the black Jackson is. No one knows. The Judge and a Delaware ride out to find him, and reunite with the gang at around dawn, black Jackson in their company, naked.

As when Grannyrat deserted, the Judge is disturbed at the black Jackson's disappearance. He is intent on maintaining the unity of the gang at all costs.

The gang rides into a jungle, where after nine days they meet an old man with two donkeys. Glanton tries to question him, but the man is incommunicative. The men leave him and ride deeper into the jungle, the Judge shooting birds to study and stuff by night. He also collects exotic leaves, sketching and annotating in his ledger.

Unlike Glanton, the Judge is undisturbed by the gang's lack of purpose. He does what he's always done, studying each new environment to master its contents. The Judge, in other words, always has a purpose: to master the world, to wreak violence and war, regardless its direction.

Toadvine asks the Judge what the purpose of his studies is. The Judge explains that only nature can enslave humankind, and in order to be a "suzerain," or absolute ruler of the earth, he must know and understand every natural object. He envisions a world in which everything that exists does so only because he permits, a world in which he alone dictates his fate. The freedom of birds, he concludes, is an insult to him.

Earlier with Webster, the Judge discussed his sketches of manmade artifacts. Here he discusses his studies in naturalism. Although he claims to desire absolute dominion over the earth, later he implies that his true desire is to be a god of war participating in eternal warfare—these desires seem mutually exclusive, but each involves the use of one's will to exert mastery.

In the morning, the gang rides on. They cross the Yaqui Rive, and on December 2, 1849, they ride into Ures, the capital of the Mexican state of Sonora. They are greeted by a ragged, sordid crowd, and spend the night in a hostel run by a German. The German disappears, providing neither service nor asking for payment, so the gang pays townspeople to tend to them. They feast on goats, listen to music, and hire prostitutes. By nightfall, the Americans are **dancing** and debauched; dogs begin fighting in the courtyard of the hostel. Glanton goes out and kills them. In the morning, Glanton and the Judge have a boy fetch the gangs' horses, which, with another boy, he hastily does.

Although wanted in Chihuahua, the gang takes advantage of what seems to be a lack of communication between the Mexican states and finds refuge in Sonora. However, the uneasiness of the Sonoran people suggests that word of the Americans' brutality has indeed reached them. They seem to be merely placating the gang to avoid violence. Glanton's killing of the dogs suggests that he is still unstable.

CHAPTER 15

The governor of Sonora provides the gang with a new contract to hunt the Apaches. Carroll and Sanford have left the gang once and for all, but a man named Sloat has joined after falling ill and being left behind by a company of people seeking gold. The narrator implies that Sloat is not long for this world. The scalp hunters ride north onto the Sonoran Desert, where they massacre a village on the Nacozari River.

History is repeating itself—the gang has a new contract to kill. Carroll and Sanford, who joined the gang recently, desert, perhaps realizing that the scalp hunters are half mad and doom-driven. Given that the new recruit Sloat's fate is imminent death, their desertion seems wise.

As they ride to Ures to receive payments for their scalps, the gang encounters a party of Sonoran cavalry led by one General Elias. A firefight ensues, in which three of Glanton's men are killed and seven wounded, four so badly that they can't ride. At night, camped, the gang can see the fires of a Sonoran army, some five hundred troops led by Elias. The wounded scalp hunters call out for water.

It seems that the Sonoran government knew of the gang's crimes all along and issued the contract only as a means of coaxing them out of Ures until an army could be assembled to confront the Americans. Perhaps history is not repeating itself after all.

While the gang prepares to ride out, Glanton holds a lottery to determine which of the gang members will kill the four men unable to ride with them. The men draw arrows from a quiver, four of which have red flannel tied to them. When selecting his arrow, the kid begins to draw one, sees that the Judge is watching him, then choose a different arrow. Nonetheless, the kid draws a red-tasseled arrow, along with Sam Tate, Webster, and Harlan (first name later given as Tommy), who are therefore assigned to do the killings. Of the wounded, two are Delawares, one a Mexican, and one a man named Dick Shelby. An unwounded Delaware takes Webster and Harlan's arrows, to which Glanton says nothing; he and the gang ride out onto the plain. The Delaware with Webster and Harlan's arrows clubs the two wounded Delawares to death where they lie.

The kid attempts to avoid one of the fatal arrows, but as if by fate, and seemingly per the Judge's will, he draws one. The gang members' killing of their wounded comrades-in-arms is both pragmatic—the gang needs to flee Elias and can't afford to be slowed down by the wounded—and also an act of mercy, in its perverse way: those Americans captured by Elias can expect torturous agonizing deaths. The Delaware seems to think it more proper or dignified that the wounded Delawares die by his hand, suggestive of a race-based partisanship within the gang.

The kid and Tate discuss who will kill whom; the kid tells Tate that he can ride out without doing either of the killings if he wants. Tate warns the kid that, if the Sonoran army captures either of the wounded scalp hunters alive, unthinkable cruelties will befall them. Then he stands, says that killing means nothing to the Indians (referring to the Delaware who's just killed his fallen comrades), and rides out.

It is with moral self-sacrifice that the kid excuses Tate from doing his killing. Tate knows that it's better for the wounded to die than to be captured, yet he inconsistently indicts the Delaware for killing his own. He is conflicted, it would seem, about the idea of comrades killing comrades.

The kid decides not to kill the wounded Mexican, who will die soon anyway. Shelby, however, is still fully conscious. The kid tells Shelby that he'll just leave him if that's what Shelby wants. After reminding him that Glanton will kill him for this act of mercy, Shelby asks the kid to hide him under a nearby bush. The kid obliges, only for the other man to attempt to take the kid's gun. The attempt fails. The kid begins to take his leave, until Shelby cries out for water. The kid goes back to Shelby and gives him water, then rides out.

The kid attempts to minimize his agency in death by letting the Mexican die of already existing wounds. He does everything he can to accommodate Shelby, even after Shelby proves himself dangerous. Both here and when he helped Brown, the kid exposes himself to personal risk in order to treat another with kindness and respect. The Judge, however, later accuses the kid of abandoning Shelby to Elias's cruelties, which is also accurate.

The kid, as he rides to catch up with the gang, comes upon Tate, whose horse has been lamed. The kid dismounts, and together the men walk through the desert leading their horses behind them. Snow begins to fall, and by the time the men begin to scale a ridge, it is a foot deep. In the night, while Tate and the kid sleep, five of Elias's scouts come upon them; the kid shoots one and runs, being shot at all the while.

Again, the kid distinguishes himself by prioritizing his comrades-in-arms over personal safety, choosing to accompany Tate rather than speed away from Elias. Yet, however selfless the kid may seem, he is not so selfless as to make a stand with Tate, whom he pragmatically abandons.

Morning finds the kid crouched under a promontory. He walks all day, bitterly cold, and continues walking through the night to stay warm. At dawn he sleeps, only to resume his trek north soon after. That night, from a high rim, he sees armies mutely, senselessly clash and disperse. Then he moves on, starting down the mountain.

The clashing armies emphasize the purposelessness, the absurdity of violence. After all, what has Glanton's gang gained for all the blood they've shed? The scalp hunters squander all they earn, morally destroy themselves, and poison their alliances.

After some time, the kid sees smoke; he heads toward it, to find a tree burning in the desert, ignited by lightning, around which crouch many desert creatures. The kid sleeps in its warmth. In the morning, he keeps moving. He comes upon horse tracks, which he follows for miles. Soon he comes across a great black mass: it is the burnt remains of the scalps taken from the people on the Nacozari.

In the Bible, God speaks through a burning bush to Moses. The burning tree here is silent, suggestive of God's absence. The Americans abandoned the scalps in part because they are in Apache country and can't afford to provoke the Apaches to retribution.

The kid finds a horse, which, after some difficulty, he mounts and rides. The two are soon joined by another horse, which walks alongside them. By the next day, the kid's horse is dehydrated and failing, but he nonetheless manages to rejoin the gang. The scalp hunters are wounded, filthy, and exhausted; four more of their number are dead after being ridden upon and attacked by Elias's army, including Sloat. The gang knows neither how far the Mexicans are behind them, nor how far the Apaches are ahead.

The scalp hunters' vicious crimes are catching up with them, surrounded as they are by enemies bent on retribution. As the narrator foretold, Sloat has died, which seems to be the fate of all involved in the gang's evils.

The gang rides all day. At night, the Judge selects the weakest horse to kill for meat. Standing beyond the firelight, he asks for help in killing it; none rise to help him. Tobin tells the kid to ignore the Judge and places "a cautionary hand upon the kid's arm," but the kid assures Tobin that he isn't afraid of the Judge and volunteers. The two lead the horse out of the light, where the Judge crushes its skull deftly with a giant rock. Its meat is prepared to eat. The scouts sent out that night do not return.

In their dire straits, the gang members seem especially afraid of the Judge, and especially when he is in the darkness where he can't be witnessed. Do they fear that he will murder them in the darkness now that the game is falling apart, or worse? The Judge's method of killing the horse is gratuitously brutal, extravagantly imposing.

The next day, the gang rides and the men find in the desert a ring of eight human heads. The Judge kicks one as if to make sure that it's not attached to a body buried beneath it. Then the gang moves on, riding past ruined wagons and more corpses. Before dark they arrive at the town of Santa Cruz. The locals greet them with weapons and contempt, but one family offers them a place to stay and food for the night. The men sleep in a stable, where they light a fire.

The eight human heads are reminders that human violence is ubiquitous in the world of the novel, not restricted to the actions of the scalp hunters and their pursuers. The gang members must be ragged and pitiful indeed for a family to take mercy on them, especially given what the family must know of the gang's crimes.

CHAPTER 16

In the morning, the scalp hunters leave Santa Cruz. They ride the next day past the ruins of an estate at San Bernardino full of wild bulls, one of which gores the horse ridden by one James Miller. Miller shoots both bull and wounded horse, disgusted by the whole affair. The gang rides on.

The bulls seem to be descended from domesticated bulls that over generations became feral and wild. Human dominion over nature is fragile; what we once mastered can soon come to master us.

The following day, the men ride past a church at San José de Tumacacori, the architecture of which the Judge lectures on expertly. In the church live two hermits, one of which gang member John Prewett shoots while the other hermit, the first's brother, escapes. This second hermit is soon found; he is imbecilic and not altogether sane. The gang leaves him. Glanton says they ought to have shot that hermit too, because he does not "like to see white men that way."

The Judge's lecture shows that one can have a deep knowledge of sacred objects without internalizing their sacredness. The hermits foreshadow the idiot whom the gang travels with later. Although Glanton thinks insanity troublingly diminishes a white man's dignity, he ironically overlooks his own insane behavior.


The gang heads out, riding through woods, past the village of Tubac, onto the desert. Eventually, they come upon their lost scouts—a man named Gilchrist, the last two Delawares and Bathcat—hanging from a tree, hideously mutilated. Some men cut them down, and the gang rides on, past San Xavier del Bac (a Catholic mission located ten miles out of Tucson)— where behind them a pale green meteor passes overhead—then past Tucson.

When he introduced Bathcat, the narrator foretold Bathcat's death, and indeed that fate has come to pass here. In their small way, the gang honors these men's deaths by cutting them down. The green meteor recalls the portentous meteors that fell during the kid's birth, and also foreshadows the meteorite on which the Judge tests his strength in Tucson.


Soon the gang rides within sight of a party of about one hundred Apaches. A group of twenty or so of the Apaches rides out to meet the gang. Their leader asks Glanton where the Americans are headed, but immediately thereafter Glanton's horse bites the ear of the Apache leader's horse. Weapons are drawn, but the Judge assures the Apache that his party is peaceful.

Glanton's horse is so accustomed to violence that it bites the Apache's horse unprovoked. It was cunning of the gang to discard their scalps, for otherwise the Judge would not have been able to deceive the Apaches into thinking his party is peaceful.

Soon, more Apaches ride out to meet the gang, including a tribal chief with even more authority, Mangas Colorado. The Judge speaks with him as well, and soon Mangas is convinced that the Americans are friendly. To make up for the injury to the Apache horse's ear, Mangas demands whiskey, which can be procured in Tucson. Glanton asks Mangas how much gold he has; "bastante [enough]," Mangas replies. So Glanton promises to return within three days with a barrel of whiskey.

The Judge again demonstrates what an artfully manipulative diplomat he can be on the murderous gang's behalf. This scene also underscores how fluidly opportunistic the gang is in its alliances: only days ago they were brutally hunting Apaches, and now they are procuring whiskey on the Apaches' behalf. The gang is truly dedicated to nothing but survival and warfare itself.


The garrison in Tucson, Arizona, is commanded by the American Lieutenant Couts. He returned from an expedition four days ago to discover Tucson full of Apaches, who have been disruptive and demanding whiskey. Very formally, Couts greets Glanton, who asks where the Americans can get a drink. All the bars are closed, but the Americans enter one anyway, and the proprietor serves them in his underwear.

The hermit at the beginning of the novel claimed that whiskey is one of the four things that can destroy the world, which seems borne out by how it dominates the Apaches' actions. Couts is ironically respectful of the half-mad, barbarous Glanton, presumably because he is the leader of a company and white.


Glanton and the Judge go out into the town square to recruit some new gang members. They meet a man named Cloyce Bell, who might be willing to pay for the gang to give him an escort to California. Bell would also be bringing with him a wild imbecile whom he owns and exhibits for money. The imbecile is kept in a filthy cage and is chewing feces when Glanton and the Judge first see him. Glanton asks if Cloyce lets women see the imbecile—hereafter referred to as the idiot—and Cloyce replies that none have ever asked.

The idiot is a character easily dominated, whose own brother treats him inhumanely, degradingly, and makes a profit in the process. Everyone in the novel is always using someone. Glanton is troubled to look upon the idiot perhaps because he sees in the idiot a man who has no control of his fate, something Glanton fears very much.

By noon, the Americans, all slightly drunk, have gone to a place to eat. The proprietor, Owens, comes over to their table and says that he doesn't mind serving "people of color," but that they have to eat at a different table; he thinks that the gang members are not white. Glanton defies him, but Owens insists, saying that he knows for a fact that black Jackson is in fact black. David Brown gives Owens a gun and tells him to shoot Jackson; Jackson rises and blows Owens's brains out. Davy Brown calls Jackson the "most terrible nigger I ever seen" and tells his brother, Charlie Brown, to get some plates.

Even though the white Americans are morally inferior to almost everyone else in the novel, they are ironically and absurdly offended to be identified as people of color, to resemble the people they've been hunting. In arming Owens, Brown seems to be intentionally provoking Jackson to violence.

After eating, the gang goes to a cantina where Lieutenant Couts and some of his soldiers confront them. Couts tells Glanton that he needs to arrest Owens's murderer. Glanton denies that any of his men shot Owens, and the Judge goes further and claims that the gang never even ate in Owens's establishment. Couts curses and leaves with his soldiers.

Without a witness, Couts's self-evidently just accusation against Glanton's gang lacks legal efficacy. By avoiding surveillance, the gang also avoids being held accountable for its actions.

Glanton succeeds in recruiting two men into the gang. In the cantina sits Cloyce, whom Glanton offers a drink. Cloyce explains to him and the Judge that the idiot he owns was left in his care once their mother died. Upon learning that the idiot is Cloyce's own brother, the Judge proceeds to examine the contours of the man's head. After the examination, Cloyce exits the cantina.

For the Judge, who desires a full knowledge of nature, biological mutations must be somewhat disturbing, occurring as they do by chance, beyond human control. He studies Cloyce's head in accordance with the pseudoscience of phrenology, which holds that skull shape is indicative of character, thought, and emotion. Erudite as he is, the Judge's scientific understanding does not transcend his time.

Lieutenant Couts confronts the gang once more. He sits with the Judge, who learnedly explains points of law to him. The Judge translates Latin terms of jurisprudence, cites cases to support his explanation, and quotes legal authorities like Blackstone and Thales.

Though Couts's cause is just, the Judge dominates him with his legal knowledge; Couts seems to yield to the Judge's expertise, for none of Glanton's gang is arrested for Owens's murder.

In the morning, it's discovered that a young Mexican girl has been abducted. Her clothes are found torn and bloody, and drag marks are found in the desert along with a shoe. Her father has fallen to his knees and cannot be persuaded to rise.

Quite likely another of the Judge's young victims. However, not even the narrator witnesses the attacks on children it records; like the black Jackson, the Judge gets away with his unwitnessed crimes.

That night, the gang takes to the streets in drunken debauchery and they steal a barrel of whiskey. A merchant in Tucson brings out a litter of dogs, one of which has six legs and another of which has two. Yet another of the dogs has four eyes in its head. The merchant tries to sell the dogs to Glanton, but Glanton warns the man away and threatens to shoot the mutant dogs. More debauchery ensues.

Though Couts welcomed the gang members into Tucson, they are proving themselves even more disruptive than the Apaches. Like the idiot, the mutant dogs deeply disturb Glanton. They confront him with nature's indifferent determination of an organism's fate and the indignities an organism can suffer.

By noon the next day, the gang again wanders the streets. They go to the farrier (someone who provides hoof care for horses), named Pacheco, to collect the horses they entrusted to his care. Pacheco has for his anvil an enormous meteorite, which the Judge lifts on a wager. On a further wager he lifts it over his head. While the men feel the meteorite, the Judge lectures on the heavenly bodies. A final wager is proposed, in which the Judge must throw the meteorite ten feet. Although no one is willing to bet that he can, the Judge clears the distance easily by a whole foot.

Like the idiot and the mutant dogs, whose mutations have fated them to be dominated and shunned by others, the Judge also seems a mutant, yet one contrastively rendered superhuman in strength and charisma.

CHAPTER 17

At dusk, the gang rides out of Tucson. With them are five new recruits, Cloyce and the idiot, and also the barrel of whiskey stolen the night before, which Glanton promised to Mangas Colorado. The barrel has been drained, refashioned, and now holds only three quarts or so of liquor. Mangas and some Apaches ride out to meet the gang, and the whiskey is exchanged for gold and silver. Mangas seems dissatisfied with the trade, but Davy Brown assures a new recruit that the Apaches won't follow in the night.

The gang never loses an opportunity to exploit people, here Mangas Colorado and his men. Although Brown's confidence that the Apaches won't follow the gang goes unexplained, it may be because he assumes that the Apaches— who have historically been regarded as having difficulty with the use of alcohol—will get so drunk on the whiskey that they won't be able to follow.

The gang rides west, past little towns and through a saguaro forest. They camp; Glanton stares thoughtfully into the fire. The narrator describes him as a man full of resources, equal to all challenges, even death. He does not weigh consequences, and even though he accepts that we cannot escape fate, he nonetheless claims agency and would drive the sun to its final darkness as if he ordered it at the beginning of time. Meanwhile, the Judge sits scribbling in his ledger, watching the idiot tirelessly.

The central characterization of Glanton in the novel. He is something of a great man whose viciousness is consequently all the more tragic. He is obsessed with fate, and seems to have intimations that he will die violently; his desire to control this fate results in self-destructive tendencies, hence the metaphor centering on the sun. Meanwhile, the Judge who wants to master everything with his mind is entranced by the mindless "idiot."

Two days later, the gang encounters a legion of one hundred Sonoran troops led by Colonel Garcia. They are seeking a band of Apaches led by a man named Pablo. Glanton exchanges rudimentary civilities with Garcia but rides on, the gang in tow. The narrator says that it's as though the place to the south from which Glanton has come and the place east to which he's riding don't have existence for him.

Even though the gang was almost wiped out by the Sonorans serving under Elias, Glanton acts as though that never happened. As obsessed with fate as he is, Glanton also lives relentlessly in the present, without any sense of guilt or regret.

The next night, the gang is sitting around the fire, the Judge off on some mission. Someone asks Tobin if there used to be two moons in the sky, and he says it's possible. He supposes that God, disturbed by the lunacy on the earth, could have extinguished the second moon, and left the first only because He could think of no other way to make it possible for birds to fly at night.

Tobin's response to the question about two moons is based on a historically widespread astrological belief that the moon makes people insane. Tobin's God, it would seem, thinks it more important that birds be free to fly at night than for people to be rid altogether of their insanity.

Someone else asks if there are humans or like creatures on other planets. The Judge has returned to the fire and answers in the negative. He says that the universe is infinitely various, and that the order we see in the universe is imposed by our own minds, not inherent in the thing itself. Davy Brown spits into the fire and dismisses this as crazy talk.

Even though the Judge claims to desire a full knowledge of nature, here he suggests that that knowledge would be impossible to acquire given nature's infinite variety. At the same time, the Judge's belief in chaos as the natural state of the universe aligns with his own supreme attachment to the chaos that is war.

The Judge smiles and kneels beside Davy Brown with a coin in his hand. "Where is the coin," he asks. The Judge throws the coin and it circles the campfire, being perhaps attached to horsehair, before returning to the Judge's hand. He likens this to the orbiting of the moon and the fated lives of men. He then throws the coin again and it vanishes into the night, before returning after some time to his hand. Some of the men think that it's merely a trick, and the Judge himself says that all coins are false coins.

The coin trick relates to the Judge's remark that we impose order on the universe with our own minds. The coin spins around the fire and it seems like it must be connected to horsehair. But perhaps the mind just assumes the coin must be tethered, for the Judge then throws the coin far into the night only for it almost magically to return, an act which the mind struggles to understand as an ordered event. This trick seems to prove that the universe is far more chaotic and mysterious than Brown, say, would like to believe.

The next day the gang is again on the move. Glanton's dog (the one he tamed with jerky in Ch. 11) falls to the back of the column, and it doesn't come when Glanton calls. Glanton drops back, finds the dog, hits it viciously and drives it before him.

Though Glanton likes to believe he's tamed his dog, the dog resists him, doesn't return to him like a coin tethered to horsehair. This lack of order upsets Glanton, who violently asserts his will.

Soon after, the gang rides past dead mules and ruined wagons, dead cattle and horses. They ride over a dry lake, and on past a crucified Apache. In this landscape, the narrator observes, men and rocks share a strange kinship.

The narrator's comment that men and rocks share kinship suggests that human beings cannot assert their wills over inanimate matter, for perhaps they are but inanimate matter themselves, with will and consciousness mere illusions.

While the gang camps one night, the Judge discourses on warfare. He says that what people think about war doesn't matter, because war was always and will always be here. He calls war the ultimate trade, and says that it contains all other trades. War endures, he says, "because young men love it and old men love it in them." He also says that men are born for nothing but games, and that war is the ultimate game because it involves the highest stakes. He concludes that, insofar as war is a battle of human wills within the will of the universe (that is, fate), war forces existence into a unity: "War is God."

The Judge's climactic lecture. Here he implies that his highest aim is not to be a "suzerain" as he claimed earlier, but rather to play the game of war without end. This would in turn suggest that he only uses notions of omniscience and absolute dominion as pretenses to engage in warfare. When a conflict of wills arises, the Judge says, war resolves it, and this resolution reveals fate, the will of God.

Davy Brown studies Judge Holden and dismisses him as crazy. Another gang member, Doc Irving, says that might doesn't make right. The Judge responds that the weak invented morality to disenfranchise the strong, and observes that history subverts morality at every turn. He also observes that we can never test the quality of our moral judgments.

Though some of the gang members challenge the Judge, it seems mere hypocrisy, because, as much as the Judge himself, they lead the fatal, chaotic life of war. The Judge goes on to discredit morality as a standard of judgment for human conduct.

The Judge asks Tobin what he thinks. "The priest does not say," Tobin replies. The Judge counters that the priest has already said by quitting the priesthood and becoming a warrior. Tobin says that he was never actually a priest, only a novitiate. The Judge observes that "men of god and men of war have strange affinities." Tobin tells the Judge that he won't contradict him and that the Judge should not ask that he do so; but the Judge responds that everything he could ask for the ex-priest has already given.

The Judge attempts to bolster his argument that war is the ultimate trade and also expose the hypocrisy of his fellows by pointing out that no less than a former priest, who once observed a religion centered on mercy, has turned to warfare. Tobin, for his part, tries to protect the integrity of Christianity by disqualifying himself as a representative spiritual authority.


On the next day, the gang crosses a lakebed of lava and some granite hills. The next they find water, and the Judge finds a mysterious bone. Consequently, he gives a lecture on paleontology to some new recruits, answering their questions thoroughly. Nearby, the idiot is tethered near a campfire, where he sits with hands outheld as if yearning for the flames. The Judge drops the bone and tells those listening to him that, though they want to be told some mystery, "the mystery is that there is no mystery." When the Judge raises and moves away, Tobin says that the Judge is himself a mystery.

The Judge, that great lecturer, here devalues his immense erudition; for if there is no mystery, as he says, what can all of his penetration into the mystery of nature amount to? He seems bored with his knowledge, perhaps moved by his own speech on warfare from the night before, which would hold that knowledge not useful in warfare is not worth having at all.

After three more days of riding, the gang reaches the Colorado River. There they find a wagon train ravaged by cholera. Scouring through the wreckage are Yuma Indians, some ferrying livestock across the river. Glanton speaks to an old man, who tells him that his party aims to cross the river via a ferryboat, which charges a dollar per person. The ferry arrives, piloted by a doctor named Lincoln, whom Glanton introduces to the gang.

The ferry crossing presents the first opportunity for the gang to assert their dominion and generate a profit since being pursued by General Elias through the desert.

Later, Glanton, the Judge, and five men ride downriver to where the Yuma Indians are encamped. They are met by the group's one-eyed leader, Caballo en Pelo, a lesser chief called Pascual, and another Indian named Pablo (presumably the leader of the band Colonel Garcia and his Sonoran soldiers were hunting). Davy Brown spits and Glanton calls the bunch "crazylookin," but the Judge thinks that the Indians are more useful than they appear.

Having just arrived at the ferry crossing, Glanton quickly tests the waters, as it were, investigating what the local power dynamics are so that he and the gang can better exploit them to advantage. The Judge has especial insight into how the Yumas could be useful for the gang's purposes.


CHAPTER 18

In the early morning, Glanton, the Judge, and their five men ride out of the Yuma camp. They've conspired with the Indians to seize the ferry.

Partisanship between the gang and the Yumas is fluidly and opportunistically established.

Meanwhile, that morning, a group of women at the ferry crossing have discovered the idiot in his cage. One "huge woman" named Sarah Borginnis seeks out Cloyce and shames him for keeping his brother—his given name revealed for the first time here as James Robert Bell—in a filthy cage. Cloyce gives the idiot to the care of the women.

Throughout the novel, the female characters tend to be more humane than their male counterparts, not at all preoccupied with power or entertained by cruelty. Sarah's liberation of the idiot exemplifies this. She sees the idiot not as a thing to be exploited but as a person, with a name.

While singing hymns, the women **bathe** the idiot and dress him in clean clothes. Sarah orders, while she wades in the water with James Robert, that his cage be burnt. As it goes up in flames, the idiot stares at it: everyone agrees that he understands the significance of this. Later, at night, Sarah tucks James Robert into bed.

Whereas the Judge claims that he'd have all birds put into zoos, Sarah offers a different vision of life, where cages are burnt and all human beings are treated with kindness and respect. Ironically, she acts more like a family member to James than James's own brother does. The bathing of the idiot is reminiscent of a baptism, and it is no coincidence that it is in these interactions that James Robert Bell regains his name.

In the night, the idiot wakes, and naked he wanders to the river. He enters the water, but soon loses his footing and sinks from sight. At just this moment, the Judge is walking by, "such encounters being commoner than men suppose." The Judge steps into the water and seizes the idiot—it is like "a birth scene or **baptism**" or some other strange ritual—and carries him safely back to the camp.

The Judge sadistically drowned puppies earlier, but rescues the idiot from drowning here. One explanation for this seeming inconsistency of character is that letting the idiot drown provides no sadistic pleasure to the Judge, though perhaps also the Judge has an idea for how he might use or master the idiot. The idiot seems to long for the water that Sarah so kindly bathed him in. It may be that the idiot wants *to die, and so the Judge's act is no kindness at all. After all a traditional baptism is one in which a person is dunked in the water, and here the Judge does the opposite, removing the idiot—who in his lack of thought has a kind of natural innocence—from the water.*


CHAPTER 19

Glanton, the Judge, and two other gang members sit drinking tea with Doctor Lincoln, who runs the ferry on the Colorado River. Glanton warns the doctor that the Yuma Indians cannot be trusted. The Judge persuades the doctor to take precautions against an attack: to this end, Lincoln grants the gang permission to fortify the hill near the ferry, as well as to prepare the howitzer cannon he owns to be fired.

Glanton manipulates Lincoln into giving the gang power over the ferry. In turn, Glanton plans on consolidating this power by defending the ferry from an Indian attack that he, Glanton himself, coordinated. This betrayal is the first in a chapter full of betrayals, violations of partisanship.


Two days later, the Yuma Indians attack the ferry crossing. Davy Brown and Webster stand on the hill with the howitzer and fire at them, killing some dozen Indians. Then Glanton and his men ride upon them and attack; the Indians are outraged by the betrayal. Many in the Yuma company are killed, forcing them to retreat. After the battle, the gang members scalp the dead.

The gang puts Glanton's plan to take control of the ferry into motion. It takes both Brown and Webster to operate the howitzer here, but later the Judge carries it under one arm, illustrating his almost supernatural strength. Scalping the dead is almost gratuitous—who will the gang sell the scalps to?

Glanton takes charge of the ferry, charging people not one dollar to cross as Lincoln did, but four dollars. Not long after, the gang members just begin to outright rob their passengers. Doctor Lincoln remonstrates, but the gang pays him off. Eventually, as the outrages multiply, the Doctor just locks himself in his quarters.

Glanton is back on his fated course, purposeful again now that he can exert his terrible will over the vulnerable and turn a profit. Like Trias before him, Lincoln retires from the scalp hunters' company, realizing that he too has made a deal with the devil.

Not wanting to barter with Glanton, a company of U.S. soldiers led by General Patterson builds their own ferry downriver. Once the soldiers move on, the Yumas begin to operate this ferry, represented by a man named Callaghan. Within days, this rival ferry is burned, probably by Glanton's gang, and Callaghan is murdered, to float down the river to the sea.

It is intolerable to Glanton and his fellows that their will should be opposed in any way, and also that travelers should have a choice as to which ferry they cross the river on. It would seem that the gang imposes its will, as usual, through brutality.

On Easter of that year, Toadvine and the kid and another gang member, Billy Carr, are going upstream to cut willow poles when they come across an encampment of Sonorans. In their midst is a scaffold from which hangs an effigy of Judas, which the Sonorans set on fire. The Sonorans offer the kid a drink, but he declines and hurries on.

Judas infamously betrayed Jesus Christ. His presence is fitting in a chapter full of betrayals, like the gang's betrayal of both the Yumas and Lincoln. As Judas is here set on fire, so too will many of the gang members' corpses be burnt by this chapter's end.

Time passes. By now, Glanton has enslaved many Sonorans to work at the fortifications by the ferry; the gang is also detaining many Indian and Mexican girls. They have amassed a great deal of wealth, but Glanton doesn't seem to care. He just amasses his gold and silver and jewels and money and other goods in a "wood and leather trunk in his quarters."

The gang is now more prosperous and powerful than ever. Glanton doesn't care about wealth, though; along with his men, he seems to care only about being able to dominate and exploit others, about self-destructively embracing his fate.

On April 2, David Brown, Webster, and Toadvine set out for San Diego to obtain supplies. They arrive without incident five days later. After a night of heavy drinking, Brown wakes up alone, with the party's money tied about his neck. His companions have been jailed. After attempting unsuccessfully to secure their release by speaking with the local alcalde (mayor or magistrate), Brown goes to a local farrier, who also works on guns, and asks the craftsman to saw off the barrels of his beautiful shotgun. The farrier refuses, citing the excellence of the gun's craftsmanship. Brown threatens the farrier, and the farrier flees.

Dominant though the gang is, its stronghold is not self-sustaining: supplies must be brought in. This forces the gang to send members out of its immediate sphere of influence, which ultimately makes it possible for Brown to betray the gang by defecting, taking their money with him. Most people appreciate the beauty of objects like Brown's gun; but Brown has no mind for beauty, only utility.

The farrier returns with the sergeant of the guard to find Brown hacking at his shotgun himself. The sergeant asks if Brown threatened the farrier, and Brown says that he did not threaten to harm the farrier; he made a promise to do so. When Brown finishes his work, he exits the shop, the farrier nowhere in sight. Brown tells the sergeant that the farrier must have withdrawn his charges.

Lieutenant Couts couldn't bring charges against Owens's murderer for lack of a witness. However, even when Brown admits to promising to harm the farrier, the law does not touch him. He has effectively silenced his accuser, and the sergeant is quite likely too scared to attempt an arrest.

In the plaza, Brown encounters Toadvine and Webster, newly released. The three begin drinking, first on a beach (none of them have ever seen the ocean before), then at a bar where a fight breaks out and Brown sets a young soldier on fire with his cigar. Brown is imprisoned. The next day, Brown attempts with the many coins in his possession to bribe a soldier named Petit to free him. After two days pass, Petit decides to accept the bribe. As the two ride out of San Diego, Brown shoots him in the back of the head, takes the boy's ears for his necklace, then rides on.

Brown reveals himself to be an especially cruel and extravagant killer. The soldier aflame recalls the burning effigy of Judas from earlier in this chapter, and anticipates the fire in which the Yumas burn the corpses of their betrayers. Petit is persuaded to set Brown free by the prospect of money, much as the kid was persuaded to join Captain White's army. But Brown betrays Petit: he is no longer beholden to anyone, not even Glanton.

Days later, after Toadvine and Webster return to the ferry and tell Glanton what befell them, Glanton leaves the Judge in charge of the ferry and rides with the five men to San Diego, straight to the alcalde's house. There, Glanton and his men torture the alcalde and his wife, seeking the money dispatched with Davy Brown as well as Brown himself. Nothing comes of the interrogation. The gang members tie up the magistrate, his wife, along with a local grocer, and abandon them in a seaside hut, then take to the streets for two days "crazed with liquor."

The gang is divided and also, with Brown missing, falling apart. Although Glanton rides with great purpose in San Diego, he loses all momentum after his futile interrogation of the alcalde. Instead of continuing to search for the money and Brown, Glanton and his men instead collapse into self-destructive drunkenness. It is in part this deadening of the gang's will which makes the Yumas' raid on the ferry to come so deadly.

Glanton returns to the ferry, despite warnings from refugees he meets on the way, to find a half-naked Mexican girl collared and chained to a post and a filthy Doctor Lincoln pleading with him and jabbering. "That man," he says pointing to the fortifications on the hill, presumably referring to the Judge. Glanton rides up the hill to find the Judge "like some great balden archimandrite" and black Jackson wearing nothing but free-flowing cloth. Glanton rides on to his own quarters.

Horrors abound when the Judge is in charge, typified by the exploited Mexican girl. The Judge, dressed like a high priest of war, seems even too powerful for Glanton to control now. The family of magicians foretold that Jackson could begin his life anew; but he has chosen the Judge's path, which for all but the Judge leads to death.

Days and nights of drunken debauchery and violence follow. Someone gives the idiot whiskey one night and he dances "with great gravity." A few mornings later, black Jackson is standing on the ferry and leans down to picks up a coin he finds stuck in the floor, only to take an arrow through the abdomen moments later. He turns and is shot again in chest and groin. A Yuma jumps aboard the boat and clubs black Jackson to death.

The Judge later compares dance to the ritual of warfare, and it would seem that even the idiot has a yearning to participate in just such a ritual; perhaps this explains why the war-loving Judge decides to keep him as a pet, though it may also be that the Judge wishes to master the "innocence" of the idiot. Petit died figuratively reaching for money; such is literally the case with the black Jackson.

The Yuma Indians invade the fortifications on the hill overlooking the ferry. They kill Doctor Lincoln along with many gang members, including the drunken Gunn, Wilson, and Henderson Smith. The Yuma leader Caballo en Pelo, whom Glanton earlier betrayed, discovers Glanton lying in a big brass bed. Glanton wakes and glares wildly as Caballo en Pelo gets into bed with him and is handed an axe. "Hack away," Glanton says, and the Yuma splits his head down to the throat.

The gang members are especially vulnerable to attack because they are so drunk. Bloodshed has led to sexual excitement earlier in the novel, as when the Comanches sodomized Captain White's defeated filibusters—that Caballo en Pelo kills Glanton while the two are in bed together likewise sexualizes violence. Glanton characteristically embraces his fate here.

The Yumas enter the Judge's quarters, where they find the idiot, a young girl cowering naked on the floor, and the Judge himself, also naked, with Lincoln's howitzer tucked under one arm. Over its touchhole the Judge holds a lighted cigar. The Indians scramble to get away from him, and both Judge and idiot eventually escape into a nearby wood.

Unlike the other gang members, the Judge is conspicuously, even extravagantly prepared for the Yumas' raid—did he not only anticipate but hope for this massacre, the chance to pledge himself anew to warfare for its own sake?

That night, the Yuma Indians hold a bonfire where Glanton and Lincoln's corpses, along with eight others, are burned. The Indians also burn Lincoln's dog alive, which escapes smoking and blind from the fire only to be flung back in with a shovel. The Indians divide the spoils of their raid, and the narrator observes that they, also, are subject to destiny: in the burning skulls of their enemies one can see "the prefiguration of their own ends."

McCarthy portrays violent Native American tribes as neither villains nor victims; they are effective killers, often cruel, but then again they are surrounded by effectively murderous and cruel people. As the gang brought on its own destruction, so will the Yuma warriors, who can see their fate in the burning skulls of their enemies. Violence begets always more violence. The survivors of one war are always the victims of another.

CHAPTER 20

Pursued by the Yumas, Toadvine and the kid escape into the desert. The kid has taken an arrow to his leg, but keeps moving. The two spend a cold night sleeping amid the dunes, and keep moving at dawn. The kid finds a wagon tongue, which he uses as a crutch. He tells Toadvine several times to go on ahead, but Toadvine insists on staying with the kid.

The kid's involvement with the gang has left him worse off than when he first joined them. This scene recalls the trek that the kid and Sproule made through the desert, but now it is the kid who is cripplingly wounded. Toadvine remains surprisingly loyal to the kid.

By the afternoon, the Indians have caught up with the two Americans and begin throwing spears at them and raining down arrows. The kid and Toadvine make a stand, killing one Indian before resuming their trek, pursued by the Indians all day.

The gang pursues versions and inversions of a single journey: the hunt. Many times have they triumphantly pursued the defeated; many times have they been wretchedly pursued, as here. Such is the hunter's fate.

At the wells of Alamo Mucho (a lake basin in Baja California), the kid and Toadvine meet up with Tobin. They drop down into one of the wells together to drink while the Indians fan out and fire arrows at them. The kid returns fire, and with Tobin's encouragement he kills so many Indians that the Indians decide to cease their pursuit. The Indians make camp nearby for the night, but by morning have gone.

It is not for nothing that the kid rode with Glanton's gang: he proves himself an expert murderer here, a son of war whose efficacy would not disappoint the Judge himself.

As the three Americans look out, they spy two figures moving through the desert: it is the idiot and the Judge, who is draped with meat. The two rendezvous with their fellows at the well, where the Judge offers Toadvine $100 for his hat. Toadvine accepts the trade for $125 and slides down the slope to where the Judge stands in order to hand over his hat, which the Judge refashions so that it fits his enormous head.

As he overpaid for the puppies he drowned, the Judge here pays an absurd sum for Toadvine's hat. Money is less valuable to him than it is to others; indeed, he exploits others' overvaluation of money to acquire the equipment of survival and domination.

The Judge invites the kid and Tobin to join him down the slope for meat and water, but the two are nervous. The Judge asks if they are armed, and Tobin replies, "We've just the one pistol." "We?" the Judge responds. The Judge suggests that forming rival bands is absurd, given that divided the men will die "impartially." At last, the kid descends with his canteen, which he fills. The kid asks Toadvine if he'll join him and Tobin on a journey to California, but Toadvine, looking at the Judge, says that he's wanted in California and has run out of country. The kid tells him that it isn't country he's run out of and climbs back up the bank.

The Judge is quick to seek a weapon with which to impose his will. Tobin's reply to his question indicates that he and the kid have allied themselves against the Judge, perhaps wary of his belligerence. But the Judge reminds Tobin that partisanship means nothing if the men's fate is to perish in the desert anyway. Toadvine sides with the Judge, it would seem; he may not have run out of country, but he has run out of the freedom of spirit required to live any other life but the life of war.

The Judge offers the kid $500 for his pistol, gunpowder, and ammunition. Tobin urges the kid to shoot the Judge then and there, for he'll have no other chance to kill him, and if he doesn't his "life is forfeit." The kid neither sells his gun nor shoots the Judge, and, leaving Toadvine, he and Tobin set out west.

Why Tobin thinks the kid's life is forfeit if he fails to kill the Judge is unclear—perhaps because the kid has challenged the Judge's will, which to the Judge's mind is a capital crime. The kid spares the Judge, thinking him (perhaps in error) a man like any other.

Tobin and the kid soon come across David Brown in the desert. Brown asks about what's happened to them, and Tobin explains that the Yumas took the ferry and killed most of the gang members, including Glanton. Brown learns that the Judge survived and is nearby, unarmed. He fingers the necklace of human ears around his neck, asks the ex-priest if he saw Glanton dead, which Tobin did. Then Brown rides off.

Brown, who seems to have defected from the gang in San Diego, confirms the Judge's lack of a weapon and Glanton's death with an attitude not unlike relief. Deserters in the past were punished severely by the gang, but Brown seems to have evaded such a fate.

As Tobin and the kid trek through the desert the following day, they encounter the ruins of caravans before reaching Carrizo Creek. As the kid drinks, a shot is fired at him; he turns and sees the Judge armed with a rifle on horseback, dressed in Toadvine and Brown's clothing. The kid draws his pistol and hides, watching as the Judge and the idiot move toward the creek. He and the Judge exchange gunfire, but no one is hit. Tobin advises the kid to shoot the idiot, then disappears into the desert. The Judge calls out for the kid to get a drink in the creek, for the two of them to be friends. The kid says nothing.

The Judge, probably by means of force, takes Toadvine and Brown's equipment: this is the kind of ruthless, traitorous ally he is when backed into a corner (it should be added that he does not murder the two here, though—they are later hanged in Las Angeles). The Judge fires on the kid without proportionate cause, provoked only by the kid's defiance of his will.

At night, the kid and Tobin reunite; the ex-priest is bearing a cross fashioned from the shins of a ram and calling out in a foreign language. The kid rises from his hiding spot and witnesses the Judge shoot Tobin. The kid shoots back, but misses, and the Judge disappears. The kid rushes to Tobin's side and finds him bleeding to death. Tobin tells the kid to shoot the Judge's horses. The kid manages to do so, then moves back toward the creek where he sits to drink and **bathe** his leg.

The ex-priest seems convinced that divine aid is needed in the confrontation with the Judge, perhaps because the Judge is the devil himself—hence the makeshift cross. After being shot, Tobin advises the kid to kill the Judge's horses so that the Judge must trek through the desert on foot, without the advantage of speed which the horses would grant him.

Not fifty feet away, wading upstream despite the swift current, the Judge calls out to the kid, ordering him to surrender his pistol as punishment for killing the horses. He says he knows that Tobin put the kid up to it, and will take that as a mitigating factor. The kid waits till the Judge passes before making a break for it. Soon after, he finds Tobin's tracks and blood, which lead him to the ex-priest; Tobin praises the kid for killing the Judge's horses.

In assigning culpability, the Judge conveniently neglects to take into account the fact that he himself was the first to open hostilities. The kid is merely acting in self-defense when he kills the horses. The Judge seems offended that the kid should side not with him but with the ex-priest.

That night, Tobin and the kid set off across the dunes, looking back one last time to see the Judge's fire flickering in the valley behind them. Wolves and jackals cry all night. After another day of trekking and a night spent sleeping, the two wake up and see pursuing them over the plain the figures of the Judge and the idiot.

Why is the Judge so relentless in his pursuit here? Perhaps he can't stand the idea that people should challenge his will and survive, or perhaps he does not want witnesses to his monstrosities at the ferry to live to tell the tale. Perhaps he just enjoys the hunt for its own sake.

CHAPTER 21

Tobin tells the kid to leave him and save himself, but the kid declines and the two end up staggering onward together. When the kid notices that the wind is obliterating their footprints in the desert, he proposes to Tobin that the two of them find somewhere to hide. Tobin says that there's no way to hide from the Judge, but nonetheless the two dig out a shelter under some mule bones and wait for the Judge to pass.

Unlike the Judge, the kid never leaves a man behind when he can help it—not Sproule, not Tate, and not Tobin. Though nature's obliteration of traces of human life tends to be treated as tragic in the novel, here the wind's obliteration of the refugees' footprints is vital for their survival.

The Judge passes soon enough, with the idiot on a leather leash. He has rifles, canteens, and, strangely enough, a parasol made from rotten hides and bones. The two of them pass where Tobin and the kid are hiding and disappear into the sands. Tobin says that the kid will have no chance like that to kill the Judge again.

The image of the leashed idiot shockingly epitomizes the Judge's desire both for control and unwavering dog-like loyalty from those in his power. With his pet and parasol, the Judge resembles grotesquely a woman casually walking her dog.

Tobin and the kid discuss where to go, but as they do the Judge returns. He addresses the countryside, telling the kid that he should show himself; he also accuses the kid of having been mutinous against the gang all along—"no partisan"—preserving in his heart as the kid apparently did some mercy for the Indians they slaughtered together. The Judge concludes that Toadvine and Brown are in fact alive, "in possession of the fruits of their election." The kid does not respond, and the Judge moves on, suggesting that perhaps the kid has dreamed that he will die in this place.

The Judge accuses the kid of reserving in his heart mercy for the gang's quarry, which is mutinous in the sense that the kid could not therefore commit himself wholly to the gang's rampantly destructive cause, could not give himself to war the way the Judge himself does and, perhaps, the way the judge thought the kid might be able to. The Judge is not lying when he says that Toadvine and Brown are alive—"the fruits of their election" may refer to money which the Judge offered to the two of them in payment for their clothes and Brown's gun.

The kid and Tobin would have died in the sands had a band of Diegueño Indians not found them. The Indians care for the two men and bring them to their camp at San Felipe. While the kid is eating, one of the Indians reaches for his pistol twice, only for the kid to bat his hand away. On the third reach, the kid draws the pistol and aims it at the Indian's forehead; then he puts the pistol away. While the Americans recount what befell them, the Indians denounce the Yumas as wicked.

The Indians' act of mercy is unexplained but vital. Mercy aside, the kid is still brutally defensive of his pistol, an indication that he is neither deeply grateful nor a changed man. By having the Diegueños denounce the Yumas, McCarthy reminds us that relations between the Native American tribes could be just as fraught as those between Native Americans and whites.

The next day, Tobin and the kid journey westward toward the mountains, resting at Warner's Ranch before moving on. They climb a mountain trail into frosty country, then down among low hills where pieces of wagons lay scattered. By the next day, the two reach San Diego. While Tobin seeks a doctor, the kid goes down to the sea, where "whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea."

Tobin and the kid arrive at the limit of American dominion: the Pacific Ocean. In a novel where the human capacity for gratuitous evil seems infinite, this limit takes on a serenely moral quality. It is the end of the land fought over by all these men, it is something that men can't own. In contrast to the gang's hectic ferry of exploitation is the whale sublimely ferrying its own soul. (Though perhaps the illiterate Kid might feel differently if he had read Moby Dick, which McCarthy surely has).

CHAPTER 22

Back in town, the kid goes into a tavern where he is promptly arrested by four soldiers who don't even ask his name. In jail, the kid speaks with strange urgency about what he has seen in his lifetime of only sixteen years, and the soldiers come to think that he has gone mad from having participated in so many "acts of blood."

The kid, so silent throughout the novel, begins to confess to his crimes, to bear witness and stand in judgment on his own acts of blood. He does so with urgency, as though seeking relief or redemption.

One morning, the kid wakes to find the Judge standing before his cage for a visit. The Judge tells him that Tobin has gone mad, and that the local authorities believe the Judge's own word that the kid is solely responsible the calamitous events at the ferry. They intend to hang the kid for his crimes.

Whereas the kid gives true witness to his crimes, the Judge gives false witness, just as he did in Reverend Green's case. In this way, the Judge himself evades being revealed for the monster he is.

The Judge tells the kid to come closer. He tells him that he would have loved him like a son had the kid not stood in judgment on his own deeds, a witness against himself. He accuses the kid of having poisoned the enterprise of the scalp hunters by not having given his heart entirely to warfare. After all, the Judge thinks that what brings men is "the sharing of enemies." But who would the kid have the Judge as an enemy with? The kid counters that it was the Judge who destroyed all of their fellows. The Judge checks his watch, announces that he has errands to run, and leaves.

The Judge seems to think the kid an ideal son in that he was raised on violence and has a great talent for murder. However, the kid was too merciful to serve the god of war as an absolute partisan. The kid's counter-accusation might be based on the fact that the Judge alienated the gang with his lectures and gratuitous violence (as when he shot the Indian infant), also that the Judge himself was so suspiciously well prepared for the Yumas' raid.

That night, the kid calls over the corporal who mans the jail and tells him about the gang's hoard of gold and silver coins hidden in the mountains. The corporal listens skeptically and leaves when the kid finishes. Two days later, the kid is baptized by a Spanish priest, released from prison, given a fatherly talk by the local magistrate, and turned out into the streets.

The kid must tell the corporal about the gold and silver the gang amassed while running the ferry on the Colorado River. Though the kid has confessed to heinous crimes, treasure secures his freedom, suggesting that human justice is not strictly principled.

The kid finds a surgeon in town who agrees to remove the arrow from the kid's leg the following day. The kid shows up the appointment drunk on whiskey, which causes an altercation until the surgeon promises that the ether he'll provide is a stronger painkiller than liquor. The kid is led to a sick bay to bathe, then laid out on a trestle in a nearby room for the operation.

Even after all he's been through, the kid still relies on altercations and violence to satisfy his will. The kid's commitment to drunkenness suggests a desire on his part to forget not only his pain but to cease bearing witness to his terrible past altogether.

While etherized, the kid deliriously dreams of the Judge, whom the narrator describes as having no knowable origins. The kid dreams that with the Judge is a forger who works without fire and who is trying to engrave the Judge's face into a coin that will pass for currency in the markets where people trade. "Of this is the judge," says the narrator. The forger is waiting for dawn to come (presumably so that markets of exchange will open and his coins can circulate), but "the night does not end."

Generally, the face of a ruler is impressed into a coin. Earlier the Judge claims that he desires to be a supreme ruler, and yet in this dream he never approves of the forger's representation of him. It is as though the Judge's true aim is not to be a ruler after all, for this would mean the end of the eternal night of warfare, the abstraction of warfare into merely economic terms.

The operation is a success, and within a week the kid is able to hobble through town on crutches. He seeks Tobin, but no one knows what's become of him.

Tobin's disappearance from the narrative means that we'll never know if the Judge spoke true when he said that Tobin went mad.

In June of that year, the kid is in Los Angeles and witnesses a public hanging. Later that evening, he discovers that the men hanged are none other than Toadvine and Davy Brown.

After Tobin's disappearance and the hanging, the kid, the Judge, and the idiot are the only survivors of Glanton's gang, the only witnesses to the gang's crimes.

Later, in the same city, the kid beats senseless a man who thinks he is a male prostitute, and sometime after the kid's purse, watch, and shoes are stolen. One night he sees a face slobbering at a window and goes upstairs to the room and knocks: the door is opened by a woman in a kimono, and behind her is a person in a pen similar in appearance to the idiot. Without a word the kid leaves the building.

The kid is as violent as ever. He seems compelled to track down all possibly living members of the gang, as though desirous to learn how many mental records of the gang's crimes yet exist.

With his last two dollars, the kid buys the necklace of ears that Davy Brown wore to the scaffold. The next morning, he signs on with a company driving livestock to Sacramento. He is at this employment for some months, then quits abruptly and travels from place to place.

The kid buys the necklace as though he desires evidence of his own acts of blood, an objective witness that will prevent him from forgetting what evils he is capable of. From here on out, he leads a more humane life.

During his travels, people defer to the kid as one who has experienced more than his years can account for. He acquires a horse and gun and carries with him a Bible that he cannot read. He witnesses more violence in his life, never sees Tobin again, and hears rumors about the Judge everywhere he goes.

The Bible represents for the kid a break from viciousness and violence and a turn to virtue and mercy. The Judge is as ubiquitous as evil itself, almost supernaturally so.

At the age of 28, the kid is escorting, along with five other men, a family through the desert eastward. He abandons them seven days from the coast and rides north into alien country. There he meets a procession of musicians, a man led by a rope, and a penitent shouldering a wooden cross. Behind them is a cart in which a person dressed as a skeleton sits among stones. The procession disappears into the darkness.

The procession the kid sees in the mountains seems like an allegorical synopsis of his experiences with Glanton's gang: the man led by the rope recalls the leashed idiot, the cross-bearing penitent recalls the kid's own guilt and sacrifices (and the Judge in the desert), and the skeleton in the cart recalls the gang's ferry of death.

The next day, the kid continues trekking, leading his horse over the difficult terrain. At one point, the horse refuses to go further, and it's then that the kid sees below the people from yesterday's procession, all of them murdered and butchered among the stones. The kid sees an old woman nearby, whom he approaches and promises to escort to a safe place. When she doesn't respond, the kid touches her, only to discover that she's a dried husk, "dead in that place for years."

The procession of penitence and renewal has ironically become a macabre dance of death. Violence has mysteriously and senselessly touched even this isolated spot of earth. The husk of the old woman is also a reminder that death has been here before, and suggests that murder and death will plague the earth forever.

CHAPTER 23

In the winter of 1878, the kid, now referred to as the man, is on the plains of North Texas. At night he sees a campfire, which belongs to an old buffalo hunter with whom the kid shares tobacco. The hunter tells about how he and others like him drove the buffalo to extinction. The hunter wonders aloud whether there are other planets like earth, or if this is the only one.

The buffalo hunter's story mirrors the kid's own participation in acts of genocidal violence. His question about other planets like earth seems motivated by a quiet despair, that it is possible for hideous violence to exist elsewhere as here.

Riding through barren country for three days, the man comes upon a great many people filling wagons high with bones. At night, five young bonepickers approach the man's campfire. They learn that the man is going to Fort Griffin, Texas, home to many prostitutes. The man shows them his necklace of ears and explains its origins; one of the bonepickers named Elrod, fifteen years old, hassles the man and suggests that he's a liar. The man refers to Elrod as son, to which Elrod responds: "I aint ye son." As the bonepickers leave, the man threatens to kill Elrod if he sees him again.

Elrod is about the same age as the kid was when he ran away from home and fell in first with Captain White, then with Captain Glanton. He also shares with the kid what seems to be a violent streak, combative for the sake of being combative. In a way, this scene is like the man's encounter with his younger self. Elrod is defiant of the idea of having a father; he wants to be a free agent—yet he does not know how to be free wisely. And here the "father" threatens death upon the ungrateful child.

Later in the night, Elrod returns to the man's camp bearing a rifle. The man kills him. At dawn, Elrod's companions from the night before come. They collect Elrod's effects, including his rifle. One of the boys, insane-looking, is revealed to be Elrod's brother; he now has no family in the world. The young bonepickers then pick up Elrod's corpse and bear it away.

Despite the man's threat, Elrod returns to sate his developing taste for violence, and perhaps to test his strength against the man, to have his fate revealed by the god of war. The man anticipates this and kills Elrod, which metaphorically suggests the man's rejection of his own past self, an affirmation of his having taken his fate into his own hands.

The next day, the man rides to Fort Griffin. He arrives at dark, and enters a local saloon. A little girl inside is playing a barrel organ to which a trained bear wearing a petticoat **dances**, and a showman goes around collecting money. The man orders a whiskey when he notices that sitting at a table is the Judge, who looks unchanged. The man pays, and when he turns the Judge is speaking to a group of men. The man turns his attention to a showman in the room, and a group of prostitutes. When he gazes back across the room, the Judge is gone.

This trained bear recalls the wild bear that carried off a Delaware. Like this trained bear, the man has shed his brute animal instincts, his taste for violence, and is living as peaceful a life as he can. Unlike the Judge's pet idiot, the bear is not bound, it would seem, but has accepted its role in a community of performers.

The showman collecting money gets into an altercation with a group of men. One of the men draws his pistol and shoots the bear dancing onstage, which moans and, shot again, falls to the floor. The little girl who had been playing the barrel organ runs over to the bear and hugs its head to her, sobbing.

Yet another act of violence disproportionate to its cause. That the girl hugs the bear and weeps suggests that the bear was not merely an object of exploitation like the idiot, but a valued member of a community.

The Judge approaches the man and speaks with him. He notes that he and the man are the last survivors of Glanton's gang. The Judge asks the man if he's there for **the dance**, but the man remains silent. The Judge asks if the man thinks that just because he doesn't speak he won't be recognized for what he is: he is, in the Judge's estimate, a disappointment.

The man's meeting with the Judge in this bar seems almost fated, as the Judge himself will later suggest. The Judge's observation about the kid's silence recalls Tobin's hypothesis that God speaks most profoundly in silent beings.

The Judge tells the man that all of the people are gathered in the saloon for **the dance**, and have in fact been brought here seeking their fate. The dance, the Judge says, is a ritual, and rituals necessarily include bloodletting. The Judge points to a man and speculates that his complaint against the world is that people have never done his bidding. He concludes that as war becomes dishonored, the dancers will become false dancers and fall into oblivion, and eventually there will only be one true dancer who knows that war speaks to his inmost heart. The man responds that even "a dumb animal" can dance.

The Judge's association of the dance and warfare intimates that he takes an aesthetic pleasure in violence, a pleasure he values more than anything. As did the kid's dream of the forger, the Judge foresees a time when war will be abandoned for other trades, presumably economic—but the Judge claims that he will always be a true warrior. The man's retort, a reference to the bear, implies that human beings are capable of something higher than mere violence.

The man leaves the Judge and goes into another room where he hires a prostitute. After they have sex, the man is reluctant to leave her room, but does so. He goes downstairs and watches musicians begin to play and **the dance** commence. He goes to the jakes, or outhouse, and opens the door: seated on the toilet waiting for him is the Judge. The Judge gathers the man against "his immense and terrible flesh" and shuts the outhouse door. Later, as the night winds down, two men go to the outhouse and a third warns them not to go in there. The two men look into the outhouse anyway and are disgusted by what they find. "What is it?" one asks. The other man doesn't answer.

For a novel that details in horrifically minute detail outrageous acts of violence, it is all the more shocking that the man's fate in the outhouse remains untold, as though too terrible to be witnessed. In fact, it seems as if it is so terrible that the men can't at first even understand what they are seeing. The Judge's gathering of the kid against his flesh is a grotesque parody of a father hugging his son, or of a dancer embracing his partner. The juxtaposition of the scene with the prostitute and the scene in the outhouse also raises the possibility that the Judge not only murders but also sexually violates the man.

In the saloon, there is a lull in the dancing. Men and prostitutes stagger through the gloom. A fiddler tunes his instrument and the music resumes and **the dance** continues. Towering over everyone is the Judge, who dances expertly, bowing to the ladies, laughing, a great favorite. He takes possession of a fiddle and plays and dances at once. Dancing, dancing. The Judge says that he never sleeps, and that he will never die.

With the man dead, the Judge's true image is represented in no mind but his own. Indeed, much as he was in Green's tent in Chapter 1, he is a great favorite of the people around him. The Judge's supernatural aura is enhanced by his claim of sleeplessness and immortality; the implication seems to be that he will perpetuate the night of war forever, that he himself has become or has always been the god of war.

EPILOGUE

In the dawn, a man (referred to in the Characters list as the digger) progresses over the plain. He makes holes in the ground using a two-handled instrument made of steel, thereby "striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there." Behind him, wanderers move mechanically from hole to hole, "monitored by escapement and pallet"; they seem prudent and reflective, but they are not. Their movements seem like the validation of causality. Some wanderers seek for bones; others do not. The man strikes fire in another hole and withdraws his instrument. "Then they all move on again."

The digger seems to be an anonymous hero rising up with fire against the Judge's night of war. Perhaps he is building a fence, or laying a railroad track, thereby bringing order and lawfulness to the American frontier. The terms "escapement" and "pallet" refer among other things to parts of a typewriter. It is worth noting that the events that inspired Blood Meridian are historical, though not a very well known history. Perhaps the digger is a figure for the novelist himself, striking fire out of the dead holes of history, bearing witness, though it is not at all clear that those following understand.

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