

Blood on the Horizon: Judge Holden as a Demonic Suzerain of the West

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The United States of America emerged from the 18th century as a country in its infancy, and the next hundred years of its history played host to a swath of violent, bloody conflicts. Our country fought its neighbors, the Mexicans, and its predecessors, the American Indians. It also warred with outsiders, such as Spain and Britain, and with itself, in a trying Civil War. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West* manages to encapsulate this history of violence within its title as a warning or frank admission of the bleak portrait it paints of the American landscape. Despite the unsettling connotations of the title, it's impossible to foresee how far into the dark depths of humanity McCarthy plunges in *Blood Meridian*—except, perhaps, by reading his previous works. Though *Blood Meridian* takes place at an earlier point in American history than McCarthy's first four novels, the feeling persists that we are edging closer to the brink of existence, closing in on an apocalyptic end. Twenty-one years after the publication of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy shows us the aftermath of that end with *The Road*, a novel of the destroyed world and the end of life and society as we know it. But the explanation of that end, the examination of its source, and the admonition of its terror lies in *Blood Meridian* in the character of Judge Holden. Every aspect of the judge, from his appearance to his mannerisms to his actions, contributes to his iconic, terrifying stature as the eye of the storm, a focal point for the death in the West. Throughout the course of the novel, McCarthy crafts Judge Holden as a deeply layered character—a man, witty and intelligent—a murderer, calculating and brutal—and, at his core, a demonic symbol, representative of the horror of Manifest Destiny, the decrepit, destitute state of society and, darkest of all, the brutality of the human spirit.

Even before delving into the frightening morality Judge Holden espouses in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy establishes the shape and influence of his character in numerous physical descriptions. When the novel's protagonist, a runaway youth simply labeled "the kid" first

encounters Holden, we see the initial descriptive passage conveying his appearance: “An enormous man dressed in an oilcloth slicker had entered the tent and removed his hat. He was bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height and he stood smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God...His face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small” (McCarthy 6). The Judge’s unusually large stature and hairless body, described this early in the novel, build the foundation for his characterization as a larger-than-life symbol. Several oddly incongruous elements of his character also contribute to the formation an eerie whole that adds up to something different than the normal man—Holden’s “serene and strangely childlike” face sharply contrasts with his capacity for brutal violence, and his dainty hands are similarly mismatched in comparison to his massive body. McCarthy’s first description of the Judge also foreshadows the series of increasingly dark, unholy events that he takes part in: after the Judge destroys a preacher’s reputation with a few simple lies, the preacher cries “This is him. The devil. Here he stands” (7). Holden simply strikes down a force of righteousness, and soon states that “I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him” (8). McCarthy expertly uses the kid’s opening encounter with the Judge to establish him as a mysterious character, and his confrontation with the reverend also creates a divergence between the Judge and religion, which later manifests in his antagonistic relationship with the ex-priest Tobin.

McCarthy’s early physical descriptions of the Judge gradually shift to encompass the full power of his emblematic character. As the novel progresses, Holden appears in the nude on several occasions. Yet nudity, traditionally a sign of man utterly stripped to the bareness of existence, does not affect Holden as one would expect. Instead of showing his close relationship to nature, proving that Holden is a natural product like any other man, the Judge’s hairless body

only serves to separate him from the natural, transforming him to a mythical creature. With the exception of sunburn on his giant skull, the Judge seems impervious to the forces of nature, and McCarthy's evocative imagery helps mold his phantasmagorical figure: "...their figures now quick with clarity and now fugitive in the strangeness of that same light. Like things whose very portent renders them ambiguous. Like things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed" (281-282). The last sentence vividly captures Holden as a mysterious entity, not a typical product of nature nor a child of God. It also suggests that the Judge's body is "charged with meaning," further removing him from the corporeal realm and molding him into a symbol, a manifestation of the warring spirit of Glanton's band of scalp hunters.

McCarthy doesn't delve into the war-hungry demonic core of Holden's character until late in the novel; before each layer of the character is truly peeled back, McCarthy utilizes dense, intellectual dialogue to convey the Judge's intelligence. In one passage, after speaking to a Mexican sergeant, Holden replies to a simple question with the comment "It is not necessary...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 or right principle that these facts—to the extent that they can be readily made to do so—should find a repository in the witness of some third party" (85). Holden's convoluted explanation continues, and it is clearly no real explanation at all—he merely confuses the other riders, who are accustomed to simple, straightforward language. Several pages later, McCarthy gives us more insight into the Judge's speech:

"Books lie, he said.
 God don't lie.
 No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.
 He held up a chunk of rock.
 He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.

The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools” (116).

The passage marks McCarthy’s first overt mention of the “new order” in *Blood Meridian*, a social concept that is a driving force behind much of his work. Along with the religious connotations of the word “proselyte,” we see that the Judge’s seemingly-intelligent discourse is a tool used to convert those around him, encouraging them to abandon what they think and feel to be true. Holden rides alongside John Joel Glanton as a champion of the new order, usurping the natural way of the land and its people, the Mexicans and American Indians, and cutting a swath of death across the western desert.

McCarthy masterfully builds suspense in *Blood Meridian* by continuously adding details to Holden’s character, scattering short, striking scenes throughout each chapter that ultimately lead to his grand, revelatory monologue. While his physical stature and cunning are apparent early on, McCarthy waits to unveil the violent edge of the Judge’s character until later in the novel. In one of *Blood Meridian*’s most chilling passages, the Judge purchases two puppies from a young boy, just to kill them: “He crossed upon the stone bridge and he looked down into the swollen waters and raised the dogs and pitched them in” (192). Holden’s casual murder of the innocent animals adds another facet to his relationship with nature, and once again seems to be a statement of power and authority in his new order of existence. As with the Judge’s convoluted discourse, McCarthy establishes an ideal with a scene, and later fleshes it out with more detail that reveals Holden’s perspective. Shortly after killing the dogs, Holden explains to Toadvine why he keeps a diary of the things he encounters in nature: “Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent... These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour

us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth" (198). Holden's powerful statement indicates his abject opposition to nature, just like his defiantly hairless body. Further, the statement is a second powerful endorsement of the Judge's new order mentality, a social movement bent on destroying anything seemingly disagreeable or unpermitted by mankind. Finally, McCarthy uses Holden's ruling against nature as a way to prepare us for his chilling philosophical monologue.

After the slaughter of countless Indians and shortly before the bloody end of Glanton's scalp hunters, Judge Holden fully exposes his fearsome perspective on human existence and its never-ending entanglement with war and death. His explanation covers three pages and is fascinating enough to be the focus of a lengthy philosophical discussion, but it's similarly effective as a way to understand the heart of the evil McCarthy tries to show us in *Blood Meridian*.

"War. War is your trade. Is it not?
 And it ain't yours?
 Mine too. Very much so.
 What about all them notebooks and stuff?
 All other trades are contained in that of war.
 Is that why war endures?
 No. It endures because young men love it and old men love it in
 them. Those that fought, those that did not" (248-249).

McCarthy utilizes another of Glanton's riders to frame the conversation about war, once again placing the Judge in a position of intellectual authority from which he espouses a new order ideology. Holden fundamentally claims that war is the essence of human nature, the definitive controlling influence in the world. He goes on to state that "War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god" (249). McCarthy offsets the Judge's comments with a retort from Irving that "Might does not make right," and the weight of

the conversation becomes especially clear when we realize that the man disagreeing with Holden is a killer himself. Holden's judgment of humankind is so unflinchingly evil that even Glanton's riders shy away from his opinion. The Judge finishes his lengthy conversation with a comment on human morality, stating that "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven wrong by any ultimate test" (250). Not only does the Judge utterly deny the concept of morality, he justifies any possible act of violence or cruelty as a right of the strong over the weak. The lengthy, exhaustive passages detailing Judge Holden's point of view establish that he represents the darkest portion of the human spirit, the embodiment of our ability to commit sin and make war. War, most of all, receives a great deal of attention, and it is our capacity for violence that leads into what McCarthy is warning against most strongly of all—Manifest Destiny.

Judge Holden's derisive monologue on morality, along with his presence at the side of John Joel Glanton, shows that he has no qualms with the wholesale slaughter of American Indians. *Blood Meridian* is full of unpleasantly striking, violent imagery of murdered, scalped victims, making it clear that McCarthy condemns the practice. The group's grisly end similarly enforces this sentiment—they die at the hand of Indians who had once been friendly to them, a moral repercussion of their warmongering. Only a very few escape—the Kid, ex-priest Tobin, David Brown, and Toadvine all seem to represent a force of moderation and balance, as none of them are ever shown fully endorsing the decisions Glanton makes. The other escapee, of course, is the Judge, an immortal essence of death and destruction more than a man. The ideology of Manifest Destiny mirrors the arc of McCarthy's work, and its presence as the force behind Glanton's self-justified pillaging throughout the west makes perfect sense—as we continue to

move westward, killing and laying claim to whatever we choose, we move ever closer to that apocalyptic brink.

McCarthy places a plethora of details throughout *Blood Meridian* to ensure that readers find Holden a horrifying symbol rather than a frightening one. His abnormal, unsettling nudity and hairless body, nearly-inhuman bulk and strangely small hands are factors of his physical appearance that make him an unsettling character. In the book's final pages, Holden seems to engage in a battle for the kid's soul with the ex-preacher Tobin, and his conflict with the authority of religion shows up several times in the novel, placing him on the side of evil, rather than good. McCarthy also hints that Holden molests children, such as when "He'd filled his pockets with little candy deathsheds and he sat by the door and offered these to children passing on the walk under the eaves but they shied away like little horses" and "When they'd entered the judge's quarters they found the idiot and a girl of perhaps twelve years cowering naked in the floor" (192, 275). The first example clearly shows that innocents fear something innate about the Judge, while the latter clearly indicates his guilt and condemns his behavior. Finally, as *Blood Meridian* draws to a close, the Judge seems to kill the kid, now grown well out of his youth, while Holden seems not to have aged at all. The Judge has a hand in the deaths of Tobin, Toadvine, and Brown, picking off the forces of moderation one-by-one until only the kid remains. And when he kills the kid, it is not with a weapon—he grasps him in his huge embrace, naked, as if to destroy the kid with his very essence as a monstrosity, evil made flesh. As the book ends, Holden is seen pirouetting nude on a stage, fiddle in hand, and McCarthy's use of rhyme and repetition in the final passage evoke a cultish feeling, painting one final image of the man as a harrowing monument to all our sins and simultaneously warning us not to be swayed, enticed, or charmed by the new order Judge Holden represents.