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The Subjection of Authority and Death Through Humor: Carnavalesque, Incongruity, and
Absurdism in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Subjection of Authority and Death Through Humor: Carnavalesque, Incongruity, and Absurdism in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*

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Cormac McCarthy's representation of the comic theories of the carnivalesque, incongruity, and absurdism by the antagonists of *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* demonstrates the unique and ostensible power of humor over (or at least, its awareness of and reconciliation to the absurdity of) death; it also emphasizes the supreme power and influence of humor as a means for destroying other institutions and philosophies which claim knowledge or authority but fail to sustain individuals in times of crisis. This makes humor a formidable factor in determining and justifying the outcome of human interactions and in defining the strengths and limitations of McCarthy's antagonists.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, humor, *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, Judge Holden, Anton Chigurh, carnivalesque, incongruity, absurdism

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INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy is not usually thought of as a humorous writer, and with good reason. His preoccupation with the graver aspects of life and the enigmatic depths of the human psyche naturally and properly leads readers to associate his writing with tragedy rather than comedy. However, McCarthy's subtle, ironic, and often dark humor is a recurring vital element which greatly adds to the significance and appreciation of each of his novels. While a handful of scholarly articles, notably Wade Hall's "The Human Comedy of Cormac McCarthy" and Edwin T. Arnold's "Cormac McCarthy's Frontier Humor," have examined McCarthy's use of humor, they have done so in a general sense, mostly focusing on the regional, odd, and colorful characters found in McCarthy's Southern novels and the Border Trilogy. My research will explore in depth the use of three key theories of humor—the carnivalesque, incongruity, and absurdism—in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*. In directly confronting the intersection between violence and humor in McCarthy's writing, I also will explain how and why humor is uniquely able to serve the purposes of two of the most sinister, evil, violent characters in the McCarthy canon.

In many humorous literary interactions, there is a distinction between the humor used by protagonists and antagonists. Typically, with protagonists, humor sheds light on (or lightens) the situation, enabling us to endure whatever the scene may be and sympathize with the characters as they seem more self-aware and down to earth. With antagonists, humor becomes a sharp weapon used to harm, insult and expose the human folly of others, supposedly resulting in a further distancing of the villains from the sympathies of the reader. However, McCarthy's humor is more difficult to pinpoint in such general terms. His protagonists are flawed and frequently weak; his antagonists are more complex, admirable, and sympathetic than readers might expect.

One might think that McCarthy's protagonists and antagonists are on slightly more equal terms when it comes to a battle of wits than a battle of life and death—particularly when the antagonists are as equipped and merciless as Anton Chigurh or Judge Holden, and the protagonists as vulnerable and inexperienced in ruthless warfare as Llewelyn Moss or the Kid. Yet of McCarthy's variety of characters, it is his most violent, physically intimidating, and larger than life antagonists—the Judge and Chigurh—who demonstrate the fullest capacity of humor to crush their opponents physically and psychologically while achieving power, authority, and presence over the world as they see it.

Nowhere is the use of humor by a villain more intricately, profoundly, and thoroughly illustrated than in Judge Holden, ostensibly McCarthy's most formidable antagonist, in the staggeringly violent, epic masterpiece that is *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*. The Judge is perhaps the most humorous villain set within the most humorless of McCarthy's novels. He dominates the text of *Blood Meridian* in lengthy descriptions of his striking and singular appearance and in his prolonged, esoteric discourses. He is the last character to speak and exist, and the impact of his character continues to haunt and perplex long after the book has ended. Many scholarly articles have analyzed the Judge in various archetypal roles, yet there remains to be seen any significant discussion on the humor which defines and sets apart the Judge as such a monumental, overwhelming presence in McCarthy's writing.

The pattern established in *Blood Meridian* of an overwhelmingly outmatched protagonist struggling against a powerful antagonist who appropriates humor in confronting and triumphing over authority and causes of fear is revisited in *No Country for Old Men*. The antagonist of this novel is Anton Chigurh, a fearsome and enigmatic villain and the only character who comes close to resembling the cruelty, eccentricity, and indestructibility of the Judge. While much has

been written on Chigurh's peculiar philosophical code and assumption of societal roles, a deeper study of his use of humor is essential in attaining a comprehensive and intimate view of the exceptional and objectionable actions, statements, and attributes that make up his personality and character.

In narrowing the discussion of McCarthy's employment of humor through the Judge and Chigurh, this analysis will focus on three comic theories which are featured prominently in the philosophies and behavior of both characters and are useful starting points for examining McCarthy's macabre sense of humor on a deeper level. The first of these is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, a predominantly medieval type of comedy which acquires power in its subversion of social norms, values, and systems and in its ability to free the masses from dogmatism and a stagnant social order. The result may be either purifying or appalling; as Bakhtin states, "The carnivalesque celebrates the act of degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (18–20). The second comic theory is incongruity, the groundwork of which is found in Immanuel Kant's explanation that "laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (qtd. in Raskin 31). As linguist Victor Raskin explains, the essential humor of incongruity is found in the "inappropriateness, paradox, dissimilarity," and "the element of surprise" resulting from the negation or sudden altering of one's expectations; it also includes irony—wherein the opposite of what is expected occurs—and the juxtaposition of opposite scripts to create a surprising, contradictory connection (31; 33). The third comic theory is absurdism, which "strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 24). Essential

hallmarks of absurdism which Martin Esslin identifies and explores in his examination of various absurdist playwrights and theorists include “the abandonment of the concepts of character and motivation; the concentration on states of mind and basic human situations, rather than on the development of a narrative plot from exposition to solution; the devaluation of language as a means of communication and understanding; the rejection of didactic purpose; and the confrontation of the spectator with the harsh facts of a cruel world and his own isolation” (233). As the Judge and Chigurh’s confrontational encounters and verbal disputes decrease their grounding in humor (as demonstrated through these three comic theories), the characters’ power and influence over their own fate and over the fate of individuals, ideologies, and institutions meant to provide order, reason, and meaning is lessened or weakened. When comparing the two characters, Chigurh’s failure to fully embrace the chaotic, incongruous, and absurd nature of humor demonstrated by the Judge leads us to a deeper realization of the comparative strengths and limitations of Chigurh and his adversaries—both mortal (Bell, Moss, Wells) and immortal (death, fate, chance)—when considering the ability to survive, thrive, and exercise control in the world.

Humor is a formidable factor in determining and justifying the outcome of human interactions and in defining the essential strengths and limitations of McCarthy’s protagonists and antagonists. Through the outlandishly invincible figure of the Judge and the somewhat more realistic figure of Chigurh, McCarthy demonstrates the ability of humor to exert power and influence over the world by overthrowing institutions or philosophies of authority and ultimately by confronting the stark reality of death itself. In examining these novels together, I argue that McCarthy’s representation of the carnivalesque, incongruity, and absurdism by the characters of Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh has two significant outcomes: first, it demonstrates the unique

and ostensible power of humor over (or at least, its awareness and reconciliation to the absurdity of) death. Secondly, it emphasizes the supremacy and influence of humor as a means for destroying other institutions and philosophies which claim knowledge or authority but fail to sustain individuals in times of crisis.

CHAPTER 1

The Carnavalesque in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*

Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque focuses on the ability of comedy to incite an expression of repressed emotions and tensions through a period of unbridled festivity and unregulated behavior. While this type of comedy is traditionally viewed as liberating and provocative in its subversion of conservative hierarchical structures, the carnivalesque also acts as a temporary release mechanism for inappropriate behavior, ultimately reinforcing the need for the security and stability of the societal regime. Thus, the carnivalesque is a somewhat ambivalent attack on authority in which comical figures (jesters, clowns, fools) are able to critique and defy the rules of society, but only in a liminal space and for a seasonal period of time before order and authority are restored. However, in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, the carnivalesque is combined with the absurd, resulting in the collapsing of tragedy and comedy into each other and the confusing transformation of the character role of the wise fool into the Judge and Chigurh, figures of supreme authority who usurp and demolish all others' claims to such authority.

Numerous scenes in *Blood Meridian* evoke the carnivalesque through description; McCarthy frequently describes the troupe in terms similar to a group of circus riders, and he outright labels their night of lawless and ugly festivity in Ures as a "carnival" (202). As noted by Manuel Broncano, the gang's encounter with the Comanches is a "carnavalesque representation of . . . 'funhouse figures' whose performance does not seek to elicit laughter but blood" (37). Later graphic mutilations of corpses evoke "Bakhtin's characterization of the grotesque body," in which the primary functions and animalistic parts of the body are emphasized and exaggerated to the exclusion of its abstract and spiritual qualities (Broncano 37). Scholars often draw on the carnivalesque when discussing the grotesque or macabre tradition of comedy, which is produced

through the alteration and exaggeration of characters “into extreme shapes that parody human forms” and can lead to chaos, depravity, and an overdose of riotous living (Owens 51). The bloody raids and massacres serve as a bleak demonstration of the power of the comic theory, which horrifies us almost to the degree of failing to recognize or appreciate its undisguised presence in lines such as “a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious” and the sergeant’s dumbfounded response, “Oh my god,” which fall in the midst of such overwhelming, frenzied havoc (McCarthy 53). The historical and mythical setting of *Blood Meridian* is an absurd reimagining of the Bakhtinian notion of green space wherein rules are suspended and liberating activities occur: It is a desolate, death-ridden land, “a space devoid of law and morality,” and an ideal situation for the permanent fluctuating and overthrowing of authoritative structures in a morally ambiguous space (Ellis, “No Place,” 169). Over and over again, the Judge invokes humor in challenging and subverting authoritative figures, ridiculing the institutions and principles by which society is conducted and replacing them with a capricious, temporary form of order underneath which looms chaos, competition, and violence.

In confrontations with disciples of science, religion, brute force, and truth, the Judge demonstrates a pronounced interest in humor as the preferred, most efficient means of challenging and subverting all authorities besides himself. He refutes the ex-priest and the Reverend Green both literally (killing the one and deposing the other) and literarily (in his unanswerable, silver-tongued accusations of their characters). He ends the kid’s hopes of a more idealistic future by finishing him off in the jakes, and he even thwarts the usual omniscience of the reader, who has difficulty make sense not only of what he says, but what he intends in saying it: as Jay Ellis notes, “We can never be sure [the Judge] *means* what he says” (“McCarthy music,” 164). Nearly all of the Judge’s confrontations end with a final token of humor and a

deceptively simple gesture—“the judge smiled” (85)—which is mesmerizing and mystifying in its ability to serve as the conclusive, irrefutable, final word in any situation. Just as disturbing as is the Judge’s overthrowing of conventional morality and ethics is “the lack of moral consequences” rewarded him for his misdeeds; the Judge seems to prove the exception to every doctrine or authority that would condemn him, leaving readers to grapple with the rectification of his wrongs in their own competing philosophies (Owens 12). While the Judge’s remarkable, often ludicrous, near-death experiences are delightfully ridiculous to read about, this same slippery, elusive quality is more difficult to come to terms with on a fundamentally ethical level. As Owens points out, “It is indeed difficult to laugh when our moral sensibilities are being so thoroughly challenged” (13).

Harkening back to the American tradition of folk humor and plain speech triumphing over the pompous and hypocritical pretenses of ‘civilized’ society, the Judge’s humor transcends other means of interpreting events and responding to reality, including reason and emotional intuition. Realistically, the power which the Judge claims to be seeking (or to have) over the world is enormously irrational, incomprehensible, and even absurd—it seems that “not only nature, but also history, comes under his study and destructive control” (Ellis, “No Place,” 10). He is not, however, an unreasonable being; in fact, his propensity towards bizarreness often credits him with greater self-awareness and perception into strange, secret dimensions of the human psyche, exhibited in instances such as when he alone is able to ‘tame’ and ‘save’ the imbecile that becomes attached to him. Neither is the Judge immune or unaware of the effects of emotion and moral reasoning, for he observes and may even envy its unshakable consistency in the kid—“I know too that you’ve not the heart of a common assassin . . . 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” (McCarthy 299). However, the Judge never succumbs like the others to the belief that emotions, moral sentiments, and spiritual impressions cannot be ridiculed or overruled by a higher will; instead he finds “delight in bringing high emotions to the test of some vulgar or grotesque association” (Martin 9).

Though the Judge seems to revel in the chaos and carnage produced by the carnival that he calls life, his reasons for doing so remain somewhat cryptic—as Owen notes, “the Judge is always found smiling when nobody knows the joke” (16). The Judge’s nonchalance and apparent immunity to the fear experienced by his comrades encourage us to identify him with the macabre itself, something “paradoxically attracting while repulsing” which “smiles at death and laughs at its own horrible truths” (Owens 14). His liminal and ambiguous presence within and without whichever group he is with call to mind the characteristic clowns of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, which “were not actors . . . but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance,” and which “stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors” (Bakhtin 8). The Judge is no fool, but he is forever fooling. His engagement in the riotous or debauched behavior of the men is off the page or understated, but he is not a completely sane and rational creature: “I gave him my best study, the judge. Then and now. He appeared to be a lunatic and then not. Glanton I always knew was mad” (McCarthy 127). His smile has no reference besides “the smiles of bats, lizards, and corpses”; his dance resembles no recognizable step, but rather reflects the portrayal of death in traditional “medieval depictions of the *danse macabre*, death dancing” (Guillemin 244). The final impression which he leaves is that of some unnatural, dangerous, exaggerated outcast of the human species, without parallel or reference in this or in any other of McCarthy’s novels.

Attempts to identify or uncover the true history of the Judge end in futility and dark imaginings: when asked, “What’s he a judge of?” Tobin’s response suggests fear and distrust—“What’s he a judge of? What’s he a judge of. Tobin glanced off across the fire. Ah lad, he said. Hush now. The man will hear ye. He’s ears like a fox” (135). The subject is not raised again for another several hundred pages, near the end of the book, when the kid, delirious, sees the Judge and the narrator expounds on his growing presence and power:

A great shambling mutant, silent and serene. Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing (309–10).

This scene marks the tragic beginning of the kid’s fateful descent to a final reckoning with the Judge and still leaves unanswered the question of how the Judge came by his authority as a judge, though it indicates his supreme control over the processes of metal forging, forgery, and destiny that the kid sees taking place: “The judge smiled. The fool was no longer there but another man and this other man he could never see in his entirety but he seemed an artisan and a worker in metal. The judge enshadowed him 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” (310). Whatever the Judge’s credentials or lack thereof, McCarthy’s decision to recast the Bahktinian character of the fool as a judge, a public figure

whose role is to authoritatively determine the verity and accuracy of events, estimate the worth or quality of others, and exert control over pronouncing sentences involving life and death, results in the dark and absurd transformation of the carnivalesque into a dangerous weapon which grants limitless and undisputed authority to pass final, life and ultimately world-ending judgment on others.

In *No Country for Old Men*, the disruptive, disorderly nature of the carnivalesque at first seems particularly suited to Chigurh, who challenges the religious and ethical systems of others while following and celebrating his own uniquely violent and grotesque path. Chigurh moves through society as a separate, superior, and destructive force, demonstrating the relativity of truth and authority through a series of violent, subversive, and disorderly actions that all together are quite darkly comical—“a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (Bakhtin 11). His disregard for the choices, beliefs, mannerisms, and occupations of regular citizens is shown on multiple occasions, such as when he ridicules, corrects, manipulates, frightens, bribes, and murders people without apparent reason, emotion, or compassion (with the one possible exception of Carla Jean, to whom he apologizes before shooting). Chigurh’s striking difference from other characters in his line of work is also shown in his rejection of Well’s philosophy (“If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?” 175) and in Bell’s bafflement at his murder of Carla Jean (“I can think of no reason in the world for that no-good to of killed that girl,” 281). Finally, there is Chigurh’s disdain for and departure from the laws of the land, which is perturbing but certainly nothing unusual in Bell’s digressive diagnosis of unregenerate criminals: “Bad people cant be governed at all. Or if they could I never heard of it” (64); “They

dont have no respect for the law? That aint half of it. They dont even think about the law. It dont seem to even concern em” (216).

In each instance, Chigurh’s disruptive actions reflect the “suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life” that identifies the carnival spirit (Bakhtin 15). However, the striking absence of carnival laughter—which is both rejuvenating and degenerative in its “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding” nature—signals the hollowness behind Chigurh’s parodic representation of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 12). For Chigurh, the world does not take on a “droll aspect, in its gay relativity,” but rather is revealed to be a capricious and sinister place where order is created by force by outlaws who operate on their personally advantageous understanding of the workings of the world (Bakhtin 11).

According to Bakhtin, the role of laughter in connection with the carnivalesque use of humor to defeat and degrade authority is fundamental and powerful: “Festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts” (92). In contrast to the excessive expression of outrageous, grotesque, carnivalesque humor by the Judge in *Blood Meridian*, Chigurh is deliberately distinguished from humanity by his serious, unemotional, and inexpressive nature. As Carson Wells tells Moss, “I guess I’d say that he doesnt have a sense of humor” (153). Consequently, while the Judge becomes an antagonist of mythological proportions with boundless measures of influence and power, ridiculing and subverting the knowledge and authority of the learned and ignorant, rich and poor, religious and savage, strangers and neighbors, followers and enemies alike, Chigurh’s haphazard, emotionally detached, and humorless reproofs and killings of a handful of victims have an

arrogant, petty, and tedious quality to them which lends slightly more credibility to Well's verbal rebuff of Chigurh—"I'm not interested in your bullshit, Anton" (175)—than to the kid's nearly identical insult to the Judge—"You aint nothin" (331).

In addition to narrowing the scope and influence of his personality and deeds, Chigurh's inability to embrace the universal aspect of carnivalesque laughter may also contribute to his status as a perpetual outcast and target of distrust, dislike, and misunderstanding. In his description of the origins of carnival laughter, Bakhtin explains that laughter became a weapon to expose the often ugly truths obscured by medieval seriousness under a mask of fear, intimidation, and violence: "As opposed to laughter, medieval seriousness was infused with elements of fear, weakness, humility, submission, falsehood, hypocrisy, or on the other hand with violence, intimidation, threats, prohibitions. As a spokesman of power, seriousness terrorized, demanded, and forbade. It therefore inspired the people with distrust. . . . When its mask was dropped in the festive square and at the banquet table, another truth was heard in the form of laughter, foolishness, improprieties, curses, parodies, and travesties" (94). With the provision that Chigurh believes his philosophy to be absolutely and universally true, Bakhtin's description of seriousness fits Chigurh surprisingly well, and indicates at least one reason why Chigurh is incapable of exuding the charisma, liveliness, and strength of the ever-popular Judge, who is never in want for admirers, sexual partners, or social company ("He is a great favorite, the Judge," 335). However, even without the carnivalesque reveling in the chaotic overthrow of laws and lives to further his own purposes, whether whimsical or logical, the fact remains that Chigurh is relatively unchallenged and scarcely inconvenienced by the majority of the characters.

Instead of embracing and imitating the whimsical, irrational, and chaotic nature of the universe as understood by the Judge, Chigurh undercuts the carnivalesque by adhering to a strict personal code of principles which allow for a limited, controlled measure of chaos (a coin toss perhaps, which he decides not only whom to offer, but also when, where, and why). His code authorizes him to kill anybody he crosses paths with, based on the fatalistic assumption that everyone he meets has made an inevitable, deliberate sequence of choices and consequences which led to their interaction. He explains this orderly, systematic view of the world to demonstrate his absolution of guilt in his impartial role as Carla Jean's killer: "I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. . . . A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning" (259). If readers take Chigurh's perspective, it is characters like Moss, Bell, and Wells who upset the natural order of the world and prompt Chigurh's appearance as a kind of grim reaper to cleanse, stabilize, and eliminate disorderly individuals from society: Moss falls from hunter to hunted, from a "law abiding citizen" to a "dumb-ass . . . Too dumb to live" (220; 27); Bell's life has been simultaneously blessed and cheated ever since he "was supposed to be a war hero" but "lost a whole squad of men. Got decorated for it. They died and I got a medal" (195); and Wells' casual behavior, lack of preparation, and weakness leads to his death, an outcome that actually surprises and intrigues Chigurh—"You surprise me, that's all. I expected something different . . . Did you hold me in such contempt? Why would you do that? How did you let yourself get in this situation?" (175; 178).

Living in a country where practically everyone is willing to alter their character, behavior, or go to extreme lengths where large amounts of money are involved, Chigurh alone

identifies himself as an unwavering and invariable figure, “someone who is completely reliable and completely honest,” who refuses to “second say the world” no matter the cost, thereby remaining invulnerable (252; 260). Like a god in possession of ultimate knowledge and power over the course of events, he disdains others for claiming to control events—“[People] exaggerate their own capabilities. . . . They pretend to themselves that they are in control of events where perhaps they are not” (253)—yet often speaks as if he has complete control over every situation: “[The satchel] will be brought to me and placed at my feet,” (176); “I’m in charge of who is coming and who is not” (251); “I have no enemies. I dont permit such a thing” (253). This arrogant mindset is shaken, however, when Chigurh inexplicably finds himself injured and at the mercy of lesser opponents such as Moss, stoned teenage drivers, and his own body, which recovers slowly from injuries, requires greater cleanup, patience, and attention than he is used to giving anyone, and leaves him with chafing reminders of his fragility like sore wrists, an aching leg, or a slight limp.

Additionally, while there may be no mortal characters able enough to oppose Chigurh to the point of defeat (although Moss, Wells, and Bell each contribute in their often humorous methods of elusion, insult, and denunciation), he is still subject to the power of universal and supernatural forces beyond his control such as fate, chance, and death. In their impartial, chaotic, and humorous reckonings, these forces are capable of overthrowing Chigurh’s fixed sense of determinism and perception of his dominant place in the world, a fact which he appears to grasp and ignore at the same time. On the one hand, he tells Wells that he is not outside of everything (“Not everything. No,” 177) and he could be referring to himself when he warns against claiming more power than you have: “The prospects of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities. . . . They pretend to themselves that they are in control of events where perhaps

they are not” (253). Yet almost in the same breath, he removes himself from scrutiny, cryptically telling Wells that death “doesn't mean to me what it does to you” (177) and confidently asserting, “I have no enemies. I don't permit such a thing” to the money owner (253).

Whether or not Chigurh realizes and comes to terms with his own vulnerability at the end of the novel is not fully explained; however, in his conversation with Wells he at least shows himself capable of regretting past behavior—“I'm not sure why I did this But it was a foolish thing to do”—and of rethinking his views when they prove incorrect or lead to undesirable outcomes: “Getting hurt changed me Changed my perspective. I've moved on, in a way. Some things have fallen into place that were not there before. I thought they were, but they weren't. The best way I can put it is that I've sort of caught up with myself. That's not a bad thing. It was overdue” (173–75). Ultimately, even if Chigurh does manage to reconcile his strict code and his “one way of life” to the chaotic and dynamic nature of the world, his methods and style in doing so are unimpressively private, simple, and practical. This is particularly obvious when shown in comparison to the epic, triumphant, and passionate speeches and demonstrations of the Judge, which incite riots and massacres and which dramatically threaten to overturn the very foundations of civilization (the “war is god” speech is a particularly pertinent example).

Another element of the carnivalesque which appears but is not fully developed in Chigurh's character is the grotesque. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque is produced through the alteration and exaggeration of characters' bodily appearances which results in parody of the human form and an overdose of depravity as the higher stratum of human intellect and spirit is degraded and debased through contact with the lower stratum of the body: “All the other forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was

linked with the bodily lower stratum” (Bakhtin 20). Violence and murder naturally inspire shock and repulsion, and Chigurh’s partiality for committing murder through particularly unusual or repugnant means (in addition to his odd, cumbersome airtank and captive bolt pistol, he uses a shot gun, birdshot, handcuffs, and of course the iconic coin toss, which adds a sickening twist to the game of chance), his unemotional, unhesitating dispatch of his victims in cold blood, and his objectifying, somewhat sadistic desire to gaze into his victims’ eyes as they die certainly suggest the influence of the macabre.

However, as brutal and horrific as Chigurh’s murders are, they fade and dwindle in comparison to the series of savage, appalling, bloody travesties enacted in *Blood Meridian*, and even to the overwhelming everyday reality of endless death and violence that depresses and frustrates Sheriff Bell. Seen in context with other murderers who flatly acknowledge their indulgence of malevolent desires and their unregenerate natures (“He told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he’d do it again,” 3) or who insult and belittle Bell while proudly claiming their crimes (“I said to him . . . that I was sorry because I didnt think done it and he just rared back and laughed and he said: Where do they find somebody like you? Have they got you in diapers yet? I shot that son of a bitch right between the eyes and drug him back to his car by the hair of the head and set the car on fire and burned him to grease,” 297), Chigurh’s method of murder has a touch of reason, humanity, and dignity to it. While not exactly commendable, Chigurh’s murders are unique and striking enough for Bell to realize that he is neither lunatic nor phantasm—“*This is a goddamned homicidal lunatic, Ed Tom. Yeah. I dont think he’s a lunatic though. Well what would you call him? I dont know*” (192); “He’s a ghost. But he’s out there” (248). Bell comes to view Chigurh as a strange, exotic type of man beyond his experience and abilities—“I reckon

he's a man" (282); "You realize that you have come upon somethin that you may very well not be equal to and I think that this is one of them things" (299). An excerpt of Chigurh's speech to Carla Jean after the ill-fated coin toss reveals a particularly strange, sympathetic, poetic side to his character which never surfaces elsewhere and which hints at the faint existence of relatable humaneness behind his external persona of cool formality and asceticism: "Yet even though I could have told you how all of this would end I thought it not too much to ask that you have a final glimpse of hope in the world to life your heart before the shroud drops, the darkness. Do you see? . . . I'm sorry" (259).

Further evidence distancing the grotesque from Chigurh's methods of murder includes his unusually thoughtful tendency toward tidiness and his generally sophisticated behavior. Unlike the careless, messy massacres and strewn-about carcasses and corpses which accompany violence in *Blood Meridian*, Chigurh makes a concentrated effort to clean up after his handiwork and to not cause needless, widespread destruction: "Would you step away from the vehicle please. . . . Chigurh wiped his hand with his handkerchief. I just didnt want you to get blood on the car" (7); "Chigurh stepped back to avoid the spray of ceramic chips off the tub and shot him the face" (104); "The reason I used the birdshot was that I didnt want to break the glass. Behind you. To rain glass on people in the street" (200). He also maintains a neat, orderly, and tasteful appearance (including a handkerchief and expensive ostrich boots) and is one of a few McCarthy characters whose speech is almost entirely free of emotional breaks, pauses, swears, broken or run-together words, ungrammatical or informal constructions, and extraneous expressions that identify the colloquial habits and identities of other characters, such as "kindly" for Bell or "Yessir" for his two deputies. The resulting human figure does not stand out starkly among men or attract, horrify, or fascinate us to the same degree as does Judge Holden's extreme, irresistible,

and inexplicable personality, but it serves Chigurh's modest purposes in isolating himself from others while simultaneously blending in with the crowd of nameless, numberless others whose backgrounds remain cloaked in mystery and uncertainty.

A final testament to Chigurh's ultimate lacking of the "grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" traits that characterize the grotesque body (Bakhtin 19) is his unremarkable appearance, which is mostly left to the imagination of readers with the exception of two brief, general descriptions from Moss and a boy at the end of the novel, both of which leave readers with the disappointment that there really is nothing unusual to distinguish him from the average profile of an American male Vietnam veteran: "Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly exotic" (112); "Medium height. Medium build. Looked like he was in shape. In his mid thirties maybe. Dark hair. Dark brown, I think. I dont know, Sheriff. He looked like anybody" (292). As opposed to the Judge, whose immense, unforgettable physical presence as the smiling, hairless, naked, infantile giant is depicted every few pages in *Blood Meridian* until it is established as an icon of dread and mystery to characters and readers alike, our impression of Chigurh is vague, subjective, and incomplete, much like the impressions left by his expensive ostrich boots as he limps away to who knows where in his final scene of the novel.

The contrasts between the Judge and Chigurh illustrate both the advantages and disadvantages of the carnivalesque in attacking the structures of society. In *No Country for Old Men*, Chigurh's struggle against the power of forces beyond his control combined with his vulnerability and his fixation on controlling the outcome of his fate results in an uncertain and unimpressive final victory for Chigurh at the end of the novel, devoid of the power and perpetuity of a fully realized employment of the carnivalesque. In *Blood Meridian*, the Judge's employment of the carnivalesque is combined with an absurd outlook which reveals the world to

be a dark, bleak, and terrifyingly permanent liminal space where order, justice, and truth are not restored, but are shaped and fabricated by those who wield the power of witness and have the final say—or rather, the last laugh. Through embracing the unpredictable and disorderly forces of chaos and the carnivalesque, the Judge maintains his status as the ultimate voice of authority and the only character whose voice is never overthrown or silenced. The overwhelming, consuming, near frenetic levels of power and glee represented by the Judge at the end of *Blood Meridian* are paradoxically chaotic and orderly, demonstrating the Judge's moment of triumph as he alone knows and remains to tell the truth about his existence.

CHAPTER 2

Incongruity in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*

The groundwork of incongruity as a theory of humor is found in Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant describes the humorous surprise that results from the negation or sudden reducing of one's expectations. According to Kant, "laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (qtd. in Raskin 31). As Victor Raskin, author of *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, explains, the essential humor of incongruity is found in the "inappropriateness, paradox, dissimilarity," and "the element of surprise" resulting from the negation or sudden altering of one's expectations (31; 33). This type of humor also includes irony—wherein the opposite of what is expected occurs—and the juxtaposition of opposite scripts to create a surprising, contradictory connection. In confronting figures of authority and powers such as death, fate, and chance, the power of incongruity is revealed most strongly in the figure of the Judge, whose appearance, behavior, and significance is so full of contradiction and paradox that it baffles readers and characters alike, defies reason and comprehension, and overwhelms any attempt to definitively analyze and interpret the Judge's character. In contrast, the incongruity exhibited by Chigurh's character is more frustrating and puzzling than powerful: it reveals him to be a silent outsider and an odd, freakish exception to most of the rules and scripts of society, yet leaves us without a deeper understanding of or emotional attachment to his role and destiny in the universe.

It is perhaps unsurprising that incongruity features so prominently in most of McCarthy's novels, which are not often read as primarily comic-driven works and so tend to encourage the sudden, surprising insertion of humor into non-humorous circumstances. Yet the circumstances are so extreme and appalling in *Blood Meridian* as to allow for a more emphatic juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy where it occurs. The "traumatic violence and shocking imagery pushes past

the boundaries of conventional fiction” to produce “uncomfortable moments of laughter tinged with fear” (Owens 15). Such moments are found in eerily exchangeable descriptions such as “laughing and hacking in a welter of gore” (here used to describe the men’s gutting of the antelope) in the sudden change of pace and tone throughout the book, from pages of unhurried description to sudden spontaneous confrontations or dialogue—“Many scenes in the novel may be considered as comic-horror, full of dark satire and gut-wrenching surprises” (McCarthy 43; Owens 15). Yet of all the incongruous pairings in the novel, the biggest surprise is certainly Judge Holden, whose very appearance is almost like some cosmic joke, with “childlike, or rather fetal features . . . repeatedly alluded to through references to his baldness, hairlessness, paleness, smallness of extremities, and nudity” (Guillemin 242).

Far from being limited or abashed by his frequent nudity, hairlessness, and oddly childlike characteristics, the Judge revels in his natural state and uses it to his advantage, resorting to the naked strength of his arms, his “immense and terrible flesh” (333), and even “his pizzle” (131) to extinguish the lives of others along with the traditional use of knives and guns. The meaning of his nakedness is frustratingly difficult to uncover, especially when he seems equally comfortable in a state of refinement (“He was dressed in a suit of gray linen and he wore new polished boots,” 305) as in one of complete disarray (“the judge approaching was clothed in little more than confetti so rent was his costume to accommodate his figure,” 298). At times he is akin to an ancient religious icon, whose eschewing of garments might have some greater spiritual significance of having obtained a higher level of transcendence (“The judge sat upwind from the fire naked to the waist, himself like some great pale deity,” 92). At other times the Judge’s nakedness is vulgar, unsettling, and disturbing, like a savage, dangerous, and even sinister or non-human evil presence in its rejection of one of the fundamental signifiers of civilization:

“Across from him sat the vast abhorrence of the judge. Half naked,” (243). There is a sexual perversity about the Judge’s nakedness which is never explicitly described but hinted at (“They found the idiot and a girl of perhaps twelve years cowering naked in the floor. Behind them also naked stood the judge,” 275), and also a blunt, straightforward practicality in his ludicrous appearance in wild and desolate circumstances which demand that he form such improbable contraptions as a parasol made of rib bones and hide (297) and a “wig of dried river mud from which protruded bits of straw and grass” to protect his head (282). The tangling of these multiple scripts and the mystifying result is illustrated in the Judge’s rescuing of the idiot, who, after being washed and clothed like a civilized person, casts off his clothes and nearly drowns in the river before the Judge comes along, “stark naked himself—such encounters being commoner than men suppose or who would survive any crossing by night,” and saves the idiot in so strangely religious, violent, and charitable an act that McCarthy’s narrator seems baffled at what to make of it: “A birth scene or a baptism or some ritual not yet inaugurated into any canon” (259). In each of these scripts, the Judge wields his body as a shocking, overwhelming, yet ultimately bewildering signifier of himself; his size, both physical and figurative, is too large for him to fit for long into any clothes or categories of meaning that would help us define, understand, and confront his character. It is no accident that he changes and discards clothes as readily as he switches personas from a kindly playmate and “a great favorite” (335) to a murderer and harbinger of death, but retains his nakedness as an emblem of his inability to be contained, deciphered, or subjugated—whether by man, nature, age, or infirmity. Fittingly, at the end of the book he embodies infant and man, hearkening back to the opening line, “See the child. . . . All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man,” (3) and overshadowing the journey of the kid’s manhood with his all-encompassing and consuming presence: “Towering

over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing . . . huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant” (335).

Another instance where the Judge’s incongruous behavior demonstrates his subjugation of authority and death is in the magnification of the awful and terrible nature of his conquests and kills through their enactment as a type of child’s play, game, or ritual. It is clear from the text’s introduction to the Judge that he views life as a game to be played and won by those who know how to manipulate the game and the other players to their advantage: his overthrowing of the Reverend Green by a solemn indictment of his character with ridiculous fabricated accusations (“he was run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat. Yes lady, that is what I said. Goat,” 7) has an element of sport and play to it that immediately illustrates the Judge’s ability to sway audiences in his favor regardless of truth and reason. Even when the Judge reveals that he made up everything, essentially playing an elaborate trick on and making a fool out of everybody—“I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him” (8)—the reaction is laughter, admiration, and recognition (“Finally someone began to laugh. Then another. Soon they were all laughing together. Someone brought the judge a drink,” 8). Throughout the novel he continues to make fools out of others by demonstrating a serious interest in and allegiance to various authorities, and then betraying, abandoning, or vanquishing such authorities with his intelligence and wit, laughing at the dismay and demolition left in their wake: “The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning [the Judge] 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). His declaration of war as the ultimate game with the stakes being the lives of all the players is the most sincere, unchallenged belief that the Judge conveys, and one which darkly allows for only

one winner in the end (“Men are born for games. Nothing else. . . . All games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all,” 249).

The Judge takes his authority to kill from this belief in war as god, declaring that “[the annihilation of the defeated] is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification” (249). The circumstances and descriptions of the Judge’s acts of murder are varied and contradictory in their intent and purpose. His soft-spoken, sophisticated, and enticing manner contrasts harshly and bizarrely with his propensity to commit acts of savagery and perversion without hesitation, such as when he tricks a group of Indians into a trap by pretending to surrender and then coolly, smilingly starts the butchering: “Well it would have brought tears to your eyes. All dead save me, he called. Have mercy on me. . . . he turns to us, the judge, with that smile of his, and he says: Gentlemen. That was all he said. He had the pistols stuck in his belt at the back and he drew them one in each hand and . . . he commenced to kill indians” (134). Nearly as disturbing as the Judge’s calm and comfortable approach towards killing is his actual process of killing, which ranges from the conventional scalping and shooting to acts that are more directly primal, requiring hands-on force and brute strength to execute, including his strange and ambiguous gathering of the kid “in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh” (333). Perhaps the most shocking and jarring murder committed by the Judge is that of the innocent Apache child, a murder which is so irrational and unjust that Toadvine dares to put a gun to the Judge’s head; however, this act fails to intimidate the Judge, who demands, “You either shoot or take that away. Do it now,” and smiles when Toadvine withdraws, defeated (164). While the Judge’s triumph over such a weak victim may seem contemptible, this murder fulfills in part the Judge’s demand that “the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him” in order for him to become a supreme suzerain over the earth and a

dictator over the terms of his own fate (198). His refusal to allow even the smallest, weakest creature on earth to pass unnoticed (“These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us,” 198) demonstrates the indomitable strength of his resolution to defy any standard of decency, morality, reason, or justice that may prevent him from subjugating “whatever exists in creation” (198).

In *No Country for Old Men*, incongruity is found in linguistic and semantic properties of the text wherein “two overlapping scripts are perceived as opposite in a certain sense, and it is this oppositeness which creates the joke” (Raskin 100). While the numerous unexpected, unpredictable, and seemingly contradictory behaviors of Chigurh make him a prominent figure of incongruity, in a perhaps ironic twist, the majority of incongruous verbal humor is expressed by underdog, sardonic, trickster characters such as Wells and Moss, demonstrating the profound influence of incongruous, humorous dialogue and behavior in persuading readers to understand, identify, and sympathize with the opinions and predicaments of these wily, loquacious characters over the more laconic, blunt, and serious character of Chigurh.

There are several external signifiers of Chigurh’s identity that produce an element of surprise and opposition between what readers know about and what they observe from his character. To begin with, the ambiguous first name of *Anton*, whose usage and derivations include German, Russian, French (Antoine, Antonin), Spanish (Antonio), Ancient Roman, and English (Anthony, Tony), to name a few, establishes the exotic and complex, ancient origins of his character, while the last name *Chigurh* is a unique anomaly in its baffling spelling, pronunciation, origin, and meaning—a fact Moss calls attention to when he humorously mistakes it for “Sugar” (152). While readers gather a great deal of external information about Chigurh in addition to his name, such as his age, looks, wardrobe, occupation in the Vietnam War and as a

hit man, and signature habits and routine, they are as nonplussed and frustrated as Sheriff Bell when it comes to organizing these facts to understand and pin down the precise identity and location of Chigurh: “I tried to see if I could get his fingerprints off the FBI database but they just drew a blank. Wanted to know what his name was and what he’d done and all such as that. You end up lookin like a fool. He’s a ghost. But he’s out there” (248). Chigurh’s mysterious, foreign yet familiar identity extends even to his method of transportation, an expensive “brand new Dodge pickup” which is found to have no traceable history in American society: “Truck had been bought in Mexico. Illegal. No EPA or nothin. No registration” (287).

The contradiction between the known and omnipresent yet unknown and undetectable figure of Chigurh is mirrored in the plot’s centering on the thoughts and actions of three male characters who each fail to personally take down his mark and who never directly exchange words with each other (although Chigurh and Moss communicate on the telephone, Chigurh is silent when Moss confronts him in person). The incongruity of seemingly opposite yet overlapping scripts is further emphasized in the book’s introduction of these three characters engaged in unrelated circumstances and activities (Bell reminiscing, Chigurh in handcuffs, and Moss hunting), which surprisingly and suddenly connect over the insertion of three stages of murder (Bell discusses the contemplation of murder, Chigurh carries out an actual murder, and Moss comes upon the bloody aftermath). The punch line is delivered when Moss’s arbitrary act of taking the money links together two opposite and seemingly unrelated characters (Bell and Chigurh), opening up the possibility for further contrast and surprise as all three characters provide different and competing scripts or perspectives on the same series of events.

Further evidence of Chigurh’s decisively incongruous nature is demonstrated by McCarthy’s odd juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory objects or behaviors which initially

surprise and perplex us but may also reveal significant insights about his cryptic psyche that assist in our interpretation of the text. A notable example is found in his employment of an oxygen tank, an instrument used to preserve and prolong life, to power a slaughterhouse bolt gun which he uses to kill his lesser victims in a silent, quick, and disturbing manner, as they typically die before realizing what is happening and responding accordingly. There is also his ambiguous treatment of the gas station attendant, whom he calls “friendo” and banter/toys with (“Will there be something else? the man said. I dont know. Will there? Is there somethin wrong? With what? With anything. Is that what you’re asking me? Is there something wrong with anything?” 53) before causally (yet intentionally) bringing up the dreaded (yet innocent) question: “What’s the most you ever saw lost on a coin toss?” (55). Numerous other contrasts between the noble and trivial abound, including Chigurh’s hinging of the crucial question of life or death on the simple, trivial tossing of a coin, his ironically mundane acts of chewing peanuts (55) or drinking milk (80) while engaging in or preparing to engage in criminal activities (which is later contrasted with his humorous remonstrations of Carla Jean for thinking of commonplace affairs before her death: “They’s bills aplenty left to pay yet I wouldnt worry about it,” 255), and his bizarre demonstration of preferential treatment, politeness, and attachment to some of his victims as he studies their faces and eyes as they die, apologizes to or discourses at length with them beforehand (Carla Jean; Wells), or tries to communicate with them in their final moments (“Chigurh dropped to one knee and leaned on the shotgun and looked at him. What is it? he said. What are you trying to tell me? . . . Can you hear me?” 199). In each case Chigurh becomes a figure of incongruous humor through his strange ability to remain stable as the world dissolves into chaos. To all appearances, he is unperturbed by and separate from the awful proceedings which take place all around him, and which in most cases he has caused. His separation renders

him oddly similar to both the God whom he models his behavior after—who operates impartially and unchangingly (“My word is not dead. Nothing can change that. *You can change it*. I dont think so. Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact. . . . What’s done cannot be undone,” 256)—and to the Satan whom Sheriff Bell believes in, who is interested in creating chaos for unclear reasons (“If you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees . . .”), and who “explains a lot of things that otherwise dont have no explanation” (218).

Not all of Chigurh’s killings are fraught with such sincerity and profundity, however, as illustrated by Well’s description of his disturbingly mundane manner of killing (“He came out into the street and killed every one of the Mexicans and then went back into the hotel. Like you might go out and get a paper or something,” 150) and by the curt, blunt, and wordless manner in which he shoots two men at the scene of the crime right after one of them makes a joke (which becomes much more darkly funny after his own death): “These are some ripe petunias, one of the men said. Chigurh didnt answer. He . . . pulled the pistol from the waistband of his trousers and turned around to where the two men were standing and shot them once each through the head in rapid succession and put the gun back in his belt” (60). Whether Chigurh is aware of the inscrutable, incongruous nature of his actions, words, and persona, or whether he thinks he is engaged in “bona-fide communication, i.e., in the earnest, serious, information-conveying mode of verbal communication,” is unclear (Raskin 100). However, his obstinate refusal to definitively commit to one script (the necessary contextual information to interpret meaning from words) results in dubious conjectures and a feeling of unresolved ambiguity which distances him from the perceptions and sympathies of readers and characterizes him as an uncooperative communicator.

Perhaps the climactic moment of incongruity in the novel occurs directly after Chigurh's patient, serious speech to Carla Jean on the inevitability of events, wherein he confidently and eloquently states, "You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world. Do you see?" (260). To Carla Jean's tearful assent, Chigurh responds, "Good . . . That's good," a statement which is immediately and ironically contradicted with "Not good" in Chigurh's assessment of his own injuries following the car crash that he could not avoid in spite of seeing the vehicle coming and throwing himself in the other direction (260). In an even more amusing twist, the law-breaking Chigurh is not even at fault in the accident; the perpetrators are a couple of Mexican boys who had "been smokin dope" and "run a stopsign" at the speed of "probably about sixty mile a hour" (287). As ruthless and formidable as Chigurh can be in hunting and killing seasoned assassins (Wells), Vietnam snipers (Moss), and ordinary, helpless citizens (Carla Jean), the fact that his plans and person are endangered by three anonymous kids breaking the rules of society is a thoroughly ironic put-down from the universe.

Although the character of Chigurh is by far the oddest, contradictory, and most inappropriate of incongruous juxtapositions, Moss and Wells make a more intimate and lasting connection with readers through the use of incongruous verbal humor and witticisms to communicate a basic idea and to subtly share additional information that attracts and engages our attention, emotions, and sympathy. As Raskin explains, the deliberate use of two overlapping scripts and the resulting ambiguity in Moss and Well's verbal humor demonstrates not only their mastery of natural social behaviors and discourses ("Humor seems to be the next most socially acceptable form of communication in our society after *bona-fide* communication Joke

telling is a cooperative enterprise,” 104), but their empathetic regard for the listener (“[If] the speaker is fully aware of the overlap and the resulting partial or full ambiguity and still proceeds with the text . . . the purpose of the mode he is engaged in . . . is not to convey any information contained in the text he is uttering but rather to create a special effect with the help of the text, namely to make the hearer laugh,” 101) and their cooperative and inclusive approach to social laws and customs: “In many if not most jokes . . . , ambiguity is deliberate and the intention of the speaker includes two interpretations which he wants the hearer to perceive. If both the speaker and the hearer are in the same mode of communication . . . the hearer knows the ‘rules of the game’ and is not only ready to perceive the second interpretation along with the first obvious one but actually is willing to look for it” (115).

From Moss’s introduction as a predator and stalker of wildlife, the irony of which unfolds as he is hunted and shot down by strangers, the ironic and absurd nature of Moss’s predicament is pointed out repeatedly, both through his own sarcastic, matter-of-fact jibes (“You dumb-ass, he said. Here you are. Too dumb to live”; “There is no description of a fool, he said, that you fail to satisfy. Now you’re goin to die”; “It’s all right, he said. You need to be put out of your misery. Be the best thing for everybody,” 27–28) and through unintentionally humorous remarks which have a double meaning that foreshadows or reveals the truth about Moss’s situation. Examples of the latter include his unwitting assessment of his own dilemma when he comments of the last man standing after the showdown, “You aint goin far, he said. You may think you are. But you aint” (15) and when he finds the money and contemplates the permanent effect this momentous occasion will have on the rest of his life before gradually realizing the actual, awful impact of his decision to take it: “His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead” (18); “You live to be a hundred, he said, and there wont be another day

like this one. As soon as he said it he was sorry” (20). A supreme moment of irony occurs when a guard at the border, mistaking Moss’s trouble for a marital spat, helpfully advises him to fix the trivial issue before it becomes unmanageable: “Sometimes you have a little problem and you dont fix it and then all of a sudden it aint a little problem anymore. You understand what I’m tellin you?” *Yessir. I do*” (189).

The type of humor that Moss most often employs is one of dry, odd juxtaposition between his extremely serious situation with ordinary, candid sayings and droll, parodic behavior of a criminal on the lam that invites readers to share his gloomy perspective and at the same time feel comic relief from the situation: “I’m fixin to go do somethin dumbern hell but I’m goin anyways What if I was to not come back? Is them your last words?” (24); “He realized that he would never see his truck again. Well, he said. There’s lots of things you aint goin to see again” (29); “You aint kiddin, are you? Me? No. I aint kiddin a bit. Are we out of preserves?” (50); “Do you live like this all the time? she said. Sure. When you’re a big time desperado the sky’s the limit” (224). Our natural feelings of sympathy, liking, and rooting for Moss develop into respect and compassion for his character when he honorably refuses to cheat on his wife, when he admits when his sharp-edged wit is too insensitive and crude (“I been pickin up young girls hitchhiking and buryin em out in the desert. *That aint funny*. You’re right. It aint,” 231), and ultimately by his utterly noble, deliberate, and futile sacrifice of his own life to try to save that of the young female hitchhiker. Moss’s humor serves a double function in calming and freeing his character of fear and indecisiveness as he accepts whatever has happened and moves on in as positive and optimistic a way as he can, and in conveying to readers that he is a more clever, intelligent, and experienced adversary than McCarthy’s usual targets of violence (such as the kid

from *Blood Meridian*), and as such makes a more enduring and favorable reckoning of himself in the canon.

Wells also uses humor to distract and relieve himself and others from the tension and awful severity that accompanies any discussion revolving around Chigurh, such as in his easy dismissal of Chigurh as an unmanageable threat (“*Just how dangerous is he?*” Wells shrugged. Compared to what? The bubonic plague? He’s bad enough that you called me. He’s a psychopathic killer but so what? There’s plenty of them around,” 141), and in his humoring of Moss’s suspicious, sarcastic, and defensive attitude about being injured by Chigurh (“You look dumbern hell settin there. Wells smiled. Why dont you put them damn flowers down. All right,” 149; “I know how he found me. He wont do it again. Wells smiled. Well good on you, he said,” 154). Though a relatively minor character, Wells establishes himself primarily through lively verbal interactions as more experienced and prudent a character than the average gullible, naïve official. His casual, brief, and humorous approach towards practically every situation (with his own death as a notable exception) has the dual purpose of lulling listeners into a complacent and compliant mode of behavior while he extracts information from them (“Send me up a couple of whores and a fifth of whiskey with some ice. *Sir?* I’m just pulling your leg. You need to relax,” 145) and of concealing his own insecurities and fears about his vulnerability against the unpredictable and irresistible forces of death, luck, and fate (“Are you afraid of this guy? Wells shrugged. Wary is the word I’d use,” 157; “By the old woman’s calendar I’ve got three more minutes. Well the hell with it. I think I saw all this coming a long time ago,” 178). Though he remains a less likable and reputable figure than Moss, Wells distinguishes himself nevertheless as an intriguing, roguish figure who succeeds in quickly tracking down and gaining the trust of Moss (which Bell and Chigurh fail to do) and in gaining enough of Chigurh’s attention and

regard (which Bell fails to do) that Chigurh decides to grant him a personal, private, and prolonged visit (at seven pages, his death scene is the longest in the novel).

Though neither Moss nor Wells triumphs physically over Chigurh, their “easy shift from *bona-fide* communication to joke telling as the most accessible and acceptable form of non-bona-fide communication” endows them with greater knowledge of and experience with the scripts and workings of society in more intimate, sociable, and pleasurable ways than Chigurh appears to achieve in his solitary, aloof path (Raskin 104). This is demonstrated vividly when both characters lose all that they loved, but, unlike Chigurh, are still shown to have cherished and valued life for the wealth of relationships, emotional experiences, and fond memories which they possessed. Moss has had a wife whom he deeply loved, as illustrated in his response to the young hitchhiker’s advances with a humorous yet sincere rebuff: “Well darling you’re just a little late. Cause I done bought. And I think I’ll stick with what I got” (235). He also has a dead mother whom he loves (as another humorous quip demonstrates: “If I dont come back tell Mother I love her. *Your mother’s dead Llewelyn*. Well I’ll tell her myself then,” 24) and a living father who respects and is proud of him (“He was the best riflshot I ever saw. Bar none. . . . He was not in no drug deals. . . . He wasnt raised that way,” 293–294). As for Wells, his death scene is the only one in the novel in which his dying thoughts and memories are poetically and poignantly described, demonstrating the prominence and value—both positive and negative—of key figures, relationships, and events in his life: “Everything that Wells had ever known or thought or loved drained slowly down the wall behind him. His mother’s face, his First Communion, women he had known. The faces of men as they died on their knees before him. The body of a child dead in a roadside ravine in another country” (178).

In contrast, Chigurh disappears and becomes distant when confronted with death (“The man didnt even look at him His thoughts seemed elsewhere He could have been a mute for all that Moss knew,” 112–113), unable to reconcile the ultimate script of opposition—life and death—through any kind of comprehensible verbal or physical expression. His final words in the novel—“Take it. Take it and you dont know what I looked like. You hear?”—and his final action—“They watched him set off up the sidewalk, holding the twist of the bandanna against his head, limping slightly” (262)—fail entirely to recapture the awesome, extreme, and triumphant power of omniscience and dominance over death which the dancing, smiling Judge exudes in the final scene of *Blood Meridian* as he says and shows through his spirited dancing that he will never die. The juxtaposition of their final, lasting impressions further emphasizes the power, confidence, and authority that accompany the incongruous and humorous act of seizing control of one’s own destiny and the fate of others’ lives while surrounded by savagery, uncertainty, and misfortune.

CHAPTER 3

Absurdism in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*

Absurdism evolved as a challenge to reason; according to Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, it "strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (24). Absurdism is therefore a type of incongruity that emphasizes the nonsensical and irrational nature of reality, life, and death that become darkly trivial and humorous when viewed logically as a series of inexplicable and meaningless pursuits. Essential hallmarks of absurdism which Esslin identifies include "the abandonment of the concepts of character and motivation; the concentration on states of mind and basic human situations, rather than on the development of a narrative plot from exposition to solution; the devaluation of language as a means of communication and understanding; the rejection of didactic purpose; and the confrontation of the spectator with the harsh facts of a cruel world and his own isolation" (233). While both the Judge and Chigurh confront the absurd nature of life and death, only the Judge is ultimately able to triumph over death by embracing the whimsicality and demoniac madness found in absurdist comedy.

In *Blood Meridian*, the Judge directly resembles the frustratingly inexplicable mysteries of life and death in that he is an enigma, stripped of conventional identifying markers (no hair, no first name, no past, often no clothes) and taking on enough various personas to conceivably be labeled as prophet, devil, and madman. From the beginning until the end of the novel, "his name, his motives, and even his very existence are inexplicable, often verging on the diabolical" (Jarrett 77). Though the Judge insists on pursuing the art of understanding the universe through his broad education and philosophical sermons, he paradoxically attempts to subdue and extinguish as much of it as he can control. He "spoke of nothing less than the order of the universe, even as he

warned that no human mind could comprehend that order” (Ellis, “No Place,” 8). He ridicules meta-narratives that give structure, purpose, and authority to civilized society, yet the stories he tells are dismissed or misunderstood by those who hear them, and his own life story is a never-ending mystery swallowed up by the “farcical (tragic) comedy of life,” in which all “humans play a secondary role” (Broncano 31). Readers may never learn the deepest and truest reading of the Judge’s character, yet he remains the most certain, fixed, and stagnant of perhaps all of McCarthy’s characters in his consistently undefeated abilities and opinions which sustain him through every sort of unpredictable experience.

The role of death in *Blood Meridian* is as pervasive a theme as the role of the Judge himself, and it is no surprise that death lurks in the background of any situation involving the Judge. The ultimate fear of death governs or motivates every individual and group’s behavior except for the Judge, who uncannily resists being killed on numerous occasions and deals out death in a manner akin to that of the devil, bringing about both literal and figurative deaths of other mortals. The Judge’s association with Satan is made directly and often enough to warrant a comparison regarding the role of the devil wreaking death and destruction upon the world; Reverend Green declares with solemn dread, “This is him. The devil. Here he stands” (McCarthy 7). Tobin calls him a “sootysouled rascal” with pointed “ears like a fox,” and urges the kid to kill him for the sake of saving his own soul, convinced that the Judge will—as he eventually does—destroy him, body and soul (McCarthy 124; 135). The Judge’s uncanny resistance to death calls to mind tales of men selling their souls to the devil in exchange for eternal life, and true to this motif, the “oxymoronic picture of the enormous infant” which the Judge represents “suggest[s] that the Judge has apparently come to monopolize the child motif” (Guillemín 244).

The Judge distinguishes himself more clearly from other men by his attitude towards death than by any other form of behavior—at one point Tobin describes a tense scene where they follow him “solemn as owls” while he “did laugh when he seen our faces” (McCarthy 130). Still, what is so extraordinary about the Judge’s apparent cheating of death is not so much his confidence over avoiding his own death but rather his defiant, gleeful attitude in having caused the death of others. He is “the poet of death” and glorifies it accordingly while laughing in its face at the same time (Owens 62). The power which this defiance supposedly grants him nearly exceeds all comprehension. The audacious claim that he will never die punctuates his transformation into “the mad, murdering god Lucifer, Yahweh, Shiva, a gentleman and a fraud, an eternal form of mankind, well versed in all philosophy, multilingual yet still naked, bestial . . . Last and First Man” (Owens 62).

While McCarthy’s candid, carnivalesque description of the numerous massacres, scalping, and murders in *Blood Meridian* can be misinterpreted as a light and superficial treatment of death, the finality and horror of death do not compete with McCarthy’s forthrightness, but McCarthy rather elevates and complicates the status of humor by using it to horrify, surprise, and provoke readers into finding a way to cope with death. After all, at the end of the novel, the Judge “may go on dancing, but the rest of us are left to clean up the mess, mourn the dead, and tend fences,” which brings readers back to the business of reconciling our lives with the absurdity and mystery that is death (Ellis, “No Place,” 171). Wade Hall’s discussion of McCarthy’s comedy returns to a fundamentally optimistic perspective, arguing that humor can ultimately increase our awareness of the follies of life, and, correspondingly, enhance our ability to cope with life in a positive and gratifying manner. He concludes, “Although humor points up life’s absurdities, it is nonetheless finally about life, not death . . . McCarthy commits

himself through humor to life” (Hall 73). Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the tragic nature of life is ameliorated by the comic nature of death, so that even “the bloodbath McCarthy called *Blood Meridian* may properly be called a comedy of life” (Hall 73). To complete this conversion from tragedy into comedy over the course of life, as the triumphant fiddler of the dance and winner of the game at the end of the novel, the Judge takes on the representation of death as “life’s ultimate absurdity and hence the ultimate comic character” (Hall 73).

Another indication of the role of humor within the context of the theme of death in *Blood Meridian* is evidenced in its emergence as the most powerful and attractive approach to death in contrast with other less satisfactory approaches, including indifference, anguish, religious fervor, bitter defiance and ambiguous silence. The overwhelming number of deaths in *Blood Meridian*, many of which are accompanied by prolonged and intense physical suffering, seems to stifle any hint that there is birth, renewal, or reason for optimism ahead. The world is portrayed as “a strange drama in which the devil fiddles, dances, grins, and wins while the rest of humanity remains ignorant of the proceedings” (Owens xiii). The Judge, however, is an exception; McCarthy’s steadfast depiction of Holden as a “ubiquitous and unstoppable” force from beginning to end makes a convincing case that he might be free from the restrictions and rules applying to mortal men (Sepich 17). He has outlived everyone by the end of the novel, and his already expansive presence ultimately threatens to overtake and overpower the narrative elements of the novel itself as the narrator’s thoughts and voice are swallowed up by attending to the Judge’s words—reported now in the present tense—and it dawns on us that “we are in the continual present of a dangerous immortal” (Ellis, “McCarthy music,” 166). The triumph of the Judge is particularly impressive considering the “inevitable constraint and defeat” which dooms the rest of the gang to meet their deserved, bloody ends—on more than one occasion at the hands

of their own comrades (Ellis, “No Place,” 170). While his path has been one of continual hazard, violence, and moral perversion, the Judge nevertheless presents an attractive alternative to death when compared to the rest of the gang or the unfortunate, unfulfilled kid.

Some may argue that even the Judge is ultimately fighting in vain against the retribution which has overtaken the other doers of violent deeds, that his “malevolent victory dance is eternal only in its general application,” and that his “brag at the end that he will never die represents the brag of the whole species rather than of any one individual” (Owens 56). Whether or not the Judge’s laughter in the face of death is justified or his avowed immortality can or will come to pass, the implications of such an ostentatious claim are significant in their resemblance to absurdist theory’s ultimate deconstruction of humor itself as an unstable, unreliable means of understanding how the world works. Yet if the Judge’s dance, laughter, and smile will not prevent his fate, it will serve just as well if not better than a well-aimed spit to mock and defy the universe for its inability to overthrow the truth of his philosophy.

In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy employs absurdism primarily through the unconventional, unresolved, and undemonstrative nature of his plot, characters, and dialogue in creating a less than fulfilling or goal-oriented sense of accomplishment and progress which rational, conventional narratives seek to convey. The characters of Chigurh and Bell in particular demonstrate a keen awareness of the absurd nature of the universe as Bell struggles to reconcile his beliefs with and as Chigurh effortlessly adapts his philosophy to the idea that traditional societal systems of making meaning—such as language, religion, and morality—are corrupt and unreliable, and that the stark, depressing reality of uncertainty and death is the inescapable truth of the human condition. An examination of Chigurh and Bell’s contrasting methods of coping with the absurd demonstrates the growing prominence of a sense of faith, meaning, and

consummation behind Bell's journey as he seeks for liberation outside of societal systems and ultimately seems to receive a mystic, eternal connection with his dead father and daughter. In contrast, as Chigurh's strict principles and invincible person are shown to be more inconstant and vulnerable than he would have us think, the dwindling certainty of logic, authority, and truth behind his character results in our rejection of his interpretation of the culmination of life in all its experience and diversity as—with luck—the postponement of eventual obliteration and insignificance.

From his startling introduction as an unemotional, terse killer to his quiet disappearance after being the victim of a violent car crash, Chigurh demonstrates his knowledge and acceptance of the absurd nature of the world. His appreciation and manipulation of the role of chance or luck in controlling life, his devaluation of language as a reliable means of clearly conveying truth, and his light, nonchalant approach towards death and pain make him a prominent figure of authority and power through his understanding and use of absurdist principles. However, Chigurh is ultimately thwarted by the absurdity of the world through his failure to fully comprehend and subjugate the power held over him by luck, death, and the character of Sheriff Bell, who becomes Chigurh's main contender in determining the meaning of life as Bell shifts from being the disregarded voice of earthly justice and reason to the prevalent voice of eternal hope and grace.

The significance of luck in determining the outcome of events and the fates of characters is a recurring theme in *No Country for Old Men*, as demonstrated by McCarthy forcing his characters to deal with inexplicable, overwhelming, and unforeseeable circumstances (e.g. Carson's sudden confrontation with Chigurh; Moss's unplanned discovery of the money; Chigurh's unexpected car crash). As Esslin explains, the idea that the world operates beyond our

understanding and that the human condition is one of unpredictable, arbitrary, and meaningless reversals of one's good or ill fortune is a fundamental element in absurdism: "A feeling of helplessness when confronted with the vast intricacy of the modern world, and the individual's impotence in making his own influence felt on that intricate and mysterious machinery, pervades the consciousness of Western man today. A world that functions mysteriously outside our conscious control, must appear absurd. It no longer has a religious or historical purpose; it has ceased to make sense" (Esslin 219–220). Naturally, many characters in the novel are wary of luck and reluctant to accept it as the official, non-negotiable basis for the world's operation: Moss, Carla Jean, and the convenience store owner all initially prefer to assign outcomes in the world to human agency, as demonstrated by Moss's remonstrance to himself to keep a steady head ("All used bills. He sat looking at it. You have to take this seriously, he said. You cant treat it like luck," 23), Carla Jean's reproof of her and Chigurh's attributing both good and bad parts of her life to luck ("She's really my grandmother. She raised me and I was lucky to have her. Well. Lucky dont even say it," 130; "You make it like it was the coin. But you're the one. It could have gone either way. The coin didnt have no say. It was just you," 258), and the store owner's unwillingness to ascribe the high value to the coin toss that Chigurh assures him exists ("I didnt put nothin up. *Yes you did.* . . . I dont know what it is I stand to win What do I want with that? *Take it. It's your lucky coin.* I dont need it. *Yes you do. Take it,*" 56–57). However, after each character is confronted by Chigurh and challenged by forces outside of their control and beyond their comprehensive or apprehensive abilities, they submit to the power and authority of luck—Carla Jean and the store owner both give in and call the coin toss, and Moss revises his earlier dismissive views on luck in a conversation with the hitchhiker: "*I was always lucky. About stuff like that. About meetin people.* Well, I wouldnt speak too soon. *Why? You fixin*

to bury me out in the desert? No. But there's a lot of bad luck out there. You hang around long enough and you'll come in for your share of it" (234). Only Bell and Chigurh appear to appreciate the omnipresence and reality of luck in the most serious of circumstances, though they differ drastically in their reconciliation to this realization.

Chigurh's extreme fascination with and respect of the power of luck is demonstrated in his inclusion of it in the foundation of his very strict and uncompromising philosophy. He goes beyond belief in the mere presence of luck in the world to the belief that he himself is an instrument of the absurd world and a natural force of chance destruction. Accordingly, he fulfills the destinies of others by killing or sparing them when they cross his path—but keeps his personal feelings out of it through unemotional detachment or through means of the impartial coin toss. When confronting Carla Jean, Chigurh's rare appreciation of the (to him) irrationality of Carla Jean's blaming him rather than herself for her death—"I knowed you was crazy when I seen you settin there Chigurh smiled. It's a hard thing to understand," (257)—demonstrates the sincerity of his belief in his role as an instrument of chance and fate. The contradiction of Chigurh's belief in absolute, incontestable luck and his belief in his own control over when and how luck asserts itself becomes problematic when trying to distinguish between choices that have logical, rational antecedents and choices that bring about arbitrary, unpredictable, and unintentional consequences. At one point Chigurh argues deterministically that Carla Jean's choices are directly tied to the consequences she now faces ("Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this," 259), but then he arbitrarily grants her an exception in accordance with his understanding of how the world's chaotic and absurd nature sometimes inexplicably extends rather than destroys life: "I have only one way to live. It doesnt allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps. In this case to

small purpose” (259–60). When Chigurh tells Carla Jean, “You didnt do anything It was bad luck” (257), he overlooks the fact that the choice leading to Carla Jean’s death can be directly traced back either to Moss’s rash refusal of Chigurh’s terms to return the money and die so that Carla Jean will live, or to Chigurh’s arbitrary, unnecessary, and voluntary decision to give Moss an ultimatum wherein either he alone or both he and his wife will die. This contradiction remains with Chigurh throughout the novel as he varies his methods of killing without any particular reason for doing so, alternately questioning, ignoring, deceiving, consoling, or offering the coin toss to his victims after he has already made the decision to place their lives at risk from his personal weapon of choice.

Chigurh’s ultimate inability to master the forces of the world in controlling his own luck is demonstrated when bad luck comes close to destroying him on at least three occasions—when he purposefully allows himself to be arrested for a trivial reason, when he is bested and eventually hurt by Moss, and when he is injured in the car crash. Characteristically, Chigurh survives all three events and refuses to view them as evidence that his will is subject to forces outside his control. He ascribes the change in his perspective after getting hurt to himself entirely—“The best way I can put it is that *I’ve* sort of caught up with myself. That’s not a bad thing. It was overdue” (173; emphasis mine)—and determinedly and stoically behaves as if he were above feeling pain or fear whenever he is injured—“Other than a light beading of sweat on his forehead there was little evidence that his labors had cost him anything at all” (164); “No pain. Not yet” (261); “There was a bone stickin out under the skin on his arm and he didnt pay no more attention to it than nothin” (291). However, Chigurh’s confidence does not prevent the narrator from detailing the physical effects of his injury (“He went gimping down the hallways . . . trying to hurry and winging the bound leg out at his side,” 120; “His leg was throbbing like a

pump,” 161; “His leg hurt,” 172; “[He] staggered to the sidewalk and . . . looked at his arm. Bone sticking up under the skin. Not good. . . . Blood kept running into his eyes and he tried to think. . . . His head was ringing,” 260–261) or lesser characters like Moss or Wells from believing they can handle him (“I can make him go away. *I can do that myself*. I dont think so. *You’re entitled to your opinions*,” 148–149). Whether or not readers are skeptical of or terrified by Chigurh’s version of his own authority and mastery over the absurd and capricious nature of the world, one thing is certain—his exceptional durability and power fall flat in comparison with Judge Holden’s irrefutable supremacy over the absurd world of *Blood Meridian*.

In contrast with Chigurh’s calm resistance to the power of luck, fate, and chance, Bell appears to be at the mercy of luck’s sovereign and calculating whims, such as when he is unable to stop Chigurh, save Moss, Carla Jean, or his fellow soldiers in Vietnam, or stop drugs and criminal behavior from compounding over time. In his depression and helplessness, Bell accepts luck as a signifier of the distressing, unsettling, absurd truth that anything could happen at any time to any one without discernible logic, reason, or meaning attached to it. However, unlike Chigurh, Bell ultimately recognizes and is grateful for the positive as well as the negative effects of this incomprehensible and awesome force which intervenes in the lives of men, demonstrating a ray of hope which is completely absent from Chigurh’s narrative and which comes to stand out more prominently in Bell’s thoughts, beliefs, and dreams: “People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they dont deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did” (91).

While in the case cited above Bell ascribes the good things in his life to God, his overall view of chance is much broader, varying from a mere coincidence that has small bearing on the

nature of the world (“This here was just dumb luck,” 42) to a mysterious, external force which may or may not exert power and influence over our behavior (“I guess you ought to be careful about cussin the dead. I would say at the least there probably aint no luck in it,” 73), suggesting his overall uncertainty of the powers that influence the human condition. However, Bell strongly refutes the meaninglessness and emptiness behind absurdism by asserting that basic goodness and truth continue to survive (“I think that when the lies are all told and forgot the truth will be there yet,” 123; “Does it work? Yes. Ninety percent of the time. It takes very little to govern good people,” 64) and even thrive everywhere in spite of and not due to his futile efforts to contain the bad forces and characters in the world. Inasmuch as Bell follows Uncle Ellis’s advice to see the good in life rather than the bad (“You never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from,” 267), his acceptance of his own futility against the power of luck is a liberating and rejuvenating experience, allowing divine grace to free him of the guilt he bears for not being able to prevent undesirable actions and events from occurring.

The corruption and devaluation of language in communicating and creating meaning is a key element of absurdism which McCarthy uses to explore and contrast the approaches of Chigurh and Bell to understanding the meaning of life and their own occupation in the world. Rather than focus on the linear and logical progression of the characters and plot towards a meaningful and climactic conclusion, the narrative of *No Country for Old Men* alters the traditional purpose of language to clearly and truthfully communicate by frequently switching from one time or viewpoint to another, withholding the narrator’s commentary on the manner, emotion, or meaning of the characters’ words, and mysteriously obscuring or concealing McCarthy’s own voice underneath the sayings and philosophies of the characters. In keeping with Esslin’s description of absurdism, each of these characteristics of McCarthy’s writing

“tends toward a radical devaluation of language [as] what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters” (26). This is not to say that the actions or words of McCarthy’s characters are insignificant; on the contrary, when a character’s words are brief, mundane, contradictory, or ambiguous, every piece of text becomes even more necessary and valuable in our search to create meaning and sense out of the absurd. As Esslin explains, sometimes a messy, vague, unresolved style conveys more information about the frustrating, contradictory, and inexplicable nature of the human psyche by saying less: thus, the raw, vague, confusing text of an absurdist work “remains the clearest and most concise statement of its meaning and message, precisely because its uncertainties and irreducible ambiguities are an essential element of its total impact” (44–45). Both Bell and Chigurh’s absurdist approaches to language compel readers to examine their characters without the aid of conventional social metanarratives and institutions for interpreting reality into meaning. The result of this examination is a clearer understanding of why it is Bell whose beliefs in the meaning and value of existence prevail and endure in the end in spite of the fact that he stands no chance against Chigurh physically.

Unlike the didactic and silver-tongued Judge, Chigurh is primarily a man of action, not words: the first words he speaks in the text do not occur until after he has strangled a deputy and chased down a car, and they are vague, deceptively polite, and misleading: “Sir would you mind stepping out of the vehicle?” (7). He continues to show his disregard for the conventional purposes of language by contradicting his verbal cooperativeness and sociableness as he inquires information of several men at the scene of the shootout and then abruptly, silently shoots them all (60), discoursing at length in a calm, respectful, and rational manner with Wells and Carla Jean before he kills them (178; 260), and disclosing no or very little information through his

language when he is made vulnerable, as demonstrated by his utter, uncommunicative silence when Moss threatens him with a gun (“The man didnt answer. He could have been a mute for all that Moss knew,” 113) and by his verbal preoccupation with only practical, simple matters when he is injured in the car crash (“I need something to wrap around my head and I need a sling for this arm,” 261). In each example, the distance between words and actions and the lack of understanding or cooperation between them demonstrate Harold Pinter’s similar portrayal of disconnection between sound and sense in his absurdist works: “Instead of any inability to communicate there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship” (Esslin 244). Like the Judge, Chigurh displays interest and experience in the way men use words, symbols, and narratives to construct our culture and ideology; however, unlike the Judge, he distances himself from the endless, banal, and contradictory clamor of the masses by remaining a perpetual outsider and detached, almost scientific, investigator on the fringes of society (“Chigurh watched him. Then he shot him in the back,” 121). Even when Chigurh is isolated in a hotel room for five nights, readers come no closer to discerning the true nature of his character while he, meanwhile, continues to silently and methodically observe the world and wait for the right time to act: “He kept the television on and he sat up in the bed watching it and he never changed channels. He watched whatever came on. He watched soap operas and the news and talk shows” (165).

The absurd and meaningless effect of language is clearly shown in Chigurh’s last conversations with Wells and Carla Jean, both of whom futilely use words to bargain, plead, insult, and call him crazy before they die. In the case of Wells, Chigurh distances himself from their conversation by labeling it as such (“*Do you have any notion of how goddamned crazy you*

are? The nature of this conversation? *The nature of you,*” 175), shows greater interest in Well’s actions than his words (“You think that as long as you keep looking at me you can put it off,” 176; “You think you wont close your eyes. But you will,” 177), notes the distance between words and their meaning (“They always say that. But they dont mean it, do they?”), and finally contradicts Well’s verbal assertion that he has three more minutes to live “by the old woman’s calendar” by killing him while the “new day was still a minute away” (178). In the latter case, Chigurh devalues his own words (“I had no say in the matter,” 259) and overrules Carla Jean’s assertion that ethical ideas can prevent actions from taking place: “*You’re just a blasphemer. Hard words. But what’s done cannot be undone*” (256). Though he speaks more graciously and tenderly to Carla Jean than to Wells or any other character (“You’ll be all right. Try not to worry about it,” 257), the brutal and indisputable result of actions—such as whether the coin lands heads or tails, whether Carla Jean calls heads or tails, and Chigurh’s pulling of the trigger—remains the same. While these two examples demonstrate Chigurh’s clearest and most honest attempts to explain his philosophy through language, the lack of verbal and ideological cooperation and understanding between Chigurh and the other characters—i.e. the “difference of opinion” that he tells Moss was had between himself and Wells (183)—undermines his efforts to show the logic, meaningfulness, and truth that he believes to be behind his actions. Ultimately the effect of the contrast between Chigurh’s plain, controlled manner of speaking and his unpredictable, unchecked, violent actions is to complicate and distort (rather than illuminate) the meaning of truth by portraying things one way in the words and thoughts of man and another way in the actions of man and the events in the world.

Bell likewise struggles with the inadequacy of language to express meaning and truth as he often backtracks, qualifies, or generalizes his words rather than make an untrue or overly

specific statement—"I told the man I thought I'd stick with what I had. That aint always a good policy. But it aint always a bad one neither" (62). Suspicious and doubtful of ever being able to represent the truth to himself or to others, Bell notes that the persuasive power of language can manipulate him against his own better judgment and knowledge ("I keep waitin to hear somethin else. Maybe I will yet. Or maybe not. It's easy to fool yourself. Tell yourself what you want to hear. . . . I aint sure anymore what it is I do want to hear. You tell yourself that maybe this business is over. But you know it aint," 248). Furthermore, he laments his inability to cooperatively and productively engage in communication with persons so immoral and insensate that their inner psyche is alien to him: "He was not hard to talk to. Called me Sheriff. But I didnt know what to say to him. What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul? Why would you say anything?" (3-4).

Bell's conscious awareness of how little he is able to prove or state with certainty and his inclination to keep his understanding of truth as basic and factual as possible places him in common with modern absurdist theater, which "has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being" (Esslin 25). Yet in spite of his ever cautious and unsure perspective on the issues that most concern him, Bell remains one of McCarthy's most forthcoming and straightforward characters. His musings and reminiscences provide intimacy and respite from the cold, rational, objective viewpoint accompanying Chigurh's narrative as he persists in striving to intuit the human condition as fairly and fully as he can. Much like the creative and insistent energy which fuels the writings of dramatists of the absurd to intuit and confront the truth of the human condition, Bell is ultimately reassured and empowered rather than weakened through his confrontation with the totality and absurdity of meaning and language

as he reduces (and paradoxically, magnifies) the fundamental problem of and solution to the human condition to a paragraph:

“My daddy always told me to just do the best you knew how and tell the truth. He said there was nothin to set a man’s mind at ease like wakin up in the morning and not havin to decide who you were. And if you done somethin wrong just stand up and say you done it and say you’re sorry and get on with it. Don’t haul stuff around with you. I guess all that sounds pretty simple today. . . . I might of strayed from all of that some as a younger man but when I got back on that road I pretty much decided not to quit it again and I didnt. I think the truth is always simple. It has pretty much got to be. It needs to be simple enough for a child to understand” (249).

Whether or not Bell is right, his shift from depressed witness of tragedy to determined participant in absurdist comedy is a rhetorical triumph over Chigurh’s version of the world’s dreary descent into further violence, confusion, and immorality. Furthermore, Bell’s transformation closely resembles Esslin’s optimistic interpretation of Samuel Beckett’s absurd play *Waiting for Godot*, wherein the recognition of the “illusoriness and absurdity of ready-made solutions and prefabricated meanings, far from ending in despair, is the starting point of a new kind of consciousness, which faces the mystery and terror of the human condition in the exhilaration of a new-found freedom” (Esslin 88). By the end of the novel, Bell’s yearning for the simplicity, consistency, and mystery of truth has already begun to be realized as he undertakes to return to a mythological, primitive sense of the purpose of life and his own role in watching for and following his father’s fire.

The issue of how to approach or reconcile oneself to death is a critical topic in absurdism and in *No Country for Old Men*. In absurdism, death presents the greatest challenge to mankind’s

cry for value and relevance in its universal and unchangeable decree that all life will end and decay, thus reducing the meaning of life to “man engaged in purposeless exertions, in a futile frenzy of activity that is bound to end in senility and death” (Esslin 117). In contrast with existentialist thinkers, where the point of life becomes for man to rally his faculties and dutifully press on after facing the nothingness and meaninglessness of his own existence, absurdism wallows uproariously and gloomily in its recognition of the futility and absurdity of every symbol, feeling, or articulation which claims to have truth and meaning. As a result, laughter and sorrow occur simultaneously as absurdist thinkers continually re-discover ignorance, silence, and obliteration at the pinnacle of life. This collapsing of tragedy and comedy into one another is demonstrated in Esslin’s description of Eugène Ionesco’s play *Jeux de Massacre* (1970; “Killing Game” in the American translation): “As the number of characters who die in a loose sequence of sketch-like scenes increases the mechanical succession of deaths does become funny, so that the play can be described as a riotously hilarious Dance of Death, a powerfully grotesque and at the same time tragic image” (185). A similar image of simultaneous comedy and tragedy is conveyed in *No Country for Old Men* with Ellis’s use of a distressing yet oddly funny metaphor in describing how he came to grips with his futile struggle against death and violence: “All the time you spend tryin to get back what’s been took from you there’s more goin out the door. After a while you just try and get a tourniquet on it” (267). When confronted with the stark, blank reality, unfairness, and horror of death, no two characters so fully, openly, and successfully confront the absurd nature and purpose of death on a universal scale as do Sheriff Bell and Chigurh. While both characters counter the cycle of absurdism in remaining literally alive, Bell ends the novel as the more figuratively and spiritually alive, renewed, and liberated character as he reconciles his limited understanding of the current, absurd state of the world with his dreams

and hopes for the existence of eternal truth and life through perceiving and accepting the gift of divine grace.

With his presumably perfect record of zero living enemies in the world, Chigurh appears to have more understanding of and experience with death than any other character in the novel. While his resolute, unemotional tactics of killing others cause many to think of him as a cold-blooded psychopath without empathy or rationality, absurdism offers a more probable explanation for Chigurh's approach to death as a way to realize and liberate himself from the absurd nature of the world. Chigurh's intuition and dismissal of the ultimate absurdity of death through indifference and casualness (a humorous contrast with the fear, denial, and despair which others demonstrate) falls under Eugène Ionesco's discussion of how laughter functions in reconciling us to the absurdities of the world: "Humour makes us conscious, with a free lucidity, of the tragic or desultory condition of man. . . . To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying. . . . Logic reveals itself in the illogicality of the absurd of which we have become aware. Laughter alone does not respect any taboo, laughter alone inhibits the creation of new anti-taboo taboos; the comic alone is capable of giving us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence" (Esslin 192). In recognizing the futility and absurdity of spending life struggling against and avoiding that which is inevitable, Chigurh frees himself to concentrate on his simple lifestyle of killing and living without being inhibited by the psychological fear of death or by societal constraints of morality and justice.

Another element of absurdity is highlighted by the sheer number and variation of murders associated with Chigurh. The different methods, circumstances, and commentaries on the real-time murders, near-murders, and past murders involving Chigurh open up a plethora of contradictory and convoluted implications about his true perspective on the meaning of death,

highlighting “the tragic difficulty of becoming aware of one’s own self in the merciless process of renovation and destruction that occurs with change in time” (Esslin 70). In many instances the reasons Chigurh gives for killing are practical, simple, and unemotional (“I just didnt want you to get blood on the car,” 7; “I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will,” 174–175; I have no enemies. I dont permit such a thing,” 253; “I gave my word,” 255), suggesting his repression or denial of the awful weight, meaning, and tragedy that is historically, culturally, and psychologically ascribed to death. However, his encapsulation of the ultimate, epic battle between life and death in simple, routine expressions (“I’m here and you are there. In a few minutes I will still be here,” 175; “[Your life] had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end,” 260) could also be used to argue that ordinary, commonplace facts and events like breathing and surviving are actually more meaningful and valuable than everything else humans spend their lives pursuing. As for his own personal death, his silent, untroubled, near-death encounter with Moss suggests that he perceives it as an inevitable, ordinary, meaningless event and accordingly approaches it without apparent concern or awe (“The man didnt even look at him. He seemed oddly untroubled. As if this were all part of his day,” 112), yet he cryptically states that and continually acts as if his view of death is special and different from the rest of society (“*You’re not outside of death*. It doesnt mean to me what it does to you,” 177). His extraordinary survival of hazardous confrontations reflects admirable physical superiority and vitality which thwarts death on the surface, but his demonstrated vulnerability in the car crash and the exchange of gunfire with Moss cause us to question the truth behind his appearance of mastering death. Ultimately, Chigurh’s ambiguous and irresolute confrontations with the absurdity of death leads us to a place beyond both hope and despair, where the comic intuits and exposes the awful truth but “offers no way out” (Esslin 192).

Bell also frankly recognizes and accepts the undeniable presence and power of death, but assigns the terror of personal and physical oblivion relatively small significance in comparison with the much more devastating death of the soul. Many of Bell's thoughts and conversations on physical death contain an element of dry, absurd humor which both amuses and disturbs him, as in his reminiscence of the deaths of death row prisoners ("You see somebody ever day sometimes for years and then one day you walk that man down the hallway and put him to death. Well. That'll take some of the cackle out of just about anybody," 63). As he reproves his deputies for lightheartedly joking about death ("You all dont be makin light of the dead thataway," 44) and goes out of his way to treat a dead redtail hawk with respect ("He wouldnt have the trucks running over it," 45), he demonstrates his awareness of and continual struggle against the callous invincibility and apathetic soullessness that comes from humorously mocking and deriding the sacred and serious too often or too carelessly.

Bell's sensible, serious, and resigned approach to physical death is candidly and simply stated at the beginning of the novel—"I always knew that you had to be willin to die to even do this job. . . . Not to sound glorious about it or nothin but you do" (4). This view is developed and reiterated in Bell's concise and pragmatic views on the deaths of guilty strangers ("Whatever they were the only thing they are now is dead," 73), in his acceptance of Ellis's similarly succinct summary of the demise of Uncle Mac ("He was shot through the right lung. And that was that. As they say," 270), and in his wishing to leave behind the limitations, ailments, and regrets of his own physical life ("Bell tried to think about his life. Then he tried not to," 269; "If I was supposed to die over there doin what I'd give my word to do then that's what I should of done . . . And some part of me has never quit wishin I could go back," 278; "I agreed with him that there wasnt a whole lot good you could say about old age," 281). In contrast, Bell's fearful

anxiety over the widespread and gradually degrading influence of uncontrollable external pressures and appetites like drugs, promiscuity, violence, desire, and selfishness highlights his essential worry over how humans are to reconcile themselves to the meaninglessness of what they do, say, and believe, and what is true, good, and eternal. Like a character from absurd dramatist Eugène Ionesco's plays, Bell is forced to confront the "loneliness and isolation of the individual, his difficulty in communicating with others, his subjection to degrading outside pressures, to the mechanical conformity of society as well as to the equally degrading internal pressures of his own personality . . . [and] the anxieties arising from the uncertainty of one's own identity and the certainty of death" (Esslin 197).

Fortunately, Bell is not alone in his efforts: his sense of companionship and connection with his father and Loretta and his growing reassurance in the existence of incomprehensible good as well as evil in the universe penetrates the darkness of his absurd bewilderment to show him how to freely and authentically experience existence and how to accept both life and death with grace and dignity. At one point Bell even wryly implies he would have succumbed to death, emptiness, and despair a long time ago without the invigorating and inspirational presence of his wife Loretta, whom he heeds, esteems, loves, and gives supreme credit to for his existence, both humorously ("Just dont come home dead some evenin, she said. I wont put up with it. I better not do it then," 138) and seriously ("If I didnt have her I dont know what I would have. Well, yes I do. You wouldnt need a box to put it in, neither," 305).

CONCLUSION

Coming to terms with the pervasive influence of comedy in McCarthy's writing is an essential step if readers wish to attain an enlightened understanding of the underlying motivations and limitations of his characters. In featuring humor as a significant and essential part of understanding life and death from the viewpoint of villains as well as heroes, McCarthy not only validates the study of humor as an essential component to understanding life, but also demonstrates the versatile and virile nature of humor as a means of attaining power and influence over the development of characters and circumstances. Part of Judge Holden's formidable reputation as the most unassailable, malefic and maniacal antagonist in the canon of McCarthy literature is due to his expansive persona and his inability to be categorized into a single definition. However, the Judge's confrontation with authority and death establishes an unparalleled example of how theoretical methods and manipulations of comedy function practically to produce a weapon more clear and cutting than his pistol or his philosophical arguments may prove to be.

Clearly, McCarthy's inclusion of carnivalesque, incongruous, and absurdist comedy in *No Country for Old Men* extends to a larger number of characters and retains an overall smaller influence than the Judge's application of these theories. However, comedy continues to play a prominent role in defining and determining the essential strengths, weaknesses, and outcomes of confrontations between the competing philosophies of Chigurh and his opponents. As Chigurh eliminates and destroys the lives of others with authority and conviction, his inability to control and thrive in the grotesque, unexpected, and absurd nature of the universe exposes the ultimately pathetic, uncertain nature of his bleak, lonely existence. As for Chigurh's mortal opponents—who already achieve priority over the Kid in their possession of names, relationships, and

demonstration of psychological, emotional, and intellectual depth—they are all successful to some extent in challenging or frustrating Chigurh’s philosophy, whether it be verbally (as in Wells’ constant contempt of Chigurh and in his verbal ordering of Chigurh to kill him merely to deny Chigurh the full satisfaction of doing so without Wells’ consent) physically (when Moss has the opportunity to kill Chigurh), emotionally (when Carla Jean arouses his empathy and offer of a coin toss), or ideologically (when Bell rejects his empty nihilism for a view of mystical, familial eternity). However, ultimately the endings of all the characters’ stories in *No Country for Old Men* are abrupt, incomplete, and unfulfilling as they are all shown to be fallible and susceptible to chaotic and irrepressible sources of power which subvert, contradict, and bewilder their version of the way life is and is supposed to be.

In the end, readers are left with competing responses of disappointment that such evil has taken place while goodness has perished and relief that evil has ceased for the time being while goodness has not entirely faded from the narrative. Unlike the Judge’s all-encompassing, definitive, and terminative triumph over forces of nature and man alike at the end of *Blood Meridian*, the triumphant force at the end of *No Country for Old Men* is undetectable, unverifiable, and immortal; it waits ahead in the future, somewhere in the coldness and darkness, with either a warm fire or a cold heap of ashes.

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