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**WHAT ELSE CAN NATURE MEAN:  
AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CORMAC  
MCCARTHY'S FICTION**

*Kateřina Kovářová*

**Abstract**

Cormac McCarthy's natural imagery has always attracted critical attention as a significant aspect of his fiction, since the mere volume of natural descriptions indicates their importance in the texts. However, McCarthy's nature was broadly perceived as symbolic, or as a setting device embedding the works in the environments of Tennessee and the West. McCarthy's natural imagery was first thoroughly studied by Georg Guillemin and Dianne C. Luce in their monographs *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004) and *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (2009). Since then, other critics such as Andrew Keller Estes have explored various aspects of McCarthy's natural imagery and the relationship between the human and non-human world and contributed to discussion on McCarthy's natural environment and its functions in the texts.

Following ecocritical theoretical framework of Lawrence Buell who suggests understanding nature and culture as inseparable domains with mutual influence instead of seeing them as isolated counterparts, this paper argues that reading McCarthy's novels with environmental awareness significantly alters their interpretation. The analysis of McCarthy's method of describing the natural environment and processes demonstrates that McCarthy's nature should not be interpreted as a purely aesthetic object, but rather as a means towards the revision of American history, and that his critical stance towards anthropocentrism reveals the ethical orientation of his fiction.

**Keywords**

Cormac McCarthy; ecocriticism; nature; culture; environmental ethics; anthropocentrism; Lawrence Buell

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MCCARTHY'S singular vision was already fully formed in his first novel. His insistence on time, on the rhythm of the seasons, the phases of the moon, and most of all the evening redness in the West, manifests itself in almost the first image of *The Orchard Keeper*, and in the last, and rises to its most extreme pitch in *Blood Meridian*. (Hodge 2006, 67)

In his review for *Harper's Magazine*, Roger D. Hodge highlights two significant aspects of Cormac McCarthy's natural imagery: the links among the individual novels and "McCarthy's singular vision" (Hodge 2006, 67) of nature. McCarthy's natural imagery has always attracted both readers and critical attention as a significant aspect of his fiction, since the mere volume of natural descriptions indicates their importance in the texts. However, nature used to be perceived as a symbol or as a mere setting device embedding the works in their Tennessean and Western environments. Many studies seemingly focused on the place or other environmental aspects in fact "use environment to 'explain' the characters wandering through McCarthy's landscapes" (Estes 2013, 18). McCarthy's natural imagery as such was first thoroughly studied by Georg Guillemin and Dianne C. Luce in their monographs *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004) and *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (2009). Since then, other critics such as Andrew Keller Estes explored various aspects of McCarthy's natural imagery and the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds and contributed to the discussion on McCarthy's natural environment and its functions in the texts. This paper focuses on the depiction of nature in McCarthy's fiction and its significance for the interpretation of the works, emphasizing topics that recur throughout his literary career. While each of the novels would deserve an analysis of its own, this study predominantly analyses characteristics significant for more than one novel in order to expose the ethical orientation of McCarthy's fiction.

## **1. The Ecocritical Perspective**

Ecocriticism is the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 1996, xviii). William Rueckert coined this term in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978, where he suggests inviting ecology to literary criticism as one of the possible ways to approach a literary text.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1970s, the discussion on ecology, the natural environment, and the impact of humanity on the Earth has begun to form an integral part of public debate as well as various academic disciplines such as psychology or sociology. Yet in the field of literature this topic has been rather marginal up to the 1990s with no systematic approach and only a smattering of essays (Glotfelty 1996, xvi). Cheryll Glotfelty further theorizes on the subject matter of ecocritical enquiry:

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<sup>1</sup> Although Rueckert's text is an early example of ecocriticism, it already foregrounds several crucial topics, e.g. the ethical dimension of ecocriticism and the issue of anthropocentrism (Rueckert 1996, 106–107).

“Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (1996, xix).<sup>2</sup> Ecocriticism deliberately avoids creating a rigid set of rules and embraces a plurality of approaches; therefore, it is more defined by the similarity of its topics rather than by a uniformity of methodology. However, environmental critic Lawrence Buell established the following four criteria of an environmental text:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. [...]
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. [...]
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation. [...]
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (Buell 1995, 7–8)

While being more of an idea of how “potentially inclusive *and* exclusive the category of ‘environmental’ is” (Buell 1995, 8), these criteria imply four main issues that ecocriticism addresses: the urge to stop marginalization of nature in literary studies (and in our thinking in general), the issue of anthropocentrism,<sup>3</sup> humankind’s responsibility towards the natural environment, and the necessity to see nature in a different way than a mere aesthetic device or symbol, which is another way of appropriating it and of using it as a commodity.

All Buell’s notions are present in McCarthy’s fiction in various forms. However, an expectation to find a clear agenda in McCarthy’s fiction is bound to be disappointed by its employment of “the illusion of ethical neutrality in its narrator” (Luce 2017). The meaning must be co-constructed by the reader, because McCarthy’s subtle hints are often easy to overlook. This paper aspires to discuss the techniques McCarthy uses in his natural descriptions and to demonstrate how his natural imagery reinterprets American history and challenges the anthropocentric attitude.

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<sup>2</sup> Ecocriticism suggests abandoning the nature/culture binary and perceiving these concepts in terms of scale rather than opposition because of the mutuality of their relationship. Therefore, the boundary between these concepts is in flux, which impedes their definitions.

<sup>3</sup> Anthropocentrism is an “assumption or view that the interests of humans are of higher priority than those of nonhumans” (Buell 2005, 134), placing humankind at the centre of the world and establishing it as a norm.

## 2. McCarthy's Natural Imagery

In this paper, the word nature refers to “the material world, sometimes but not invariably including human beings” (Buell 2005, 143). In the context of McCarthy’s work, it is important to distinguish between nature and landscape, which “typically implies a certain amplitude of vista and degree of arrangement [... and] the totality of what a gaze can comprehend from its vantage point“ (Buell 2005, 143). Nature in McCarthy’s fiction is not limited to landscape imagery. On the contrary, the author emphasizes the complexity, interdependence, and dynamics between the environment and its inhabitants. Both living and non-living elements belong to it, as well as the relations between them and processes which might be invisible to the observer. This paper does not want to eliminate or hierarchize, but rather to enhance the diversity and multi-level character of McCarthy’s natural imagery. Hence the aspect of the nature definition which Timothy Morton considers problematic in his *Ecology without Nature*, that “nature is both the set and the contents of the set” (Morton 2007, 18), is actually necessary for understanding its complexity in McCarthy’s case. While Buell’s definition might seem quite general, it attempts to avoid the nature-culture binary, which is usually the basis of definitions of both nature and culture.

Like all natural imagery in literature, McCarthy’s natural descriptions are culturally produced. Despite his thorough knowledge of the regions he writes about, the novels are still literary works which do not simply pretend to document or imitate the actual locations. McCarthy often uses anthropomorphism,<sup>4</sup> figurative language, or prose poems in his depictions of the natural environment. However, the anthropomorphism is not used in order to make nature more likeable and enable the reader to sympathize with nature by approximating it to them, but it is rather a method used to distort and destabilize the nature-culture binary still prevalent in Western culture. Even though McCarthy’s writings are inspired by the tradition of nature writing, literature is not the only medium influencing their natural imagery. According to Dianne C. Luce, the techniques used in landscape descriptions in *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985) frequently correspond with luminism and other forms of 19<sup>th</sup> century art (Luce 2017). Stacey Peebles points out that “[t]hroughout McCarthy’s career he has also been invested in writing for film and theater and so has been more engaged with media and performance than has been assumed. In addition to novels, he is the author of five screenplays and two works for theater, and he has been deeply involved with three of the seven film adaptations of his work” (Peebles 2017, 2). I believe that the influence of art

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<sup>4</sup> Attributing human characteristics to the non-human.

and film as visual media affect McCarthy's use of natural descriptions, transforming them into a means designed to convey meaning.

The character of the natural description is defined both by the observer and the observed. While in his novels McCarthy employs a seemingly ethically neutral omniscient narrator, this perspective is frequently replaced by a view focalized through a character. The narrator often describes a scene, a vast area, from a distance, where the reader is given a privileged position (this perspective corresponds with Buell's above-mentioned definition of landscape). These images frequently precede or follow some violent action and provide a moment of contemplation and "for their duration, such landscapes are focalized from a static vantage point while the narrator's eyes move over the elements of the scene" (Luce 2017). The narrator becomes a sort of lens for the reader, transcribing what is there to be seen, seemingly unbiasedly as if becoming a device to mediate the image, i. e. a camera. See one of the opening images of McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965):

East of Knoxville Tennessee the mountains start, small ridges and spines of the folded Appalachians that contort the outgoing roads to their liking. The first of these is Red Mountain; from the crest on a clear day you can see the cool blue line of the watershed like a distant promise.

In late summer the mountain bakes under a sky of pitiless blue. The red dust of the orchard road is like powder from a brick kiln. You can't hold a scoop of it in your hand. Hot winds come up the slope from the valley like a rancid breath, redolent of milkweed, hoglots, rotting vegetation... (McCarthy 2010a, 10)

The passage continues and after several paragraphs easily transforms into the history of the central community of the novel. Being an opening passage, it clearly states a very exact location in the novel, partly based on real places, partly fictional.<sup>5</sup> The area is portrayed from a vantage point, possibly distant. The omniscient narrator evokes an image of an undisturbed place which is shared only with the reader, thereby giving them a privileged position. Hence the emphasis on "you," on a place where there could be "one," which is not neutral but highlights this privilege of the reader. Yet the undisturbed place is not spared the human impact in the form of roads that permeate the landscape. The perspective changes as the overview of a vast area is followed by an immersion into the place in the following paragraph. A natural sense of time is implied by the mention of the season. The unstable boundary between nature and culture is established by a link between a wind and the breath. The visuality of the first paragraph is varied by other senses, touch and olfaction.

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<sup>5</sup> Red Mountain in the novel is based on Brown Mountain in Tennessee (Luce 2009, 1).

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When the description is focalized through a character of the novel, their historical context, point of view, psychology, and emotion come into play. The character's view is more frequently used in a scene where the character is surrounded by the natural environment or interacts with it, although they might also be seeing a vast area. These descriptions often lack any sense of appreciation or contemplation but focus more on emotion or on a psychological reaction provoked by the natural environment that can be either positive or negative. The bodily sensations tend to occur in this kind of description since the characters not only see nature but also hear, touch, and smell it as in the following excerpt from McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark* (1968), where Culla Holme, the novel's protagonist, enters a forest:

He came down out of the kept land and into a sunless wood where the road curved dark and cool, overlaid with immense ferns, trees hung with gray moss like hag's hair, and in this green and weeping fastness birdcalls he had not heard before. He could see no tracks in the packed sand he trod and he left none. (McCarthy 2010b, 122)

While the passage is narrated by the third-person narrator, Culla's experience is emphasized. The narrator highlights what Culla sees, hears, and feels, engaging him in the description. The mediated stimuli are a feature that recurs throughout the novels: the senses of the characters become ours and we join their experience. The nature-culture binary is established by crossing from the "kept land" to the wood, but it is immediately distorted with the image of moss hanging "like hag's hair." The lack of light creates tension between the beauty of the place and its possible dangerousness. The environment in this passage is not a silent and picturesque scenery seen from a distance, it is depicted in its complexity, even mentioning the organisms living in the environment.

The combination of narrator's and characters' views enables McCarthy to describe nature from different perspectives, to provide both the revisionist 20<sup>th</sup> century point of view influenced by two world wars and the environmental crisis, the immediate experience and impressions of a human being surrounded by nature, and the prevalent perspective on nature from the time in which the novel is set. This density of natural imagery also puts an emphasis on the reader. The references and changes in tone are quite easy to overlook, which shows how much their interpretation depends on the reader, who must follow McCarthy's technique. Dianne C. Luce comments on the role of the reader:

McCarthy expects so much from his readers that his works sometimes seem to be written for a specialized local audience, an audience of insiders. Read

with a knowledge of place, the works open out in unsuspected ways, and what may seem merely a realistic detail relegated to the hazy background of McCarthy's fiction – the displacement of a small landowner, a temperance parade, a flooded river, a passing reference to White Caps, a comically corrupt justice of the peace—comes into focus as a newly perceived foreground, one that was always there to be recognized. (Luce 2009, vii–viii)

The reader recognizes the subtle differences in descriptions and understands when the voice belongs to the narrator and when it is focalized through the character, which changes the meaning. Readers are expected to recognize the references and hints that uncover the ethical and ecological dimensions of the texts. Moreover, the details Luce lists frequently provide valuable information of a certain historical moment or social situation which is influenced by, or influences, the natural environment, such as the exploitation of natural resources, the extermination of a species, or the industrialization of the area. Nature is part of the action, of the plot, of the characters' actions and doings. Nature and culture influence one another constantly, frequently with serious consequences.

### 3. A New Perspective on American History

Traditionally, the history of the westward expansion tends to focus on the advancement of civilization and on humankind, excluding the nonhuman. In *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) Roderick Nash points out the significance of nature and particularly the concept of wilderness for American history and calls it “the basic ingredient of American civilization. From the raw material of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give that civilization identity and meaning” (Nash 1979, xv). The specifics of American nature were a crucial aspect that immensely influenced its history both on regional and national scales. McCarthy's fiction reflects this fact, providing a revisionist commentary implicating the human history in the natural one (Buell 1995, 7) as another facet of the nature-culture interdependence.

McCarthy's vision of history and of the advancement of American civilization does not correspond with the nationwide myth of a victorious process of claiming the promised land. His revisionist view narrates a different story, a story of conquest and destruction. While the Southern novels contain hints of the history of the region, the most complex vision of history is depicted in *Blood Meridian*, a novel set in the middle of the westward expansion. Luce comments on the fact that the landscape imagery in the novel destabilizes the ethos of the West:

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McCarthy's landscapes are not the renderings of the pastoral or picturesque or even the sublime west distributed to curious nineteenth-century Americans in the cultural centers back east. Rather, they tend to deconstruct and deromanticize the mid-nineteenth-century west and the imperialism that claimed, tamed and absorbed it as part of America. (Luce 2017)

McCarthy uses a view of nature culturally constructed through the visual arts and uses it to reinterpret the westward expansion, traditionally understood in terms of achievement and triumph, as a form of destruction leading to a major environmental crisis, thus suggesting a perspective on westward expansion as a crucial moment in American history with regard to the mutual influence of humanity and nature. Arguably, this expansion into the natural environment has never stopped, as is apparent in the Border Trilogy. What Cormac McCarthy does most noticeably in *Blood Meridian*, which reappears throughout his work, is to reframe American history from a different angle, from the environmental point of view. In this aspect McCarthy's perspective on the westward expansion in *Blood Meridian* strongly resembles a perspective several years later employed by New Western Historians.<sup>6</sup> David Worster comments on the interest in the role of the natural environment as follows:

A second theme in the New Western History is this: The drive for the economic development of the West was often a ruthless assault on nature and has left behind it much death, depletion, and ruin. Astonishing as it now seems, the old agrarian myth of Turner's day suggested that the West offered an opportunity of getting back in touch with nature, or recovering good health and a sense of harmony with the nonhuman far from the shrieking disharmonies of factories, technology, urban slums, and poverty that were making life in Europe and the East a burden to the spirit. (Worster 1991, 18)

McCarthy's description of the actions of the Glanton gang<sup>7</sup> provide anything but an image of harmony in any sense. Instead of colonizers seeking a new life, the author focuses on a group of violent individuals who commit very brutal crimes for the sake of the economic prospects offered by the authorities; this is obviously a story which tends to be overlooked by "mainstream" history since it does not fit into the mythmaking narrative.

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Volker Depkat, who directed my focus to New Western History at the New Pathways in North American Studies conference in Brno.

<sup>7</sup> A group of scalp hunters that is loosely based on historical persons (mainly the characters of John Glanton and Judge Holden). The economy of scalp hunting and the real Glanton gang are discussed in depth in John Sepich's *Notes on Blood Meridian*.

*Blood Meridian* challenges the notion of a separate setting and narration. Natural descriptions appear in the text either as what Luce calls “narrative commentary” or they can be themselves a means of narration. The occasional remnants of the progress of civilization appear in the novel in the form of the ruins of churches<sup>8</sup> on the outskirts of towns (an image revisited in the second volume of the Border Trilogy, *The Crossing*, published in 1994) with “faded frescos” quite reminiscent of ancient paintings on stone walls later in the novel. The images are meant to be seen, to stay, but the text is full of other, unintentional remnants of civilization. In this aspect *Blood Meridian* again precedes New Western History and the statement Richard White makes in his essay “Trashing the Trails” that “[t]he New Western Historians – particularly environmental historians – have an affinity for trash as the evidence of human actions, the relics of culture. Where Old Western Historians see nature, New Western Historians see the debris and the consequences of human use” (White 1991b, 27). The following passage from *Blood Meridian* is an example of McCarthy’s attention to such relics:

They began to come upon chains and packsaddles, single trees, dead mules, wagons. Saddletrees eaten bare of their rawhide coverings and weathered white as bone, a light chamfering of miceteeth along the edges of the wood. They rode through a region where iron will not rust nor tin tarnish. The ribbed frames of dead cattle under their patches of dried hide lay like the ruins of primitive boats upturned upon that shoreless void and they passed lurid and austere the black and desiccated shapes of horses and mules that travelers had stood afoot. These parched beasts had died with their necks stretched in agony in the sand and now upright and blind and lurching askew with scraps of blackened leather hanging from the fretwork of their ribs they leaned with their long mouths howling after the endless tandem suns that passed above them. (McCarthy 2010c, 260)

As they ride across the area, the Glanton gang continuously finds scattered remnants of previous travellers’ possessions. The fact that they find these several times shows that human debris is a recurrent feature of the land. However, the environment is not only a passive place where these things lay, it is part of the process. The mice eating the rawhide, have co-created the image. The aridity and climate of the region has prevented the disintegration of both the machinery and the animal carcasses.

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<sup>8</sup> The ruined churches often contain the remains of human bodies and/or animal carcasses, creating images of other stories of death that have taken place in the area. The deserted architecture also resembles images of abandoned cabins that reappear throughout southern novels.

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On the other hand, the bodies of cattle, horses, and mules represent human creations, since they do not belong to the area.<sup>9</sup> The carcasses themselves narrate a story of suffering with “their necks stretched in agony,” becoming a terrifying memento of the expansion to the West, a mummified image captured forever.

The nature-culture relationship is not depicted only by visual means but also through the characters’ attitudes and actions. As discussed in the first section, the combination of narrator’s and characters’ perspectives enables McCarthy to present the revisionist view in contrast with the societal attitude of that time. In terms of westward expansion, the attitude towards the environment is the basis of understanding the consequent actions. As Richard White points out in his monograph *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A History of the American West*:

To most whites nature existed largely as a collection of commodities. God, they believed, had created nature for individual human beings to use, and it was their duty to make use of it. Logically enough, they valued plants, animals, and minerals according to their utility, and to call something useless was to question its right to exist in a human-dominated environment. (White 1991a, 212)

This strongly anthropocentric understanding of nature as a mere resource directly implies that humankind has no responsibility to nature. It is perceived only in terms of its value for humanity. Judge Holden, arguably the most conspicuous character in *Blood Meridian*, represents this view of nature as a commodity in its most extreme form. In one of his speeches he says:

Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. [...] Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. [...] But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. [...] The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in zoos. (McCarthy 2010c, 209–210)

Unlike the protagonists of southern novels who destroy or contaminate their surroundings, generally because they are ignorant of them, Judge Holden deliberately uses death

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<sup>9</sup> Even the horse, one of America’s canonical animals, was brought to America by Spanish settlers. They were not domesticized from wild American horses, on the contrary, wild mustangs as we know them are descendants of domesticated European horses brought to the continent (see White 1991a, 18–26). Hence the imagery of Native Americans as “natural” people proves unrealistic, since they ride horses that were obtained from European colonizers, and they have also altered the natural environment, i.e. by burning pastures for the horses (White 1991b, 33–34).

as an instrument of power and control. His desire for control is bound to a purely anthropocentric ethic. Holden represents an ideology of destruction, driven partly by the desire for economic success and partly by the desire to master the new land.

In a similar fashion the historical colonizers thoroughly believed they were entitled to own the land and to use it for their benefit. Their purpose was to “civilize” nature and to create it in their own image. This did not mean only to breed cattle on the land, but also to dispose of the indigenous population. And since nature was perceived as a commodity, for the purpose of divesting themselves of an obstacle in the form of the Indian tribes the buffalo was used as an efficient weapon. “The elimination of the buffalo by white hide hunters cut the heart from the Plains Indian economy. Various military commanders encouraged the slaughter of bison for precisely this reason. Without the buffalo, Plains Indians could not effectively resist American expansion” (White 1991a, 219). The species was hunted down so ferociously and systematically neither for its hide, for sport, nor for making room for the cattle and railways, but mainly as a means to suppress the defiance of certain Native American tribes. The bounty economy is in principle very similar to the one of scalp hunting. The Glanton gang is hired and payed by the government to slaughter the Native Americans and to bring the authorities the scalps as proof. Both are quite profitable businesses serving the same goal: to ease the hardships of westward expansion.

The description of the buffalo slaughter is brutal in way that is similar to the depiction of the Glanton gang’s encounters with Native Americans. The image of thousands of dead animals in *Blood Meridian* drastically rewrites the Old West romantic panorama:

[D]ead animals scattered over the grounds [...] and the tandem wagons groaned away over the prairie twenty and twenty-two ox teams and the flint hides by the ton and hundred ton and the meat rotting on the ground and the air whining with flies and the buzzards and ravens and the night a horror of snarling and feeding with the wolves half crazed and wallowing in the carion. (McCarthy 2010c, 334)

The apocalyptic image of scavengers feeding on countless carcasses of which only the hide was taken is hardly imaginable, yet completely realistic. While the bison population was already decreasing in the 1840s “not so much from overhunting, although that was increasingly a factor, as from a combination of drought, habitat destruction, competition from exotic species, and introduced disease” (White 1991a, 216), which still points to predominantly human inflicted causes, their numbers decreased rapidly in the following three decades with the arrival of professional hunters and the mechanization of the whole process. Hence the constant movement of the wagons is contrasted to the motionlessness of the carcasses accentuated by the repetition of the conjunction “and”

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giving the description a certain rhythm. Moreover, the image of busy wagons reappears in the epilogue with the image of bonepickers gathering buffalo bones, which were then turned into fertilizer (Sepich 2008, 67). Despite the short-term feast for the scavengers, the impact on the whole ecosystem is beyond the powers of the imagination. The development is completed in a short passage in the following novel, the first volume of the Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1991):

That was in eighteen sixty-six. In that same year the first cattle were driven through what was still Bexar County and across the north end of the ranch [...] five years later his great-grandfather sent six hundred steers over that same trail [...] In eighteen eighty-three they ran the first barbed wire. By eighty-six the buffalo were gone. That same winter a bad die-up. (McCarthy 2010d, 7)

The near annihilation of a whole species took only several decades. This was a drastic change for the western ecosystem, happening at such a speed that the organisms simply could not adapt (apart from the wolves who started to prey on cattle, making them highly undesirable and the next species to be exterminated). Prairies were turned into pastures surrounded by fences, animals considered vermin were trapped or poisoned. The grazing lands did not last long either, only after a couple of decades they would slowly be replaced by industrial enterprises.<sup>10</sup> *Blood Meridian* describes “the violent birth of a national symbolic that has made heroes out of scalphunters and Indian killers and constructed the near extinction of the buffalo and massive deforestation as symbols of triumph and mastery, the proud heritage of the modern American citizen” (Spurgeon 2009, 104). McCarthy retails the Western myth in more realistic colours as the persistent and unstoppable advancement of civilization seen in a wider environmental context.

*Blood Meridian* and the subsequent Border Trilogy narrate the story of a conquest which did not end with the closure of the frontier, if such a thing ever existed.<sup>11</sup> The infinite struggle of humanity and the natural environment has continued far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Environmental issues, which appeared mainly as hints and passing remarks in the southern novels, become central topics of McCarthy’s Western novels. The notions that the history of humankind cannot be separated from natural history and that humanity exists in a much broader context also appear in the text. *Blood Meridian* begins and ends with two meteor showers. The first one takes place before

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<sup>10</sup> In the Border Trilogy, the cowboy life bound to cattle slowly disappears in favour of industry.

<sup>11</sup> New Western History abandons the still influential Turnerian concept of frontier based on ethnocentrism and suggests avoiding it since it is a simplification which does not aid in describing the complexity of the historical moment of westward expansion.

the beginning of the novel and is described by the father of kid, the novel's protagonist: "Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The dipper stove" (McCarthy 2010c, 3). Leonids really occurred in 1833 and the accounts speak about "the greatest shower ever recorded" (Sepich 2009, 51–53). At the end of the novel, before the kid dies, the natural phenomenon reappears: "The rain had stopped and the air was cold. He stood in the yard. Stars were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness" (McCarthy 2010c, 351). The kid's life and the whole narration, which is reminiscent of a terrible nightmare, is opened and closed by a very distinctive natural phenomenon. The book, which might seem to be a feverish dream or horror at first sight, is actually based quite thoroughly on historical accounts. By setting the timeframe of the novel between two meteor showers, McCarthy clearly reinforces the importance of nature in the text. The human history is embedded in the natural one, providing the novel with a cosmological perspective.

#### 4. Challenging Anthropocentrism

Since anthropocentrism places humankind at the centre of the world, the value of the nonhuman is subsequently determined by its utility to human beings. One of the direct consequences of an anthropocentric perspective on the world is the objectification of nature, understanding it as a resource, as a man's possession. Anthropocentrism is a spectrum from strong to weak, in which the weak form considers the possibility of biocentric values or an understanding of the value of the nonhuman (Buell 2005, 134).

In McCarthy, the superiority of humankind over nature is challenged. "What we do find in *The Orchard Keeper* is the first sign of McCarthy's attempt to create a narrative that escapes the confines of anthropocentrism and makes the world of nature, animate and inanimate, an equal principle in his epistemology" (Cant 2008, 70). As demonstrated above, the role of natural imagery in McCarthy's fiction exceeds the notion of setting, symbol, or beautiful interlude which is an end in itself. It is an active participant in the stories, it frames them in terms of time. McCarthy's vision of history takes the environment into account and offers a very different perspective than the traditional story of progress. "It is precisely the contrast between Judge Holden's will to master a nature conceived of as enemy and the horrendous environmental catastrophe of the closing of the frontier that constitute *Blood Meridian*'s challenge to normative thinking about the environment" (Estes 2013, 120). When nature is understood as a commodity designed for human use, it releases humankind from any ethical responsibility toward it, which leads to disastrous consequences.

## *What Else Can Nature Mean*

Once the economic principle rules not only decision processes, but also humanity's conception of nature, nothing more than gain is taken into consideration. The massacre of the buffalo is the most excessive description of a phenomenon that recurs across the novels: bounty hunting. The book *Trapping the Fur Bearers of North America* is mentioned both in *The Crossing* and *The Orchard Keeper*: "McCarthy's inclusion of the ancient pamphlet, with inaccurate drawings of the wild cats, shows the historical place of the lynx and bobcat as animals with bounty-value; the felines pelts are worth money to man. As such, the bobcat and the lynx have more value dead than they do alive" (Sanborn 2006, 40). The bounty hunting business, however profitable, is frequently not motivated only by the value of the hide on the market, but also by other factors, such as the above-discussed use of the buffalo to control the Native Americans, or the near extinction of wolves brought about for the protection of cattle used as a means of subsistence. The very same economy is applied to other human beings in scalp hunting. The ostensibly neutral narrator then parallels these actions, proving them both inherently morally wrong.

In this aspect, McCarthy's texts quite explicitly discuss that „the human interest is not [...] the only legitimate interest" and "[h]uman accountability to the environment" (Buell 1995, 7). In other words, if humanity is capable of the alteration and destruction of the natural environment and its inhabitants, it is our obligation to take into consideration other interests and other perspectives in order to avoid another catastrophe like the buffalo slaughter. Again, the point of view of the observer is crucial for understanding this. The following paragraph from *The Crossing* describes cattle as a human creation:

The wolves in that country had been killing cattle for a long time but the ignorance of the animals was a puzzle to them. The cows bellowing and bleeding and stumbling through the mountain meadows with their shovel feet and their confusion, bawling and floundering through the fences and dragging posts and wires behind. The ranchers said they brutalized the cattle in a way they did not the wild game. As if the cows evoked in them some anger. As if they were offended by some violation of an old order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols. (McCarthy 2010e, 26)

In this paragraph, the point of view shifts between the omniscient narrator, the wolf, and the ranchers (Sanborn 2006, 70). From the wolf's point of view, the cow is described as a clumsy and stupid creature, a human-created species, an alien in the ecosystem. As with every human creation, cattle are destined to be imperfect. The image of a fenced environment only emphasizes the dependence of the animal on humans. Note the contrast with the following paragraph from the same novel, one that describes a pronghorn as a creature of natural origin:

At night she [the wolf] would go down onto the Animas Plains and drive the wild antelope, watching them flow and turn in the dust of their own passage where it rose like smoke off the basin floor, watching the precisely indexed articulation of their limbs and the rocking movements of their heads and the slow bunching and the slow extension of their running, looking for anything at all among them that would name to her her quarry. (McCarthy 2010e, 26)

Both species are described as the potential prey of the wolf. In the second paragraph, the reader is given an account of the wolf hunting the antelope unmediated by any other character. The antelope (pronghorn) is described as perfect in its natural unrestrained environment. The emphasis on the movement of both the cow and the antelope makes a clear contrast between them and highlights the included point of view of the predator: the wolf can kill a cow in full health but needs to choose a weakened individual from the pronghorn herd. The perfection of the natural creation is emphasized by the aesthetic division between the species.

The aesthetic distinction between natural and civilized is transparent when McCarthy comments on civilization penetrating the natural environment. All the way from *The Orchard Keeper* to *The Road* (2006), human creation is destined to be imperfect, be it cattle or the shacks built by the Red Branch community: “Even the speed with which they were constructed could not outdistance the decay for which they held such affinity. Gangrenous molds took to the foundations before the roofs were fairly nailed down. Mud crept up their sides and paint fell away in long white slashes. Some terrible plague seemed to overtake them one by one” (McCarthy 2010a, 11–12). Describing buildings as leprous is only one instance of the aesthetic division between the civilized and the natural. Everything created by man is frequently described in terms of constant decay or sickness, in stark opposition to the grandeur, majesty, and perfection of things of natural origin. Human settlement is, mainly in the southern novels, accompanied by waste and rot, constant reminders of the finality of man, emphasizing the discrepancy between the linear time of humankind and the cyclical time of nature.

While McCarthy frequently challenges the nature-culture binary, his aesthetics proposes a new one, much more in favour of its natural side. Things natural are things beautiful. Humanity can never come near to the perfection of things born in nature. However, this notion does not imply that nature is valuable only as an aesthetic object. McCarthy challenges anthropocentrism through aesthetics, through the concept of beauty created and utilized by humankind only. McCarthy’s approach suggests the idea of intrinsic value, meaning that nature does not have to be “useful” to humans and that it has a right to existence as such. It is also clear that

the anthropocentric hierarchy which ascribes humankind the highest priority is challenged in *Blood Meridian*:

The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence the very clarity of these articulated belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (McCarthy 2010c, 261)

In this passage, McCarthy probably most clearly undermines the anthropocentric hierarchy. Everything is equal, a stone, a plant, a human. “In its post-humanist ‘optically democratic’ representation of wilderness, *Blood Meridian* undertakes to imagine nature in its sheer materiality, beyond anthropocentric terms” (Guillemin 2004, 81). There is no notion of harmony, only of the equality of all things. And it is no accident that this notion of democracy and equality is inseparably bound to vision. The challenge of our perception of nature starts with our eyes. McCarthy makes the reader see the lack of human responsibility to nature through visual descriptions and thus posits the question of an environmental ethics.

While often focusing on the visual aspect of nature, the beauty of it is not an end in itself, as the above-discussed topics have demonstrated. The images of humankind’s irresponsible behaviour to nature and the fear embodied in thoughts of nature’s complete destruction pervade the works just as much as a sense of the author’s admiration for nature. However, reading McCarthy with attention to his method of describing nature and the environmental undertones in the works suggests reading McCarthy as an author contemplating the relationship between the human and nonhuman and the question of a nature-culture binary. Employing an ecocritical perspective for reading McCarthy’s fiction presents the texts as discussions of the pressing issues of environmental ethics and anthropocentrism instead of seeing them as elegies for an idyllic past.

In McCarthy’s world, the human and nonhuman are bound together and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish where one ends and the other begins. Nature and culture exist as a continuum in McCarthy’s fiction. However, the author re-establishes the questioned binary when challenging the anthropocentric perspective. In McCarthy’s world, nature is a powerful force, difficult to define, but existent

and having an impact on the human characters. However, the ethical responsibility for the future of nature is placed on human shoulders. This paper has primarily demonstrated the extensive potential offered by an ecocritical study of McCarthy's nature. The means of depicting the natural environment, both the content and method, are important tools for the author's broadening the meaning of nature to contain areas such as ethics and our perception of history. Once taken into consideration as an adequate topic of analysis instead of a background, nature presents many different ways to read McCarthy's work. The works themselves then become ecosystems where everything depends on everything else.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The suggestion of understanding a literary text as an ecosystem is also proposed by ecocriticism and it fits the interpretation of McCarthy's works much better than understanding occurrences of nature in isolation or as a background. The ecocritical "method" is then much deeper than a study of isolated topics.

## *What Else Can Nature Mean*

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