

Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

University of Algiers 2 Abou El Kacem Saadallah

Faculty of Foreign Languages

Department of English



Minimalist Style and Ambivalent Spirituality
in Cormac McCarthy's Later Texts: An Implied Reader's Perspective

Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the LMD Doctorate
Degree in Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies

Submitted by

Djamila Houamdi

Supervised by

Dr. Houria Ait Ammour

The Jury

President: Prof. Brahim Mansouri

Supervisor: Dr. Houria Ait Ammour

Member: Prof. Fewzia Bedjaoui

Member: Dr. Fethi Haddouche

Member: Dr. Assia Kaced

Member: Dr. Mohamed Douifi

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Academic Year 2019/2020

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the substance of this thesis is entirely the result of my investigation and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

Djamila Houamdi

Signature:

Date:

Dedication

To Two of the Most Inspiring Teachers of Literature

Ms. Imene Moulati and Prof. Fouad Djemai

May their beautiful souls rest in peace

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I shall express my keen appreciation to The Cormac McCarthy Society and The Minimalists for being an unfailing source of inspiration. Equal thanks are extended to my teachers and colleagues at the departments of English in both universities of Algiers and Blida. Special thanks to my special mates who made all our encounters, academic and non-academic, an opportunity for intellectual exchange. Sincere appreciation is, as well, due to all those institutions and libraries which made their scholarly resources accessible to researchers.

On more levels than one, I am immensely indebted to my parents, my brothers and my little niece Ritadj. Without their unconditional support and understanding, I would not have afforded neither to undertake this endeavour nor to sustain it all the way through.

As is the human nature—because to err is human—and as is true about any project, I apologize for whatever flaws or errors that could be found in this thesis; they are solely my own.

Abstract

The present reader-oriented study deals with the later texts of Cormac McCarthy. In particular, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* share a remarkable leaning towards minimalist style and ambivalent spirituality which, in turn, affects the reading experience. In fact, the novels pose challenges to their reader not only because of their discontented and often intrepid commentary on cultural, moral and spiritual questions but also because of their discomfiting prose-poetic narrative mode. Such challenges could be best understood by resort to Wolfgang Iser's and Hans R. Jauss' theories of aesthetic response and aesthetic reception, respectively. Concepts such as "horizon of expectation", "aesthetic experience" and "indeterminacy" facilitate the examination of the reader-text relationship. Notably, McCarthy's later texts are characterized with terseness, omission, subversion, ambivalence and ambiguity. Their generic, stylistic, moral and spiritual indeterminacies are, thus, a space which—simultaneously—marks the author's withdrawal from the text and invites the reader for a larger participation. As such, they stimulate the reader to fulfill a set of aesthetic roles. By extension, a successful interaction between the texts in question and their reader is realized through the latter's responsive involvement, identification, independence and introspection. The analyses also reveal that the transaction which takes place between the implied reader and McCarthy's literary texts contributes to the maximization of the reader's interpretive and creative potentials. In other words, the implied reader in these later novels is not simply a reader; he is a spectator, viewer, listener, chorister, orchestrator and writer.

Keywords: Aesthetic Experience, Cormac McCarthy, Hans R Jauss, Implied Reader, Indeterminacy, Minimalism, Spirituality. Wolfgang Iser.

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Introduction

With the Covid-19 outbreak, by the end of 2019, many people turned to fiction for answers. Amidst pandemic-inspired fears, novels such as Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947) and Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) represented—not an escape or refuge from reality but—a return to it. In fact, the 21st century literature is replete with pictures imagining the end of 'the world as we know it'. Such works are often well-received by an audience that has grown weary of daily news exposure to terrorist attacks, hate crimes, ecological threats and unforeseen experiments-gone-wrong. Their popular reception, it must be admitted, may be symptomatic of the current commercial, social and cultural atmosphere rather than an indication of their critical or literary merit. However, one of the few authors whose literature genuinely—and ingeniously—captures the gloomy harbingers of the new century, without falling prey to loose style or banality, is American novelist, playwright and screenwriter Cormac McCarthy. In its depiction of existential woes, suicide, excessive violence and cataclysm, McCarthy's later novels embody the dilemmas of the age. They also exemplify some of the finest sort of writing. As such, his texts are attuned to the concerns of the public, yet they transcend the pitfalls of literary repetitiveness and repeatability. In addition to their pared down style, McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005), *The Road* (2006) and *The Sunset Limited* (2006) share a common tendency to treat their subjects in a nonchalant manner. Regarded collectively, such works could be described as being written in a minimalistic mode; especially that, of late, McCarthy's name is frequently mentioned along with writers, such as Ernest Hemingway, who are often considered minimalist. Arguably, the author's distinct stylistic and thematic choices play a significant role in the reception of his texts. So, the hypothesis is that minimalism as a mode of writing—that determines style and subject treatment—could be one of the major reasons behind these millennial novels' controversial reception among readers. While associations of minimalism with negativity are common, there is little evidence that minimalism can engender a positive response. Therefore, the

main concern which motivates the undertaking of the present research is to identify how McCarthy's later texts stimulate rich reading experiences.

By the turn of the new century, McCarthy seemed to abandon his commitment to tell stories about the South and the West. His 20th century literature wraps a strange welter of paganish brutality, sacred quest, pastoral romanticism and neurotic oddity in a resonant and intricate language whereas his later fiction turns away from such cultural and historical issues and opts—simultaneously—for a less complicated style. Though the immediate reception of the later works is mostly favorable among critics and scholars, among lay readers it appears more controversial.¹ This, of course, does not suggest that reviews of the novels are in a similar vein. On the contrary, there are—as will be seen in the literature review—important differences. The gap between those different perspectives is even wider—and more apparent—in the responses of common readers. For instance, a quick look at readers' feedback on *The Road*, in reading-platforms such as Good Reads or LibraryThing, is enough to reveal the irreconcilability between readers' opinions. Indeed, a multitude of expressions—often contesting one another—is used by readers to explain their judgments of—and attitudes towards—the novel.² What could be noted is that these bloggers' responses, though overwhelmingly numerous, may broadly fall under two categories. One category sees that the novel is too barren and boring, actionless and offputting. It is plotless, pointless and unnecessarily complicated with obscure words. The almost non-existent punctuation and the fragmented sentences seem to be irritating and embittering to readers. So, the novel—for them—is considered as unworthy of the praise it got (Pulitzer Prize). A second

¹ Some scholars, such as Dianne C. Luce and William Quirk, consider *The Sunset Limited* to be less successful publically and critically in comparison with *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men* ("Millennium", Luce 9; Quirk 34). While that is true, it does not necessarily suggest that it is textually different from the other two since their popularity is in all likelihood due to their mediatization rather than their textual features per se (*No Country for Old Men* was quickly adapted into an Oscar-winning motion picture whereas *The Road* was discussed in Oprah Winfrey's book club).

² In the emerging field of Digital Humanities, it is often argued that technology has transformed reading practices, and so—as Anouk Lang explains in *From Codex to Hypertext* (2012)—it is necessary to integrate online "forms of inquiry" in the field of reception studies (2). Our reference to readers' shared opinions on online platforms aligns with similar notions.

category admires the novel's magnificent language and finds its fragmentation and simplicity brilliant. For such readers, the father-son journey is heart-wrenching yet memorable in a way that very few postapocalyptic tales can be. This, of course, is a common phenomenon in the field of literature. Readers are very often divided in their opinions about literary works for a number of reasons. Age, education, gender, culture, personal taste, and political or ideological affiliation are among the factors which affect a reader's evaluation of a literary work (a work of art in general). Apart from such circumstantial factors—as these are beyond the scope of the present research—we are concerned with those textual properties which influence a reader's reaction.¹

Disparity between readers' responses is a recurrent phenomenon, yet it surprisingly receives scarce attention among scholars because focus is very often laid on the production rather than the reception of literature. Contextual explanations—though significant and insightful—do not provide a comprehensive view of such phenomenon; that is why, novel critical perspectives are needed. The present research attempts to cover such neglected aspect by offering reader-oriented analyses. The latter not only contribute to our comprehension of the texts but most importantly elucidate the particularities of the object-recipient relationship. By exploring a text's mode and theme treatment, while keeping in mind the reader's perception of them, we take a giant step towards understanding the challenges and achievements involved in the activity of reading. So, the primary objective here is not to interpret McCarthy's texts—because there are plenty of available interpretations—instead our priority is to unveil the nature of communication—failed or successful—that is established between writer, text and reader. Moreover, the minimalistic nature of these novels includes the present study in another uninvestigated realm. Minimalism, though well researched in departments of arts, remains unattended in departments of literature. Thus, attempts to examine the dynamics of such mode of writing are necessary to bridge a gap in our knowledge and help

¹ Though such responses do not constitute our subject of investigation, they are the starting point of our awareness about the controversial responses to McCarthy's later texts.

advance other critical endeavors. Furthermore, since McCarthy's literature is steadily paving its way towards university curriculums, as both a canonical and a popular literature, it becomes more pressing to consider his texts from a reader-centered viewpoint in order to facilitate the instructor's management of the learners' difficulties and potentials. Finally, our interest in McCarthy's later novels, and their treatment of the subject of spirituality in particular, stems from a personal motivation to shed light on the openness and tolerance with which these texts handle the tense debate on religious belief. In exploring such aspect—and emphasizing its impact on the reading experience—the intention is to highlight how literature surmounts many of the make-believes that stand in the way of communication. And it is communication that humanity needs the most in times such as our own: verging on the edge of catastrophe.

In an attempt to contribute to the fields of McCarthy studies, reading studies and research on minimalism, the present thesis builds upon—and adds to—the scholarly contributions that have been reached so far. Several aspects that relate to our subject of investigation have been well explored by scholars in the field; while a few others require more attention. Therefore, a literature review, in addition to indicating the key ideas and the major approaches that were carried out in these research areas, identifies the gaps which necessitate further exploration.

To begin with, a few full-length studies have been devoted to examine minimalism as an American literary phenomenon that was particularly notable during the 1980s. Most of those studies are an elaboration of arguments which were introduced in Cynthia W. Hallett's leading work *Minimalism and the Short Story* (1999). A major argument, which is voiced in Karen Alexander's (2001) and Emily Zubernis' (2016) researches, centers on the relationship between modernist tendencies and minimalist aesthetics. On the one hand, Zubernis examines the works of Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett and Lydia Davis to “show how minimal writing renounces some of fiction's most powerful tools” (1). As such literary minimalism could be considered as a transnational endeavor to “make it new” by “making it less”.

Alexander, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on the will for reduction as a significant poetic and prosaic trend that flourished in the American twentieth century writing. Both theses reassert Hallett's basic argument that such literature thrives upon the minimum because it barely meets "the least possible requirements" or "essential conditions" for the genre (Alexander 7). Jeremy Bailey's thesis, *Mining for Meaning* (2010), extends the point further by linking those literary inclinations to the artistic movement of minimalism which emphasized minimum material and maximum effect. Through reading texts by Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Cormac McCarthy, Bailey highlights certain overarching tendencies which could be traced in the earlier as well as the later works. In a similar vein, Robert Clark's *American Literary Minimalism* (2014) successfully highlights the flexibility of minimalist aesthetics by showing its wide range of possibilities. In his discussion of well-known minimalists, like Raymond Carver and Jay McInerney in addition to the less-studied novels of Susan Minot and Sandra Cisneros, Clark contends, as his fellow scholars would agree, that "American literary minimalism stands as an important yet misunderstood stylistic movement" partially because of overgeneralization and "overly narrow temporal parameters" (1,2). We may add as one of the reasons behind such widespread misunderstanding, narrow focalization which attempts to restrict minimalism to specific country or genre. In fact, pejorative judgment against such mode of writing is not a distinctly-American phenomenon since minimalism was often regarded with similar hostility in other contexts; that is why, other studies, such as Warren Motte's (1999) and Adrian Wanner's (2001), are useful in demystifying the broad dynamics that inform such a transnational phenomenon. Though not too abundant in number, such researches are sufficient to offer us an adequate view of American literary minimalism as seen against other literary and non-literary currents. However, with the exception of Clark's work, what the previous studies fail to consider—though they indirectly hint at it—is the evolutionary nature of minimalism. The dire need for a scholarship that debunks attacks on the movement (made by figures such as Madison Bell, 1989 and John Aldridge,

1992) led these scholars to overlook the significance of non-uniformities between texts. There are significant variations in the modulation and appropriation of minimalist techniques into different generic molds. Minimalism begun with modernist experimentation and its “will for innovation” continues to evolve in what some may call a “post-postmodernism”. So, minimalism did not simply exist or persist over a period of decades—and on various lands—it also *evolved*. A recently published article, which is entitled “Three Phases of Literary Minimalism” (2016), attempts to highlight such idea but only scantily manages to do so. It actually limits its categorization of minimalisms to the representative works of Hemingway, Carver and Barthelme. The more recent ‘brand’, that is displayed through the works of contemporary writers, is entirely neglected. Hence, the present research devotes full attention to McCarthy’s minimalist texts in an attempt to highlight the significant aesthetic changes which take place in this late phase of minimalism.

Although McCarthy’s late stylistic affinities remain relatively uninvestigated, his thematic concerns are well-studied. A plethora of research, known collectively as Cormackian criticism, is devoted to his novels and—to a lesser extent—his dramas. The increasing interest in his works asserts the writer’s growing popularity and recognition. It also reflects the wideness of his literary vision. An early orientation in McCarthy studies tends to focus—almost exclusively—on his representation of regional matters. That, of course, is no surprise since his southern and western novels are particularly interested in historical, cultural and social questions. “[H]is descriptions of space and place, along with the absence of regular psychologizing”, Jay Ellis notes in *No Place for Home* (2006), is the most persistent aspect of his early and middle fiction (5). Likewise, Christopher J. Walsh, in *In the Wake of the Sun* (2009), rightly adds that McCarthy’s texts have “a reputation for being complex and at times seemingly opposed to any kind of interpretation” because of “their hybridity, [as] they can be simultaneously funny, brutal, and gruesomely violent, often within the same novel, chapter, or passage” (xxi). It is such a quality which invites scholars to approach his texts from a variety of angles. As a consequence, a

second orientation in McCarthy studies delves into his discussion of philosophical issues. Illustrating such a point, Dianne C. Luce asserts, in *Reading the World* (2009), that McCarthy's engagement with specific questions such as "human and natural history or, more essentially, with the universal questions of humanity's place within the cosmos and the relation of our spiritual nature to our psychological and material being—carries his bedrock philosophical concerns" (vii). Of similar interest and critical merit is Lydia Cooper's *No More Heroes* (2011) which deals with the connection between narrative perspectives and questions of morality. Cooper who suggests that "a complex dialectic between despair and idealism runs through McCarthy's corpus, making any attempt to identify a unifying worldview in the novels a challenging, if not impossible, task" also asserts that his characters "demonstrate a fragile heroism in the face of doom" (1, 2). Along similar lines, Russell M. Hillier discusses the issue of morality and its significant impact on the lives of characters. The latter he describes as *Souls at Hazard* (2017). His analyses are distinguished with their fine tone and profound tracing of the intertextual links between McCarthy and other literary predecessors. One of the crucial remarks made by Hillier is his acknowledgment of the methodological difficulty encountered while approaching McCarthy's texts. He asserts that "[no] single, systematic, authoritative, and overarching theological or philosophical scheme can satisfy or totalize the many-sidedness of his imaginative project" because of its "multiple traditions and disciplines of thought" (4). In effect, such repeatedly-voiced attention to McCarthy's sprawling interests represents another orientation among scholars who attempt to explore the author's literary and intellectual influences. Such a concern seems to reach an apogee in Michael Lynn Crews' full-length study, *Books are made out of Books* (2017), which offers us a guide to trace the various threads that are interlocked throughout McCarthy's oeuvre. Despite its usefulness, Crews' research is not as insightful as Steven Frye's edited volume, *Cormac McCarthy in Context* (2020), which is written by a constellation of scholars. Together they cover a wide range of influences that are aligned with McCarthy's literary, cultural, sociological and intellectual affiliations. Although

such orientations are not the concern of the present research, they do correspond to our examination of McCarthy's probing into questions of religion and spirituality. The latter, as will be shown later, occupies a central position in many of his novels, and it is closely linked to questions of cultural myth, intellectual conviction, and theological belief.

As far as spirituality is concerned, McCarthy's literature has given rise to a wide range of interpretations. So much so that spirituality-centered readings could be considered as another orientation in its own right. Such readings often contradict one another and are mostly irreconcilable. Writing in 1983 about the earliest novels, Vereen M. Bell brings to the fore the first statement about McCarthy's ambiguous nihilism. He essentially argues that the "novels are as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot" (31). Because of their lack of moral considerations and their total surrender to capriciousness without search of meaning or significance, many characters which inhabit McCarthy's "strange heterocosm" can be seen as nihilistic (31). However, Edwin T. Arnold expresses a different opinion. In *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (1999), he argues "against this particular thread of anti-interpretation, for it seems to [be] a reduction of McCarthy's exceedingly rich fiction" (45). In fact, Arnold is among the first scholars to note the biblical resonances in McCarthy's early and middle novels calling him a "mystical writer". He explains that despite their desolate world and wretched fates, characters such as Culla and Suttree bear the weight of sin and suffer with an unattained grace. Though it is never explicitly asserted, in these novels there is a "profound belief in the need for moral order" that is evident through allusion to Christian names and parables (46). It was perhaps difficult to appraise such viewpoint until more recently when works such as Manuel Broncano's *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction* (2014) and Matthew L. Potts' *Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacrament* (2015) appeared in order to highlight the several scriptural signs that are present throughout McCarthy's oeuvre. The two make extensive references to the Old and New Testaments in order to establish a corresponding background against which McCarthy's style, characters and themes could be perceived. Broncano

sums up the abundance of religious symbols by enlisting “anchorists and hermits, priests and ex-priests, prophets and heretics, pilgrims and penitents, martyrs and virgins, ... saintly and devilish individuals”; as elements which “are too conspicuous to be ignored and too recurrent to respond to anything but overarching design” (1). This theological point of view is contested with another perspective that advances a cultural and/or historical understanding of the author’s engagement with systems of belief. One of the exponents of such view is Timothy Parrish who locates McCarthy’s literature with broader currents. The connection between religious belief and historical practice is highlighted in the western novels. The region’s bloody history which is the work of men such as judge Holden is the result of their “bapt[ism] into the peculiarly American faith” (Parrish 74). It is a faith which validates or at least normalizes, through a mythical belief in its own supremacy and righteousness, the excessive racial violence which marks the region’s past. For instance, *Blood Meridian* (1985) depicts acts of borderless expansion and ethnic transgression which are the result of doctrines such as the manifest destiny. In a way, Parrish suggests that if America is a nation that is based upon a religious creed—as is often cited—such creed might be—not puritan but rather—political and ideological in nature. So, what McCarthy’s novels show is the consequence of an intransigent belief in cultural myths which could manipulate and even oppose scriptural doctrines. A similar perspective is adopted by John Cant in his *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2008). The study reveals McCarthy’s counter-myth intents. Through language and imagery, he “critiques the myth of Exceptionalism in its various forms” such as the pioneers’ promise to civilize wilderness and the imperialist manifest destiny which claimed “to bring Christianity and capitalist vitality to ‘lesser races’ under the aegis of expanding nation” (9). Such cultural constructs substitute—and play the role of—religion in this case because certain political and economic pursuits are sacralized and mythologized. A recent perspective advances a metaphysical reading of McCarthy’s late novels. Notably, Petra Mundik, in *A Bloody and Barbarous God* (2016), recognizes “the polarization in McCarthy criticism” but chooses to focus

her study on aspects of Gnostic cosmology which are subtly blended within the novels' fabric (1). She explains her view by noting that the "vivid descriptions of violence are combined with his interest in spiritual revelations" and so his novels portray a world that is "hostile to humanity" in the same way that Gnosticism is "characterized by a negative evaluation of the created world and a reliance on direct spiritual insight" (3). It could be noticed that the majority of interpretations, while attempting to validate one reading, disregard other possible interpretations. McCarthy's previous texts are comparatively easier to classify because they lean towards one of the afore-mentioned perspectives. The later texts, however, fall in between. Indeed, it is hard to decide which of these interpretations is supported and which is refuted. Existential, scriptural, cultural and metaphysical readings are equally (un)sustained in McCarthy's later works.

In fact, the later texts have made the question of spirituality more pressing than ever before. Like John Clute, Allen Josephs sees that "the central riddle of *The Road* is God" but whether McCarthy is pro or against religion; whether he sees it as a form of redemption or condemnation to humanity remains indeterminate. Similarly, in her article about "Beckett's Influence in Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*," Lydia Cooper argues that the text is difficult "to interpret, especially in terms of how [it] fits within McCarthy's corpus" (1). Here, nihilism is back into play and Christianity is equally present. Both strains compete for the reader's attention, but none seems to emerge triumphant or defeated. Commenting on what he calls a "Minimalist Tragedy", William Quirk similarly contends that "if the Bible has been one of the greatest sources of meaning in human history, and Beckett one of the most poignant voices of despair at the lack of meaning, *The Sunset Limited* sets up a bridge between them in the dialogue between Black and White" (36) [emphasis added]. It is such a bridge which solidifies the myriad of readings suggested by these and other scholars. Nevertheless, it is only very recently that a few scholars began to accept the dual nature of these texts. Allan & Nancy Feyl Chavkin (2018) recognize "the ambivalent religious sensibility at the heart of [these novels]" (2). So, in addition to their closeness in mode of writing, the later texts also share thematic

consistency—especially in terms of spirituality—which encouraged some observers to conclude that they could be read as companions or continuation to each other (Griffiths; Banco; Tyburski).

A single question, however, remains unaddressed. Throughout our review, we noticed a significant absence of the reader. In the research about minimalism as in the analyses of spirituality in McCarthy’s fiction, there is a remarkable negligence of the reader. Though it is predictable that such textual features—in a way or another—affect the reader’s perception and reaction to the texts, there has been no attempt to approach *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* or *The Sunset Limited* with the intent of comprehending their reading process(es). So far, the only step taken in that direction comes from Kenneth Lincoln and James Lilley who—in passing—characterize McCarthy’s reader as a “spotter, tracker, sniper, translator, and executioner in [the] tale”, “storyteller and witness” (Lincoln 144; Lilley 3). Such characterization is accurate despite its coming short of addressing the issues from a critically-informed perspective. It, therefore, needs full-length examination. Philip Greaney’s *Less is More: Literary Minimalism in American Short Story* (2006) also covers part of the question as it attempts to evade the misunderstanding about minimalist short stories by examining the reader’s viewpoint. Notwithstanding its limitation to structural—rather than thematic—elements and its exclusion of the novel form, Greaney’s thesis successfully demonstrates “a richness of effect, an interpretative polyvalency, an interactive vitality which *exists because not despite of the 'less'*” (2) [emphasis added]. In a similar vein, we endeavor to provide another illustration—by focusing on McCarthy’s novels and including thematic aspects—that “all literature makes demands upon the reader, but ... minimalism makes specific demands in-line with its specific narrative techniques: reading 'less' demands that the reader do more” (3). Hence, it is the concern of the present research to examine McCarthy’s later texts, taking into consideration their minimalism which is reflected both in a reductionist style and an ambivalent spirituality, from a reader’s perspective. Such a contribution comes with the intention of enriching

both scholarly fields by merging together interests in reading, spirituality and style.

The present thesis is, thus, planned to meet two main objectives and answer three main questions. The first aim is to identify the literary evolution which is marked in McCarthy's later texts. Their remarkable leaning towards minimalism and spirituality denote a movement towards newer realms which were not stepped into in his previous works. Upon achieving such a goal, the second—and even more important—aim is to demonstrate the various ways through which the reader interacts with *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*. By focusing on the reader and his interaction with the styles and themes of these texts, the intention is to show how certain textual features stimulate the reader to be more involved and active which, by extension, makes reading more affective. Along with these two major goals, the study seeks to attain two other subsidiary aims. On the one hand, the thesis intends to spotlight the late-phase characteristics of minimalism as they are exemplified in McCarthy's fiction. On the other hand, it extends the debate on religion in contemporary fiction by offering a close view of McCarthy's treatment of the subject.¹

In order to achieve these research objectives, three main questions are probed into. The study initially attempts to address a simple—but necessary—question: how are McCarthy's later texts different from his previous ones? Answering the question will be realized through two phases. First, a commentary on style in McCarthy's later novels is offered in order to show how these texts share important minimalistic features. In the second phase, the earlier southern and western novels are briefly compared to *Country for Old Men* so as to demonstrate the changes that occur stylistically and thematically, if any. Upon answering this initial question, it will be possible to ascertain whether there is an evolution in McCarthy's literature or not. Then, attention is shifted to the later texts by focusing on a particular question: how is spirituality represented in *No*

¹ Both Robert Alter's *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (2010) and Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (2010) mention McCarthy's texts as an example of a contemporary "religious" literature but, because of their broad scope, they do not probe into the details of such religiosity.

Country for Old Men, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*? Because the theme of spirituality is treated in a minimalistic manner, that is ambiguous and contradictory, focus on it is deemed necessary to comprehend reading challenges. After addressing such stylistic and thematic choices, the way is paved to address the final question: what implications do the later texts make on the reader's role? The negative and positive responses that are stimulated by the texts should be explained in order to understand the nature of the relationship between McCarthy's texts and their reader.

Among the several approaches which could be employed to analyze a text and its effects, such as cognitive and affective stylistics, the present research opts for a reader-oriented approach. Particularly, the study combines between—and makes use of—the concepts and tools that are introduced by German theorists Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. The latter suggests that reading is a form of communication and meaning is the result of a transaction between text and reader. Jauss focuses on a different—yet relevant—aspect of reception as he notes the impact of a reader's horizon of expectations and will for identification on his eventual response to a given text. For instance, each of McCarthy's later texts evokes the reader's awareness of certain genre elements, literary traditions or narrative conventions. Consequently, it is crucial to address the interplay between expectation and realization in order to comprehend how such texts unfold to the reader. Iser's critical thesis contends that every text is made up of determinate and indeterminate meaning. While the majority of critique centers on the former in an attempt to uncover the meaning which is constructed by the writer, his transactional approach focuses on indeterminacy. Whether syntactic, semantic or pragmatic, indeterminacies occur in varying degrees and forms; thus, by focusing on them the critic is led to figure out the implications and the demands that are made upon the reader. Accordingly, in our analyses of *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* emphasis is put on these texts' indeterminacies so as to understand what roles they attribute to their implied reader. Such an approach is deemed appropriate because it corresponds to the stylistic and thematic features of McCarthy's later texts. The motivation

behind this research, just like Jauss' and Iser's theories, is to explore the literary works not as artistic creations made by the author but as aesthetic objects which are realized differently by different readers.

The thesis at hand contains five chapters. It is divided into two parts: one is theoretical and the other is critical. The initial part functions as an introductory and theoretical background at the same time. It begins with an overview of American literary minimalism, its manifestation in McCarthy's texts and its major inclinations. It provides a more insightful view of the dynamics between the minimalist text and its reader as it presents the difficulties encountered and the interpretive potentials aspired for by such a mode of writing. The following chapter which deals with reader-oriented criticism moves from general premises to specific analytical tools. That is to say, it first clarifies the confusion about significant terms such as response, reading and reader before narrowing focus on the theoretical approach which conjoins Jauss' and Iser's reader-centred concepts. Upon completion of this part, it is expected that the necessary knowledge about Minimalism as a writing theory and Aesthetic Response as a reading approach is gained.

The second part, which is comprised of three analytical chapters, is devoted to the criticism of Cormac McCarthy's later texts. Unidentical in genre, form, structure and content, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* share nonetheless a central concern with spirituality and exhibit a remarkable affinity towards minimalism. Their clustering in the present research allows us to examine McCarthy's literary evolution from regional to universal writer in parallel with changed stylistic and thematic choices. Hence, the first analytical chapter, which is entitled "*No Country for Old Men*: the Landmark of a Literary Transition", is broader in scope. By providing a synoptic overview of McCarthy's oeuvre, it shows continuities and discontinuities which occur in his later texts. Such a change is deemed significant in the reception of these novels as well. The subsequent chapter, which is entitled "The Reader's Roles in a Parabolic (Post)apocalyptic Novel", puts under the limelight McCarthy's widely-read novel *The Road*. It begins by addressing the generic and stylistic properties

of the text then proceeds to examine its semantic and pragmatic complexities. Eventually such analyses reveal the text's main implications on the reader. The last chapter, which is entitled "The Reader's Roles in an Existential Dramatic Novel", is devoted to McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*. It begins with a necessary examination of the narrative-dramatic nature of the text. Similar to the previous two chapters, it examines the different forms of indeterminacy that are found in the text and concludes with newer perspectives on reading and meaning. The final conclusion sews different threads together as it recapitulates the major findings and highlights the main aspects which mark the implied reader's interaction with McCarthy's texts.

As previously noted, the thesis devotes full attention to McCarthy's later texts. However, it purposefully excludes *The Counselor* (2012), from the discussion because it—as a cinematic text—does not respectively fit with the literary characteristics of the other novels. Its being an unpublished text (screen script) poses no question about its relation to readers. Hence, it could be better discussed in an adaptation study along with McCarthy's other adapted texts. The study is also meant to be analytical (qualitative) rather than empirical; that is why, no attempt is made to evidence actual readers' responses. Though such an attempt is plausible, its results provide contextual explanations but fail to probe into the particularities of the text-reader relationship. Regardless of individual differences, the interaction between text and reader is determined—in equal measure—by the reader's response to certain textual aspects. As no amount of quantitative data is enough to explain such interaction, empirical analyses neither prove nor refute the arguments made about readers' interaction with these texts. Therefore, they are deemed unnecessary; especially that our intention is to *comprehend* rather than *categorize* reader's experiences.

Part One
Theoretical Foundations

This first part, which is entitled “Theoretical Foundations”, is meant to present the critical and conceptual background of the thesis. In other words, it highlights the major lines which inform and guide the present research. Whereas the initial chapter introduces a literature-writing theory, namely minimalism, and explains its key principles in order to comprehend the literary fabric of the texts under study, the following chapter devotes attention to the cornerstones of a critical theory, namely reader-response, and points out their correspondence to the particular analytical aims in the second part.

The first chapter, that is entitled “Minimalism as a Literary Mode of Writing”, offers a brief overview of the various manifestations of minimalism in the field of literature. While doing so, it indicates the mode’s main features along with the different views and variations it has inspired. Its relationship to contemporaneous literary movements is also subject to examination as that helps explain part of the controversy that surrounds such literature. Focus is then placed on the minimalistic features which characterize McCarthy’s later texts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the hypothetical link between the reader and minimalist tendencies. Thus, the aim is—first—to demonstrate the corpus’ literary background and—second—to pave the way for the ensuing theoretical and analytical discussions.

The second chapter, that is entitled “The Text-Reader Relationship: a Transactional Approach”, provides a close view of the critical concepts that inform the subsequent literary analyses. It begins by defining main terms in the reader-response paradigm and stating its major objectives. Then, it presents Hans R. Jauss’ key notions about reading as a form of aesthetic activity. After that, attention is laid on Wolfgang Iser’s advancement of a transactional critique that views literature as form of communication between text and reader. Both theories are appropriated, for the purposes of the present thesis, in accordance with the particularities of McCarthy’s texts. Therefore, the analytical tools are selected in the hope of ensuring the relevance and insightfulness of the results.

As a whole, this first part is designed to establish a theoretical background for the study. In literary and critical terms, the two chapters introduce the issues

that are central in the present thesis and state the framework within which the latter operates. The chapters are complementary in nature since the first suggests certain claims about minimalism as a literary mode of writing while the second suggests a critical approach that corresponds and provides the tools to examine such claims.

Chapter One

Minimalism as a Literary Mode of Writing

This initial chapter is devoted to minimalism as a literary mode of writing. It does not try to integrate another history or theory of minimalism; instead, a more modest purpose is sought. In four sections, we attempt to cover—first—the main affinities and tendencies that are associated with the minimalist style. Second, focus is shifted to the American literature where minimalism has acquired more than one name and generated more than a few assaults and appraisals. The third section deals with Cormac McCarthy’s texts as an example of the movement’s contemporary face. Finally, the relationship between minimalism and the reader is subject to discussion in the last section. Accordingly, the present chapter aims to set the floor for the subsequent ones by providing the necessary background about the appropriate literary and stylistic contexts within which *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* are best seen. It also paves the way for the second theoretical chapter as it elucidates the literary nature of the texts in question which helps define and narrow the corresponding tools of criticism.

1. Minimalism and Literature

Prior to its emergence on the literary scene, minimalism appeared—and actually dominated for a brief period of time—on the artistic scene. The 1960s which are often referred to as years of rage and radicalism facilitated the surge of artistic tendencies, such as crudeness, impersonality, minimum subject matter and ordinary material, to the surface. Though often regarded as too extreme or artless, the impact of minimalism extended to reach not only visual arts and music but also literature as well.¹ The latter voiced such an effect by the 1980s, most prominently, among short-story writers.

Before moving further in the discussion of literary minimalism, it is necessary to pause for a quick note on the term, its definition and usage. As an inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural term, “minimalism” seems to have

¹ Many studies, such as Edward Strickland’s *Minimalism: Origins* (2000) and Marc Botha’s *A Theory of Minimalism* (2017), tackle with more details the evolution of minimalism from arts to literature. For further information on minimalism as an artistic movement, see: Frances Colpitt’s *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (1990) and James. S Meyer’s *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (2001).

irreverently indulged itself into usage along the years for none seems to approve quite wholly of its currency or significance, yet everyone continues to use it. Despite the skepticism and uneasiness that are often expressed when the term is used, there seems to be no good-enough substituent for it; that is why, it is still used in reviews, literary histories and dictionaries. Regardless of the polemics surrounding its status as a (sub)movement or a trend, it suffices—for the purposes of the present research—to view it as defined by *Merriam Webster Dictionary*: “a style or technique (as in music, literature, or design) that is characterized by extreme spareness and simplicity”. As such, minimalism has always existed in one way or another. However, its increasing presence in the later decades of the twentieth century (and the beginning of twenty-first) aroused curiosity about its significance as a cultural phenomenon. Focusing on its manifestation in the field of literature, the present section attempts to trace its different forms as it appeared in different—transnational—literary contexts. Though there is no direct linkage that can be claimed to relate the Russian, French or English minimalist works to the American literature—except for some intermittent influences—it is not without benefit to consider the broad affinities which drive such a mode of writing.

1.1. Minimalism as an Anti-generic Mode of Writing

“Compression is the first grace of style” is an old axiom attributed to Demetrius, author of *On Style (De Elocutione)*; thus, it is perhaps not unjustifiable to contend that affinities towards simplicity, brevity or reduction may date back as early as Greek writing (136). It seems the literary history is unsurprisingly full of such recurrent tendencies which existed estimably in other world literatures, but gained prominence—and fame—in the American context. The Russian literature, for instance, offers us a rich case of study in which minimalism appears as a form of “prose miniatures” or “prose-poems” that came to existence on the border of different genres.

The question of Russian minimalism, though very interesting, has not been thoroughly addressed. We, in fact, owe a great deal of what we know about

Russian minimalists to author Adrian Wanner's research. In his study of the movement's roots in a literature which he—quite tellingly—describes as being reputed for “gigantomania ... [and] verbosity”, he notes that the rupture from such traditional mode of writing was originated by the *stikhotvorenie v proze* (prose-poem) (*Russian* 3). Since the latter is a genre which challenges classification and resists the established rules of aesthetic writing, Ivan Turgenev's (1882) publication of his prose-poems marked a turning point. Among the many things that prose-poems negate are notions of poeticity, generic boundaries and determinacy. Such a track was later on picked up by Russian minimalists who saw ‘lessening’ and sparseness as negations of prevalent expectations rather than negations of artistry. Their works, Wanner explains, constitute themselves “as literature by fiat rather than by adhering to any received literary conventions.” (*Russian* 5).¹ By opposing—or least neglecting—generic assumptions, the Russian minimalist prose, also referred to as mini-story or anti-story, combined both poetic and prosaic features while it also reversed the alleged maximalist label which is associated with its literature. Daniil Kharms' prose miniatures (1930s), for instance, “in their extreme laconicity ... provide a counterpoint to the publicly encouraged monumentalism of Soviet literary production” (“Generic” 458). Likewise, Ivan Bunin's very short—sometimes trivial—narratives exemplify the will towards extreme reduction which may suggest banality at times but help forward an aspiration for transparency and anti-illusional expression. He explains, to Galina Kuznetsova, in *The Grasse Diary*, his opt for brevity by the fact that “even with the greatest writers, there are only isolated good passages, and between them- water” (qtd. in “Subversion”, 532). From total adherence to norms of writing to deliberate challenge, from the prose-poem to the anti-story, it seems the minimalist endeavours are fuelled by different purposes but they meet at common point. Wanner explains: “the ultimate vanishing point of all minimalist art: the empty

¹ In a previously published article, entitled “From Subversion to Affirmation: The Prose Poem as a Russian Genre”, Wanner notes that the prose poem had less influence on poetry than on prose (541). However, he mentions the works of Lev Rubinshtein, Dmitrii Prigov and Vladimir Sorokin as major practitioners of Russian minimalist poetry.

canvas, the white page, the protracted silence” aim to invite “the reader or beholder ... to ponder his or her own operative assumptions about the meaning of art and life” (“Generic” 468). Such an invitation will be further discussed in a subsequent section.

1.2. Minimalism as a Zero-Degree Writing

The French literature is replete with works which show an inclination towards simplicity of expression. Yet, that is not the only reason why it could be deemed as having a “more venerable lineage [to minimalism] than its American counterpart” (Motte 2). Indeed, some of the most eminent French writers have struggled to advance the cause which American minimalists came to embrace later. For instance, in *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes provides valuable insight into the formal metamorphosis of literature and writing as a craftsmanship in the twentieth century. He explains:

Writing thus passed through all the stages of a progressive solidification; it was first the object of a gaze, then of creative action, finally of murder. And has reached in our time a last metamorphosis: absence in those neutral modes of writing called here 'the zero degree of writing' ... the absence of all signs, finally proposing the realization of this Orphean dream: a writer without Literature. Colourless writing ... (5)

Reaching a late stage in its evolution, the language of modern literature drifted into impoverishment and impersonality. The absences—phonetic, syntactic and semantic—that characterize such a language form a style that is devoid of stylishness. It is a mode of writing which is content with the minimum (zero). In *Small Worlds*, Warren Motte expresses a similar opinion. He mentions Albert Camus, Maurice Blanchot and Nathalie Sarraute as direct precursors to the minimalistic short fiction published by *Editions de Minuit*.¹ Notably, Camus’s *L’Etranger* is deemed significant in the advancement of “a style of absence” that gestures towards terseness, unemotional and telegraphic storytelling as a neutral—perhaps innocent—writing (Motte 25). Such a literature is considered minimalist

¹ Other academic works, such as *Romanciers minimalistes, 1979-2003* and *L’écriture minimaliste de Minuit*, focus on an assembly of French novelists who, writing by the turn of the century, display a common set of characteristics which are attributed to minimalism in general. For example, the literature of Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Jean Echenoz, Hervé Guibert, Edmond Jabès is also considered as reflective of tendencies towards simplicity and ordinariness.

because of its interest in the frugal portrayal of the mundane, the banal and the insignificant. It flatly calls into attention the astuteness of everyday life which seems to have been clouded with symbols, illusions and metaphors. In this regard, it could be argued that one of minimalism's overarching concerns is to "reinvest the ordinary with interest and attempt to persuade us that the apparent banality of our quotidian experience deserves immediate, direct examination" (Motte 6). Globally speaking, economy of expression is central to minimalism's logic which considers 'smallness'—in all aspects—as an opportunity to amplify its effect.

1.3. Minimalism as a Silent Writing

The name of Samuel Beckett is repeatedly evoked whenever minimalism is discussed. As an Irish novelist and playwright, his influence reached far beyond geographic or generic borders. He, not only inspired well-known American minimalist artists such as Philip Glass and Robert Morris, but also left a creative and critical body of work which "follow, articulate and affirm the broader logic of minimalism" (Bell L. 35). As such, his literature reflects a central minimal tendency towards silence. Similar to the verse-less poem and the whitewashed painting, Beckett's late theatre reached an epitome of silence (nothingness or zero degree) with his play *Breath* (1969). A thirty-second play with no characters or acts; opens with a cry and closes with a scream. Thus, literary minimalism opposes, besides superfluous language and generic steadfastness, the excessive "pretence" of exhaustiveness of full communication.

In his study of American fiction, Frederick Karl devotes a chapter to the "Possibilities of Minimalism" in which he begins by acknowledging the influence of Camus's and Beckett's literary works on American literary minimalism. He suggests that such literature increases the reader's awareness about "the spaces between words, the pauses between breath, the silence between noises" (384). In the same vein, Lucy Bell's article, "Between Ethics and Aesthetics: The Residual in Samuel Beckett's Minimalism" argues that the reader—being aware of the inexhaustibility of the object—is "condemned to an infinite process of reading the indivisible, indissoluble, irreducible residue" (44).

While the word “condemn” suggests a sort of punishment or burden, it conveys also the infinite openness which faces the reader of a minimalist text. Such openness is not always welcome since it gives rise to feelings of weakness and incompetency in front of an “indissoluble” object.

In artistic minimalism, the attempt to reduce the subject matter to the minimum—in order to draw attention to its own state as an object of art—is seen through its self-referentiality; however, in literary writing, the minimalist enterprise is to some extent different. “Unlike those expressive modes, which may or may not exploit representational possibilities, literature is *necessarily* wedded to representation” (Motte 21). That is to say, literature inherently refers to a world outside so it cannot do without words—its basic material—and it cannot be altogether free from subject matter. Nevertheless, a serious attempt is made to strip down such a medium of unnecessary detail, connotation or imagery. It seems expression has become a burden on the writer’s back. As Beckett simply puts it, “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Beckett 103). Hence, by drifting to silence, the writer removes some of the weight placed upon him and calls onto the reader to share in the making of the minimalist text. The ways in which such a target could be met—if at all—will be further discussed in the following sections.

2. Minimalism and American Literature

The appearance of minimalism on the American literary scene by the 1980s came in association with the cultural, social and artistic environment inside the States in addition to the influence of the global literary atmosphere. Thus, the time was finally ripe for such mode of writing to exercise its full potential, the premises having already been laid down by preceding generations. In the previous section, we attempted to highlight the unifying character which—despite its various manifestations—is grounded upon three main principles. It is an anti-generic, silent and economic style. The American experience, though

belated, presents a distinct case for study. Although it does not diverge too far from the minimalist legacy elsewhere, there are significant differences that are typically encountered in the American minimalist fiction. From its genesis to its current state, certain features have been accentuated while certain others have been paled. Hence, the present section aims at highlighting the particularities of American literary minimalism while also comprehending its stance among contemporary literary movements.

2.1. Minimalism and Modernism

The genesis of American literary minimalism is a key element in the majority of studies addressing the movement¹. The latter is considered as a continuation, extension or culmination of—and sometimes reaction against—pre-existing literary streams. In fact, minimalist literature owes much of its later popularity to a set of modernist tendencies which developed by the early twentieth century. Such direct linkage is not meant to abusively align minimalist works with Modernism; it rather recognizes that minimalism's seeds were planted—and watered—in a modern era. Going further beyond that is not literally superfluous, yet it does very little service to the purpose of present study which is to understand minimalism as a contemporary literary phenomenon. The list of its major precursors includes figures such as: Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov and Henry James (Barth); Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams (Alexander 16); besides James Joyce and Samuel Beckett (Hallett 12).² In designating these names, scholars do not mean to attribute or impose the “minimalist” label on works which are not. Some of their literary features, however, are very close to the principles informing minimalism.

¹ Defining minimalism as a movement, rather than a literary trend or a style, is not the purpose of the present research; however, it could be generally referred to as a movement to mean simply a period in which minimalist fiction flourished in the United States (1980s).

² Such lists which make claims about practitioners or originators of minimalism are subject to change over time. Regarding the main literary precursors, for instance, we notice that Barth (1986) includes some while Alexander (2001) includes a different set. So, it all depends on how far one wishes to go in search of minimalists and minimalistic traits.

For instance, the fiction of James Joyce appears as different from any minimalist work as any two texts can be; yet *Ulysses*, despite its stylistic and thematic complexity, is but a tale about an ordinary day of a man. The same could be said about the stories in *Dubliners*. Poe's grounding notions about the short story are also considered important. Cynthia Hallett, whose research work focuses on the minimalist short story, asserts the centrality of his idea of "singleness of effect" in a similar way that Robert Clark sees many of the above writers as representative of the influence which Impressionism and Imagism had on Minimalists. In his article "Keeping the Reader in the House", he illustrates the impact of Anton Chekhov on Raymond Carver's short fiction. The latter tends to avoid exposition and focuses instead on the senses in its reporting of daily experiences. Kim Herzinger, as well, believes that "it is Chekhov's tone and temper, his stories which are all 'middles', that seem to be the sturdiest foundation for the 'minimalists'" ("Introduction" 10). Carver's "Cathedral", for example, is a short tale featuring a casual meeting between the narrator and a blind man. Though very little is related regarding the significance of such encounter, it seems to have provoked intense emotions which—though repressed—led to the very act of telling the story. The heightened sense of implication renders this otherwise-liminal incident into a tale which suggests depth and profundity of experience. In seeing the image of a Cathedral, the narrator is brought back to his senses. He is "awakened" by the sudden realization that the "blind" man possesses far more sight and sensitivity than himself. Overt reliance on outer appearances and prejudices can stigmatize one's view so much that his inward sight is blinded and so his understanding—and appreciation—of life is tarnished. The text, of course, states no such message; it rather employs a detached unemotional tone and a terse style to draw a mere episode in a mundane life. Often, a reader approaches a text with prior views which—if subverted or contradicted—he is thrown off balance.¹ Hence, the

¹ In view of the gender-sensitive polemics surrounding the use of pronouns, bias is often associated with 'he', 'she' and 'them'. Since no pronoun is beyond reproach, in this research the reader is thoroughly referred to as a 'he' which served well as a neutral grammatical component in older texts.

reader of a minimalist text is like the narrator who cannot see certain meanings because he is too busy focusing on formal aspects of the narrative. The absence of the latter diverts the reader's attention and—figuratively—opens his eyes and stimulates him to be more introspective. Clark asserts also the impact of Amy Lowell's polyphonic prose on minimalist fiction. As a late Imagist, taking after Pound's poetic dictates, she writes in a manner that combines condensation and compactness. These are two of the most praised features of minimalist writing. Though often found more in poetry than in prose, minimalism makes use of compact and strictly-worded statement to achieve its will to reduction and brevity. In this regard, Clark points out that such mode of writing "straddles the boundary between prose and poetry" in order to remain away from excess or affluence of expression while it simultaneously maintains a high sense of implication and suggestiveness (*Minimalism 2*).

Moreover, the authorial influence of Ernest Hemingway is of indisputable significance. Scholars often regard his Iceberg principle as a fundamental instruction to minimalist texts. Being tutored as a journalist, he favored brevity of expression that consists of short, simple and declarative sentences. The conciseness of his prose is triggered by a desire to tell the truth. In other words, the writer's mission is to present events and characters as natural as they are without embellishment or forced sophistication. What he calls a "one true sentence", as Karen Alexander affirms, is the core of his aesthetics; that is why he attempts "to get rid of anything that might obscure that essential sentence" (25). In order to ensure that the bulk of the narrative comes into focus, writers are advised to eliminate all unnecessary or extravagant verbiage. Omission, thus, becomes a strategy of writing. Hemingway contends: "if a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them" (*Afternoon 192*). *In Our Time* (1924), which is mostly regarded as an Ur-text for minimalism, offers a good example of how such reduction operates. James Gifford, in the introduction to a republished edition of the collection in question, notes that Hemingway's prose is

one that seems extremely easy but is in fact extremely difficult because “the absent matter can be detected by its influence on those things that do appear in the text” (ii). The reader’s task then is to dig below the surface of the narrative in search of what is missing. What is missing may take the form of unrevealed past, an unseen motive, an unnamed event or unarticulated response. Hemingway continues to explain the concept of his Omission Theory saying that “the dignity of the movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing” (*Afternoon* 192). In other words, he highlights the difference between simplistic and ‘naïve’ fiction, which is all too easy to see through its inconsistency, and a straightforward prose which is simple but well-wrought. Regarding such double-edged simplicity, Alexander Hollenberg’s study, *The Ethics of Simplicity*, argues that it is the result of “an anxiety regarding the very practice of reading in America during the modernist period” (4). Because readers’ interpretive strategies are limited to the comfort zone of their beliefs, it was necessary to drag them out to less secure territories in order to challenge—and change—those practices. Hollenberg further explains, regarding such minimalist tendency, that “a text whose formal properties make it, upon primary reading, “easy to understand,”” is bound to give to its reader the impression of “cognitive accessibility”; however, it “also produces moments of hesitation ... moments where we are asked to question our tenuous hold upon the meaningful “subtext,”” (2). Thus, by reducing authorial involvement, through minimizing explicit exposition and explanation, the reader is offered a free reign in interpreting the text. Therefore, it could be argued that notions of reduction, omission and reader’s engagement, which constitute the core of Hemingway’s model of fiction writing, are vitally operative in the minimalist aesthetics as well.

Hallett capitulates the afore-addressed points in saying that “the seeds of artifice” informing minimalism can be traced in the works of some modernists “whose conscious codes of omission were designed to make an audience feel more than they understood” (12). In its emphasis on the immediacy and

sensuality of experience, the singularity and veracity of the image, minimalism follows—and enlarges—the footsteps of rich modernist traditions.

2.2. Minimalism and Postmodernism

That literary minimalism is deeply rooted in modern aesthetics is well illustrated. However, many esteemed scholars are of the opinion that such mode of writing is closely connected to a postmodern system of thought. For instance, art critic, Kim Levin, sees minimalism as “the last of the modernist styles” and thus “a transition between the modern and the postmodern” (90-91). Irrespective of art history, in the field of literary studies, views about the connection between the two revolve around two major questions: is minimalism part of a broader postmodernism? Or is it an opposing movement?

Most probably, a great deal of the answer to such queries resides in the very definition of ‘minimalism’ and ‘postmodernism’, yet that—vexed debate—is not one of the concerns of the present research. Accordingly, it might be safer to consider both as contemporaneous—perhaps overlapping—currents instead of assuming the antecedence or ‘supremacy’ of one over another. In this regard, the term ‘postmodernism’ is congenially employed to designate a theoretical period (roughly beginning by the 1960s) and a cultural condition rather than a strictly characterised and defined type of literature.¹

Discussing a similar issue, professor Zoltan Abadinagy says that “minimalism and postmodernism [are] like two eggs in the same basket” (“Minimalism” 130).² He later points out the multiplicity of perspectives in regard to the dynamics of such relationship. He shares the opinion that “minimalism is a response to the same (i.e. postmodernist) view of the world, but the same philosophical conclusions regarding the postmodern nature of the world

¹ The fact that one of the main characteristics of postmodernist fiction(s) is, for example, its stylistic and generic pluralism, which is seen through “a frequent use of random techniques, mixed and merged styles, and increasingly provisional methods”, problematizes all attempts of definitional accord (Woods 50).

² He refers to the critiques of Diane Stevenson, Charles Newman, Todd Gitlin, and John W. Aldridge. Kim Herzinger, Ewa Chrzanowska-Karpinska, W. M Verhoeven who also voice a similar opinion.

result in a radically different *ars poetica*” (“Minimalism” 129). His stance is that both currents are triggered by a myriad of epistemological and ontological apprehensions, yet their responses and modes of expression are different. Both substantially reject the totalizing worldview of the preceding modernism and challenge its alleged realism. Their disenchantment with language and traditional modes of narrative is another common core between the two. For Herzinger, “it can surely be said that certain Postmodernist tendencies: irony, self-reflexiveness, conspicuous structural invention, overt concern with the limitations of language, and the rejection of traditional story lines are *backgrounded* in the new fiction” (“Introduction” 12) [emphasis added]. However, one responds through a tense narrative reflecting the alienation and disturbances of its author, the other’s response is a carefree mini-story about an ordinary blue-collar guy. While the fiction of postmodernists, such as Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, is more philosophical, dense, fragmented and too disillusioned with the chaos of material culture to sustain any solid attachment to everyday reality, minimalist fiction is less pretentious, straightforward, seemingly uncomplicated by ornament or metaphor and more—say—down-to-earth. The major distinctions between the two are best explained by Abadinagy as follows:

micro processes take the place of the dumfounding complexities of the macro patterns; heterotopic space yields to veristic spatial embedding; ... emotionalism succeeds ... the individual that cares fills the place of the individual turned automaton; anti-intellectualism takes over from the philosophical bent (“Minimalism”135).

In other words, while minimalism engaged in the seemingly-trivial issues of quotidian city-life, postmodernism engaged in a maximalist emersion into global cultural phenomena. While the latter favoured intellectual and philosophical musings, the former preferred depthless day-to-day exchange. One literature resembles a look at galaxies whereas the other is akin to a look at quantum particles.

2.3. Minimalism and Post-postmodernism

The extreme ordinariness and laconicism which characterizes minimalist fiction reflects, not only a counter-act against the maximalism of the era, but also an attempt to bring attention back to the concrete everyday affairs with which postmodernists were risking to lose touch. Thus, minimalism aligns its endeavour with a quest for a more suitable mode of writing which could be better attuned to the on-going changes that manifested themselves by the turn of the century.

Along similar lines, Marc Chénétier, in his 1998 book *Beyond Suspicion*, notes how such fiction “interrupted” several decades of representing quotidian life “as an ambiguous artefact” that is “pushed to the edge of the unknowable” so as to introduce back “the images and noises of the everyday, the ordinary” (216, 218). Enigmatic writing, which merely accentuates the uncertainties of the age, induced a number of writers to avoid falling in the trap of unrealism. In a study of consumerism, culture and the contemporary American novel, James Annesley discusses the post-1980s in terms of its depiction of violence, urban despair, and indolence. For instance, Jonathan Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs* (1990), Raymond Carver stories, Ray Shell’s and Jess Mowry’s tales, Bobbie Ann Mason’s Vietnam novels, the westerns of Jane Anne Phillips and John Nicholls and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) are described as “blank” because they share a common set of “disturbing thematics” (3). Intriguing enough, such disturbances are bluntly written as a result of “an apocalypse culture”, a “millennial angst”, and an “atomised, nihilistic worldview” (3). The indifference with which such problems are faced reflects—among other things—these writers’ search for “some kind of radical aesthetic that finds expression in extreme, marginal statements and pronouncements” (3). So, what we are calling ‘minimalism’ could be but an umbrella term that actually covers many currents which emerged in an attempt to re-appropriate the literary enterprise to the problems of a new millennium.

In this sense, as Verhoeven declares, the term ‘minimalism’ is “one of the most misleading names ever given to any brand or school of writing” (43). It is very unlikely to disagree with such statement in view of the large number of

appellations that are given to such blank fiction. With a variety of preoccupations and a diversity of targeted audiences, the trend proved to be hard to pigeonhole under a specific literary banner; that is why, it has become a tradition in scholarly studies to recite its lengthy scroll of names which includes: dirty realism, pop realism, , neo-domestic neo-realism, K-Mart realism, wised-up realism, post-alcoholic blue-collar minimalist hyper realism, coke fiction, diet-Pepsi minimalism, white trash fiction, TV fiction, hick chic, high tech fiction, freeze-dried fiction, around-the-house-and-in-the-yard fiction, post-Vietnam post-literary postmodernist blue-collar neo-early Hemingwayism, and post-postmodernism (Herzinger, “Introduction” 8) . Of course, it remains debatable whether all these terms denote the same fiction, yet the difficulty that scholars encounter in the designation of the contemporary works indicates the multifacetedness of the literature produced by such writers as Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison and Tobias Wolff. In John Barth’s words, such a literature represents “the most impressive phenomenon on the current literary scene”. Its flourishing especially in the form of short stories that are “terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, [and] cool-surfaced” is certainly remarkable (Barth). However, the description “minimalist” has been largely diffused, since the 1980s, to include other works by Alice Adams, Andre Dubus, Richard Ford, Elizabeth Tallent, David Leavitt and—ultimately—dozens of others such as Jay McInerney, Lydia Davis, Susan Minot, Sandra Cisneros, and Cormac McCarthy.

Notwithstanding that ‘minimalism’ is the term which outlived the other ones, it is nevertheless unfree of reproach. Even some of those writers who are considered as ‘minimalist’ are ill at ease with such term. Raymond Carver, for instance, sees that “there's something about 'minimalist' that smacks of smallness of vision and execution” which he does not like just as Richard Ford dismisses such term as a sign of a reviewer’s laziness to search for a better one (qtd. in Herzinger, “Introduction” 8). The difficulty is not limited to the terminology alone but even attempts to limit the boundaries of such fiction by time, place,

technique or genre have been in vein. In view of such polemics, it is necessary to consider minimalism through its characteristics rather than through its content. Thematic and technical differences that gradually appear between works—considered as belonging to the same tradition—over a span of decades is a recurrent phenomenon in the field of literature. Thus, the evolution of minimalism, from its emergence in the beginning of the twentieth century, then its flowering in 1980s, its relative decline and then rise by the early twenty first century, necessitates the re-viewing of its most basic traits. Accordingly, the following pages are devoted to the main features that are commonly found across minimalist works.

2.4. Characteristics and Principles

Bill Buford's introduction to *Granta's* issue on the "new writing from America" which is dubbed as Dirty Realism, attempts to group under the term works which voice specific thematic concerns such as economic malaise, monotony, consumerism, societal ills and elements of low culture. This account is not only unhelpful but admittedly restrictive as it narrows the scope of a literature which aims at expansion. His enumeration of certain formal aspects, however, is more enlightening. He notes the literature's insistence upon writing in "a flat, "unsurprised" language, pared down to the plainest of plain styles" (Buford 5). He adds, assuredly, "it is what's not being said—the silences, the elisions, the omissions—that seems to speak most" and—quoting Frank Kermode—explains that "it takes time before one realizes how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition are being represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch" (Buford 5). In other words, under the surface of a blank and shallow narrative lies an insightful portrayal of life without ornament or false illusion. Regardless of what is being portrayed—as that changes with time and culture—minimalism insists on keeping the portrayal simple and flat-toned. Along similar lines, critic Kim Herzinger lists among the most remarkable elements of stylistic minimalism, the following:

- a) formally sparse, terse, trim
- b) tonally cool, detached, noncommittal, “flat,” affectless, recalcitrant, deadpan, laconic
- c) oblique and elliptical
- d) relatively plotless
- e) concerned with surface detail, particularly with recognizable brand names
- f) depthless
- g) comparatively oblique about personal, social, political, or cultural history (“Postmodernism”, 73)

The presence of some or all of these traits in a text is sufficient to designate it minimalist since they all reflect a will for reduction, simplicity and veracity. It can certainly be argued that minimalism’s most salient—perhaps unalterable—attributes are stylistic more than anything else. Such features can be encountered in a short story, a novel, a dramatic piece or even a poem. They could be accompanied with a historical, romantic, philosophical, tragic or humorous content.

Similarly, Robert Clark is of the opinion that “minimalism is best defined on the basis of style rather than generalizations about character types, the perceived role of consumer culture, or domesticity” (*Minimalism* 1). He suggests three main criteria—besides the above-stated attributes—that distinguish minimalist fiction from the rest. It is a literature distinguished as “efficient, allusive and implicative” (*Minimalism* 5). This draws a bold line separating a (pulp) fiction which is simply concerned with ordinary stuff—taken at face value—and the minimalist works which intently reveal less than they contain, allude rather than state, and imply instead of declare.¹ Achieving these aims in the crudest manner possible is the epitome of literary efficiency. In fact, part of the persistence of minimalism is due to its flexibility of both content and style. Barth also points out the various levels on which minimalism may function in a narrative. First, minimalism of “unit, form and scale” refers to the size or length of the composition; such is the case of Hemingway’s *In Our Time* which is a collection of short stories in vignette form. Second, minimalism of style

¹ The famous aphorism ‘less is more’, which is attributed to architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and many others, has become Minimalism’s motto as it encapsulates its philosophy. Reduction, hence, does not mean diminishing but rather seeking possibilities elsewhere.

designates a stripped-down vocabulary and a simple unornamented unemotional language; such is the case of Carver's *What We Talk about When We Talk About Love*. Third, minimalism of material is related to the plot, characters, exposition and theme; such is the case of Barthelme's *Moon Deluxe* in which nothing significant seems to happen. So, a text can be minimalist in one of these aspects or in all of them. The 1980s' short fiction tends to include more of those aspects than later fiction which emphasises one side at the expense of others. Hartmut Obendorf, in *Minimalism: Designing Simplicity*, adds to those tendencies towards minimalism of means, meaning and structure which are encountered in all minimalist enterprise "the focus on involvement of the recipient" (58). The latter is a driving motivation in visual arts and music as in literature. By reducing the medium, structure and meaning more space is allowed the recipient to be more involved.¹ In order to better comprehend the late changes in minimalism and its tendencies, particularly as they are handled in McCarthy's texts, the following section traces the prominent traits which qualify *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* as minimalistic.

3. Minimalism and McCarthy's Texts

McCarthy's name does not feature very strongly in studies of literary minimalism. As a late practitioner, his literature bears a slight resemblance to the early (prototypical) minimalist works; that is why it is only recently that a few scholars started qualifying his texts as "minimalist". Besides, the very nature of his writing style which draws, as will be discussed in an upcoming chapter, on a variety of literary traditions makes it hard to situate his oeuvre within a single mode of writing. It is strange for a writer who has been called the heir of William Faulkner—a maximalist—to be considered among minimalists. Yet, unlike his early works, the later novels diverge thematically and stylistically from the Faulknerian vein.² Gradually McCarthy integrated more minimalistic techniques

¹ Further discussion of the argument about the reader's involvement is left to the last section of this chapter

² More on the thematic and stylistic changes that characterize McCarthy's later fiction is discussed in the first analytical chapter that is entitled "*No Country for Old Men*: the Landmark of a Literary Transition".

in his fiction and—true to the Elliotic vision—he not only burrowed from his predecessors but also contributed to the expansion of the minimalist tradition. Thus, the present section attempts to highlight an aspect of his literature which has been hitherto under-studied. Upon initial inspection, minimalistic features could be traced in McCarthy’s late novels on three levels: means, meaning and structure. So far, it suffices to demonstrate such minimalistic traits for their significance is examined in more detail in the analytical chapters.

3.1. *No Country for Old Men*

In *No Country for Old Men*, punctuation gradually diminishes from the page. Though McCarthy was never a big fan of “weird little marks”, he seems to dismiss them bit by bit from his texts. In his interview with Oprah Winfrey, he says—commenting on James Joyce’s works—that the latter “is a good model for punctuation. He keeps it to an absolute minimum”. Unlike the works of Henry James and Marcel Proust which he considers strange—for one reason or another—works by Joyce are more readable. He explains, “there’s no reason to block the page up with weird little marks. If you write properly, you shouldn’t have to punctuate ... It’s important to punctuate so that it makes it easy for people to read. *It’s to make it easier, not to make it harder*” [emphasis added]. In that sense writing properly entails the preclusion of all that distracts readers’ attention away from the essence of the writing.¹ In the novel, the writer manifests more abundantly a lack of concern with meticulous or proper punctuation. He uses ‘dont’, ‘cant’ and ‘shouldnt’ instead of the correct grammatical form. Lindsey Banco comments saying that “contractions, which

¹ Adam J Calhoun, a researcher in neuroscience at Princeton University, upon wondering on the effect of punctuation and what it suggests about a novel, finds out that “more than simply carve out a space for words”, commas, periods, quotation marks and semicolons create a visual difference between texts. He initially compares William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* to McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*. While a lot seems to be going on in the first, the second seems less stressed about action and more spatial. Contrasted to other novels such as *Ulysses*, *Great Expectations*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *A Farwell To Arms*, *Blood Meridian* uses the least number of punctuation marks to interrupt the words’ flow. Though such observations are suggestive of a peculiar interest rather than scholarly evidence, they help explain why a less-punctuated text is visually easier to read.

often austere lack their apostrophes, reproduce visually the disavowal at the heart of much of McCarthy's fiction and thus help underscore a broken, fragmented, and ultimately empty world" (276). In other words, by declining punctuational conventions, the McCarthy's aims to make the text not only a visually less complicated matter but also visually suggestive of the bleakness and disorder it portrays.

McCarthy's rule for good writing—which he reveals in his interview with Oprah Winfrey—is to use “simple declarative sentences...periods and capitals and the occasional comma, and that's it”. *No Country for Old Men* is a perfect illustration of such rule. The narrative, which depicts series of hunts and killings, develops through simple brief statements. As a thriller, strangely, there is no heightened sensibility or eventfulness, and if there is any, it must have been suppressed because the sequence of murders appears to be routinely narrated. No sentence intensifiers or complex syntactical structures are employed. For example, when Llewelyn Moss—the fugitive protagonist—seizes the briefcase of money, the ‘event’ is portrayed as follows:

He sat in the floor with the case between his legs and delved down into the bills and dredged them up. The packets were twenty deep. He shoved them back down into the case and jostled the case on the floor to level the money. Times twelve. He could do the math in his head. Two point four million. All used bills. He sat looking at it. You have to take this seriously, he said. You cant treat it like luck.
(10)

In instances such as this, the third-person narrator uses a reportorial tone to describe Moss's dilemma. No psychological depth is given to such act. There is no lying awake at night struggling with consciousness or perhaps regret. There is no moral questioning or fear from the forthcoming troubles. The character, here, voices no inward feeling or thoughts, which gives the impression that he has none. James Wood, in a review he entitles “The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy”, contends that this “new novel has almost none of the battered ormolu that makes [McCarthy's] earlier prose so distinctive”. Yet, such syntactic and semantic sparseness matches “the spirit of the novel. Everything is tight, reduced, simple, and very violent”. That is why the novel could be described as investing

in a minimalism of structure and meaning. Likewise, *The Road* exhibits remarkable inclination towards minimalism of material and structure.

3.2. *The Road*

Similarly, *The Road* uses a minimal punctuation. Quotation marks and speaker tags are completely non-existent. The story, taking place in an undeclared—though recognizable—area, begins a few years after an unnamed cataclysm strikes earth. It follows the journey of a father and a son towards a southern coast. Besides being the only major characters in the novel, very little is known about their previous life. Ashley Kunsu, Creative Writing professor, in her article “Maps of the World in Its Becoming”, comments on the bare-minimum world which distinguishes *The Road* from other similar tales. She argues that “just as these basic forms hold together what remains of this ruined fictional world, McCarthy searches for the essential elements of story — character, meaningful action, etc — that hold narration together when artifice, self-consciousness and irony are burned away” (68). Thus, in this nomadic narrative many gaps are left unfilled. What caused the end of the world is left unspecified. “It could be anything”, McCarthy reluctantly suggests to David Kushner in one of his (very few) interviews. The characters are referred to as ‘the man’ and ‘the boy’ as if denied an identity. “They could be anybody” (*The Road* 182). Their whereabouts, though traceable, are never explicitly stated. Perhaps, it could be anywhere on earth. Even the time is scarcely known. They “hadn’t kept a calendar for years” (2), but does it matter? when “there is no later, this is later” (56). The minimal nature of the plot, the stripped down narrative, and the numerous omissions in the text imbue the novel with—in the words of critic James Wood—a “reticent power”.

Similar to Hemingway’s texts, *The Road*’s use of conversation reveals many insights about the characters which the narrator never exposes. The boy, for instance, has a lot of questions to ask. As any kid, he wonders about things which he has never seen or known before such morels, waterfalls and Coca-Cola. This indirectly states that he was born after the catastrophe. Among the things he ignores is the name of his country which suggests that the catastrophe has wiped

out human existence and no traces of previous life are left. Thus, no hope for reconstruction is possible. However, an exchange such as the following highlights a hidden or stifled sentiment that grows in the father's heart:

We cross a bridge here. It looks to be about eight miles or so. This is the river. Going east. We follow the road here along the eastern slope of the mountains. These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads. Why are they the state roads?
Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.
But there's not any more states?
No. (24)

The father makes sure to inform his son about their journey on the road. He often explains to him their need to move in order not to be tracked down or attacked by others. He gives him instructions which may seem inconsequential chitchat, but—as it is revealed later in the narrative—the father hopes very deeply that his child survives and finds a sort of family or community. Such an idea is never explicitly stated by the father or the narrator, yet it reaches the reader through dialogue. The latter is widely used by minimalist writers for it achieves their indented distance from characters. Again, McCarthy makes a good use of the technique to reflect the subject matter of the novel. As Ely (the old man from *The Road*) says, “in times like these the less said the better” (80). In his next novel, *The Sunset Limited*, dialogue is the center of the narrative and, as the following pages highlight, it emphasizes the writer's will for withdrawal.

3.3. *The Sunset Limited*

The Sunset Limited, as ‘a novel in dramatic form’, depends in its development entirely on dialogue. Apart from describing the room in which the conversation takes place and a curt sketch of the two characters, McCarthy relates no significant detail about their status or background. A lot can be implied through their talk though. That Black is deeply—and traditionally—religious is made clear through the bible copy on his table. That White leads a comfortable—though perhaps unsatisfactory—life is implied through his sporty attire. As in several minimalist works, McCarthy's begins in the middle. The dramatic-narrative begins right after Black saves White from suicide. Their exchange helps elucidate the disparity between their positions which is embodied in their

minimal names. Moreover, like Beckett's drama, there is a minimum of stage directions in this single-act play. Gestures such as moving, standing or eating occasionally interrupt—but make no major impact on—the discussion. One of the reasons behind such reduction of formal elements, such as action, may be due to the work's heavy content. Black and White, in effect, stand for two antagonizing world views that are philosophically, ontologically, spiritually and intellectually divergent. Yet, despite the fact that their conversation touches upon very serious issues which require deep thinking and reflection, the language that is employed is simple. Syntactically, Black is an uneducated man, so his register reflects his educational and social background; whereas White is too world-weary and depressed to care about sophisticated expression (though by the end he resorts to such verbalism). Most of their dialogue seems like a sheer verbal ping-pong.

In her study of Beckett's influence on "McCarthy's (literal) kitchen drama", Lydia Cooper maintains that *The Sunset Limited* also evokes "under-populated stage worlds in which characters, trapped in physical stasis, argue philosophically through dialogue that plays on the meaninglessness of disconnected, unproductive language" (1) . The conversation is pressed forward through repetitions. Like minimalist music, with its percussive repetitive melodies, literary repetition augments the effect of a phrase and emphasises its meaning. Meaning here is not an 'incident' but a process that builds up gradually. In many instances, Black insists on getting an answer which White is unwilling to give. So, he insists.

Black Have you ever read this book?
White I've read parts of it. I've read in it.
Black Have you ever read it?
White I read *The Book of Job*.
Black Have. You. Ever. Read. It.
White No. (12)

In this example, White avoids answering because he knows the implications of such a simple question. His numerous readings do not include the bible; hence his criticism of religion is deemed inadequate. Along similar lines, William

Quirk sees that, besides its “stripped-down aesthetic”, this particular instance “seems to swerve out from a moment in [Beckett’s] *Waiting for Godot*” where Vladimir asks Estragon the same question (36). The novel’s extreme reliance on dialogue, in addition to its crude style, mark its investment in a reductionist mode of writing in order to communicate issues of heightened relevance and gravity in contemporary times.¹ Thus, McCarthy’s text echoes the aesthetic and literary resonances of one of the most esteemed minimalist playwrights. As such his late fiction could be regarded as another (newer) face of minimalism. The next section recapitulates the major features which characterize McCarthy’s minimalism.

3.4. McCarthy’s Prose-Poetic Minimalism

In fact, McCarthy’s later texts could be best characterized as utilizing a “stylized minimalism” (Dorson 6). His narratives are dismissive of punctuation, abnegating towards complex syntax and make use of terse dialogue to advance forward. However, his language—though not ornamented—is still brilliantly evocative of poetic pleasure. In *The Road*, for example, which depicts a bleak and decaying world, we find statements such as “beyond that the ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash” (131).

In such rhythmical—almost verselike—passages, McCarthy slides away from the basic reductionist style. However, despite its lyrical appeal, such language does not contradict minimalism’s will for condensation and sensory experience. In other words, minimalist literature—traditionally—shuns flowery style, yet it—principally—calls for compactness and density which are inherently poetic rather than prosaic features. So, McCarthy’s combination of both tendencies results in a new minimalist face. It is a face that best captures minimalism’s multi-generic nature (found in the Russian prose-poem as discussed in an earlier occasion). In the same vein, James Wood excitedly points out in “Getting to the End” that McCarthian minimalism “represents both the

¹ The last chapter is devoted to McCarthy’s employment of minimalist strategies to discuss issues of race, intellect and faith.

logical terminus, and a kind of ultimate triumph” to the tradition. Robert Clark sees that McCarthy’s novel, just like Cisneros’s *Caramelo*, is a successful exploration and expansion of minimalist style. In short, contrary to the view that minimalism had a brief heyday in American literature after which there is nothing but dirt to throw over its grave (Bell et al.), minimalism—as a style—is still alive and in a fit state.

The regenerative potential of minimalism as a mode of writing is re-asserted through works such as McCarthy’s. Thus, such a literature debunks the punchy criticism that has been directed towards its informing principles. Critic Warren Motte writes reflectively: “if the minimalist gesture of reduction is viewed in a positive light” then one can see that... “minimalism’s philosophical [reductive] stance is ... motivated by a wish to distill a sort of crystallized abundance. Here again, one comes up against ... a strikingly counterintuitive notion ... Yet if one makes that leap it becomes possible to see that small things *can* signify abundantly” (5). In other words, if one is aware—and tolerant—of such fiction’s unorthodox mode of writing, which thrives upon concealment, omission, gaps, reduction and extreme simplicity, its rich contribution to the field of literature becomes more insightful. The myriad of interpretive possibilities which are engendered because—not despite—of the absences and the negations can only be understood if one adopts a different standpoint than is usually assumed. Thus, the research at hand, in its attempt to obtain a fair view of minimalism’s literary dynamics, focuses on the reader. The latter is, as will be shown in the next section, regarded as an interesting player in the minimalist enterprise.

4. Minimalism and the Reader

This last section ultimately brings different threads together. Having already developed an understanding of minimalism, its principles and various literary manifestations, it is crucial to see how such mode of writing corresponds to the central thesis of this research. The latter is, again, reader-oriented and aims at exploring the dynamics of the reader-text relationship. As any text, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* have their own

“pleasant” and “unpleasant” characteristics which affect the reader. Thus, it is necessary to see how their minimalist aesthetics are a reflection of the relationship between minimalism and the reader. Accordingly, the main points discussed in this last section are: first, the status of reading and its impact on the advancement of minimalism, then, the unity of purpose between minimalist tendencies and reader-response approaches, and finally the role of the reader in minimalist literature.

4.1. The Status of Reading and the Advancement of Minimalist Aesthetics

In order to evidence a special relationship between minimalism and the reader, it is useful to understand another factor which contributed—besides the cultural and social ones—to the flourishing of literary minimalism. Though oft-neglected, the role played by national institutions in the promotion of minimalism during the 1980s is very important. Offering a contextual background here is not meant to ‘historicise’ or ‘politicise’ the literary phenomenon in question; it rather seeks to illustrate how minimalism—from its very inception—attempted to establish a particular linkage with the reader.

Margaret Doherty’s article “State-Funded Fiction” offers an insightful discussion of the issue. It highlights the effective role played by the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) in encouraging many later-known-as-minimalist writers. For instance, Frederick Barthelme (1979), Raymond Carver (1970, 1980) Richard Ford (1980, 1986), Bobbie Ann Mason (1983) and Tobias Wolff (1978, 1985), to name but a few, received financial support through the Creative Writing Fellows program. Doherty argues that the agency’s shift from funding “formally dense, politically dissident literature ... to funding formally conventional, thematically populist[literature]” facilitated the growth of minimalism or at least guaranteed its financial sustenance (80).¹ Maximalist literature was unlikely to achieve the same “commercial success” in the

¹ The expression “formally conventional” is rather ill-suited here as it suggests that minimalist fiction is traditional which—as has been afore-discussed—is not true. Both maximalist and minimalist modes subvert certain rules of writing as they substitute two opposite tendencies in postmodern—unconventional—literature.

marketplace as the minimalist (flash)fiction which dealt with popular problems and thus was closer to the average reader. The institution's shift in policy reflected pre-existing tensions between maximalism and minimalism, postmodernism and realism, elitism and populism, which inhabited the American "art and culture since the end of World War II" (82). Such tensions seemed to divide the American reading community even further, yet, in doing so, NEA escaped being defunded and it secured its continuity through a literature that appreciates "the common reader" and aims for "a broad reading audience while still meeting the standards of high art" (81). Hence, if it were not for state sponsorship, it would have been very difficult for minimalists to reach as many readers as they did (or to even write at all). The focus on the reader (consumer) explains why "'populist minimalism' appeared to be formally uncomplicated and supposedly required no tutelage to be understood" (88). The very appeal of minimalism lies in its attempt to involve the reader, an involvement that may come in the form accessibility and populism, as is the case with the 1980s short fiction, or it may come in other forms.¹

Indeed, minimalist literature raises some curious questions. One must consider whether it is relatively easy to read such texts or if it, in fact, is more demanding than one might initially presume. Some academics argue, as postmodern critic Arthur Saltzman notes, that "less is less" because "minimalist fiction so boils down the world, the argument runs, that it loses the broth" (423). That is to say, upon excessive reduction, minimalism turns trivial and banal. The reader, consequently, needs no particular knowledge or intelligence to understand the text. However, such impression cannot—and ought not—be over-generalized on all minimalist fiction. It is true that plain diction, uncomplicated structure and simple subject matter facilitate the reader's immersion within the world of the story; yet if employed differently, the same mode of writing can create difficulty

¹ "Prior to 1980", Doherty further notes, minimalist works by "revered writers like Samuel Beckett and Ernest Hemingway [who] were eventually installed in the literary canon" required readers "to go to school in order to understand that kind of fiction" (88). That is to say, though such literature favored reduction and simplicity it is not necessarily more accessible or easier to read. Minimalist works can involve the reader by being more challenging.

for the reader. For instance, when so little is elaborated in a text, it is extremely important that the writer's wording is precise and the reader's imagination is vast; otherwise, a good deal of meaning will be lost. On the surface, this is a kind of challenge which may drive the reader away rather than call him in. In this regard, minimalism invites readers to prioritize concentration over attenuation because "plot pounces from everywhere. Every instant is a mystery, every inch a milestone. To blink is to miss a history" (Saltzman 427). Therefore, less can mean more. When the text offers the minimum, it is an attempt to allow the reader to contribute the maximum.

4.2. Minimalism's Attempt to Increase the Reader's Involvement

What remains unascertained, however, is whether minimalist aesthetics actually *result* in the exclusion or inclusion of the reader. Critics' opinions are firmly divided in this regard. The issue requires a thorough investigation and is largely dependent on the individuality of each text and the individual response of each reader. That is why it is only through a growing body of research that a righteous understanding can be attained. 'Speculations' among those who are in favour of such literature, such as Kim Herzinger and Arthur Saltzman, and those who condemn it, such as John Biguenet and Madison Bell, suggest that minimalism can generate two distinct attitudes among its readers: either a negative passive reading or a positive active one.

On the one hand, a reader may be taken aback by the 'limitations' of the minimalist text. The omissions, the crude vocabulary, and the mundane subject matter reduce the narrative into something boring and uninteresting. This discourages him from further reading as he has all reasons to believe that the work lacks any aesthetic merit. By lessening exposition, for example, conversation presides over the narration. The factual tone leaves little room for sentimentality or dramatization which is often encountered in works aspiring to create strong emotional impressions upon the reader. Hence, narration is framed in a neutral way that is "devoid of any emotional coloration" which in turn fails to place the reader in the novel's ambient atmosphere (Alexander 28). This may convey the impression that the writer has nothing important to say, no wisdom to

share or inspiration to spread. So, the work as a whole seems shallow and even unworthy of being considered literature. Many minimalist texts suggest nothing important to their readers. In fact, they mostly appear too uncreative and less-than-sophisticated to hold the reader's attention for a few pages. For example, such stories tend to "begin in the middle and end in the middle" (Hallett 494). The omission of a huge amount of information and narrative detail, before and after the focal narrated incident, makes readers feel as though they have missed out a great deal of the story. In a sense, the reader is stuck in the middle and asked to see further backward and forward in order to comprehend why such 'banal' story is being told at all. In such case, the reader is very likely to stop reading it or else exert no effort to even understand its *raison d'être*.

On the other hand, a reader may feel engaged with the work's proximity to his everyday life. The simple diction and the uncomplicated structure allow him to focus on the moment. Because most minimalist stories are moments and slices of life rather than lengthy narratives, the reader may be drawn to stop for a while and reflect on that moment as he does on a moments of his own life. In that sense, it is relatable and thus easier to be involved with. Like in poetry, the use of condensation and brevity augments the emotional impact of the minimalist story. Because the focal meaning is not lost in superfluous plot details, the reader can feel the intensity of certain conflicts and understand the gravity of certain problem without explicit intermediary. With minimum authorial involvement and instruction, the reader is capable of constructing his own meanings. In other words, minimalism's silence and "sententious ambiguity leaves the reader holding the bag" (Broyard). Metaphorically, the bag may well *seem* unnecessarily empty but it can hold hidden treasures inside. This, of course, does not suggest that if a reader finds that the text is unsatisfactory or possesses no artistic value it is the reader's fault. On the contrary, this is an ample proof that minimalism as a mode of writing is not obtainable to everybody. It is beyond doubt that only a skilled writer—of some excellence—is able to successfully invest in a 'cramped' textual space. Such is a risky leap, so the work has equal chances of being either turned down or picked specifically from a shelf full of

other books. For the same reasons, one reader may favor a minimalist text above others while another reader may deem it as a non-literature. Yet, that certainly reflects the reader more than it reflects the text. The latter could be a wellspring of excellence except that it could not be seen as such. A good case in point is that of Beckett's reader who, in Lucy Bell's words, "is simultaneously free ... and bound" (44). Freedom is the result of the text's minus-symbols minus-referentiality approach while he is also bound to infinite process(es) of reading(s). In other words, even Beckett's texts do not appeal to everybody—and that is perfectly normal in the world of literature—but once they do, myriads of treasures are discovered.

Arguably, minimalist literature is never out to get the reader the way the rest of literature does. The holes that are left by the writer are meant for the reader to pick up and compose a coherent whole. In its deliberate refusal "to evaluate characters by ascribing historical, psychological, socio-economic, or moral motivations for their behavior", minimalism puts the reader on equal footing as the writer or the stories' characters (Herzinger, "Introduction" 16). Minimalism does not underestimate the reader's intelligence and ability to discern what is unstated or unnamed. Because 'if the writer is writing truly enough', the reader will be able to comprehend what the missing parts imply or else what that very act of omission suggests. It is a token of trust. The author does not need to act like a sociologist or moralist so as to guide the reader to certain conclusions. Instead, it is "by gesturing towards ... straightforward comprehension while also producing moments of indeterminacy that subtly resist the reader's inferences" the reader is allowed an equal potential to imagine, interpret and criticize (Hollenberg ii). In more ways than one, minimalism, as a mode of writing and a literary phenomenon, contributed in putting an end to a virtual custodianship over the reader. In a world that offered so much else, the minimalists offered—in Carver's words—to renew "a compact between writer and reader"; they offered communication, a communication based on equality, trust and interaction (qtd. in Herzinger, "Introduction" 15). At a time when a lot could be said but very little could make any sense or impact, it was necessary to

return to one of the very basic functions of literature. The audience, after all, does not substitute a passive consumer but an individual who responds differently to what they are offered. By choosing to draw a seemingly depthless image of life, minimalists do not mean to make their works “simple enough to engage the once-a-year reader or to rely on the most immediately accessible fictional conventions”; they instead want to restore reading as “a conjugal act, an intimacy shared. Both parties must participate wholly, if the act is going to work” (Herzinger, “Introduction” 15). Therefore, minimalism’s most esteemed endeavour is the attempt to re-connect the broken circuit between text and reader.

4.3. Minimalism and Reader-Response

It is no coincidence that the popularity of the American minimalist short story co-occurs with the rise of reader-response criticism. Elizabeth Freund notes that the return of the reader as “a specifically native American phenomenon, comes in diverse guises” (134). One of those guises is the welcomed influence of the German reception theory; the other is minimalism. As an art movement, minimalism’s *modus operandi* creates a space for the viewer or the listener to be involved in the construction of the experience.¹

It may seem to make little sense that some artists—with their alienation from and discontent with their societies—would choose to produce such inclusive works. Yet, their endeavour was one informed and sustained by a willingness to (re)establish a broken ‘covenant’ between them and their audiences. In a similar vein, publisher Dan Lacy’s talk, at the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, draws attention to the changing mechanisms at the wake of the 1980s. Lacy meditates on the status of the word as a medium between reading and writing. His words reflect an acute awareness of the problematizing—if not polarising—state of art during the era. He explains that the “communion between author and reader, artist and viewer, composer and audience by which creation is consummated depends on the possession of a

¹ Steve Reich’s “Music for Pieces of Wood”, for instance, may seem a non-laborious composition for an instant, yet once the listener figures out the ‘mathematical’ pattern sustaining the performance, listening becomes way more appealing and enjoyable. In fact, the listener can understand how the piece was composed just by listening.

common vocabulary of words and forms and structures of meaning” (23). However, at a certain point in time, such “common coin” could no longer retain its rigor, that is to say its “freshness and force of communication”, so new ways of expression were sought. The problem with these new forms and pathos of communication was their estrangement from the audience (alluding to postmodernism). Hence, “communion fails, full creation is aborted, and the artist’s work in whatever field becomes a solipsism” (23). In response to this state, minimalist writers attempted to reinvigorate realism as a way of closing the ever-enlarging gap between writer, text and reader. Fortunately, they were not the only cognoscenti concerned with maintaining that communion. A number of literary critics saw the necessity for building a bridge through which readers—literature’s indomitable maintainers—can be (re)introduced to academia. Hence, such turn towards the reader is actually typical of the era’s intellectual mood.

Interestingly, reader-response approaches, such as Wolfgang Iser’s, call into attention a significant interplay between reader and text.¹ However, some kinds of texts are closed; they ‘restrict’ the reader’s imagination by being overly-expositional and offering every segment of information about characters, setting, actions and conclusions. Other types of texts, by appearing minimal and constrained, are open enough to allow readers the opportunity to unleash their imagination. ‘Traditionally’, criticism’s sole task was to extract meaning from a text. (The) meaning could reside self-sufficiently in the very words of a text or else it could be inferred from the author’s context (personal or historical). Matching this paradigm was a literature that exhausts its literariness. Maximalism’s will to communicate effectively indeed creates such literary complexities in front of which criticism could but wonder. However, the shift in concern from the psychologies of the author and the ‘formalities’ of the text to the response of the reader parallels a shift in literature from supplying the reader with a complex encoded message for deciphering to a simply-put narrative which stimulates thinking rather decoding. In this sense, the criticism of reader-response and the literary inclinations of minimalism belong to the same ‘school

¹ The details of Iser’s theory will be discussed in the next chapter.

of thought' . As a critical doctrine and a literary tendency, both are disposed to broaden the limits of writing and reading by moving from centre to periphery. In fact, even if the two approaches were not the outcome of shared historical and cultural circumstances, it remains nonetheless valid that Reader-Response finds its holy grail in Minimalism.

Conclusion

Away from assaults and appraisals, minimalism as a movement in art and literature proves harder to delimit and richer than expected. Its call for a return to the essential—though not pleasant to many—enlarged creative horizons. In the field of literature such expansion appears in the form of a revival and enrichment of pre-existing modes of writing. By the late twentieth century, a bunch of American short-story writers produced—and popularized—a minimalist aesthetics which responded positively to both socio-cultural and literary conditions. Its concern with the on-going existential disturbances engraved by an excessively material and mediatized world, led to its adoption a pared-down uncomplicated style which focuses on daily matters. Without offering commentary or analyses to what it portrays such fiction gives the impression of banality, yet it, in effect, favours the vitality of experiences and images over indulgent writing. Though the works often evoked in discussions of minimalism seem to be groupable, they do not establish a substantial school or critical theory per se. A few other writers—such as McCarthy—came later to expand the boundaries of such literature even further.

Despite his reputation for embellished and sophisticated prose, McCarthy's turn to minimalist style did not increase the refinement and profundity of his literature. His later texts can be regarded as minimalistic due to their reduced punctuation, elliptical structure and condensed expression. Nevertheless, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* are written with such lyrical grace and heightened sensitivity that they are distinctly marked among their likes. Thus, minimalism's enterprise cannot be pigeonholed under a specific genre, timeframe, subject, or style. It is a literary mode of writing which continues to develop and adapt to newer demands. However, what unifies such

aesthetic endeavour is its contingency upon the reader. The latter is targeted not only as a consumer or a subject but also as an involved partner. The following chapter offers critical insights through which such claim can be attested.

Chapter Two

The Text-Reader Relationship: A Transactional Approach

This second theoretical chapter presents the main assumptions and concepts which underpin the current research. The initial section begins with a broad examination of the author-reader-text relationship from a reader-centered viewpoint. Thus, it offers an overview of the major critical premises that led to the rise of reader-oriented theories, and then it provides definitions of concepts such as response, reading and reader. In so doing, the aim is (first) to evade terminological ambiguity and (second) to set the floor for a more elaborate discussion of analytical tools. In the next section, the work of theorist Hans Robert Jauss is discussed as it informs—and offers a theoretical background to—the present study. Some of the concepts he introduces to the field of reception studies are essential to understand the reader-text dynamics for they provide a distinct vision of the different poles that are involved in the making of literature. Similarly, the third section is devoted to the work of another prominent figure in the Constance School: Wolfgang Iser. The latter's model of reading represents the main theoretical arguments which support the subsequent analyses of the literary texts. Both his views on the reader-text relationship and his transactional critical approach guide our attempt to understand readers' responses to McCarthy's text. The chapter concludes by explaining the appropriateness of Jauss' and Iser's theories to the study of McCarthy's later texts.

1.The Theoretical Premises of Reader-Oriented Criticism

Every analytical or critical stance which a critic, scholar or researcher adopts in his study of a text reflects his epistemological assumptions about the nature of textuality, authorship and reading. The present research, being a reader-oriented study, is thus based upon a set of theoretical premises which regulate its adoption and use of critical terms and tools. In this opening section, the gist of reader-response criticism is introduced along with conceptual definitions of terms such as response, reading and reader. The aim is to pave the way for the discussion of the critical approach that is best suited to examine the relationship between the reader and McCarthy's texts.

1.1. The Rise of Reader-Oriented Theories

Reader-oriented theories are broadly thought to have emerged in reaction to formalist approaches which made of the reader a deliberate outcast. As such, their main contribution was the (re)habilitation of the reader as a central element in literary criticism. However, such a stance only gathered momentum thanks to the accumulating influence of other schools of thought. The early precursors of reader-oriented theories can be traced back in some of the classical notions of rhetoric and oratory; however, direct theoretical and critical lineage is linked to the principles of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics.¹ Together they helped introduce a new paradigm of literary criticism which focuses on the reader as an interpreter whose consciousness of a text (a phenomenon) is pivotal in the eventual perception of meaning.² The reactionary nature of reader-response approaches gradually appeared on the surface as it challenged some of the then most uncontested critical doctrines. In its obsessive concern with *the text itself*, New Criticism succeeded indeed in preserving the ‘literariness’ of the text from being inadequately melded with issues of politics, history or psychology. Yet, in so doing it deprived literature of its social and cultural function as it curtailed the range of interpretations which a text may allow. For instance, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s essay on “the affective fallacy” argued that a text’s original/correct meaning needs to be preserved from all extraneous elements. According to them and many formalists, taking readers into consideration creates “a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does)” and a fall into “impressionism and relativism” (31). Contrary to the belief that a meaning which depends on—or reflects—the emotional, cultural or social state of a reader is a complete demolisher of the literary work, the endeavor of

¹ Notions such as *mimesis*, *catharsis* and the *sublime*, which were introduced by Plato, Aristotle and Longinus respectively, are considered by some (such as Rafey Habib) to be the earliest manifestation of reader-centered criticism; however, in “The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response”, Jane P. Tompkins argues that despite its concern for the audience, classical criticism was more engaged with rhetoric and language as an effective tool of power (226).

² Notably, the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer inspired later critics such as Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish in their formulation of reader-response and reception theories.

reception and reader-response theorists began with the belief that meaning is essentially the audience's making. Perhaps, the most prominent exponent of such an idea was Roland Barthes. His revisionary definition of textuality and authorship paved the way for the establishment of a firm space for the reader in literary criticism. As early as 1967, Barthes argued that a text is "a tissue of quotations" while the reader is "the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed" (146). In other words, the reader's place is the center and not the periphery. A statement such as "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" must have appeared quite rebellious at the time (Barthes 148). In fact, what is genuinely 'rebellious' about reader-response as a view and an approach is the unapologetic enthusiasm with which it presents and defends its stance and results. Just in the same manner as postcolonial critics, feminists and other hitherto marginalized groups strive to make their voices heard, those who advocate the reader's role in the making of literature strive to have their own say too.

It must be emphasized that Reader-response, which emerged in the corridors of the Constance School in 1970s and continued to develop until it reached American universities in 1980s, was "not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation" (Tompkins ix). Such critics, coming from different scholarly fields, approached texts in a variety of ways. In fact, a number of theoretical trends have emanated from this critical orientation to involve other areas of study such as sociology, psychology, linguistics and pedagogy. For instance, Norman Holland focused on the psychological aspect of reading by arguing that each reader's response depends on an identification with or against a given perspective or theme in the text. Stanley Fish, introducing the concept of "interpretive community", looked at the social and collective aspect of response whereas another group of critics, led by Hans Robert Jauss, were interested in the literary and aesthetic aspect of the reading experience. However, despite such divergent views, Reader-response criticism is grounded on two basic assumptions. As Lois

Tyson puts it, first “(1) the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them... rather they actively make the meaning” (170). The centrality of the reader to the enterprise of literature, not only as a receiver but also as a co-producer, will be discussed in the following subsections which respectively deal with (re)definitions of response, reading and reader.

1.2. What is a Response?

Ironically, “response” is one of the most loosely defined aspects of reader-response theory.¹ At best, it has been described and explained, but never thoroughly defined. It is still understood as being part of the phenomenon of literature to which many assumptions and classifications are attached. Opinions about response seem to change in parallel with opinions about literature.

In his influential book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Wayne Booth attempts to define what pure literature is². So, he discusses questions about authorial involvement, craft, technique and—most importantly—the relation between authors and their readers. About the latter, he asserts that the “fashion among serious writers” is to write “for themselves ... and let the reader be damned”; that is why giving attention to the reader is seen “as a commercial blemish on the otherwise spotless face of art” (89-90). In other words, attention to the reader, and especially his preferences or capacities, is seen as a mediocre attempt to please or entertain. Serious literature is supposed to transcend such goals. So, the reader—according to such a stance—is irrelevant to the writer’s craft. Booth’s critical work extends to commentaries on response. He discusses the widespread “attacks on readers” who are merely excited and thrilled with sentimentality, action, suspense or mystery. Such readers’ responses to—and

¹ In 1982, Louise Rosenblatt attempted an explanation saying that “in the days when simply to talk about the reader’s response was considered practically subversive, it would undoubtedly have been premature to demand greater precision in the use of the term” (“Transaction” 268). However, even decades after, it does not seem that much has been done to improve the precision of the label.

² Along with I.A Richards, Walker Gibson and Gerald Prince, Wayne Booth is considered as one of the avant-garde critics whose transitory stance between formalism and post-structuralism helped advance reader-oriented theories.

appreciation of—fiction is deemed of a “low” quality because the proper reader, on the contrary, is “willing to take his pleasure from ‘aesthetic’ and ‘intellectual’ qualities, or from a contemplation of the artist's skill” (120). Subsequently, Booth explains this “anti-popular” tendency to deplore emotional responses and plead for more analytical, intelligent and discriminatory ones. He says, in contemporary fiction, that is, by the end of the nineteenth century, it is more apparent that “tears and laughter are, aesthetically, frauds” which ought to be shunned for the sake of an untainted “aesthetic distance” or “alienation effect” (122). Such an effect is achieved not through too personal or too close associations between the reader and the text but through a cognitive stimulus. So, the responses which were encouraged and appreciated, at least until the mid-twentieth century, are intellectual rather than emotional.

Walter Slatoff, also comments on such a widespread stance by noting that as all literary works “are designed to affect the emotions” and those emotional responses are not “inherently less responsible than intellectual ones” (36, 37). In his monograph entitled *With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response* (1970), he argues that readers’ responses are varied and divergent for a number of reasons such as “experience, values, attitudes, temperaments, and habits of mind” (34). Regardless of those differences, he further notes, readers tend to react to texts with involvement or detachment, because every response takes place through a “mysterious fusion of knowledge, judgment, sensory comprehension...” (31). Put otherwise, there is no response that is entirely free from affective judgment; that is, the reader either feels involved or detached from the text. The process that leads to such outcomes goes includes a complex array of emotional and cognitive reactions.

Jonathan Culler who is a prolific writer about theory and criticism after structuralism, comments, in *On Deconstruction* (1982), on the influence of post-structuralism on language, literature and criticism. He asserts that changes in contemporary literature led to a different view of reading and response as well. He says, “the structuralist emphasis on literary codes, the constructive role forced upon readers by certain experimental fictions, and the need to find ways to talk

about the most refractory contemporary works have all contributed to a change in the reader's role" (39). So, with the newly arising difficulties which readers and critics alike faced with recent works, it was necessary to focus attention on one type of response at the expense of another. "Modern reader-oriented critics", he says, are more concerned with the reader having his "expectations proved false, struggling with an irresolvable ambiguity, or questioning the assumptions on which one had relied" than with his "feeling shivers along the spine, weeping in sympathy, or being transported with awe" (39). As such, response mirrors the critic's understanding of literature.

It is no surprise, thus, that reader-response critics—especially those who view reading as an experience rather than a social or psychological act—focus more on cognitive, intellectual, critical and artistic responses rather than purely affective ones. The present study, however, does not disregard emotional responses when the text stimulates them. That is to say, though focus is laid on aesthetic responses and roles cognitive and affective reactions are also discussed whenever necessary. The next subsection carries on the discussion about response as it gained a more elaborate shape in Louise Rosenblatt's theory of aesthetic reading.

1.3. What is Reading?

When Louise Rosenblatt published her first edition of *Literature as Exploration* (1938), a purely reader-centered criticism was not yet clearly anticipated. With WWII looming large over the scene, the tenets of 'traditional' thought were holding their stance for the last moments before eventual collapse. Therefore, her work did not receive appropriate attention until decades later. Notwithstanding her belated recognition, many of the reader-response principles which were to be formed later on owe to Rosenblatt's pioneering work. In an interview following her receiving of the fourth Award for Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts which was granted to her by the National Council of Teachers of English (1999), she reflects on the early phase of her writing. She explains that the shift from "the Newtonian stimulus-response paradigm" to "Einsteinian theory" was similarly a shift from viewing the observer as detached,

“distinct and self-contained” to being recognized as “mediator in the perception of the world...and constantly in mutual interplay with [the] physical and human environment” (“Interview” 160). It is such an ‘interplay’ which, she contends, needs to take place between the reader and the text so that literature achieves its purpose.

One of the interesting points that Rosenblatt makes in her *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978) is the difference between “efferent” and “aesthetic” reading. The former is what students are usually asked to do in literature classes: reading for the sake of extracting information about setting, characters, language, etc. This, though pedagogically important, ought not to substitute the whole literary experience, she argues. Being motivated by her own concern for the freedom and ‘fulfillment’ of her learners, Rosenblatt cared less for theoretical criticism than for actual reading; that is why, she gave priority to the aesthetic reading which is mostly lacking in classroom settings. Her later (1982) writings campaign for an aesthetic viewing, teaching and criticism of literature. She, quite appealingly, asserts that “in order to shape the work, we draw on our reservoir of past experience with people and the world, our past inner linkage of words and things, our past encounters with spoken or written texts” (“Transaction” 270). Previous experiences (both actual and literary), immediate emotions, inner sensations, reflections, judgments and expectations are altogether fused in the reading process along with the text at hands in order to *live through the experience* of reading. An aesthetic reading, hence, is not a passive one-sided reception but rather an active involvement which demands a ‘literary’ fusion with the text in the form of—not just an interaction but—a *transaction*.¹ Unlike an efferent reading, which merely searches to answer preset questions, aesthetic reading aims higher and deeper in search of a fuller and richer experience. Her oft-quoted statement, which became an anchor upon which all reader-centered theories could land, maintains that “a novel or poem or play remains merely

¹ Rosenblatt explains her use of the term transaction instead of simply interaction by saying that the latter “suggests the impact of distinct and fixed entities”, while the former refers “to the interrelationship between the knower and what is known” (*Exploration* 27). Hence, transaction carries the meaning of equality and mutual influence more appropriately.

inkspots on a paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text” (*Exploration* 25). Put more succinctly, the literary work comes into existence only through its convergence with the reader’s response.¹ Therefore, the primary concern of a (transactional) reader-response critic is quite justifiably laid on the aesthetic reading. More on the reader’s aesthetic role will be returned to in the next, but we need, first, to answer an important question which has been so far delayed: who is the reader?

1.4. Who is the Reader?

With the increase of the scholarly attention that is directed towards the reader, it became necessary to pause and reflect about the output of such contributions, especially as the very definition of the reader was not a matter of consensus. Elizabeth Freund’s *Return of Reader* (1987) and Andrew Bennett’s *Readers and Reading* (1995), in this regard, offer a reflective account about the abundant and confusing number of answers which the question of the reader’s identity has engendered (Bennett 2). Indeed, the many nominations given to the reader indicate not only the diversity of critical perspectives and purposes but also the fluid identity of the subject (reader). However, despite the variegated conceptions and attributes which critics assume and argue for in their studies about the reader, it is possible to mark a number of distinctions between readers as far as character and position are concerned.²

¹ It must be noted that Rosenblatt’s idea of a transactional reader-response runs—partially—counter to the attempt of effacing the importance of the text in favor of the reader. Instead, her stance is more moderate as she emphasizes the importance of both in the construction of meaning.

² It is necessary to note the difference in the use of the term ‘reader’ with or without a definite article. In this regard, Lois Tyson demonstrates that “when theorists discuss actual readers whose responses they analyze”, they use ‘readers’; however, when referring to a “hypothetical” reader whose “reading experience” they analyze they use the term ‘the reader’ meaning the reader they conceptualize in their own theoretical perspective (187). Thus, the present research, being concerned with a theoretical rather than an empirical reader, uses “the reader”.

Apart from those who regard the reader as an (actual) individual whose response is subject to investigation, such as Norman Holland, David Bleich and Stanley Fish, the majority of reader-response critics view the reader as a hypothetical construct. The tasks, roles and analytical uses of such an entity vary from one critical stance to another. For instance, defining readers according to their relationship with the text results in three broad categories (each category heterogeneous in itself). The first category sees the reader as actually portrayed or explicitly addressed *in* the text. Such reader is generally referred to as “addressee”, “narratee” or “fictitious” (Prince).¹ The second category believes that the reader is hypothetically conceptualized by the text. In other words, every text creates its own reader. The latter is variously described as being “postulated” (Booth), “mock” (Gibson) or “implied” (Iser). Despite the significant differences between these labels, they commonly attribute a role to the reader; a role that is oriented—and to a certain extent controlled—by the text. The third category considers readers as being above the average reading level of armchair-reader. That is to say, the reader whose response they study is “ideal” (Culler), “super” (Rifaterre) or “informed” (Fish). The skills and capacities which such a reader possesses allow him to achieve a perfect grasp of the text. So, in general, these major conceptualizations of the reader tend to regard the receiver as either addressed, constructed or transcending the text. Bennet adds a second-wave of readers which are—more or less—in conflict with the text. He lists, “the resisting reader (Fetterley), the actual, authorial and narrative audience (Rabinowitz), the embedded reader (Chambers), the Lacanian reader (Felman), the female reader (Schweickart, Flint), the queer reader (Koestenbaum), and even the mind reader (Royle)” (3). All in all, these dissimilar tendencies are indicative of the varying levels of potential and position granted to the reader.

It must be emphasized that, on the one hand, these hypothetical readers are not necessarily a substitute to the real one. The flesh-and-bone reader is intrigued, called or subtly directed to play a certain role in the text; yet he can

¹ The clearest example of such direct address could be found in Baudelaire's preface to *Fleurs du Mal* “hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frère! ”.

accept or reject such a role. So, though the text engages in interplay with its virtual reader, the actual reader is quite independent of such authorial or textual schemes. An ideal reader, on the other hand, is abstracted in a way that paradoxically bends the text to their understanding while depriving the reader of all resistance to the text. Such role, which not even the actual writer of the text can assume in view of the many instances where authors find themselves quite estranged from their own writings, remains hypothetically valid only as a method of literary criticism. Accordingly, reader-oriented approaches proceed in two main tendencies: one admitting the reader's identity and so retaining a realistic dimension in its conception; whereas the second seems to neglect the reader as an individually distinct entity, and this makes of him virtually superior but actually non-existent. The present research is aligned with the view of the reader as a textual construct because the aim, here, is to understand the reader-text interplay as a type of aesthetic experience. The following section, hence, is devoted to a more profound examination of such a view.

2. Jauss' Aesthetics of Reception

What is known as *Rezeptionsaesthetik* or aesthetics of reception has become one of the most elaborate approaches in Reception theory for its laudable attempt—in the words of Paul de Man—to “mediate between the communicative and the aesthetic function of language” and literature (*Reception* xvii). Jauss' approach, which emanates from a keen interest in the history of literature as a series of receptions rather than productions, is combined to his advocative stance towards a literary hermeneutics. His attempt “to bridge the gap between literature and history, between historical and aesthetic approaches” proved very insightful as it encouraged the revision of concepts long-taken-for-granted such as value, judgment and critique (*Reception* 18). What interests us in Jauss' theoretical work, in particular, are three concepts: “aesthetic experience”, “horizon of expectations” and “identification” because they help us explain some of the factors that contribute to the controversial reception of McCarthy's later texts.

2.1. The Aesthetic Experience

In the first part of *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1977), Jauss explores the historical uses and misuses of the aesthetic pleasure that is derived from works of art in general. He, next, narrows his focus on literary texts. Essentially, he contends that “even in our time, the disclosure of another world beyond everyday reality is the most obvious door to aesthetic experience” because it places “next to our life another life, next to our world another world” (*Experience* 8). So, the distance created between the material reality of the individual and the ‘virtual’ possibilities offered by the text sustains the curious, pleasurable, and individual character of literature. Such an “aesthetic experience”, as elaborately explained by Jauss, involves three fundamental aspects: *Poiesis*, *aesthesis*, and *catharsis*. These are independent, non-hierarchical aspects which overlap and complete each other. *Poiesis* is the productive function or faculty that is generally attributed to the maker or owner of the work. It depends on the writer’s artistic capacity and craft which produces the narrative world that is unfamiliar to the reader. The latter is positioned on the receptive side of the spectrum, and his artistry is called *aesthesis*. The act of reception and perception are no less creative than the writer’s skill because it involves the cognition of the unfamiliar (*Experience* 34). Jauss sees *catharsis* as the communicative efficacy of the aesthetic experience. He says: it is “the enjoyment of affects as stirred by speech or poetry which can bring about both a change in belief and the liberation of his mind in the listener or spectator” (*Experience* 92). In other words, the stimulation that is produced by a literary work and the consecutive response that comes from the reader amounts to the level of *catharsis* when the effect of such an experience is durable and profoundly impactful both emotionally and cognitively. Such a function, Jauss asserts, “corresponds to the ideal object of all autonomous art which is to free the viewer from the practical interests and entanglements of his everyday reality and to give him aesthetic freedom of judgment by affording him self-enjoyment through the enjoyment of what is other” (*Experience* 35). Thus, both the artistic pole, that is the writer, and the aesthetic pole, that is the reader, meet at this tangent point.

Here both self and other can communicate. Such a communication is as effective as any form of social interaction.

2.2. The Horizon of Expectations

In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), Jauss asserts that a text “is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes even among its readers new resonances” (21). The orchestration of new resonances is, according to Jauss, subject not only to the historical context but also to the aesthetic participation of the audience.¹ In order to explore such interplay, he suggests two major concepts which highlight the function of expectation in the shaping of the reader’s response to the text. In his second and third theses, Jauss contends that the reader, at any point in time, approaches a novel, poem or play with a set of expectations about its genre, form, themes and language (*Reception* 22).

That “horizon of expectations” is vital in the eventual life of the text because it determines its position among other similar texts in the same tradition or period of time as it influences the reader’s evaluation of it. Jauss explains, “[a] literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions” (*Reception* 23). It does so by triggering the remembrance of previously-read texts, stimulating certain emotional states or arising anticipation about the nature and conclusion of the text (*Reception* 23). In the light of such expectations, the text then can either keep them “intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading” (*Reception* 23). So, responses to a text are to a large extent bound

¹ Jauss refuses the claim that “an analysis of aesthetic influence [cannot] approach the meaning of a work of art at all or can produce, at best, more than a simple sociology of taste” (*Reception* 22). It is true that focus on the aesthetic participation of the reader in the literary experience inevitably touches upon issues of taste—as an individual or a communal choice—yet, by understanding response, we can achieve a profound view of the text and its rich potential for multitudes of meaning if either perspective, context or expectation is changed.

to its modulation of the reader's horizon of expectations. Whereas the fulfillment of expectations engenders a reproduction of genre elements which mean that the text is a continuation of the established tradition, the alteration of those expectations means that the text attempts to reach the extreme genre boundaries or leave them altogether. Jauss refers to a good enough example to illustrate the advanced point. Both Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Ernest Aimé Feydeau's *Fanny* were published in 1857. While Feydeau's novel became an instant Parisian success because of its conformity to the then norms of taste, *Madame Bovary* not only "offended the public morals" but also failed to attract the audience through its narrative style simply because its "impersonal narration" was too innovative for the time. Later on, as a "horizontal change" took place, Flaubert's novel became a worldwide success and was sanctioned into "the new canon"; this in turn "made Feydeau's weaknesses—his flowery style, his modish effects, his lyrical-confessional clichés—unbearable, and allowed *Fanny* to fade into yesterday's bestseller" (*Reception* 28).

"Reconstructed in this way", Jauss further explains "the horizon of expectations of a work allows one to determine its artistic character by the kind and the degree of its influence on a presupposed audience" (*Reception* 25). Therefore "if one characterizes as aesthetic distance the disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work", then it could be argued that "change of horizons" is another indication of the text's value (*Reception* 25). Through its "negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness", a text may harbor negative reception in the form of "rejection or shock, [or] scattered approval", yet as it achieves a "gradual or belated understanding" its evaluation will change as well (*Reception* 25). In other words, while conformity to horizon of expectations may lead to immediate success and popularity, challenging or changing horizons may lead to momentary rejection but it certainly opens a more spacious realm for the text to be appreciated once the aesthetic distance is established. A text belonging to the first category is characterized as satisfying "the desire for the reproduction of the familiarly beautiful; confirms familiar

sentiments; sanctions wishful notions; makes unusual experiences enjoyable as ‘sensations’; or even raises moral problems, but only to ‘solve’ them in an edifying manner as predecided questions” (*Reception* 25). As such it is received as a satisfactory entertaining work but its artistic value may not stand the test of time. A text belonging to the second category is characterized as defying expectations, challenging the norms of the genre and the language or themes prevalent at the time. As such it is received as an alienating, shocking and disappointing work, but when it surpasses those negative reactions it can be regarded as having that “classical character of the so-called masterworks” (*Reception* 25). Since those responses—positive or negative—are part and parcel of the life of the literary work, they are necessarily taken into consideration in the critical studies whose primary concern is to achieve a profound understanding of the literary dynamics. Paying heed to the reader’s impact on the meaning, value and life of a literary text is, thus, an insightful approach to adopt in criticism because it increases our knowledge of both the text and the reader.

As Jauss aptly shows, throughout the history of literature a good many books were rejected for a set of allegations such as: scarce artistic value, social inaptitude, cultural offensiveness or religious deviance, only to be thought of quite differently at a later time. This change in evaluation proves that a work’s value may lay heavily on its reception rather than creation. This, as well, indicates that either the artistic pole had failed (not all literary texts are pieces by masters obviously), in which case rejection is a fair enough response, or that the aesthetic one did. In such a case, the work might be of a great value except that it could not be read as such, so in a way it never comes to exist as a *literary work*. Viewing McCarthy’s texts against the horizon of expectation is, therefore, relevant to our discussion. *No Country for Old Men*, for instance, is received with the expectation of its being a western novel. That is to say, it is expected to fulfill certain roles such as distinction between good and evil or centralization on a heroic figure. When such expectations are turned down, the reader is likely to feel disoriented or disappointed. The next section highlights another element, namely identification, which affects the reader’s response to a text.

2.3. The Reader's Identification with the Narrative

The relevance of identity issues to the theories of reception and reader-response is most noticeable in the critical work of Norman Holland who emphasizes the impact of personal experience and unconsciousness on the formulation of meaning. Such a concern, however, is often encountered in studies of actual rather than hypothetical readers. In this regard Slatoff notes, discussing the variation between involvement and detachment responses, that there is a widespread tendency among critics to consider either an individual reader whose “prejudices, idiosyncrasies, personal history, knowledge, needs, and anxieties” make him experience “the work of art in solely ‘personal’ terms” or “the ideal or universal reader whose response is impersonal and aesthetic” (54). He asserts that “most actual readers ... transform themselves as they read into beings somewhere between these extremes” (54). Jauss’ discussion of the audience’s identification with the text is, in this sense, a moderate stance between the two. That is to say, in his attempt to elaborate a theory of aesthetic reception, Jauss touches upon the issue of identification which constitutes a pattern of interaction between—most particularly—the hero and the reader. Though this concept is not as elaborate as the others, it is nonetheless useful in understanding the interplay between text and reader and the response which comes out as a result. Jauss focuses his analyses on the hero as an old and central element in most narrative fiction, yet he asserts that “identification with what is being portrayed may occur through other relevant figures or through a paradigmatic situation” (*Experience* 153). In other words, what he recognizes as responses related to the hero’s character can be roughly generalized when other elements of the narrative are influential such as main characters, themes, setting or language.

Identification, which Jauss variously describes as an aesthetic “attitude”, “behavior”, and “affect” is categorized into five levels, namely: associative, admiring, sympathetic, cathartic, and ironic. These levels of identification are bound to the hero who could be common, perfect, imperfect, suffering or anti-heroic respectively. Put differently, when approaching the text, the reader

searches for his own resemblance in the protagonist who is either equal, superior or inferior to him. For instance, in a romantic fiction the focus is conventionally placed on the hero—a perfect being—and since the reader’s attention is drawn towards this powerful and impressive character, his response involves enjoyment admiration and even imitation. The less perfect the figure, the more it inspires feelings of astonishment, sympathy, disinterest, estrangement or alienation. By extension, the reader’s attention may be focused on one of the other characters, on a particular situation, problem or trait of the narrative that attracts his interest and—more or less—reflects his own experience.¹ Because of their closeness to personal taste and identity, positive and negative reactions denote “the primary levels of aesthetic experience”. The reader goes through a sequence of emotional states which prepares him to enter into another reading phase by taking up “the attitude of aesthetic reflection, [and] interpretation” which involves more than mere emotions to reach cognitive understanding and retrospective judgment (*Experience* 153). In other words, the secondary level of aesthetic experience is built upon analysis, meditation, judgment and criticism which require a distancing from the typical identification with conventional narrative aspects.

Of interest is the fact that *many* readers never move past the primary level, because of their personal involvement, while many critics rarely move away from the secondary level because of their scholarly detachment. In McCarthy’s later texts, it is quite noticeable that the reader is stimulated to identify with or against a given character who represents a given—moral or spiritual—stance. In *The Sunset Limited*, for example, the narrative is divided between two opposing characters, namely Black and White, who pressingly require the reader’s involvement and judgment. Jauss’ theory of aesthetic reception, in this regard,

¹ For example, in a novel like *Absalom, Absalom!* in which there is no central heroic figure but rather a castellation of characters whose intricacy attracts a complex array of ideations, one reader may identify with Miss Rosa’s revenge-full tale, another may feel impressed by Thomas Sutpen’s grand—though gruesome—ambition. Similarly, Judith’s silence, Henry’s rebelliousness and Charles Bon’s maleficent desires may capture the reader’s attention as they cultivate intense feelings of—gender, generational and racial—inequity and persecution. Quentin’s tormented memory of the Old South and Shreve’s estranged conception of it as a non-southern are also representative of different standpoints which relate to various aspects in the reader’s personality or individual experience.

offers a crucial perspective from which the reader's primary and secondary levels of identification could be examined. Following suit, Wolfgang Iser who is a leading theorist and fellow from the Constance School, devotes a particular attention to the aesthetic transaction between the text and the reader through a series of emotional and cognitive interplays. The next section deals with Iser's theory of aesthetic response.

3. Iser's Transactional Theory of Aesthetic Response

Wirkungstheorie or aesthetic response is Iser's contribution to the field of reader-oriented studies which he regards as necessary because "a literary text can only produce a response when it is read" (*Act ix*). What he suggests literary scholars should do in analyzing a text, however, is not the same as other reader-response theorists suggest. He explains that it is "virtually impossible to describe this response without also analyzing the reading process" (*Act ix*). Thus, his approach tries to comprehend "the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader" that are brought to play by the text. That is why he makes sure to differentiate the objective of his theory from that of Jauss'; the latter he regards as more concerned with the "history of readers' judgments" whereas his approach attempts "to assess individual realizations and interpretations of a text in relation to the conditions that have governed them" (*Act x*). Though both theoretical stances have different purposes and are certainly employed in criticism in different manners, Iser's *Wirkungstheorie* is not very far from Jauss' *Rezeptionsaesthetik* for they both pay an equal attention to those literary works which could be described as responsible for a "horizontal change".¹

Iser presents a critical approach that views the reading of literature as a form of communication which necessitates the participation of author, text and reader in order to be successful. Hence, he suggests a model of reading that aims to secure the receiver's role in the making of the literary work. His critical views

¹ Jauss is more concerned with (collective) readers' responses to a text by focusing on the expectations that accompany such a response; that is why, his theory is more commonly used in histories of literature. Iser focuses more on the individual response and how it is shaped by the text; that is why, his approach helps explain the relationship between the text and its reader. Nevertheless, they both take the factor of literary expectation into consideration.

are introduced and revised in three major books, namely *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1974), *The Act of Reading: A theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978) and *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989). Together, these books constitute the bulk of his understanding of the reader-text dynamics as well as his commentary on the writing and reading of literature. Since Iser's theory provides the most essential analytical tools used in the present research, the largest section of this theoretical chapter is devoted to the discussion of indeterminacy and the implied reader.

3.1. Indeterminacy as a Stimulant of Response

Wolfgang Iser, who has been largely influenced by the works of George Gadamer and Roman Ingarden, applied the philosophy of phenomenology to the interpretation of literature essentially arguing that a linguistic structure, such as a literary text, is a phenomenon which ought to be regarded as a construction of inner consciousness, that is, the reader's imagination. He, unlike some reader-response critics, does not ultimately reject the text in favor of the reader; instead, he sees that the 'virtual nature' of the literary text necessitates a convergence and transaction between the two. In "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach", he asserts:

The literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text [by the reader], but in fact must lie *halfway between the two*. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader (50) [emphasis added]

In this sense, the act of interpretation depends on both tenets: reader and text. None of them can be claimed to inherently contain (the) meaning. Like Jauss, Iser maintains that a literary work is made up of two poles: the "artistic" pole which is the author's creation, and the "aesthetic" pole which is "the realization accomplished by the reader" (*Act* 21). The act of concretization by the recipient is no less creative than the act of production by the writer. The artistry with which a novelist, poet or playwright creates his piece of literature is manifested through the creativity of the plot, the distinctness of the themes or the depth and

beauty of his style; while the aestheticism of the reader is seen through his ability to make “extra-literary” elements such as past experiences (in everyday life or with fiction), values, knowledge and connections osculate with the inkspots on the page. For instance, metaphors, allusions, parodies, pastiche and collage are all stylistic devices which derive their value in equal measure from the one who formulates them as from the one who deciphers—or *concretizes*—them. Because the literariness of an object “cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader”, it is only through a transaction between the two that the literary work comes into existence (*Act* 21). The significance of literary criticism, hence, rests on its attunement to such interplay.¹

Reading, as viewed by Iser, is an act and a process which involves interplay and exchange between text and reader. The text, he argues, is made up of “determinate” and “indeterminate” elements. As the producer, a writer or a speaker attempts to express a determinate meaning; however “what is meant can never be totally translated into what is said, [hence] the utterance is bound to contain implications, which in turn necessitate interpretation” by the receiver (*Act* 59). What is concealed, left out or missing in the text—consciously or unconsciously—remains part of the text as it constitutes “the unwritten text [which] shapes the written” (*Act* 183). In other words, what the writer formulates in the text could be subject to reformulation by the reader in case it is indeterminate. Thus, the meaning of the literary work is realized not only through determinate elements but through indeterminate elements as well. To illustrate the point, Iser refers to Virginia Woolf’s comments on the novels of Jane Austen in which the author of *Mrs Dalloway*’s asserts that *Emma*’s author conveys “much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind” (qtd in *Act* 168). Iser explains that

¹ To evade any confusion, it must be emphasized that Iser’s approach analyzes the text in order to understand the reader’s response; it does NOT analyze the reader’s response to understand the text. That is to say, it attempts to explain the reception of a work by referring to textual characteristics. In so doing, it inevitably touches upon certain meanings in the text, yet it does not claim to offer exclusive or conclusive interpretation to the text under study.

gaps—whether explicit or implicit—stimulate the reader to make his own projections on the meaning of the (printed) text. He says:

What *is* said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said "expands" to take on greater significance than might have been supposed: even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound (*Act* 168)

What critics, especially formalists, emphasize in their interpretations is, thus, no more than the determinate meaning of the text for the indeterminate remains largely neglected. To a certain extent, the negligence of such a significant element in the literary work deprives the reader and the literary field of so much potential, freedom and richness. That is why Iser's approach focuses on the indeterminacies as a way of exploring—and restoring—much of the meaning that has been hitherto lost in interpretation.

Indeterminacy, it must be noted, exists in varying extents. That is to say, while certain texts are exhaustive, finite and meticulously written, other texts are—by comparison—loosely written in the sense that they are fraught with concealment, silence, absence and ambiguity. In modern literature, Iser argues, indeterminacy has observably increased as conventional or traditional modes of writing have been challenged (*Prospecting* 6). With their innovations and experiments in language, technique, structure and content, several (post)modernist writers defy in their texts—to varying degrees—expectations of wholeness, exhaustiveness, linearity, consistency or clearness. James Joyce's novels are a good case in point. *Ulysses*'s "high degree of indeterminacy", Iser demonstrates, "sends the reader off on a search for meaning. In order to find it, he has to mobilize all the forces of his imagination" (*Prospecting* 27). The prevalence of indeterminacy in an excessively allusive and multifaceted text such as *Ulysses* challenges the reader in a way that denies him of usual fulfillments. In other words, the novel resists the reader by remaining open to interpretation which in turn exposes "the limitations inherent in any meaning, [as such] modern literature offers the discriminating reader a chance to come to grips with his own ideas" (*Prospecting* 27). Introspection and retrospection are in this case an effect

that is achieved through an ascendant indeterminacy. In short, depending on the places and forms of the indeterminate meaning, the reader's aesthetic response takes on shape and significance. Every indeterminate element in a text marks and implies a space for the reader to manifest himself.

3.2. Levels of Indeterminacy

Reading is a form of interaction. However, “the codes which might regulate this interaction are fragmented in the text and must first be reassembled or, in most cases, restructured before any frame of reference *can* be established” (*Act* 166). Disconnections and gaps, as asserted by Iser, are not deficiencies to be shunned but rather stimulating elements which ought to be taken into consideration when studying a text (*Prospecting* 9). Their function and effect vary from one instance to another; yet every text—literary or not—communicates a given content in a given form for a given purpose. Part of what is communicated remains indeterminate. Therefore, indeterminacies can dominate on three textual levels, namely semantic, syntactic and pragmatic (*Prospecting* 15). In McCarthy's later texts, indeterminacies are found, to varying extents, on the three levels. Thus, it is necessary to comprehend, through the examples offered by Iser, the significance of different indeterminacies.

First, as far as the text's organizational patterns are concerned, a syntactic indeterminacy creates a difficulty in reorganizing events and plotlines, constructing the referential field of the narrative or simply decoding a complex sentence. So, the reader is faced with an incoherent, incomplete, fragmented or unharmonious text. Second, when meaning is not clearly stated or determined, it is hard for the reader to reach any conclusion with certitude. Consequently, he is pushed to pause, check and reflect on his understanding of the text. Vagueness, fluidity, inarticulateness and indecision pull any form of communication to a variety of possibilities. The multiplicity of meanings is laid at the reader's door in order to select, dismiss and re-construct his individual understanding of the literary work. The latter, hence, semantically belongs to the reader especially if the author's character, beliefs, and objectives are not apparent in the text. So, third, at the pragmatic level, indeterminacy can be most clearly noted when

trying to decide the author's intentions. Those intentions could be traced at a micro-level where the purpose or meaning behind the use of some literary devices such as symbols, metaphors and allusions is ambiguous or at a macro-level where the gist and significance of the narrative is itself subject to wonder. Iser illustrates his observations with a comprehensive example that best conveys the essence of indeterminacy and captures its function. The serial story, he asserts, "make[s] very special use of techniques of indeterminacy" (*Prospecting* 10). As a writing strategy, the use of indeterminacy in the serial story achieves a set of purposes. The cutting technique, for instance, "interrupts the action usually where a certain tension", either because of suspense or anticipation, in order "to make the reader try to imagine the continuation of the action" (*Prospecting* 11). "The abrupt introduction of new characters or even threads of the plot" is another instance where the reader is stimulated to ask questions and makes connections that are not revealed or unforeseen (*Prospecting* 11). Iser contends that such techniques increase the reader's participation in and interaction with the text that is why they were one of the factors which contributed to the success of certain literary publications. Probably, the most famous author who made use of both the form and technique of the serial novel is Charles Dickens whose texts were periodically received by a press-reading audience (*Prospecting* 11).

However, Iser admits that indeterminacy in the serialized novel is "more deliberate and calculated" than the one occasioned in the book because in the former it "arise[s] from a strategic purpose. The reader is forced by the pauses imposed on him to imagine more than he could have done if his reading were continuous" (*Prospecting* 11). Regardless of the quality of the text, Iser further explains, "the pauses simply bring out a different kind of realization, in which the reader is compelled to take a more active part by filling in these additional gaps"; consequently, readers find that the novel seems better and more engaging in the serial form than the book-form which "is a clear evidence of the importance of indeterminacy in the text-reader relationship" (*Prospecting* 12). Success in involving the reader more profoundly in reading is achieved through the freedom that is "guaranteed to the reader in the act of communication" as he is stimulated

to ask and answer questions, interpret and make connections between events and characters (*Prospecting* 12). In the novel form, where techniques such as cutting or interruption are—arguably—less prevalent and deliberate, indeterminacy is achieved through different—conscious or unconscious—stratagems. For instance, in Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrew* (1741), William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848) and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Iser notes, one wants “to paint a picture of Victorian society and one of human nature itself” while the other ‘simply’ seems to portray a single ordinary day, yet the latter (*Ulysses*) is more challenging to readers due to its indeterminacy (*Prospecting* 22). Thus, the impact of indeterminacy is not strictly dependent upon the scale, size or theme of the text; it is rather dependent upon its stimulation of an aesthetic reader-response.

Because of their minimalism, which is apparent both in style and in subject treatment, McCarthy’s later texts are a fertile soil for indeterminacy to thrive. The very essence of minimalist aesthetics is the removal of certain narrative features or textual elements in order to increase the reader’s participation. So, as will be evidenced in the second part, McCarthy’s texts are characterized by different levels of indeterminacy. For instance, *The Road* exhibits a remarkable syntactic indeterminacy which is due to its fusion between various styles and genres. It also presents an incoherent, even inconsistent, vision of spirituality in the postapocalypse. By extension, the meaning and purpose of the tale is hard to define or comprehend. Therefore, the relationship between the text and the reader is defined by the decreasing amount of indeterminacy, that is the author’s control, and the increasing amount of indeterminacy, that is the reader’s participation. When tracing the parts of the narrative where meaning is ruptured or connection is broken, it will be possible, as Iser’s approach postulates, to examine the interplay which takes place between McCarthy’s text and their reader. In what follows, the basic forms of indeterminacy along with its major (presupposed) effects will be further discussed.

3.3. Forms of Indeterminacy

Although the places and levels of indeterminacy vary from one literary text to another, whether syntactic, pragmatic or semantic, Iser asserts, indeterminacy is marked by “two basic structures”, namely blanks and negations which stimulate and regulate the reader’s response, and thus are “essential conditions for communication” (*Act* 183).

Blanks are “the unseen joints of the text” which indicate a need for a connection that is missing in “the overall system of the text” (*Act* 183). In other words, “the imaginary object”, that is, the literary work is formed through the *combination* of different textual segments. As a vacancy, a blank suspends the connection between textual segments (schemata) and thus it triggers the reader’s “acts of ideation”. Indeed, the reader is stimulated to supply his own projections which consequently contribute to the formulation of a coherent gestalt.¹ Hence, the perspective segments appear as “a fragmented, counter-factual, contrastive or telescoped sequence, nullifying any expectation of *good continuation*” (*Act* 186). Differently said, the gaps that exist between narrative perspectives, the omissions in the plot or characterization, the ambiguity of motives or inner thoughts are—among other things—ruptures in meaning which mobilize the reader’s imagination and “increase[s] the constitutive activity” (*Act* 186). The latter varies from one text to another, from one reader to another and from one reading to another. “The greater the number of blanks, the greater will be the number of different images built up by the reader” (*Act* 186). Iser believes blanks to be more pervasive through modernist literature which problematizes the act of reading by making it more contingent upon the reader. It, unlike less challenging texts, ‘provokes’ the reader’s imagination and image-building faculties for it withholds—sometimes cuts—links between the different textual segments and it makes the reader undergo a constant shift in perspective from protagonist to character to narrator and eventually to himself as a (fictitious) reader. “The text

¹ It must be noted that a blank is more effective when it “run[s] counter” to the reader’s disposition for it is entirely dependent upon his own experience (*Act* 185). Thus, a blank is a form of obstacle which impedes meaning.

can never be grasped as a whole— only as a series of changing viewpoints, each one restricted in itself and so necessitating further perspectives. This is the process by which the reader 'realizes' an overall situation” (*Act 67*). In brief, blanks draw the reader’s attention to the necessity of making connections between various perspectives in the text; once such connections are made the blanks are substituted with images; thereby, (re)formulating the overall image of the work.

Negations are another type of indeterminacy which designate particularly “omitted though expected narrative features” (*Act 209*). As “minus functions”, negations refer to the nonfulfillment of traditional functions in the text though the latter invokes them. Iser argues that “the negative relationship between the features expected and those practiced brings about a unique mode of communication” (*Act 209*). The communication actually occurs between the reader and the text on the one hand and the text and other texts of the same genre or tradition on the other hand. Simply, many narrative features, such as setting, characterization, resolution and narrative voice, serve a common purpose which is the “facilitation” of reading and the determination of meaning in a way that makes the reader see the text through the eyes of its author. However, when such features are modified, subverted or omitted, the reader—consciously or unconsciously—searches for them. In fact, the communicatory function of negations, as a stratagem, is most salient and effective when the reader is familiar with the negated features.¹ For instance, a clearly defined setting is meant to provide the reader with a referential—temporal and special—field that helps him situate the narrative and thus formulate a prior judgment about characters, attitudes and conflicts. This, of course, is often helpful but it also results in conventional and/or subjective readings. However, when such background

¹ Unlike blanks, negations cannot be simply ‘remedied’ through connection. When the reader seeks to counterbalance the negated feature, connection alone does not allow him to consolidate any permanent mental image. So, these cancelations actually invalidate any form of formulation or re-establishment of such features (or their effect). In other words, even if the negated feature is restored back to the text through the reader’s imagination, the ‘problems’ encountered by the reader will not disappear. By ‘revoking’, ‘modifying’, ‘relegating’ or ‘neutralizing’ invoked knowledge and familiarity (with plot, language and characters), the text pushes the reader to question its validity or usefulness of such features.

setting is unspecified, the reader is more likely to make judgment without being necessarily influenced by prior notions regarding race, gender or class for example. Noticing the absence, the reader might attempt to find an alternative, yet imagining a setting of his own making does not help elucidate the text's meaning for him because inconsistencies and shortcomings will eventually appear. Then, the reader learns that the very act of relying on background knowledge and prior assumptions is invalid and unnecessary. For instance, in a novel like *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader travels through inconsistent and conflicting monologues which make him feel utterly disoriented. The absence of a unifying narrative voice which provides direction and guidance may irritate or confuse the reader, yet it draws his attention to the falseness of such "direction". In Faulkner's novel, as Iser notes, the reader "must search the unformulated connections, find and abandon them, and so experience for himself just what senselessness is" (*Act 222*). In other words, instead of communicating the loss of meaning in the text through the direct words of characters, the reader is made to *experience* such meaning at first hand by denying him the orientation that is traditionally associated with the narrator's function (*Act 208*). Negations, in this sense, mark the virtual theme of the text because they draw the reader to a profound level of involvement which in turn encourages a larger participation in the construction of meaning. What may seem on the surface to be a deficiency in the text is in effect a quality. In the last section, the blanks and negations which could be found in McCarthy's later novels are briefly referred to, but prior that it is necessary to pause for a close examination of Iser's reader. The character and function of the implied reader should be understood before any claims are made about his position or response.

3.4. The Implied Reader

Iser declares in his introduction to *The Implied Reader* that “in setting out the basic material for this theory”, he has sought to record “the *succession of activities* which the novel, from Bunyan to Beckett, has *demande*d of its readers” (xii) [emphasis added]. Thus, by tracing the different patterns of communication that take place between reader and text, he makes use of “the implied reader”¹ as a concept which elucidates the dynamics of the transactional reading as performed through tasks, roles and occupied positions. Such a reader, however, is so multifaceted that the term itself has become multifarious.

In one instance, Iser defines the implied reader as embodying “all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself” (Act 34). The search for the implied reader on whom the literary work exercises its effect, has led some researches to seek contextual conditions such as time, place, knowledge and taste in order to identify whether the reader is “fit” or “unfit” for the text.² Though prior knowledge, experience and context are indeed important factors in reading, Iser’s theory shifts attention towards the text and its demands and implications on its reader. His attempt to record the hypothetical-reader’s interactive reactions to certain aspects in the text aims at understanding the pattern of communication between text and reader. Simply put, the purpose of such an approach is more about *what the reader does* rather than who he is.

In another instance, Iser contends that “knowledge is offered or invoked by the text in such a way that it can undergo a guided transformation *in and through the reader's mind*” (Act 217) [emphasis added]. Hence, in order to understand meaning, we need to see how it is realized by the reader. He, therefore, argues that “no matter who or what he may be, the real reader is always offered a

¹ Iser’s “implied reader” is the theoretical counterpart of Booth’s “implied author”. Both are regarded as a “second self” which the author/the reader assumes during the act of writing/reading.

² It is true that an outside reality affects reading and an ample proof of its effect is the fact that meaning changes from one reading to another according to the reader’s changed circumstances. However, Iser views reading as a communication between text and reader; thus, his theory grants more attention to the (internal) textual conditions that influence reading.

particular role to play, and it is this role that constitutes the concept of the implied reader” (*Act 35*).¹ Such a concept, he further explains has “two basic, interrelated aspects”, namely “the reader's role as a textual structure, and the reader's role as a structured act” (*Act 35*). As a double-fold entity, the implied reader’s role is understood, first, through the text and its “response-inviting structures” (*Act 35*). Since indeterminacy is the vehicle through which the reader’s response is provoked, regulated and accentuated, then the reader’s role is largely prefigured through its places in the text. Second, the reader’s “actualization” of such textual structures is not entirely bound by the text, so his role can be modulated according to his own “ideation” (*Act 35*). The ultimate coalescence and interplay, Iser declares, between the role offered by the text and the role performed by the individual reader is *only one possible “fulfillment” of meaning* (*Act 67*). So, every act of reading is a distinct fulfillment of a particular text-reader communication. The “tension” which takes place during the act of reading between the reader’s real self and the imagined self that is created and implied by the author’s text is “certainly tenable” because “the one can never be fully taken over by the other.... and by the end of our reading we are liable consciously to want to incorporate the new experience into our own store of knowledge” (*Act 37*). Hence, while the reader’s actualizations contribute to the text’s overall meaning, the latter is incorporated within the reader’s stock of knowledge as an aesthetic experience.

Despite the criticism against the character of the implied reader on account of its virtuality, Iser asserts that his theory “derives its dynamism” from the motion and instability of meaning (*Act 21*). Using such a reading approach brings about “a welter of possible interconnections” and a “multiplicity of possible choices” (*Act 210*). Instead of clinging to what is stable, fixed, obviously right or maybe ‘safe’, Iser—and his fellow reader-response critics—ventured into a territory which is fraught with uncertainties yet fertile for the cultivation of new

¹ In this regard, Iser’s implied reader is conceptually similar to Umberto Eco’s the role of the reader (1979). Eco’s theory, however, focuses more on the text and its structure as open, closed or open/closed.

ideas, doctrines and methods of criticism. As seen through Jauss' and Iser's theories, no matter how profound and well-wrought an interpretation may be, it is only relative and liable to change; thus, it is more appropriate for the critic to leave off such pretense of determinacy and exhaustiveness because in the limitations of one interpretation there are the seeds of another interpretation. The following section, accordingly, further clarifies the appropriateness of such approach to McCarthy's later texts.

4. The Aesthetics of Reading McCarthy's Texts

“[A]t various times *Ulysses* has been called chaotic, destructive, nihilistic, and simply a joke” (Iser, *Act* 210). If that is the fate of a novel as great and impressive as Joyce's, then it is hardly a surprise that many works are received with an unfair criticism. That is why, reader-oriented criticism—*Rezeptionsaesthetik* and *Wirkungstheorie* in particular—attempts to re-explore a literary text's relationship to its reader in order to achieve a better understanding of its value and meaning. This final section has as purpose the elucidation of the appropriateness of the afore-discussed approach, which combines Jauss' and Iser's inputs, in examining McCarthy's minimalist texts. The conceptual notions that are introduced by Jauss coupled to the analytical tools that are provided by Iser form a complementary approach which is suitable to explore the reading of McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*. Together, they offer a few—yet very insightful—examples about the positions, responses and roles which were attributed to the implied reader across different eras and literary traditions.

Tracing the changes that took place during the history of the novel, Iser demonstrates a set of roles and functions carried out by the reader in different textual situations. For instance, in the earliest and most conventional type of the novel—the eighteenth century novel—the reader is supposed to fulfill a determined and limited task which consists of formulating (the) configurative meaning of the text according to a framework that is essentially controlled and

prefigured by the author.¹ Another role which was attributed to the reader, particularly in the realistic novel is that of a “discoverer”. Iser explains that “in order to ensure that the reader participates in the way desired, the narrator is set up as a kind of authority between him and the events, conveying the impression that understanding can only be achieved through this medium” (*Implied* 110). In this way, the reader’s critical faculties are implicitly activated so he can make inferences and judgments—ostensibly—without any assistance.² Thus, the clues are laid down in the path of the reader who—in accepting the journey—becomes a “discoverer” (*Implied* 111).

Functions such as discovery, judgment, construction, decision and discernment are more abundant in modernist and postmodernist literature as the latter tends to be, in general, less prototypical or conventional. Arguably, McCarthy’s later texts possess the same potential as Beckett’s for they present to the reader a highly-indeterminate meaning which acts naturally as a source of irritation and discontent. Their extreme reduction severely challenges the reader’s production of meaning. About Beckett’s texts, Iser says that their “increasing indeterminacy acts as a provocation to the audience” for it stimulates readers “into the act of ‘determining’. The more we try to project meaning onto the aimless ‘action’, the further we get from the characters and the nearer to our own ideas” (*Implied* 271). The attitudes, reactions and roles of the reader vis-à-vis such texts are less restrained or controlled since the writer deliberately withdraws his authority. This allows the reader to be closer to the text.

Jauss’ revisionist commentaries on the (evolutionary) history of literature are particularly relevant in discussing works such as McCarthy’s that are seen as difficult, challenging, uninteresting, unconventional or unreadable. Among the

¹ The writer’s commentaries in the text serve as direct orientation to the reader who is “shown the event and the outer appearance, but he is [also] invited, almost exhorted, to penetrate behind that appearance” (*Implied* 40). Hence, the reader is addressed from a superior vantage point that presumes literature’s educative potential and the author’s possession of better knowledge and wisdom.

² The effectiveness of such technique lies in the fact that it gives the reader a certain independence of character and thought though it “also compels specific reactions—often unobtrusively—without expressly formulating them” (*Implied* 118).

factors that lay behind the negative reception of certain well-written texts is their non-conformity or opposition to widespread notions which appeal to public taste. “The reader of a new work”, Jauss contends, “can perceive it within the narrower horizon of literary expectations, as well as within the wider horizon of experience of life” (*Reception* 24). While the latter is not always known to the critic, the former can be figured out through the notions, images, symbols and motifs which are invoked or alluded to in a text; that is to say, the text aligns itself with a set of other texts which inevitably trigger the reader’s memory of previous literary experiences.¹ In doing so, it not only ensures the effectiveness of communication, but also achieves the “expansion ... development and the correction of a system” (*Reception* 23). In other words, genres, movements, forms, styles and techniques are enriched through those works which resist and challenge prevalent norms. They might be poorly received but their input is valuable on a larger scale.

In a similar vein, McCarthy’s texts, which hover dramatically between positive and negative reception most of the time, could be understood as fulfilling such a function. Because of their narrative, thematic and stylistic features, they are—arguably—liable to changed receptions once a horizontal change is allowed. As if picturing such texts in mind, Jauss asserts “the ideal cases ... are works that evoke the reader's horizon of expectations, formed by a convention of genre, style, or form, only in order to *destroy* it step by step—which by no means serves a critical purpose only, but can itself once again produce *poetic effects*” (*Reception* 24) [emphasis added]. It is the aim of subsequent analytical chapters to reveal and discuss how McCarthy’s texts destroy and reproduce poetic effects.

By focusing on the blanks, the disconnections and the negations in *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*, it is possible to demonstrate the most confusing moments which encounter the reader and also point out the tasks and activities that are demanded from him. In other words, whenever meaning is disrupted or expectation is defied, it is an indication of one

¹ Jauss illustrates this point by referring to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* in which the author employs images and symbols that are well-known to his readers and then parodies them.

of the implied reader's aesthetic roles. The responses which are stimulated are as complex and diverse as the nature texts themselves. McCarthy's later texts are an interesting case study for their distinct relationship with the reader. On the one hand, they are—as briefly noted in the previous chapter—difficult to read due to their stylistic features. On the other hand, they deal with questions that are intricate and multifarious. So, their indeterminate meaning and non-conformist form is—on different levels—a challenge to the reader. The latter's reception of these texts is almost “bound” to be controversial. *No Country for Old Men* is transitional text in many respects. It marks a change in the genre of the western as it highlights an evolution in McCarthy's authorial choices. Therefore, it is presented as an indefinite text which inevitably provokes the reader's questioning. *The Road's* overall tendency towards reduction and absence makes it hard for readers to follow the sequence of events or grasp the narrator's commentaries. The several perspectives that are presented in the text, regarding moral and spiritual issues, deepen the reader's sense of loss as meaning appears untraceable and ungraspable. In *The Sunset Limited*, similarly, everything seems to fall apart: everyday life as well as narrative structure. Its extreme indecision and open-endedness unleashes in front of the reader multiple interpretations none of which is defined or limited by the text.

In view of such indeterminacies, it is impossible not to wonder about the kind of reader that these texts imply. Is McCarthy's reader a producer? A discoverer? A follower? Is he regarded as an independent player? Or simply as an inferior receiver? Such questions arise when we approach the texts from a transactional reader-response viewpoint. So as to answer them, our approach combines the theories of Jauss and Iser. By appropriating the concepts and tools, which they suggest, in accordance with the particularity of the texts in question, the aim is ensure that analyses are complementary rather than antithetical. That is to say, while certain theoretical aspects are emphasized others may fade to the background because they are not relevant to the texts or to the purposes of the present thesis. Essentially, in each analytical chapter, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic indeterminacies are tracked. However, because of the dynamic nature

of reader-response criticism and of the texts themselves, there is often a need to integrate other critical notions, mainly Jauss' theory of reception, which facilitate generic or thematic analyses. Put more succinctly, the core of the analysis is Iser's theory of reading and it is backed with Jauss' insights about reception and experience.

Conclusion

The present chapter attempted to elucidate the critical background of this research. The latter, in broadly affiliating its endeavor with reader-oriented studies, concerns itself with questions of reading, response, experience and transaction.

Albeit less rebellious—in approach—than would have been thought at initial inspection, reader-oriented theories have indeed introduced a set of stratagems and methods of literary analyses that offer renewed insights where traditional critical perspectives may fall short. The author-text-reader trio is the backbone of literature, and so it is not uncommon to face challenges when attempting to re-view an old relationship anew. Probably, the first challenge a researcher in the field may face is the necessity to limit the scope and tools of the investigation lest it expands beyond feasibility. Accordingly, the present research follows and focuses on the guidelines of what is variously known as Aesthetics of Reception and Aesthetic Response. Colleagues in the (German) Constance School, Hans. R. Jauss and Wolfgang Iser have elaborated—through separate efforts—a view of the literary text as being (re)constructed by the reader in an aesthetic manner that involves an active interaction with its literary aspects. Jauss acknowledges the importance of the reader's expectations in shaping his experience of the text; while Iser emphasizes the impact of the text's internal features in the stimulation and regulation of the reader's response. Put more succinctly, this chapter has explained the assumptions and arguments which—if panoramically viewed—come at the conclusion that reading is an aesthetic experience which is realized through an aesthetic response.

Moreover, by focusing on this particular reader-oriented conceptual framework, our use of terms is also subject to fine-tuning. While it is relatively easier, in another field of research, to employ terms without overt precautions, throughout the present thesis a number of terms are either avoided or used minimally for the sake of conceptual consistency. For instance, “writer” replaces “author” because, as noted at the beginning of the chapter, reader-oriented theories arose in parallel with a re-location (even deconstruction) of authority. Thus, “writer” is more neutral. “Text” as well is often used instead of “novel” or “literary work” since, as argued by Jauss and Iser, it is only at the hands of a reader that a text becomes literary.

The following analytical chapters, thus, will devote attention to that live circuit between McCarthy’s texts and their reader. The later texts, it will be demonstrated in the next chapter, are different from the rest of his oeuvre, so their minimalistic tendencies, which were briefly indicated in the previous chapter, demand a special reading experience. Therefore, by focusing on indeterminacy, expectation, identification and implied reader’s role, the study attempts to show how the act of reading such texts can be transformed into an aesthetic experience through the reader’s participation. It is necessary that a transaction between the two—artistic and aesthetic—poles takes place so that meaning is realized. By the same token, it is necessary that the researcher who observes and comments on such a communication resorts to his “own ideas”. This is a confession which Iser makes in order to explain the need for offering illustrations and examples of possible interpretations so that the critical work “should not lose itself in total abstraction”. Such illustrations “are not meant as interpretations of a text, but simply serve the purpose of clarification” (*Act xi*). So, as we are about to embark on a journey with *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*, it is important that the reader of the present research keeps in mind that all subsequent interpretations are merely illustrations and possibilities and that they do not—in any way—impel him to relinquish his own ideas.

Part Two

Critical Analyses

This second part, that is entitled “Critical Analyses”, is devoted to McCarthy’s later texts. It comprises three chapters each of which deals with one of his novels. Focus is laid on different levels of indeterminacy in an attempt to comprehend the interplay between McCarthy’s texts and their reader. In other words, by tracing the various gaps and negations which appear in McCarthy’s texts and examining their implications, the reader’s aesthetic roles are better understood. Accordingly, the main task of this part is to analyze the texts’ challenging aspects with the objective of revealing their impact on the reader’s experience.

The first chapter is relatively broader in scope as it touches upon several of McCarthy’s texts. Though it particularly focuses on the formal and thematic traits of *No Country for Old Men*, it also compares it to previous and subsequent novels. The purpose is to highlight the transition in the writer’s choices and examine their implications on the reader’s positions vis-à-vis these texts. The second chapter studies *The Road*. Its generic and stylistic features are first discussed before shifting attention to its content where emphasis is placed on spirituality and morality as two pivotal—and inter-related—themes in the narrative. The reader’s reaction to—and interaction with—such aspects is explored in parallel so as to offer a closer view of the interplay between the two. The last chapter deals with *The Sunset Limited*. It similarly focuses on formal characteristics in addition to spiritual and philosophical issues with the intention of exploring the novel’s indeterminate structure and meaning. The roles that are attributed to the reader in McCarthy’s dramatic novel reflect the culmination of the writer’s evolution while they also indicate an important shift in the reader’s position. Together, the later texts present common stylistic and semantic inclinations which result in similar roles for their implied reader.

The different genres of the novels under study; that is to say, their medial position between the various genres such as the detective, the western, the postapocalyptic, the parable and the play complicates their reading and, by extension, their analyses. The fusion of several stylistic traits—notably prose-poetic—is another significant factor which has a bearing on the reader’s

perception of their meaning and value. The texts' dual representation of spiritual issues also contributes to their controversial reception. Therefore, the analyses, which attempt to highlight the interplay between such textual features and the reader's interaction with them, are aided with various references to relevant literary trends and genres. The aim is to contextualize such readings—whenever necessary—and render the analyses more comprehensible to a general reader.

Chapter One

No Country for Old Men: the Landmark of a Literary Transition

The present chapter examines the position of *No Country for Old Men* as a transitional text in McCarthy's oeuvre. It essentially argues that there is, in this text, a significant change in the author's choices which in turn has an important bearing on the reader's role. The first section provides an overview of McCarthy's previous novels. It, in other words, discusses the early novels in terms of their overarching themes and styles. The second section traces, generally, the positions of the reader in McCarthy's southern and western texts. This offers an adequate background against which the later novels and authorial choices can be assessed. Thus, the third section which is narrower in focus deals with *No Country for Old Men* as it is compared to its predecessors. Though the novel is thematically related to earlier works, it marks a significant discontinuity in terms of style. Hence, the next section discusses *No Country for Old Men* as being closer to the later texts, that is, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*. The novel's leaning towards certain minimalistic tendencies explains its negation of some generic and stylistic features in addition to its indeterminate representation of spiritual perspectives. Therefore, the final section explains the change that is marked by *No Country for Old Men*. McCarthy's formal and thematic choices indicate, in this case, the beginning of a significant phase in the writer's literary evolution. The concluding analyses show that, in parallel, the reader's position and role have evolved.

1. An Overview of McCarthy's Previous Novels

As someone who started writing since 1959, McCarthy is deemed to be one of the most important figures whose literature succeeded in portraying the American experience over the span of several decades. Because of the magnitude, so to speak, of his opus, change is unavoidable and understanding of such a change is necessary. Arguably, his later works do not stand in total isolation from the rest of his oeuvre, so focus on them (later works) solely may lead to some oversight or fallacy. Therefore, the present section begins with a brief overview of McCarthy's previous novels in terms of the themes they explore and the variety of styles which they employ. In doing so, a comparison

can be made between the early and the later texts and, eventually, the changes that are introduced by *No Country for Old Men* become easier to trace.

1.1. Themes Explored in Southern and Western Novels

In his earliest works, known collectively as the Appalachian novels, McCarthy portrays outcasts who struggle with their society. The southern society was, in fact, subject to various renderings by eminent writers such as Stowe, Twain, Faulkner, Morrison and others, so McCarthy's endeavor cannot be considered altogether new or incomparable. His distinction, however, lies in his *belated insight* into the ills and evil of the Southern society. In other words, while his predecessors' literature informs the reader about a distant past that may very probably seem unrelated to the present, McCarthy's literature explores the near South that—simultaneously—bears the weight of past sins (such as slavery) and warns against a decaying future. Because of the South's historical and cultural legacy, it is unsurprising that such novels depict an awareness of the tensions that (continue to) exist between the southerner and the south, the southerner and his fellow countymen, the southerner and himself. The consequences of those tensions, which are most of the time catastrophic, are minutely portrayed in McCarthy's early novels.

For instance, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), which is the first of his published novels, opens with murder and ends up with senilities and abandoned places. His next novel, *Outer Dark* (1968), revolves around an incident of incest. Again, it is unsurprising that McCarthy probes into such an issue given its frequent appearance in two of the major sources that influence his writing: the Bible and Faulkner's novels. The novel similarly ends with murder and infanticide. No less terrifying is *Child of God* (1975) which tells the story of a cave-dweller who becomes a necrophile. As if deciding to conclude his southern constellation more humorously or at least less tragically, McCarthy depicts in *Suttree* a man almost like his younger self. The main character abandons a life of privilege to live in a houseboat near the polluted Tennessee River. He is sick with his society, its hypocrisy and shallowness. His picaresque adventures, just like those of Tom

Sawyer and Huck Finn, allow him to meet “thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, toppers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees” (457). So, through this novel and others, McCarthy re-draws the south making sure to include everyone in the picture; especially, the marginalized and the despised. When Suttree self-reflexively asks “am I a monster, are there monsters in me?”, he is in fact referring to all those monsters which inhabit McCarthy’s southern fiction (366). The latter is, briefly put, about monsters who commit monstrous deeds in a region that breeds more monstrosities. Seen so, his early literature is best understood as part of a later ‘cult’ of southern writers to which Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy belong.

Just when his name began to collocate with all that is southern, McCarthy turned toward an equally appealing region: the Frontier. Like his previous works, the Border Trilogy pays an acute attention to nature, the landscape, local accents and is fraught with acts of violence. Gangs, lawlessness, mindlessness, bigotry, genocide and greed are part of such narratives’ monotony. For instance, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* take place during the 1950s when the US-Mexico border relations were resuming “normalcy” a century after the conflict ceased (1845). Characters such as John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are American cowboys who speak native Spanish and bear English names. These are multi-cultural multi-racial tales. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy re-explores the roots of such historical and cultural cross-border conflicts. The character of judge Holden, who might be the most impressive villain in contemporary American literature, stands out in sharp contrast against the mythical frontiersman who is conceptualized in popular imagination as a pioneer in quest for a free, prosperous and self-fulfilling existence in the Wild West. Hence, the region’s turbulent routine and the inconsequentiality of violence, despite its pervasion, reveal the seethe that lies beneath the romantic, heroic and innocent pastoral dream. In Vince Brewton’s words, “McCarthy has undertaken to tell authentic westerns using the basic formulas of the genre while avoiding the false

sentimentality, uncritical nostalgia, and unearned happy endings that often characterize the genre” (133). In fact, it is more than just unhappy; his literature is a re-exploration of the southwestern obscurities in a very horrifying manner and with an intentness that seeks not to evade or justify.

In short, it is almost impossible to read McCarthy’s novels, both the southern and the western, as unattached to broader generic and regional concerns. His literature exhibits a profound awareness about cultural, social and historical problems which popular literary currents traditionally overlooked.¹ Thus, thematically speaking, the works offer a comprehensive and more discerning ‘inside’ image of the regions and their people.

1.2. Styles Employed in Southern and Western Novels

In his early career, McCarthy was often compared to William Faulkner. He even won the William Faulkner Foundation Award (1965) for *The Orchard Keeper* and was called ‘Faulkner’s legitimate heir’². The reasons for such a connection may go beyond the mere proximity of their southern tales to include even traceable resemblance in style. The high diction, the gothic tone, the complex syntactic structures made many of McCarthy’s passages seem not only to imitate Faulkner’s alluring prose but also to be a sort of poetry. Yet, imitation of Faulkner or poetry was not—apparently—the writer’s purpose as he fostered an unmistakable style in the subsequent texts which became his distinct hallmark. Terri Witek comments that “many different words, styles and voices, [inhabit] the verbal world of his prose style” so much so that “the world the narrative voice describes seems so full and unsorted” (88). What can be sorted out, however, is McCarthy’s investment in three particular stylistic features, namely sound, punctuation and dialogue.

The archaism of McCarthy’s narrative prose has always been a remarkable aspect. Yet, it is not only the complexity of the words used but also their broad

¹ Popular novels such as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove* (1985) portray the south and the west, respectively, with less critical intentions.

² Harold Bloom is one of those who thought so. See: *The American Canon: Literary Genius from Emerson to Pynchon* (2019).

range which confuses readers. Sometimes, it seems impossible to understand his statements without being initiated into natural, medicinal, and botanical sciences. In view of such intricacies, some claim that his language is unnecessarily incomprehensible. Some may even consider it as a failed imitation. Nevertheless, if such diction adds nothing to the narrative, except its peculiar sound, the claim could be deemed right but that is not the case. Jay Ellis, in his study of “McCarthy’s Music”, notes that “we must distinguish between sound that is pleasing in and of itself—words and phrases that flow to a pleasing aesthetic effect—and sound that reinforces meaning ... The best place him [McCarthy] among all, if not above most, of the strongest stylists working in the American novel” (158). In other words, McCarthy converges sound and sense in a unique manner which provides, besides the usual auditory effect that is associated with poetry, another dimension to the expressed meaning. This feature continued to develop with the rest of his canon. So, his literature cannot be thoroughly described as prose-poetic, yet there is certainly a special sound to it.

In the earliest works, nothing particular could be said about the way McCarthy chooses to punctuate his texts. Gradually, however, fewer punctuation marks appear on the pages. At first glimpse, this may seem to be of little significance or even to have no bearing whatsoever on the narrative. Yet, the importance of such an authorial choice appears clearly if, for instance, we attempt—as Peter Josyph—to read out loud. In “Blood Music: Reading *Blood Meridian* Aloud”, Josyph explains his experience in reading the novel in such a way; he says that he wanted to treat himself “to the pleasure of speaking its darkly poetic prose” and “to alter—perhaps deepen, perhaps confound—[his] understanding of this unusual, undeniably challenging novel” (52). Indeed, one of the particularities of McCarthy’s novels is their natural disposition to being read out loud because of their musicality. Hence, the gradual reduction of punctuation is meant to facilitate reading by eliminating distractions from the reader’s way while totally trusting the reader’s ear for narrative tone, pause, and intonation.

Dialogue is similarly employed to its fullest effect. Both in southern and western novels, McCarthy succeeds in capturing local accents, dialects and registers rendering conversations more enriching, insightful and realistic. Because the narrative seldom engages in exploring inner consciousness, the exchanges between characters substitute the major source of information for the reader. This ensures the impartiality of the narrative voice and captivates the reader's attention since most of the time the dialogues are humorous (as in Suttree's case) or thought-provoking (as in judge Holden's case). Gradually, dialogue occupies a bigger part of his narratives. Eventually, as in the case with the later works, it becomes the most dominant aspect. Such a tendency sets McCarthy—stylistically—closer to Hemingway who preferred uncommented-on dialogues as a way of drugging the narrative forward instead of lengthy exposition or commentary on the characters' thoughts and speech. McCarthy's increased reliance on dialogue, hence, signals a shift in style that parallels a shift in thematic concern as well.

In short, McCarthy novels can be considered as a distinguished set among their contemporaries because they render brutalities and anomalies in a very acute and sensitive manner that makes the vision they draw grim, eschewed and penetrating in comparison to other literary visions. Lincoln rightly describes such texts as weird tales about “weirder people, hill folk dementia and genetic grotesquerie”; the writer himself is a weird stance where metaphorically “Eudora Welty [is] in a dark mood, William Faulkner [has] gone nasty, Carson McCullers randy” (52). Hoffmann rightly adds that what sets the author apart from both the old and “the third (contemporary) generation of Southern authors” is his stylistic “innovate[ion] in language and form” (237). Thus, McCarthy forged a canon that simultaneously invokes the works of other novelists, who contributed in southern and western literary traditions, but departs from their repetitively reproduced content and style. Such a choice—to walk through a different pathway—becomes more apparent—and even extremist—in his later texts.

2. An Overview of the Reader's Position(s) in McCarthy's Oeuvre

The study of any writer's canon must—in a way or another—include the reader. This is particularly important when examining the reception of his works. So, after providing a brief thematic and stylistic overview of McCarthy's novels, it is necessary to consider the positions that are granted to the reader in these literary works. Of course, it might be too ambitious to claim to cover such an issue in a few lines; yet, after all, it is one research among many, so it does not have to be an all-or-none stance. What might be touched upon lightly in this research could be elaborated in another. It is sufficient, for the purposes of the present thesis, that we see the broader picture as far as McCarthy's previous works are concerned; that is why, this section explores, first, the reader's position in the earliest (southern) novels and, then, explores his position in the late (western) novels. Doing so will help us see the change, if any, in the reader's roles as far as the author's thematic and stylistic choices imply.

2.1. The Reader in McCarthy's Southern Novels

Because of the notorious content of the early Appalachian novels, which basically focus on atrocities done by socio-and-psychopaths, McCarthy makes sure not to draw his readers too close nor too far from the narratives. The latter are neither moralizing nor psychologically informative; instead, they depict events—mostly real ones—with the necessary detachment and insightfulness.

In *Child of God*, for example, the novel begins by claiming that Ballard—a young outcast—has “saxon and celtic bloods, a child of god much like yourself perhaps” (4). The reader in this case is confused because, on the one hand, there is some kind of divine kinship which is claimed to relate him to Ballard, and on the other hand, the man in question is an insane criminal to whom nobody wishes to be related. The narrator in this instance—as in many other ones—shifts attention to the second person which prevents the reader from achieving a complete estrangement from the tale. The aloof portrayal of Ballard's actions, while keeping a steadfast removal from his inner thoughts, accentuates the narrative's objective tone, yet it risks furthering the distance between the reader

and the story. The latter would have been in such a case ineffective. Thus, the use of “you” as a way to address the reader draws him back close to it and pushes him to ponder on the questions it raises. It involves the reader—almost accusingly—in the narrated incidents. In a differently-told narrative, the reader would either approve of the community’s isolation of those like Ballard or identify with the sadist maniac. McCarthy’s narrative, however, suspends the reader between the guilt of approving the community’s bigotry and the guilt of sympathizing with a necrophilic “part-time ghoul” (174). So, though the reader is not allowed to feel any sympathy or forgiveness towards Ballard’s appalling violence, he is pushed to re-question his judgment of the neighbors, the church and the society at large¹. In this regard, Gary Ciuba explains how McCarthy succeeds in creating the “necessary fictional detachment” which keeps readers’ responses balanced: one way, it is a “horrified rejection” of violence, and on the other it is a case to contemplate and learn from because after all Ballard is just another “one of their own” (188). Consequently, the novel achieves a profound searching impact on the readers and—unlike many other novels—dares them to re-examine—through this southern gothic tale—the violence and violations of fellow southerners.

To contemporary readers, such gothic tales might be very shocking; yet they do correspond not only to a horrid past but also to an equally terrifying present. Their content in fact is not very far from the realities of the 1970s and 1980s. So, even as they are related to the past they also reflect the present psychological ‘disorderliness’ of modern readers. Kenneth Lincoln, in his discussion of the proximity between McCarthy’s gruesome stories and the context of his contemporary readers, points out a number of factors which close the temporal—perhaps cultural—gap between the two. He lists the following:

¹ The aversion and repulsion that is voiced in a number of reviews and commentaries on the novel reflects this state of denial to which the reader is pulled (Hall 51; Winchell 300).

- post twelve-year-long Vietnam Conflict
- social unrest and change and revolution tearing up the streets of the country
- alternative cultures roiling around drugs, sex, rock 'n roll
- the American use of atomic annihilation staggering everyone's circumscribed imagination toward a Third World War and silent spring
- biological and chemical warfare reinstated in laboratories at home and sold abroad
- hate crimes and mob lynchings and racial discriminations and civil rights movements verging on another internecine war across America (58-59)

These factors, among others, contributed to the re-creation of an atmosphere that is not very different from the atmosphere of McCarthy's gothic southern novels. Hence, readers are—despite shock—drawn to see the recurrence of such ills and the necessity to revise their conceptions of the past in order not to be dragged to similar recesses. Facing— instead of evading—such terrible realities is McCarthy's response to such apprehended state of havoc. That is why he 'relies' on his reader's sense and engagement to achieve a lasting impact on them.

In brief, the reader in McCarthy's early novels is placed in a midway position. He is relatively controlled in the sense that he is not allowed to overly sympathize with characters' motives since their psychology is never deeply explored. This is done intentionally to avoid the perpetuation of some evil as some novels do (allegedly such as a subsequent novel, *American Psycho*, by Bret Easton Ellis). Hence, the reader is oriented and is not totally independent of the author's intentions. Yet, on the other hand, he is granted some autonomy in the sense that the narrator does not impose particular judgments on the characters and their behaviors; on the contrary, that is left in the reader's hands. In other words, the reader's judgment does not depend on an omniscient narrator's perspective or on a predefined interpretation. Therefore, in McCarthy's early novels, namely the southern gothic tales, the reader is not as controlled as traditionally expected but his position is still confined by some authorial orientations.

2.2. The Reader in McCarthy's Western Novels

The second phase of McCarthy's career comprises the western novels: *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy. The works are clearly—and cozily—nested within an old and popular genre: the Western. So, from the onset, readers approach these texts with certain generic expectations. They are for most of the time surprised by what they find.

Blood Meridian, for instance, presents readers with a satanic cast of figures who represent the Manifest Destiny in its most wicked and despicable state. This not only questions such a cultural ideology and its mythical influence on the American character but also shows the weakness—and perhaps danger—of opposition to it. In “Learning from Art”, Dennis Sansom explains a similar point by highlighting the novel's depiction of the consequences of the kid's defiance—albeit so feeble—to the judge who advocates such an order. Before killing him at the end of the novel, the judge explains to the kid the reason, saying “you alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (299). Because the kid does not wholeheartedly support the killing of innocents, though he finds himself part of the gang and takes part in their atrocities, the judge considers him as an opposition. “The kid subconsciously keeps part of his soul's passion away from the destruction of war. The judge ... cannot endure such heresy. Because he thinks he should resist even in his modest way the mayhem and slaughter of the blood meridian, *the kid is a heretic*” (Sansom 8) [emphasis added]. So, it is only by killing him that the judge feels ecstatic. The kid is seen as the figure which—unwittingly—opposes the omnipresent ideology of the Judge (arguably the ideology upon which the American Frontier is built) and as such his existence is a threat to the authority of the judge and by extension the authority of his ideology. In an article entitled “The Effacement of Agency and an Ethics of Reading in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*”, Joshua Comyn further argues that the judge Holden can be regarded “as the fictional author of the novel, and that the kid ought to be considered a sign of the reader” (54). The judge's authoritative preaching and frequent acts of inscription, as if he were an

historian, grants him the position of a writer and a creator of the tale into which the kid—just like McCarthy’s reader—has been thrust perhaps without his own consent. So, the reader is placed in the same position of the kid. That is to say, he is incessantly forced to pass judgment on the narrative, the characters and, of course, its ‘author’, judge Holden. To do so requires the reader to immerse himself with the world of *Blood Meridian*—just like the kid— but also to be resistant enough in order not to be overwhelmed by its narration¹. Nearing the conclusion, the judge declares: “only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance” (250). Projecting such a statement by such a fictional author, on the reader’s position, it becomes clear that for the reader to understand the narrative and join in its dance, he has to be entirely involved in the narrative. His opposing acts of judgment may, then, be deemed heretic and he may—like the kid—figuratively risk his soul in the way. So, the act of reading turns from being a ‘simple’ entertaining leisure that feeds the reader with nostalgic and escapist images to an intellectual stimulus that is culturally-provocative and historically-skeptical. As such, *Blood Meridian* is an anti-western that refuses to be read without a response from the reader. The case is so because the genre of the western, as Phillip Snyder rightly notes, makes use of “the cowboy codes” and “a hard-edged nostalgia for the cowboy past” which means that any attempt to reverse such a tradition is bound to raise question and perhaps engender rejection (199). So, McCarthy’s hard-boiled revisionary tale may not be easily approached by everyone simply because it touches upon a very sensitive vein in the American culture (and attempts to cut it out). Accordingly, the reader is placed in a position where he can—and ought to—judge critically, but not all readers—especially those informed by the popular westerns—are likely to succeed in that. Such a possibility of failure in countering the popularized mythical vision is symbolized in the kid’s murder. Being McCarthy’s debut ‘western’ novel, *Blood*

¹ The narrative is told in an impartial tone that neither advocates nor condemns the characters and their actions. It merely reports them.

Meridian seems to caution readers about the remainder. The unconventionality of such narratives and the uniqueness of the responses demanded from the reader become more evident in the subsequent novels.

Though less subversive, *All the Pretty Horses* also presents to the reader a few unexpected features. In several instances, it uses Spanish in dialogue without offering a translation for the benefit of the English reader. This clearly makes some readers feel as though they were left out. However, it reflects very genuinely the cross-cultural nature of not only the narrative but also the region. Hence, it immerses the reader within the true atmosphere of the place. Other than that, the reader expects some sentimental wish-fulfillment to be served in an attempt to satisfy his romantic eagerness for dreams to come true. However, the novels of the trilogy subvert that popular expectation. The openings of these novels are typically western, so from the outset the reader's expectations are raised. Throughout the narrative those expectations start to divert and eventually fade away, leaving us with an anti-western tale instead. The western hero, for instance, as a central element in all western novels is presented differently. Such a textual representation calls the reader to deconstruct, re-construct and re-imagine the frontier tale. John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are initially presented as heroes who embody the characteristics of the western cowboy, yet their journeys prove that they are not, or rather, that such a hero has never existed in the first place. Both Cole and Boyd, who is Billy's younger brother, ardently believe in the myth of the frontier; they meet their ends violently while Billy survives. Because he is more pragmatic than idealistic, his survival teaches him to abandon that bygone dream of a utopian frontier (that could be found either in the American West or the Mexican north). Years later, he is seen as an old man taking part as an extra actor in a western film. This hints at the mythical nature of the quest and shows that—in the new millennium—cowboys, cowboy code and ideals exist only as cinematic fantasies. So, the trilogy narrates, in a sense, the end of a quest for a non-existent pastoral dream. In these novels, the reader is clearly considered as an insider who is familiar with the cultural environment, can recognize the places described and is well-aware of the genre and its

fundamental elements (such as the abundance of nature and the goodness of the hero). Yet, he is made to feel estranged from the narrative because it subverts expected images, tropes and stereotypes. For instance, the hero fails in his quest and nature is often violated by sights and sounds which exemplify the growing urbanization and mechanization of the west. Accordingly, unless the reader changes his conception of the west, past and present, he will feel excluded from its future in the same way that Billy feels himself an outsider when he returns back to his country. His people look at him strangely considering him an “outlandish figure” who represents “what they envied most and what they most reviled” (*The Crossing* 170). Similarly, the reader who approaches the text with prior generic expectations may feel disappointed. He, like the western hero, would fail in his quest for a self-fulfilling idyllic reading that sanctions him from the intrusions of violence and machinery. Reading a western novel, then, is no longer an escape but rather a call to remember, question and take a stance regarding these mythical pursuits. It is an attempt to revisit a cultural narrative that has been for so long validated through popular tales in order to see its inherent fallacy and move forward. Hence, the reader is simultaneously placed in the position of a cultural insider—who knows the region, the culture and the literature—and pushed to the position of an outsider who is ready to see beyond that limited version of the West.

In short, McCarthy’ address of readers in his western novels attempt to revise popular conceptions in a subtle way. By conjuring in the reader’s mind expected images and then turning them down for the sake of more realistic ones, the author ‘forces’ the reader to question his assumptions about the region and its past. This, however, is not achieved through an enforced alternative image, but rather through an impartial—almost un-opinionated—narration which slowly moves the reader from dogmatic and mythical conceptions towards more critical and questioning ones. Thus, as Linda Woodson asserts, “the genius of [McCarthy’s] fiction is that through its multiple genres of narration ... the works leave the reader in a position of autonomy” where he is not totally dragged to

believe or disbelieve in a certain myth, past or vision, but is instead allowed to see again—with more scrutiny—the West through different lens (201).

3. *No Country for Old Men*: between Continuity and Discontinuity

No Country for Old Men, which is McCarthy's last (explicitly) western novel, returns to a more recent past (1980s) as it depicts the modern life on the borderlands. Seen chronologically, the constellation of works that are set in the west can be considered as a pentology with *Blood Meridian* being the prequel to the Border Trilogy and *No Country for Old Men* the sequel. The latter depicts the late consequences of the earlier novels. In a detective thrilling fashion, it follows the race between a war veteran, a serial killer and a sheriff. Many fates—of victims and criminals—intersect to demonstrate the fatality—and perhaps futility—of life in the west. McCarthy's selected title for the novel is largely considered as an allusion to William Butler Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium" in which an old man 'laments' age and change singing "to lords and ladies of Byzantium / of what is past, or passing, or to come". Sheriff Ed Tom Bell fulfills a similar task in McCarthy's ninth novel. In the following sections, focus will be laid on the novel's position vis-à-vis the rest of McCarthy's oeuvre. In other words, we will attempt to examine its relation to previous—especially western—novels by highlighting the main points of its continuation to—or departure from—previous themes and styles.

3.1. Thematic Continuity

In *No Country for Old Men* McCarthy continues to explore the Mexican-American border issues. Texas is being destroyed by an excess of violence, drugs, crimes and outlaws. The old Sheriff Bell—and perhaps McCarthy as well—feels unable to comprehend or cope with his changing society not—naturally—because of old age but because of the growing evil that seems unstoppable and overwhelming even to a war veteran like himself. Old morals, old ideals and old-time securities are no longer there so the country no longer suits old men (though McCarthy's previous works clearly show that old-times were no better). And there is no holy Byzantium to escape to.

In the opening scene, Sheriff Bell muses about the growing violence in the younger generation. He meets a nineteen-year-old teenager, minutes before his execution, and is completely bewildered by his boastful admission of cold-blooded and intentional murder. The boy confesses to the sheriff that he was sure he was going to hell but if freed up he would commit the crime again. This leaves the old man speechless and deeply troubled by this “new kind” of evil. “What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul? Why would you say anything? ...” (2). The narrative then proceeds with the case of Llewellyn Moss. The latter takes—with quite a reluctant conscience—a briefcase of money, so he is chased by a pair of Mexican drug dealers, a “professional” assassin named Anton Chigurh and Sheriff Bell. After a succession of escapades, the chase ends with Moss’s murder, Chigurh’s triumphant villainy and Bell’s resignation.

Though set in a more recent period and depicting a new “breed” of evil, the novel remains faithful to the older image of the west as a land of violence, lawlessness and—failed—morality. So, McCarthy does not seem to deviate from his previous conceptions of the region, its culture, history and—by extension—literature. He merely re-draws the portrait by highlighting a few—possibly negligible—points. First, what the country—not just west Texas—is going through is a belated outcome of all those years of mindless westward expansion. The tension in the frontier which was seen through massacres is now seen in the excessive amount of murder—aided or not with drugs. Second, if no immediate measures are taken—and in Bell’s view there is little that could be done—the situation will get worse. Regarding education, for instance, Bell comments that thirty years ago the biggest problems teachers faced were “talkin in class and runnin in the hallways. Chewin gum. Copyin homework”; however, “forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide” (113). In view of such decaying social order where even school cannot safeguard its sanctity or reformist role, there seems to be no hope. Thus the status quo in Texas—reflecting an aggravated rather than an isolated national situation—is the result of an accumulated deeply-seated violence. It began with the frontier myth and its bloody pitfalls and it reached an apogee with the social and psychological

havoc that took place in the post-Vietnam traumatic era. So, *No Country for Old Men* is a depiction of a country whose people struggle with depression, suicide, insanity and the unbearable wages of (historical) sin. That is why even those who wished for change or at least recovery from those social ills stood helpless in front of the escalating mayhem.

The future seems to Sheriff Bell even darker. In a discussion with an old lady who declares that she is not pleased with “the way the country is headed” because she wishes—for example—that her granddaughter would be free to have an abortion, he assures her that the way he sees it going he does not have much doubt that “not only will she be able to have an abortion, she'll be able to have you [her grandmother] put to sleep [meaning euthanasia]” (114). Bell’s view may seem pessimistic or perhaps tragic, yet it is very realistic. He has known war with enemies, and now he fights another war with his fellows, on a daily basis, and feels defeated by the latter. If in older times, evil could be reviled and condemned, now it is not; it is so prevalent and so coldly-manifested that people have grown used to it. In popular genre—as in popular imagination—a country’s sheriff is the symbol of justice and resistance to crime. However, in *No Country for Old Men* that heroic figure is itself disempowered and helpless in front of evil. Again, his subversion of the “hero’s” role is indicative of the author’s attempt to revisit and question generic stereotypes. Yet, it also hints at the very inconsistency of such an image. Whether in the past or in the present, that country was not a country for heroes but it is only now—through Bell’s despairing monologues—that we are made aware of it. So, just like Cole, Boyd, Billy and the Kid, Bell—as the contemporary frontier man—is regarded as relatively-weaker than his villain counterparts. As in the previous novels, evil is not only unpunished; it prevails.

In short, McCarthy’s focus on such issues and choice of such a symbolic figure to voice such apprehensions is very telling. He seems willing to conclude his chronologically detailed account of the border region by emphasizing, first, the rootedness of contemporary problems in the past and, second, its expanding

consequences not only on a specific region but on the country as a whole as it drifts towards the age of globalization. Thus, the novel marks a thematic transition between his revisiting narratives of the past (in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy) and his anticipation of an upcoming era when evil will transcend all—geographic and cultural—borders.

3.2. Stylistic Discontinuity

Despite its thematic attachment to previous novels, *No Country for Old Men* exhibits important features which mark the beginning of a stylistic divergence. Both in his southern and western novels, McCarthy proves his superb mastery of language as far as sound, density and preciseness are concerned; this *almost* removes his writing from the category of prose to the category of poetry. The earlier novels are fraught with an overarching poeticity that makes high diction, complexity and flow the rule rather than the exception.¹ With his last western novel, he seems to abandon—not all but—much of that poeticity for the sake of a simpler and flatter style. Therefore, the present section highlights the remarkable stylistic changes which occur in *No Country for Old Men* in order to show its transitional position between two major stylistic tendencies that dominate McCarthy's cannon.

Perhaps the most salient feature of McCarthy's prose style in *No Country for Old Men* is the absence of nature and its description. Contrary to previous works—and to the western genre in general—landscape does not occupy a central position in the text. So, the lengthy descriptive passages which readers often encounter—and admire—in McCarthy's novels are no longer found. This is due to the changed setting as the events take place in a modern-time western town where forays into nature are rare and perhaps troublesome (as is the case with Moss). Hence, the opportunity for contemplation and representation of natural space is constrained and, by extension, the author's focus on

¹ This occurs in varying degrees. For instance the style in *Child of God* is—by comparison to the other southern and western novels—less ornamental whereas in *The Crossing* it is overtly poetical. Generally speaking, however, his novels are a convergence between prose and poetry.

“embellished” description is diminished. Moreover, though McCarthy’s reputation for meticulous and careful attention to place is not entirely abandoned in the novel, such an attention does not seem to serve the same function as before. As Lee Clark Mitchell notes, in *Late Westerns: the Persistence of a Genre*, his precise designation of names of town, roads and streets “enlivens the novel”, yet “none of this is described further or lent any evocative sway. Local names and numbers remain merely that, no different in Texas than Mexico” (186). Thus, land which was heavily-laden with a symbolic meaning in previous works is in *No Country for Old Men* deprived of that (mythical) cultural significance. Details about places, then, are merely denotative.

Along with the receding focus on nature, description and linguistic density, McCarthy’s narrative style continues to favor the distant third-person narrator. However, the aloofness of the narrator from the characters, in the sense that their psychological interiorities are seldom explored, is reversed in the case of Sheriff Bell whose inner thoughts make up a good deal of the narration. Such a choice can be regarded as an instance of the modernist influence on the author’s style, yet it in fact appears more an attempt to emphasize meaning (of change, disillusionment, bewilderment and moral struggle) rather than an intention to experiment with the stream of consciousness for instance. The same could be said about the intermittent exposition of the father’s inner thoughts in *The Road*. Thus, McCarthy, on the one hand, aggravates his insistence upon remaining distant and impartial towards characters, their motives and their background but he, on the other hand, chooses to bend the rule with the protagonist¹. By doing so, he achieves a more profound effect as the reader sees the gravity of the struggle through Bell’s monologues. The same affinity to reveal—partially and temporarily—a character’s inner thoughts, for the sake of lucidity rather than characterization, is apparent in *The Sunset Limited* where White subconsciously gives up on dialogue with Black and continues his monologue solo.

¹ Not everyone agrees on who to designate as the protagonist or hero in the novel since such roles seem to be played by both Moss and Sheriff Bell in very unconventional ways. Yet, since the latter’s perspective is the one that is mostly revealed to the reader, it may be safe to consider him as the protagonist.

Another remarkable feature in *No Country for Old Men* is the increasing use of polysyndetic praxis as opposed to the asyndetic structures which characterize his earlier works. In the latter, as it was coupled to a highly complex diction, it emphasized the poetic nature of the style, yet in this later novel, as it uses a simpler language, a polysyndetic structure may reflect the rapid and inattentive succession of certain—routinely practiced—tasks. For example, the scene where Chigurh, who is a professional assassin, murders a deputy is described as follows:

He was slightly bent over when Chigurh squatted and scooted his manacled hands beneath him to the back of his knees. In the same motion he sat and rocked backward and passed the chain under his feet and then stood instantly and effortlessly. If it looked like a thing he'd practiced many times it was. He dropped his cuffed hands over the deputy's head and leaped into the air and slammed both knees against the back of the deputy's neck and hauled back on the chain (6)

The way Chigurh's actions are described indicates not only his manual "skill" but also his indifference to the act. So, the flatness of the expression, which is achieved through the lack of subordination, is a stylistic strengthening of the meaning conveyed. Moreover, the equal importance that McCarthy gives to all elements in such paratactic statements is a reflection of his will to retain judgment. As Ciarán Dowd thoroughly notes, such a "juxtaposition [is meant] for the reader to apply their own judgement in drawing causal or hierarchical connections between the assembled elements" (39). He explains, aided by Richard Lanham's study of Hemingway's novels, that such a "refusal to subordinate" is allegorical and reflective in the sense that parataxis "becomes a technique with which to syntactically mimic the unreflective stoic viewpoint of such war veterans as those Hemingway heroes" (40). Similarly, McCarthy uses the technique to stylistically represent "the unreflective stoicism of hardened Tennessee mountain folk, southwestern border cowboys and impoverished Mexican citizens, veterans of military conflict in Europe and Vietnam, and the ragged human remnants of the collapse of civilization" (41). In other words, the parataxis, the pared-down diction and the recession of description are indicators of the characters' world and state of mind.

In short, while the thematic concerns of *No Country for Old Men* hint at a continuation in the exploration of the—more or less—same issues albeit changes in time and place, McCarthy's stylistic choices demonstrate the relative recession of some features—such as poeticity—and the aggravation of some other features such as flatness, simplicity and parataxis. These features not only relate to the novel's contemporary context but also contribute in the inclusion of a broader readership, as will be shown in subsequent sections. Therefore, it is significant to note the appearance of these subtle changes in *No Country for Old Men* and their indication of further stylistic deviance in *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* which may eventually affect the reader's response and engagement with the text.

4. Indeterminacies in *No Country for Old Men*

This section focuses more narrowly on *No Country for Old Men*'s textual fabric and its impact on the reading experience. First, it comments on the text's generic and stylistic features and their impact on the reader as far as expectation, involvement and aesthetic or cognitive judgment are concerned. Second, the discussion moves to the level of content where emphasis is put on spirituality as a central question which contributes to the characters' evolvment and their eventual reception by the reader. The approach through which these elements are explored is, as indicated in the theoretical chapter, Iser's transactional aesthetic-response theory. The latter is partially adapted to examine the indeterminacies which drive the reader-text interaction. By focusing on the text's indeterminacies, seen through blanks and negations, the researcher aims at highlighting the reader's implied role in the present literary work.

4.1. Generic and Stylistic Indeterminacy in *No Country for Old Men*

When McCarthy published *No Country for Old Men*, many observers expressed their astonishment that a writer who proved his highbrow talent would venture into genre fiction which is arguably of a lesser value. However, upon close scrutiny, the text proves richer and more intricate than to be dismissed as a

mere genre fiction in the habitual sense (King 536).¹ The text, quite self-consciously, brings into question issues of genre, conformity and convergence which offer the reader—both the informed and the non-informed—a distinct reading experience. In the present novel, McCarthy’s style tends towards a more remarkable minimalism while genre swings between cinematic and fictional attributes; therefore, in the following pages, such authorial choices are examined in relation to the reader’s reception and role.

4.1.1. The Reader as a Spectator and a Moral Observer

While discussing the novel’s relative stylistic departure from the previous works, we noted its minimal reliance on description, especially of nature and landscape, though it affiliates itself with the western genre. Such a feature, seen through a general negligence of natural elements, can be considered as a symptom of postmodern times and their impactful—economic and social—changes which eventually overshadowed the region’s natural significance as a borderland or a virgin land. Perhaps the only two instances where the natural environment is referred to, with any detail or significance, are Moss’s hunting of antelopes and a police visit to a crime scene on the road. The suburbs of the city are described when “looking out across the desert” as:

So quiet. Low hum of wind in the wires. High bloodweeds along the road. Wiregrass and sacahuista. Beyond in the stone arroyos the tracks of dragons. The raw rock mountains shadowed in the late sun and to the east the shimmering abscissa of the desert plains under a sky where raincurtains hung dark as soot all along the quadrant” (27).

Reminiscent of earlier—intricate—McCarthian style, the passage provokes the reader’s notice of the intruding industrialization over a nature so still and slow. However, another explanation may account for such a stylistic feature. The author’s choice, in avoiding overt representation of nature, may be a reflection of his view of the reader. The latter is presumably familiar—not necessarily with the region itself but—with its visual representation in literature and cinema. McCarthy’s literature alone can be regarded as a superb memorization of the western landscape, so it is very likely that readers who read or watched a western

¹ Notably, Vincent Allan King discusses a variety of scholarly reviews elicited by *No Country for Old Men* as indicating cultural genre bias.

before do not need to be supplied with such details because they already have the necessary mental images to imagine the world of *No Country for Old Men*. Thus, McCarthy's minimal reliance on the description of nature is a negation of a common literary feature that is found and expected in western pastoral fiction. The genre's popularity reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s in parallel with the cinematic success of the western. Most probably, the novels of Louis L'Amour and Sergio Leone's cinematic trilogies are the best examples to cite as far as popularity and proliferation are concerned. So, it is logical to expect that—by the 2000s—reading adults are quite knowledgeable about the region. By extension, McCarthy's text purposefully neglects nature as a common feature in all narratives because it deems its reader to be already visually-informed about the west. Hence, it assumes that he is a spectator and treats him accordingly. Confronted with such an assumption, the reader is forced to make use of his popular knowledge and the novel's "negligence" is turned into a vehicle to enhance the reader's visual imagination.

More importantly, the narrative is told by two distinct narrators. It develops through the anonymous third-person narrator and the monological first-person narrator (Bell). While this is not a novelty in itself, it negates the reader's expectation from (a generic) fiction. McCarthy's choice of such narrative mode is certainly not arbitrary as he marks Bell's retrospective passage in italics in order to differentiate them from the rest of the narration. Bell is considered by many, such as William Deresiewicz to be the mouthpiece, which means that his recollections of older times and apprehensions about the future serve as an elucidation of the author's message. Yet, it becomes clear in many instances that the reader is more informed—and maybe more insightful—about the events than Bell. For example, the reader is ahead of Bell (the detective) in identifying the murderer (Chigurh) and Moss's hiding place. So, Bell's perspective in the text can be regarded as unreliable. It merely accentuates the nostalgic or apprehensive content of the novel but it does not fulfill any narrative function such as direction or orientation. The third-person narrator, on the other hand, as is habitual in McCarthy's texts, remains distant and objective in his portrayal of characters and

report of events. It is a non-omniscient narrator who barely tells the story from a safe distance. Thus the reader is not supplied with the necessary information to form a close image of characters. Throughout the entire narrative, very little is revealed about characters' backgrounds and almost none is unveiled about their motives or inner thoughts. For example, though it is unknown why Moss decides to take the suitcase of money, it is unclear upon which ground he bases his decision and it is completely unspoken whether he harbors any regret or not. Lee Mitchell notes that such "brutal pared-down style" and "tight lipped", "detached" narration "reinforces ...disconnectedness" and affects the reader's imagination of scenes and events (190). So, the narrative is presented through two perspectives: one is too self-centered the other is too distant. The reader's view of characters, hence, is not aided by a superior—or knowing—voice and such a lack of guidance and insightfulness hinders his task of imagination and judgment.

To make things worse, these characters develop in a milieu that is fraught with moral questions. The reader is similarly dragged to that milieu where he is called to observe their critical decisions. Bell, for example, makes up his mind to stop chasing the assassin and retire despite his ethical concerns. Moss decides to put his soul and his wife's at hazard by taking the money then going back to the fight scene to offer water to a wounded dope-dealer. By observing those critical situations where the characters have to make decisions based on morality, immorality or amorality, the reader is placed in the position of a moral observer who is triggered to choose his own ethical stance. Some of the traits of these characters are revealed; for instance Moss is very tactful, but such traits remain marginal and peripheral. Focusing on them does not help the reader to formulate judgment since they do not define the characters behaviors and decisions. The negation of the narrator's support also means that the reader is intended to be deprived of any insightful assistance. Thus, judgment is unreachable and if reached, it is unlikely to be accurate or comprehensive. The reader in *No Country for Old Men* is placed in the position of a moral observer whose capacity for ample judgment is greatly diminished. It cannot be determined why such a position is granted to the reader, but it seems to be in accordance with the world

of the narrative. Such a suspension of judgment is a reflection of the reader's true position in real life and not only fiction. In other words, judgment—at least in the form of a fastidious distinction between right and wrong—is an impossibility the postmodern age. Thus, it is a pretense to convey the reader the impression that he is making a credible judgment in such context. In effect, his position is analogous to Chigurh's to-be-victims. The latter are often subjugated—unaware—to a coin-toss game in which they “stand to win everything” or lose everything (that is, their life) (34). The reader, upon his reading of the text—despite its indeterminacy and refusal to pass judgment—similarly plays his chance to win everything, that is, win a meaning of his own making or lose everything, that is, lose any sense of orientation or achievement. Accordingly, though the position that is granted to the reader in *No Country for Old Men* may seem passive and too detached, it is indeed a position that is attuned to the reader's mundane experience. With such comfort comes the unease of exerting more effort to reach meaning and formulate conclusions.

4.1.2. The Reader as an Estranged Cognizant

From the onset, *No Country for Old Men* situates itself between three main genre crossroads; it is a western-detective-noir fiction. Notably, all of these (sub)genres focus on a centralized character whose adventures drive the narrative forward. The character of the “detective”, the “frontier-man” or the “villain” is thus a—if not *the*—defining feature of each of the afore-mentioned genres respectively. Yet, in the present novel, McCarthy subverts their conventional characterization in a way that destabilizes the reader's knowledge of—and reaction to—the text.

For instance, in the famous detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, investigators Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot are the chief characters who lead the plot forward with their resourcefulness, accomplishment and decision. However, Sheriff Bell, who occupies a similar position, fails to meet that expectation. In *The Figure of the Detective*, Charles Brownson discusses the requirements of the genre as set by these classical novels. Regarding the figure of the detective, he asserts that, in addition to wit and

rationality, the detective must be removed from the society and the danger that threatens it because his involvement in the crime or vulnerability to the criminal will compromise his attempt to repair social order through the eviction of the criminal. He explains that the detective must be both “intellectually powerful enough to solve the crime and spiritually powerful enough to overcome his taint”; he ought not to be “physically threatened or liable to be murdered, as this would mar his status as the criminal’s superior” (15). So, the detective’s superiority is an indispensable requirement in this genre. However, in *No Country for Old Men* Sheriff Bell lacks this superior status. First, his threatened position is revealed early on through Chigurh’s strangling of a police deputy using handcuffs. Bell is well aware of the extreme danger of this “damned lunatic” whom they “really aint never even seen before” (28). Second, his willingness to retreat back and his failed attempts to protect Moss and his wife Carla reflect his undermined position in confronting the assassin. He, therefore, prefers retirement and says confessedly: “I dont want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once. I wont do it again” (5). Such a stance makes him a “fake detective”. Despite his ethical concerns, that are voiced in his retrospective meditations, and though he says that “it aint just bein older”, he is recognized by the reader only as an old man who is unable to cope with the excess of crime and moral decadence (5). So, the character of Bell, though central in the narrative, does not fulfill the function of a detective and thus is “unfit” to dominate the text or capture the reader’s interest. This decentralization divides the reader’s attention between the “detective” and the other involved participants: Moss and Chigurh.

As a western, the novel deviates from the “norms” of the genre as well. Moss is introduced in the following manner. He “sat with the heels of his boots” and “glassed the desert below him with a pair of twelve power german binoculars” (7). Looking like a typical cowboy, “his hat pushed back on his head. Elbows propped on his knees” and he carries a rifle (7). There, he is hunting antelope under the borderland’s sun near the “raw mountains of Mexico” (7). However, the perspective is soon shifted to a more contemporary setting. Moss

witnesses the aftermath of a drug-deal gone wrong. From then on, he becomes a prey to assassins chased from one motel to another. The characterization of Moss, as the presumed protagonist, diverges from that of the frontier-man in “archetypal” western novels such as Owen Wiste’s *The Virginian* (1902) and Jack Schaefer’s *Shane* (1949). Even the more contemporaneous figures of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, who represent McCarthy’s revisited—and subverted—version of the western hero, bear more traits of the conventional image than Moss. Such an evolution, if it could be named so, casts Moss in an indeterminate category that temporarily calls to mind the picture of the popular westerner only to replace it with an evolved sketch of a postmodern guy.

Moss, as it appears, is not motivated by any given code of conduct or ethics. His acts seem to rush in a succession of tactful steps but with little meditative significance. He seems unscrupulous about the consequences of his actions. This runs counter to the common representation of the westerner. Robert Warshow, in his 1946 study, characterizes such a popular figure as being—among other things—committed to the protection of “justice and order” because that is “what he has to do” and once “the reign of law settles over the west” he is forced to depart “for some more remote frontier” (110). Such a “mission”, though it involves (lawless) violence, is represented as a call of duty to which any honorable westerner has to respond. However, Moss’s acts sometimes show practicality and materialism, such as his reluctance to dismiss of the money he finds; while at other times, he seems aware that his benevolent acts, such as helping others, will bring him more trouble. He insists on acting either way without hesitation, saying that “[he’s] fixin to go do somethin dumbern hell but [he’s] goin anyways” (16). This duality of character, though it does not present him as a fallen or flawed hero, contributes to his “classification” as a man torn between two frontiers—not the Mexican and American but—the past and present. Being a Vietnam-war veteran, it is hence understandable that Moss’s actions are not dictated by any strict adherence to a moral or philosophical code. After all, as one of his buddies explains, “a lot of them boys that come back, they’re still havin problems” (170). Such problems are not only psychological

disorders or difficulties in post-war adjustment, but they denoted a changed worldview. Whatever values or beliefs were cherished by these boys no longer retain. Perhaps they cannot even understand the world in its present state as if they have themselves grown too old. Bell realizes such an issue when he discusses with Moss's friend; he says "he turned and looked at me. And then I thought he looked a lot older. His eyes looked old" (171). That is why, even though Moss's decisions remain unexplained, it is clear that he—unlike the popularized frontier hero—does not wish to uphold any moral order. He admits, "three weeks ago I was a law abiding citizen. Workin a nine to five job. Eight to four, anyways. Things happen to you they happen. They dont ask first. They dont require your permission" (127). Accordingly, (he believes that) he acts without agency or free will. Whatever reasons lie behind such a mindset; the situation he is trapped in makes him feel so disempowered (though he does not admit it openly). Eventually, the reader's speculation on Moss's success is terribly disappointed. His skill and courage are admirable traits that attract readers to sympathize with him, yet gradually—with the revelation of Chigurh's extreme capacity for murder—the reader realizes, just like Moss himself, that he is doomed. His murder way before the end of the novel accentuates the text's subversion of the western protagonist; it disappoints the reader and forces him to search for another character whose adventures are "worth" following.¹ However, the only character who seems prominent enough to "dominate" the narrative, after Bell's retreat and Moss's murder, is Chigurh the psychopathic assassin.

The Coen brothers' adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* won four academy awards. One of them was granted to the actor Javier Bardem for his role as Anton Chigurh which, besides acknowledging the actor's outstanding performance, demonstrates the centrality of the character to the overall narrative. Chigurh initially appears as a mindless and terrifying murderer who uses odd tools—such as a cattlegun kit—to end his victims' lives. His exotic appearance enforces his image as a sinister villain. He is described as having eyes "blue as

¹ And it is more disappointing that Moss's killing is not particularly highlighted in the narrative. It is described as an invisible act against an anonymous guy.

lapis. At once glistening and totally opaque. Like wet stones” (33). “Kindly dark complected” with an air of serenity and a “[d]ark hair. Something about him faintly exotic. Beyond ... experience” (168, 65). He often seems over-concerned about the neatness of his attire and boots. Simply, as a kid puts it, “he didnt look like anybody you'd want to mess with” (169). So, he is introduced to the reader as a mysterious serial killer. He may be readily associated with other figures who occupy a similar position in contemporary crime fiction, particularly noir fiction.

Though the *noir* genre is considered to be of a French origin, it flourished—cinematically and literarily—in the United States and became so popular during the 1970s. Works such as James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Raymond Chandler’s *Farwell, My Lovely* (1940), Jim Thompson’s *The Killer Inside Me* (1952) and Lionel White’s *The Snatchers* (1953) are often labeled as noir or hardboiled because of the difficulty to differentiate between the two closely-linked subgenres. However, author and scholar Megan Abbott, in a recent interview with Annie Adams, asserts that the two are distinct from each other. Essentially, she demonstrates that the hard-boiled novels are commonly considered to be “an extension of the wild-west and pioneer narratives of the nineteenth century. The wilderness becomes the city, and the hero is usually a somewhat fallen character, a detective or a cop” (399). As such *No Country for Old Men* can be designated as a hardboiled fiction, as it usually is; however—she continues—by the end of such novels “order has, to a certain extent, been restored” and that is definitely not the case in McCarthy’s novel (399). If it has to be labeled at all, then the novel is best described as noir. First, as Abbott explains “in noir, everyone is fallen, and right and wrong are not clearly defined and maybe not even attainable. In that sense, noir speaks to us powerfully right now” (400). This is the general atmosphere in *No Country for Old Men*; it depicts a world where choices are limited and their ground is shaken because of the increasing moral ruthlessness. Such a genre is known to flourish in similar settings: Abbott notes that it emerged in the 1940s after a decade of Great Depression and re-emerged again in the 1970s after the Vietnam war. Second, the novel’s focus on the villain is one of the typical features of the genre.

Commenting on Cain's novels, Richard Bradbury, suggests that the shift of focus from detective to criminal is an attempt "to recognize the potential afforded by writing from within the "criminal's perspective" which explores questions such as how or why the crime is committed (89). Additionally, John Scaggs, in his study of *Crime Fiction*, argues that "the notion of 'monstrosity'" is placed at "the thematic centre of the [contemporary] serial killer novel" because that "is the logical conclusion of a process of criminal escalation in the genre" (116). Accordingly, the centrality of Chigurh in the narrative denotes a similar endeavor to comprehend or—at least portray—evil from within.

Chigurh, as his character is revealed along with reading, is not a flat one-sided murderer. He engages in dialogue with his victims, toys with their fate (using the coin toss), and half-lectures them about destiny, free will and accountability. While his senseless killings—of humans and animals alike—reveal pure sadism, his sardonic comments are often mysterious and eerie. For instance, in his comparatively long talk with Carla Jean he says "I thought it not too much to ask that you have a final glimpse of hope in the world to lift your heart before the shroud drops, the darkness" (150). Such a statement does not show compassion or irresolution about his act; on the contrary, he seems intent upon fulfilling a job which he is committed to. Yet, it shows an "intellectual" dimension in his criminality (this will be further discussed in the next section). To add to the roundness of his character, a man—who apparently knows about his history—tells Carson Wells—another hit man—that "he's a psychopathic killer but so what? There's plenty of them around" (81). This hints at his distinctness from evil guys that are found throughout the country (and noir fiction). Wells, in his turn, explains to Moss later that "he's a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that" (88). Thus the reader's understanding of Chigurh's character as a stereotypical killer, who kills for the sake money, out of vengeance or because of psychopathy, is eliminated as an interpretive option. The reader is puzzled by this haunting figure who pursues his aims ruthlessly and more decisively than both Moss and Bell (who are supposedly heroic in their own

ways). Thus, the reader cannot help but feel “fascinated” by this villain. Scaggs asserts that such a tendency is found in a few crime thrillers which do not seek to explore the criminal’s psychology but rather attempt to examine “the mechanics of crime, rather than the motivation for it, they might be termed *howdunnits*, rather than *whydunnits*” (115). *No Country for Old Men* exhibits a similar intention which simultaneously draws the reader’s attention towards the villain not as a “clinic” case but as a powerful agent in a country where men are gradually disempowered (starkly contrasted to Moss and Bell who are too weak to cope with him). The fact that Chigurh stands out, when compared to “a redneck sheriff in a hick town in a hick country. In a hick state”, indicates that the text profoundly challenges the reader pre-defined assumptions about the main characters (91). Given the popularity and uniformity of noir fiction, it is common that readers often approach such texts with a set of predictions regarding characters. The villain is conventionally menacing, immoral and unscrupulous, so he is rarely contemplated or—in a sense—admired for one of his characteristics. McCarthy, however, succeeds in triggering his readers’ curiosity and fascination with his noirish villain by adding—most significantly—a philosophical dimension to his character.

In short, the multi-generic nature of the text—not only in its mediatory position between screenplay and novel but also—in its use of three main generic formulas, namely detective, western, noir and their eventual negation, makes of *No Country for Old Men* both a thrilling and challenging text. The negation of a few generic norms, essentially characterization, leads the reader to feel estranged from a text which he is supposedly acquainted with. Though the novel elicits different scholarly opinions between reviewers, it undeniably, as Lee Mitchell asserts, “resists the generic suasions [it] seem[s] to invite” (204). Or as Vereer Bell—borrowing an image from physics—states “the vivid facticity of [McCarthy’s] novels consumes conventional formulae as a black hole consumes light” (“Nihilism”, 31). It turns out: Sheriff Bell is not the successful detective who solves and eventually restores law in a detective fiction; Moss is not the heroic frontier man who acts upon a strict code of ethics and Chigurh is not the

superficial villain whose position is solely defined in opposition to the hero/victim. By conjuring well-known generic tropes, such as setting, appearance and position, McCarthy triggers his readers' minds to recognize what is missing in the narrative and what is subverted in these respective genres. In doing so, he—firstly—ensures that the reader is able to make associations between characters in his text and in other texts (and even films). However, through the negation of such expectations, he attempts—secondly—to destabilize the readers' judgments. That is to say, the reader is called to make his judgment *anew*: not based on stereotype or conventionality but on an on-going evaluation as he reads the text.

4.2. Spiritual Indeterminacy in *No Country for Old Men*

McCarthy's keen aptitude for matters of spirituality became apparent as early as 1968 in his novel *Outer Dark* whose title and content echo biblical resonances (Schafer 112). Though spiritual issues are addressed in all the subsequent works—both the dramatic and the novelistic—their dominance over the text is not in equal extents. In fact, as will be shown later, there is a gradual inclusion of belief and unbelief in McCarthy's texts.¹ In *No Country for Old Men*, the writer's first millennial novel, such issues become more salient. Such continuous concern; however, should not be mistakenly considered as a form of similitude since McCarthy's conception—and representation—of spirituality is neither monolithic nor homogeneous. Unlike the previous novels which focus more on history and society, the novel in question brings the question of morality—as associated to spiritual belief—to the fore. Moral standing is concealed from the reader in the same way that emotions and motivations, such as “love, loneliness, guilt, shame, hope [and] despair” are hidden; that is why, it is hard for the reader to “judge the failure or limited success of McCarthy's characters” (Arnold, *Perspectives* 46). In other words, the overall superficiality of McCarthy's narratives reduces the gravity of its—cultural, moral and

¹ For instance, *Blood Meridian* and *The Crossing* are considered more openly-spiritual than the previous novels, yet they are less equivocal than the subsequent novels.

spiritual—questions; however, as Arnold asserts, regardless of the overarching violence, chaos and mystery in such texts, “*there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious*” (*Perspectives* 46) [emphasis added]. The minimalism with which spiritual perspectives are presented in *No Country for Old Men* complicates the reader’s perception of—and reaction to—the characters’ stances. Bell, Moss and Chigurh stand for the major spiritual paths in the novel. Their embodiment of antagonistic spiritual choice stimulates the reader’s will for identification. In his attempt to navigate through the narrative’s ambiguous spiritual world, the reader is “escorted” with these three figures. The text places its recipient at a crossroad where each path is equally inviting. In order to highlight the point, the present section examines the representation of spiritual notions in *No Country for Old Men* and attempts to explain their impact on the reader.

4.2.1. Enculturated Secularism: A Veteran’s Failure

The novel “is about a good guy, a bad guy, and a guy in between. Moss is the guy in between”, says Joel Coen in an interview about the film. The situation in which Moss is entrapped is certainly a strange one, but the way he handles it cannot be considered too strange or out of place because any young war-veteran from Texas—and perhaps anyone—would act in a similar way. In view of the surrounding circumstances, that is, drugs, crimes, intergenerational conflicts and moral deviance, his choices are best described as a reflection of the 1980s’ social and cultural atmosphere. His perspective is, arguably, the one which is most relatable to young readers because they, unlike older readers, did not witness the fading of ethics as it happened (according to McCarthy’s text, by the end of the 20th century).

“Llewelyn when he come home” from the Vietnam War, as one of his friends tells Bell, “he went to visit several families of buddies of his that had not made it back. He give it up. He didnt know what to say to em” (170). This could be just one of the many psychological struggles which Moss faces on a daily basis, so for him, the troubles of the drug-ridden West are a mere extension of the

war's ordeals. However, when the opportunity—of financial prosperity—presents itself to him, he does not hesitate about seizing it, regardless of the consequences. Moss is not particularly unethical, yet he sees that his decision—about taking or leaving the money—is a question of survival rather than morality. Apparently, survival is a skill which was instilled in his mindset by the war and engraved even further by the aftermath. As the narrator is distant from the characters' inner thoughts, the reader never knows whether Moss has any fears or regrets. Thus, while reading, it is impossible to judge the righteousness of such choice. Such a suspension of judgment is reinforced with the suspense that is conveyed by Moss' insistence upon continuing the race against killers and dopers. The reader is unable to do so this is never specified but he tries to. Even when warned that he is “not cut out for this”, he simply replies “we'll see, wont we?” (89). It is certainly an adrenalized situation that triggers expectations. As a thriller, a novel or a film featuring a fast race between a young skillful boy and a criminal band often raises its audience's expectations in favor of the hero only to satisfy them by the end. However, in *No Country for Old Men*, because it highlights the gravity of an individual's choices in life, the results of the race are shockingly different from the popular convention. Ethan Coen, the film director, summarizes Moss' situation, saying that he is “a regular guy trapped in extraordinary circumstances and tries to avoid the consequences”. He tries to get himself out of such entanglements, but since escape is impossible, he surrenders to the course of events. Such a disposal of decision, choice and control embodies the bulk of Moss' perspective.

Moss seems to be a man whose thinking is more shaped by his past than by his future prospects. His philosophy of life appears to be a simple one. He says, “it's not about knowin where you are. It's about thinkin you got there without takin anything with you. Your notions about startin over. Or anybody's. You dont start over. That's what it's about. Ever step you take is forever. You cant make it go away. None of it” (131). In other words, he believes in fate in the sense that

he is aware that what is done cannot be undone.¹ He does not seem to see life as being governed by any divine order; he does not even seem to care whether that order is fair or not. What matters for him is the present moment as an accumulation of past moments. He asserts, “you think when you wake up in the mornin yesterday dont count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it's made out of. Nothin else” (131). Such belief in the finality of decision indicates Moss’s conviction that man’s life is a sum of lived moments. No complex metaphysical or spiritual questions seem to be involved in his worldview; that is why, Moss might be the most accurate reflection of his time. His war-zone fellow explains to Bell that, though people think that “Vietnam brought this country to its knees”, in fact, their country “was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just the icin on the cake” (171). Because of its fatality, the war has caused many traumas; among those traumas is this kind of rupture between moral choice and action. Notwithstanding the many ideals that were attached to the armed conflict, in order to elevate its state from mere barbarism and opportunism to the state of sacrifice and bravery, its consequences revealed for people like Moss that their decisions—no matter how ideal—do not change—or rectify—the course of events. Coming back, those revelations were further emphasized. So, the moral degradation which *No Country for Old Men* portrays is another reflection of the country’s defeat. Moss’ friend sees that the war could not have had a different result even if the soldiers were sent to the battleground without weapons because they missed the most fundamental element which a man needs to survive in such times; he contends “you cant go to war like that. *You cant go to war without God*” (171) [emphasis added]. The absence of a moral or spiritual standing from these men’s conscience deprived them of any will or resolution. It simply rendered their hearts and minds empty. As a result, the overwhelming amount of crimes and the receding morality in the west, as in the whole country are a ramification of a cultural secularism which

¹ Chigurh, as well, believes in sort of fatalism, but he sees himself an agent in that order; Moss, however, does not believe in a supreme order. Fate, for him, is no more than a sequence of events that cannot be undone.

not only suppressed morality and spirituality but also made people, like Moss, “merely capricious” (Mitchell 195).

In brief, Moss’s worldview denies the relevance of religion or morality to the contemporary life. He appears as unconcerned about ethical or spiritual questions, as the majority of his fellows, and prefers to act upon the heat of the moment. He is neither good nor bad; however, his position—though it remains unidentified—corresponds to the larger cultural dynamics. As someone who not only survived but was also part of the most atrocious war in contemporary history, Moss is one of those to whom the war has unveiled the inconsistency of American ideals. Consequently, amorality and secularism are deemed as better—perhaps more tactful—alternatives. Thus, Moss, in *No Country for Old Men*, is the inarticulate apostle who represents the post-war reality. He represents to the reader a credible and relatable stance.

4.2.2. Eclectic Theism: A Sheriff’s Retreat

Indeed, McCarthy marks an exception in the case of Bell who, through his honest monologues, succeeds in drawing the reader to understand or even sympathize with his world-weariness. His character is a combination of Western-county patriotism and moral conservatism. Thus, his perspective may be considered as the voice of the elderly at a time that is so rapidly changing. However, as it grows clearer by the end of the novel, he is also a man of spiritual uprightness. This does not necessarily mean that he is a religious fundamentalist or even radicalist. As David Cremean notes, in “For Whom Bell Tolls: Cormac McCarthy’s Sheriff Bell as Spiritual Hero”, Bell’s “lighter” and “ritual-free” version of American Christianity frames him as “a spiritual hero” (26, 24).¹ Such a position is subject to examination in the following pages because, interestingly, Bell’s “anti-heroic” traits are also apparent in his spiritual beliefs.

¹ Cremean argues, using Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that Bell “incarnates the opposite side of Campbell’s heroic character”; that is to say, he belongs to the spiritual subcategory rather than the physical one. While this is true to a certain extent, it is a bit simplistic (as is his assumption that Bell is unaware of his region’s history) because Bell’s spirituality does not confirm with his social and cultural background, that is, an old and conservative man of law. In other words, Bell is not a stereotypical spiritual hero.

All along the narrative, Bell struggles with the change of time, the change of people, of evil, of education, morals, and most importantly, the change of convictions. His struggle, as he asserts in the first pages, is not only a result of the natural process of aging. It is not his inability to fulfill his professional duties either. Yet, somehow the two—age and profession—meet to complicate Bell’s socio-cultural-spiritual dilemma; that is why, most of the time, such as in the following passage, he rumbles about the hardships of his work especially that it puts him in constant contact with a nascent evil and degraded ethics. He explains:

There's no requirements in the Texas State Constitution for bein a sheriff. Not a one. There is no such thing as a county law. You think about a job where you have pretty much the same authority as God and there is no requirements put upon you and you are charged with preservin nonexistent laws and you tell me if that's peculiar or not ... It takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people cant be governed at all. Or if they could I never heard of it (38)

Though Bell sees that his job is almost equal to divine authority, he does not think himself equal to the evil he is supposed to chase away. For instance, when he admits his wish to avoid confronting the villain, he asserts that it is not fear or cowardice but rather something beyond articulation. What he seems willing to protect, by avoiding the assassin, is the sanctity of his soul, or as he puts it “what you are willin to become” (5). Apparently, Bell believes that by meeting the villain, he will mingle in evil and so he will “put his soul at hazard” (5). In a sense, this unexplainable terror reinforces Welsh’s idea that Chigurh is an antichrist figure; that is why, Bell fears him and wishes not to be cast under his destructive spell. Mundik, as well, commenting on Bell’s direct mention of The Book of Revelations, which his wife reads often, contends that Bell’s fears are apocalyptic (263). He, indeed, says that “nothin short of second comin of Christ that can slow this train” which means that the prevalence of evil with Chigurh (the antichrist) necessitates the second coming of Christ (the savior); otherwise, it will not stop (92). Therefore, Bell’s belief in divinity is ‘maintained’ as a result of a cultural terrorism more than for theological reasons.¹ In this regard, his

¹ Bell’s views regarding evil or apocalypse are not necessarily Christian since such notions exist in other denominations. He also offers no evidence about the religiosity of such convictions for

retirement is not a refusal to carry out his duties; it is instead a spiritual awareness that the evil he is dealing with transcends manly limits. He even confirms the resurgence of his belief in the existence of Satan as the only explanation of the diabolic spread of violence and drug in the country. Therefore, like a saint, he retreats to the sanctuary of his family and satisfies himself with the little faith and warmth he can have there.

It is unknown whether Bell eventually suffers a loss of faith, in a conventional sense, but it is very clear that his experiences and his journey bring him to a state of uncertainty and doubt. He dis-comfortably says:

I dont know what I do feel like ... I'm bein asked to stand for somethin that I dont have the same belief in it I once did. Asked to believe in somethin I might not hold with the way I once did. That's the problem ... Now I've seen it held to the light. Seen any number of believers fall away. I've been forced to look at it again and I've been forced to look at myself. For better or for worse *I do not know*. *I dont know* that I would even advise you to throw in with me, and I never had them sorts of doubts before (171) [emphasis added]

The repetitive use of “I don’t know” highlights his doubtful and questioning attitude towards what he once believed in. Whether that belief is religious, moral or intellectual, it is unidentified but it clearly causes him much anxiety and uneasiness. Nevertheless, Bell is not a disbeliever, or more precisely, he is not an atheist. In his visit to his Uncle Ellis, during which they discuss many issues including religion, he asks “you aint turned infidel have you Uncle Ellis?”; to which the uncle replies in negative (156). Thus, he clearly distances himself from “infidelity”. In other words, Bell retains his faith in a supreme deity; he also believes in the good and bad in human beings, but the input of his social and cultural experiences excludes notions such as sin, salvation, redemption, damnation or atonement from his conception of spirituality. The end of *No Country for Old Men* is marked by a dream which shows that Bell has recovered

they are not supported by significant references to biblical narratives or ecclesiastical practices. Hence, his theism is not strictly a traditional theological belief.

his tranquility after the retirement.¹ Mitchell comments on the symbolic function of Bell's dream saying that it indicates a "split between Western desire and noir reality, of the persistent hope for cultural transmission that is part of the fabric of American myth" (206). Indeed, such a split lies at the heart of Bell's spiritual dilemma. His inability to "fit" in his own country because his morals and beliefs are in a constant trial is a very significant message to the reader. The latter can grasp the gravity of the issues portrayed because they could bring a man—with so much morality, wisdom, responsibility and authority—to such a state of doubt and withdrawal. That is to say, superficial judgments or inherited beliefs—in cultural myths or religious doctrines—may not be enough to survive—and maintain one's faith—in a country that is ravished by psychopaths, dope-dealers, murderers and pure villains or to confront their power. The reader's understanding of the contemporary dilemma—between belief and unbelief—is heightened thanks to Bell's struggles. His stance, though it might not be relevant to all readers—especially those of a different age or concern—is revealed in a way that is comprehensible. In other words, Bell's inner thoughts and frequent commentaries elucidate to the reader the reasons for his spiritual convictions—regarding evil in the world—therefore, it is less ambiguous as a perspective. Bell's path is known and the arguments for it are articulated. As such, it could be regarded as a homily that is made by a saint who is as bewildered as his auditors.

4.2.3. Cosmic Determinism: An Assassin's Persistence

Early in the novel, when Bell confesses his apprehension from meeting the assassin, he describes him as "a true and living prophet of destruction" (5). While the argument "I have seen his work" explains the destructive capacity of such a villain, it seems ambiguous why Chigurh is—or could be—a prophet (5).

¹ The conclusion of the narrative brings back McCarthy's slow and lyrical descriptions. In the dream, Bell sees his father riding in the dark; the ground is snowy and he walks behind him. The father "was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there" (179). It is almost impossible not to see the intertextual link between *No Country for Old Men's* end and *The Road's* beginning. Both show a father-son journey, carrying the fire, through darkness and cold.

Prophets come with promises of reconstruction and redemption, but here is a man whose sole mission is destruction yet—ironically—he is entitled as a prophet. Though McCarthy’s literature hosts a unique set of ‘bad guys’, perhaps the most impressive of them is Judge Holden, what is distinct about this novel’s villain, as Mundik contends, is that he presents evil “not only as a specific sociohistorical problem, located within the violence of the drug trade between Texas and Mexico in the 1980s, but also as a universal spiritual struggle” (259). Indeed, the ‘prophetic’ character of Chigurh is hinted at—after Bell’s confession—when he shoots a passerby by placing “his hand on the man’s head like a faith healer” and the senseless murder is described as a “pneumatic hiss” (7). The spiritual terms that are used in order to describe such a merciless act reinforce Bell’s conceptualization. Soon after, Chigurh shoots, in passing, “some kind of a large bird” (57). Such an act, besides demonstrating his brutality towards the ecological system, foreshadows Chigurh’s cosmic function as a predator.

His brief conversations, essentially with his victims, further highlight his belief that he is endowed with a “universal mission”, that is to say, a role that maintains the cosmic order of predator-prey. For instance, when meeting the gas-station proprietor, he pressures him to call in the coin toss because he believes the man, though completely innocent and unaware, to be responsible for what may happen to him in case he loses the coin toss. In fact, he makes such a choice seem to have a higher—perhaps supernatural—significance since he is convinced that the man has “been putting it up [his] whole life”; the coin has “been traveling twenty-two years to get here” and that whether the man knows what he is betting for or not it would not change anything (33). Thus, Chigurh sees himself as mere executive who carries out the inevitable turns of fate.¹What

¹ Most probably, such fatalism is not Chigurh’s life-long doctrine as he explains to Wells—who apparently knew him in a previous setting—about his murder of the deputy. He says that he purposefully allowed the deputy to take him “into town in handcuffs” and though he is not sure why he did it, he assumes that he “wanted to see if [he] could extricate [himself] by an act of will. Because [he] believe[s] that one can. That such a thing is possible. But it was a foolish thing to do. A vain thing to do” (100). Hence it could be argued that he previously believed in human free will that could be exercised through individual strength, but he comes to disbelieve in such notion (though he succeeds to extricate himself from prison by an act of will).

brought “the invincible Mr Chigurh” to such a fatalistic view of the world and to such a bloody way of life is unaddressed in the novel (81). However, a few reviewers attempted to comprehend the reasons behind such notions. David Cremean, for instance, sees Chigurh as “a Frankenstein’s monster” that is “made by the United States” since his “formidable skills, and the familiarity with him evidenced by those in the drug world like Wells [who was]... a lieutenant colonel” indicate that he as well “came out of Special Forces ... the CIA, the FBI itself, or some combination thereof and may well be being protected” (30). Like, Moss and Bell, Chigurh’s beliefs are deeply forged by his country’s circumstances. Though this assumption does not explain the roots of his advocated philosophy, it sets him as part of a larger world-power that functions in accordance with the same predatory terms.

As Mitchell rightly puts it, Chigurh patiently “expounds his philosophy [of principled malevolence] to befuddled victims” (195). When Carla pleads him not to kill her, he tells her that he “gave his word” to her husband (to kill her if he does not return the money). She entreats him saying that he “can change it”, but he replies: “I dont think so. Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God” (148). So, she deduces—as the reader would do—that he is “just a blasphemer” (148). However, his understanding of the world and his placement in it is far more intricate than the simple dichotomy of faith/blasphemy. His act is supported by the argument that “[he] got here the same way the coin did” (150). Thus, he sees no responsibility in his own deed except the fulfillment of an act that is already determined. In other words, he believes that he has no more free will than the coin does. What informs Chigurh’s orldview is in fact more that theistic determinism; he asserts that “for things at a common destination there is a common path. Not always easy to see. But there” (150). His view, hence, transcends common horizons of logic or natural instinct; he believes that the world is ruled by a perfectly-functioning system which does not allow for oversight or exception. It is not a world of right or wrong but rather a world of cause and effect.

Regarding such an order, he speaks with the tone and assertiveness of a rabbi. He says:

I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? 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. (150)

Thus, he seems to fully embrace and adhere to a philosophy of determinism which evades, in a Nietzschean sense, any moral responsibility or guilt his conscience may suffer from. Unlike others, such as Wells who has no principles to follow or Bell who seems less certain about his (good) principles, Chigurh is full of certainty. He deems his life as “simple” and not in pursuit of “greed” or other earthly matters (102). If there is anyway at all to reconcile the bloody life he leads with the simplicity or unearthliness he preaches, it is only possible by esteeming his creeds to be of a metaphysical value or super-human aspiration. That is to say, while the rest of his fellows live as “objects” to whom things—randomly—happen, he lives as someone who make things happen. Therefore, he sees himself beyond human capacity or even reckoning. His weird methods of murder and his strange sort of prowess are suggestive of his extraordinary stance.¹ In most probability, his physical sturdiness matches his spiritual belief in his position as an agent of cosmic order. He explains, to Carla for a last time, that his belief system is not liable to change or alteration because that would make him “vulnerable”. He says:

I have only one way to live. It doesnt allow for special cases ... Most people don't believe that there can be such a person. You can see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of ... When I came into your life your life was over ... 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? (150) [emphasis added]

¹ For instance, when he gets injured by Moss, he treats his wounds with no trace of pain or discomfort. A kid as well comments that “there was a bone stickin out under the skin on his arm and he didnt pay no more attention to it than nothing” (169).

As the emphasized statement at the end of his speech indicates, Chigurh does not wish to disturb or reverse the order of the universe that thwarts innocents in the way murderers or preys in the way of predators. He is simply an agent of the world, a true prophet of destruction, or as Jim Welsh allegorically calls him “an arbiter of justice” (75). Given his prominent figure in the text, as he is the only character who does not suffer defeat, the novel may be considered as another instance where McCarthy highlights the eternal existence of evil regardless of human’s view (as in *Blood Meridian*). His perspective is certainly an unfavorable one; however, it is not entirely without merit or accuracy. The world of the narrative—and most importantly the *real* world—support his view of life and of individuals. So, even if the reader rejects Chigurh’s deeds and feels contempt towards his crimes, it is hard not to admire his resoluteness and credibility. After all, his path remains unchanged whereas the other paths are either cut or diverted. Therefore, the reader is pushed to ponder upon such spiritual perspective.

4.2.4. A Spiritual Desert: The Reader as a Lone Disciple

If the spiritual world of *No Country for Old Men* could be described in ecological terms, then it would be likened to a desert; not because it resembles a waste land where moral or spiritual ideals are void but because the paths of its characters are hard to trace. In effect, the spiritual perspectives which are represented by Moss, Bell and Chigurh are in a way truncated; that is to say, the origins and ramifications of their beliefs are only implicitly revealed. Thus, the reader is placed in the midst of untraceable tracks—that are as rough and cruel as the western desert—and required to find out his own way. Such a task is fraught with deceptions and turndowns.

The introduction of Bell as the speaker, who is an elderly man of law, directly sets him in the reader’s imagination as worthy of leading the way. His assumed wisdom and morality places him as a meritorious leader in a country that is spiritually bankrupt. Perhaps, the majority of readers will retain this view until the end. Though their perception of Bell’s role may wane in a few instances, because of his “failure” to combat evil, it is likely that the novel’s focus on his

meditations by the end of the narrative reassures them that he is the right man to follow. However, his hesitation and retreat may not please all readers. Therefore, another category of readers, most probably too influenced with western film and novel, regard Moss as the appropriate leader. Initially, he appears as a courageous and adventurous man. So, many readers are likely to identify with him; however, as it becomes clear that his stance does not confirm to the old moral codes but is instead a reflection of mundane realities, the reader understands that that Moss is not a superior and so his path leads to no spiritual fulfillment. If the reader responds to those spiritual questions—about fate, scruple and faith—with the same reluctance as Moss, he would no longer attempt to find answers. Nevertheless, a different kind of readers, who are less “idealistic” and less “escapist”, may find that Chigurh’s perspective is the one which reveals a—bitter but—true understanding of the world. Such readers do not necessarily see Chigurh’s criminality as righteous or justified, but they acknowledge the undeniable credibility of his words (regarding determinism and man’s place in a greater system). Scholar John Vanderheide, for instance, describes such worldview as a “critique of humanity’s mis-measurement of itself and of its place in the cosmos” (108). Such a perspective—it must be admitted—has its own appeal even if it is represented by extremists such as Chigurh.¹ Consequently, those readers, who are fascinated by Chigurh’s mindset rather than his acts, see in his philosophy a realistic answer to a world that grows more brutal and more incomprehensible every day.

McCarthy’s text sets significant clues for the reader, yet it leaves blanks as well. In other words, it does not suggest, neither directly nor indirectly, which of these worldviews is right or should be followed. Thus, it presents its readers with three main paths to navigate through its spiritual desert. The disparity between these perspectives, as they each contradict the other, confuses the reader. Unlike the previous texts, which express an intricate—but determinate—meaning, *No*

¹ Though such readers may not follow Chigurh’s “call” for destruction, they are likely to share his view regarding the fatality of human existence because wars, crimes and ceaseless conflicts supports the view that the world is divided between predators and preys.

Country for Old Men appears simple and less restrictive. Its openness to interpretation, however, is double-edged. It equally supports different readings without granting superiority to any of them; therefore, the reader's experience of this text may involve a sense of confusion; yet it also involves a sense of freedom because no spiritual view is imposed on him. The various spiritual and moral paths that are embodied by the characters of Bell, Moss and Chigurh represent antagonistic perspectives; each one of them leads to a different worldview. The reader is drawn to identify with one them—because of prior expectation, personal experience or close scrutiny—in a way that is not totally manipulative. That is to say, he barely catches a glimpse of their paths and the insights that are revealed to him are not enough to sustain a whole worldview or construct a belief. Even if the reader decides to side with one of the perspectives, he has to complete the missing images and the suspended answers. Despite the text's ostensible suggestion that these are the main tracks to follow, there is no authorial or narratorial approval or disapproval of any of them. This indeterminacy makes the reader more disposed to react freely and without inhibition. That is to say, whatever choice made or interpretation assumed, the text does not invalidate them or rest upon them. As such the spiritual beliefs that are brought to the fore by the characters are meant to stimulate reflection rather than acceptance. Thus, the reader is not overtly guided or oriented; he is like a disciple without a compass at hand. In this novel, McCarthy makes a transition from focusing on and socio-cultural and historical issues which necessitate criticism to discussing spiritual questions which need thought-provocation. The following section further elaborates the point by emphasizing its impact of such a transition on the reader's position.

5. McCarthy's Movement towards the Universal

If McCarthy's oeuvre is rightly divided into three main categories, then *No Country for Old Men* could be regarded as the beginning of the third phase. Justifiably, the novel signals a transition from an old phase to a newer phase. While the thematic connections are not totally cut, the aims and means are significantly different. Steven Frye notes that "the novel is a departure from anything McCarthy has written before, with a sentence-level style as spare and laconic as anything published in the contemporary period" (153). This transitional position that is occupied by McCarthy's ninth novel is not only due to a change in style but also to its movement towards a more contemporaneous setting where regional issues are mingled with global ones. Accordingly, this last section highlights the novel's significance as a bridge between McCarthy's previous southwestern novels and his subsequent millennial novels.

5.1. From Cultural and Historical Criticism to Spiritual Concern

The early narratives, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* among others, take the reader in a journey back in time to the southwestern lands. It is a horrific journey but also an eye-opening one. By portraying life in a—recent or distant—past, McCarthy attempts to reveal some deeply-seated problems which cannot be understood unless the world of those novels is so meticulously drawn. That is to say, his focus on local customs, accents, places and themes, helps to create a faithful image of the community in question. That is why both his southern and western narratives, though bitter, are credible. As it is not an easy task for a writer, especially in a relatively rigid era, to write with that penchant criticism about such mythologized regions, McCarthy prefers to re-assure his readers that he is one of them and his criticism—whether explicit or implicit—springs from a knowledge of history and society and not simply out of disdain to them. In fact, McCarthy's early works, taken collectively, seem to suggest that the origins of the country's sickness lie in its very roots—its myths—and as long as these are not understood for what they really are—violent, egoistic, supremacist, and unholy—more trouble will come. Consequently, the focus shifts

from the local roots to a larger scope that makes sense in the contemporary context. It is certainly not a new realization, since McCarthy often seems to suggest in his texts that evil is eternal, but in *No Country for Old Men* the idea appears more clearly in the sense that evil does not reside in the south or the west; it is not even confined within the borders of one country. Crimes are borderless; criminals are not characterized by ethnicity or race; psycho- and socio-paths are not marginalized cases in society, and the protagonist is no longer a heroic figure but an average everyman figure. As such, the novel can be said to solicit a larger—international—audience. The directors of the film apparently caught the hint as their cast of actors unwittingly reflects such an international appeal: Bell's role is played by an actor from the west, Chigurh's is played by a Spanish actor, and Carla's is played by a Scottish actress.

The shift of focus is of course not arbitrary. *No Country for Old Men* is McCarthy's first 21st c novel, so it occurs in a post- cold war era where a lot has changed ideologically, politically, economically and culturally. Critic Kenneth Lincoln indirectly traces McCarthy's reference to the many wars the United States had in the past and how their impact is diffused to not only home and neighboring borders but also distant lands. He mentions "the Alamo, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, the Civil War ..., global wars to end all wars, foreign conflicts of slavery, conquest, territory, imperial power..." which informed the early novels while "faux democracy, oil, uranium, outsourced productivity, our righteous War on Terror" contribute in the "resettling, or unsettling" of the west along with the other states and countries in the world (Lincoln 153). Thus, the unsettled west which McCarthy portrays in *No Country for Old Men* is but a reflection of the un-limitedness of an accumulated—regional and national— violence.

The author's increasing concern with spiritual issues—though it is not something new—indicates another shift of focus. The perspective, from which the previous narratives approach the regional problems they discuss, is social, cultural and historical. The psychological perspective is rarely evoked while

religion, mostly as related to myths¹, is occasionally discussed. However, with the movement toward an international scope, that puts aside cultural, social and historical differences, the narrative of *No Country for Old Men* introduces spirituality to the fore. The problems of violence and moral decadence, on which the novel centers, require a deeper—and a more open—discussion. In other words, in the face of such deterioration of morality, it is inevitable to discuss spiritual belief or unbelief, not as traditional categories but as important aspects in the entangled modern-day problems. McCarthy's endeavor in this sense is not an exception in American literature which is fraught with various discussions of faith issues; however, as scholar Amy Hungerford notes, McCarthy's endeavor is best seen as part of a contemporary affinity shared as well by James Baldwin, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison. In, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, she describes their works as being “a formal space that we find filled with religious feeling, supernatural power, otherworldly communion, and transcendent authority” (xvi). Such a “return” to spirituality in contemporary literature is certainly symptomatic of the nature—and gravity—of the problems faced (since they have to conjure deities) and thus explains not only McCarthy's shift of focus but also the era's destabilized sense. Nevertheless, what is remarkable about McCarthy's inclusion of spiritual issues in his later novels is its indeterminate nature. That is to say, the indeterminacy of characters' beliefs and its complication of the reader's judgment is an aspect that is noted with great interest for it provides a curious case of study especially from a reader-oriented viewpoint.

5.2. From Regional Reader to Universal Reader

Dianne C. Luce, who is one of the most cited scholars in the field of McCarthy studies, presents the aggregate of her years-long research in a book entitled *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. Her monograph focuses on the early works; yet it helps elucidate the worldview that

¹ In *Blood Meridian*, for instance, Judge Holden's biblical rhetoric shows the use of religion as a justification of the bloody westward expansion. However, in the most part, religion features only as a secondary issue in the southwestern novels.

is envisioned by McCarthy. She notes, “issues of value and vision concerning humanity’s understanding of its very nature, of its history and culture and of its place within the natural environment inform all of his work. But they are seldom presented overtly, sociologically, politically” (vii). The Tennessee period, hence, reflects his earlier vision of the world which particularly focuses on regions that are known with a problematic history and a complex of cultural and social obscurities. Luce’s contextual approach to McCarthy’s texts concludes that the writer is often informed—and influenced—by real local incidents. So, according to her, the reader ought to develop background knowledge about these regions in order to situate the novels within a concrete frame of reference. This is largely true about similar works which attempt to explore a region’s particularities though McCarthy’s texts hold their appeal even to those unacquainted of the South or the West.

The subtle universal significance of McCarthy’s works; that is, their attempt to portray the naked reality of humanity in all times and places, is implicitly inferred in all his texts, yet it is explicitly presented in the later texts. Despite the location of *No Country for Old Men* in a familiar local setting and its use of recognized generic tropes, it moves away from the confines of regional concerns to universal concerns that are shared among the global population. The question, as McCarthy seems to put it, is no longer about a specific period or a specific ethnic or national group; the question now transcends the space-time boundaries. By extension, such a literature is supposed to correspond to a heterogeneous readership. In other words, it has to make itself approachable—stylistically and thematically—to readers regardless of the differences between them. With its idiosyncratic mode of writing and its unusual perspective which maximizes the distance between author and character, McCarthy’s novel meets this aim. The author’s voice is heard less and less while readers are intrigued to make their own choices. The freedom that is granted to the reader, through the increasing indeterminacy, forges a space for the reader to feel included and involved in the narrative. Notwithstanding the diversity of backgrounds, mindsets, beliefs and experiences, all reader are invited to (re)create their own images, construct their

own visions and form their own interpretations of the text. Meaning, hence, is more contingent on the reader. The latter is defined by his universality—and willingness to actively respond to the questions of the narrative—rather than by his limited regional, national, cultural or social situation.

Conclusion

No Country for Old Men is important in the study of McCarthy's oeuvre. It is particularly relevant to the study of his later novels because of its transitional position between two distinct phases. While the preceding phases mark the author's interest in the portrayal of deeper—and older—southern and western issues, the last phase, which *No Country for Old Men* introduces, marks his growing concern with global and more contemporaneous issues. Though the novelist's skill in representing a peculiar set of villains and victims, from Ballard to Chigurh and from the kid to Moss, in the least sentimental manner remains unaltered, his method in doing it has changed. Thus, a remarkable tendency towards minimalism as a mode of writing is initiated through this novel as it signals a shift from dense and overtly poetic style to a simpler one while it also loosens its grasp on meaning. In other words, the narrative that is presented to the reader is fraught with indeterminacies. That latter encourages the reader's participation in the construction of meaning and safeguard his individuality of character and freedom of choice. As a result, the novel could be deemed as a move towards universality. The questions it asks and the answers it stimulates the reader to reach besides the roles it attributes to him evidence an entire literary evolution from regionalism to universality: style, theme, author and reader are all affected. Such evolution continues to develop and become more refined in the subsequent novels. Therefore, the next chapter explores the impact of similar authorial choices on *The Road's* implied reader.

Chapter Two

The Reader's Roles in a Parabolic (Post)Apocalyptic Novel: *The Road*

Reading *The Road* is a frightening and sickening journey through one of the most brutal, morbid and transmogrifying narratives you could ever come across. The story slowly creeps down compelling your mind to wander through the ash-covered world of the father and his son. It begins as a somewhat-dull post-end story with no promise of revival arising in the horizons. Soon, it drifts into an uncontrollable infiltration of the dark interiorities of humanity. The man's memories, his dreams and his gripping fears sneakily become yours. Above all the chaos and ruin, what truly strikes horror is the nudity, the savagery and the cool-toned human-flesh eating. The bloodcults, that are seldom confronted but terribly dreaded, haunt the entire narrative. Nevertheless, there is a little boy: soft-spoken, soft-hearted and with eyes so teary. He is the only warrant to the father to survive and to the reader he is the only warrant to carry on reading in wait of some goodness triumphing at the end. All one gets in return, though, is the feel of squeamishness mingled with a tinge of hope for the fire—after all—is not entirely extinguished. This, admittedly, subjective account of the novel is but an example of a reading experience which involves a diversity of emotional and cognitive reactions.

In the same vein, the present chapter seeks to identify the novel's major stylistic and thematic aspects and to elucidate their implications on the reading experience. The first section begins by examining the novel's literary context, genre and style in an attempt to identify their impact on the reader's position and implied roles. The next sections explore the novel's thematic complexities. The latter revolve essentially around a cluster of moral and spiritual questions. Accordingly, the second section focuses on the text's moral indeterminacy which is highlighted through the blanks arising from the multiplicity of textual perspectives. In the third section, spiritual indeterminacy is discussed in reference to a process of negation which invalidates certain literary assumptions and interpretations. The concluding section explores the pragmatic indeterminacy of the text by bringing different elements together. In so doing, a deeper understanding of the novel's purpose and the reader's role is reached.

1. Generic and Stylistic Indeterminacy in *The Road*

Before addressing thematic indeterminacies, it is preferable to begin by examining formal indeterminacies. A text's genre and style make up an important part of any reading experience. So, the influence of such an authorial choice on the reader's perception and reaction to the text must be examined in order to comprehend the nature of the interaction between text and reader. Accordingly, the present section discusses, first, *The Road*'s reception as a genre fiction and, second, its major stylistic attributes. In so doing, we aim at elucidating the implication(s) of such formal aspects on the reader's position.

1.1. *The Road*: A (Post)Apocalyptic Novel or a Parable ?

Immediate reviews of *The Road* revealed a set of contested opinions about, not only its value but even, its nature. In fact, McCarthy's turn to the apocalyptic genre was hinted at by the end of *No Country for Old Men* which makes an overt allusion to the book of Revelation and concludes with the same image that opens *The Road*: in a dark and cold place, a father carries the fire to enlighten his son's path. So, presumably, it should not be hard to categorize McCarthy's next generic venture. However, upon close examination, we find a more diverse reception. The majority of readers directly classified the novel as postapocalyptic since it narrates a post-cataclysmic story. Similarly, reviewers, such as Earl L. Dachslager, Alan Cheuse and Ron Charles note the novel's generic apocalyptic vision but are quick to emphasize the writer's brilliant "gift for language" which makes his book glow among other genre works such as Doris Lessing's and Margaret Atwood's (Cheuse). However, other reviewers share a different opinion. They regard *The Road* as an ecological or Christian parable which allegorically muses over the fate of mankind and Earth in the face of annihilation. To the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin writes "this parable is ... trenchant and terrifying" written with a "stunning, savage beauty". The reviewer of the *Kirkus Reviews* similarly argues that McCarthy "pushes his thematic obsessions to their extremes in a parable that reads like *Night of the Living Dead* as rewritten by Samuel Beckett". To *The Guardian*, Adam Mars-Jones writes, considering the text as an after-Armageddon story, "*The Road* isn't a fable, or a

prophesy... It's a *thought* and *feeling experiment*, bleak, exhilarating (in fact, enduring) only because of its integrity, its wholeness of seeing" [emphasis added]. So, reviewers are divided into three opinion groups: those who consider McCarthy's text as a postapocalyptic novel, those who regard it as a parable and those who see it as an anti-generic text (experimental). Therefore, in what follows, we will examine such a generic indeterminacy in an attempt to understand its impact on the reader's experience.

By the turn of the new millennium, a (post)apocalyptic feeling returned even more strongly in films, such as the British *28 Days Later* (2002) and its sequel *28 Weeks Later* (2007), and fiction. Such a sweeping resurgence could be understood as a global cultural phenomenon rather than a religious one though the original idea of the apocalypse comes from sacred narratives (the Book of Daniel and St. John's Revelation). The apocalypse, now re-emerging in a secular context, is one of the most popular literary genres which many consider as a reflection of the terrors of our time. Bestselling novels such as *On the Beach* (1957), *The Stand* (1978), *The Children of Men* (1992), *Oryx and Crake* (2003) *World War Z* (2006), to name but a few, envision possible ends and dystopian worlds that are the result of epidemics, ecological cataclysms, political and economic crashes or any other man-made evil. While apocalyptic fiction—which was most popular by the late 20th century—focuses on the why and how the world ends, postapocalyptic narratives—more popular in the 21st century—tend to represent the world after the end. Yet, despite such difference in vision and scope, there is relatively a little critical success in differentiating between what is (post)apocalyptic and what is not. That is, there is no consensus on generic elements or limitations. For instance, Frank Kermode's and James Berger's works touch upon the recurrent themes and patterns found across such (post)apocalyptic fictions but, similarly, remain vague about the defining

characteristics of the genre.¹ This may be due to the genre's young age and as Josef Broeck concludes, in his review of scholarly works about the genre, its emancipation "from its historical and biblical roots" which resulted in "no common agreement on the form, content, or function of apocalyptic thinking and writing." (94).

So, McCarthy's *The Road* was published at a time when many writers turned to the apocalypse which served as a mold in which they could pour their anxieties, apprehensions and expectations of the future. The millennial audience gasped at the sight of the 9/11 attacks, followed news about military invasions, watched with awe documentaries about a worsening climate and received with terror updates about worldwide epidemics; consequently, (post)apocalyptic narratives were the best type of literature to capture the spirit of the time. Thus, McCarthy's text, being part of such a contemporary literary trend, is neither exceptional nor innovative. However, what sets *The Road* apart from the rest of (post)apocalyptic narratives is its indecisive position; that is, is it an apocalyptic or a postapocalyptic novel? First, while postapocalyptic texts' very *raison d'être* is the reconstruction of another world that is founded upon a new order, new powers, new laws, or new species, *The Road* makes no attempt to build another world. Commenting on a similar point, Claire Curtis notes, in *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract*, that "there is no nature here; there is no material from which one could build a functioning society", and so *The Road* "lacks all of the potential motivations for moving forward" (26, 20). The world of McCarthy's narrative is a world of decay, destruction and dissolution whereas in postapocalyptic novels, such as the popular series of *Hunger Games* (2008), *Divergent* (2011) *The Maze Runner* (2009), we see a refraction of the world and an attempt—regardless of its righteousness or success—to re-establish some sort

¹ Author of *American Apocalypses* (1985) Douglas Robinson argues that the overt inclusiveness of the myth-critical approach, which critics such as R. W. B. Lewis and David Ketterer used, made any text that is roughly catastrophic inappropriately designated as apocalyptic. Instead, he suggests considering the scope of elements such as imagery, structure, and vision as defining criteria to distinguish between different types of apocalyptic texts (4). Yet, such a typology, so to speak, may not be so valid in view of the convergence between the genres of dystopia, utopia, zombie and apocalypse in contemporary works.

of order.¹ The closest idea of world-building in *The Road* is the re-division of its population into good guys and bad guys; that is cannibals and non-cannibals. Yet, this hardly amounts to the level of post-apocalypse reconstruction as the novel's plot is decisively minimalist. While a great majority of such texts rely on a well-developed—and suspenseful—plot to engage readers and demonstrate a particular vision of the future, McCarthy's text is almost plotless. As such, the narrative does not fit quite well with the post-apocalyptic trend. So, second, we assume that the vision of *The Road* suggests a focus on the end itself; that is, the apocalypse. However, like Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *The Road* remains silent—almost negligent—of the cause of the apocalypse. It offers its readers no anticipation of the future catastrophe that will put an end to life on earth as novels such as Max Brooks' which describes the slow annihilation of world population by nuclear radiation. Instead, McCarthy's text begins and ends in the middle of a prolonged apocalypse as if it says *the end is the end*. Yet, it does so without revealing the actual reason which leads to it; that is why readers often suggest different hypotheses such as a nuclear war, an ecological disaster, or a massive conflagration to explain the pervasion of ash and the extinction of natural life in the text. Hence, the end in *The Road* is—ironically—both present and absent. As such, McCarthy's narrative defies the apocalyptic frame which focuses on the depiction of the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it, and it also defies the postapocalyptic frame as it does not attempt to draw a picture of an alternative world. By negating such expectations, it makes the reader ponder about its generic nature. The novel is merely static, bleak and motionless. Seen so, McCarthy's text could be described as being anti-apocalyptic or neo-apocalyptic in the sense that it simultaneously uses and resists some conventional attributes that are associated with apocalyptic and

¹ These novels, for instance, could be classified as dystopian because they depict an ugly world and a community (district, town or group of people) that struggles for justice and better conditions. Thus, though the narratives take place in the aftermath of a catastrophe, which affiliates them as postapocalyptic, they also present a will for reconstruction. *The Road*, however, cannot be strictly described as dystopian, despite the ugliness and imperfection of its world, because there is no community to speak of. It is barely a tale of an individual quest for survival in which social or political struggles no longer matter.

postapocalyptic narratives. Yet that—question of what name could be given to the novel—is not central in the present research.¹ Instead, the question is: how does such a generic indeterminacy affect the reader’s experience of the text?

Because of the absent—but expected—elements, the text invites the reader’s involvement by triggering his curiosity to figure out what is overlooked and supply what is missing from the narrative. Assuming that *The Road* is one among many imagined—textual, graphic and cinematic—versions of the end, it is likely that the reader feels ‘entitled’ to mentally fill the gaps. Wesley Morgan’s “The Route and Roots of *The Road*” is a good example of a reader response that actively tracks the characters’ journey through cities, towns and landscapes which the writer never explicitly mentions. The ability of such a reader to fill in the gaps in the narrative’s setting is indicative of the text’s inviting structure. Readers’ speculative imagination of the apocalypse in *The Road*, as noted earlier, is another example of the positive impact that is achieved by the negated generic features. Second, and more importantly, the reader is mobilized to meditate about human life on a planet that is hit by plagues, natural disasters or technological excesses, and discover what remains of the present life and what fades away. It is a call for reflection without overt fantasy, illusion or horror (such as the hope for reconstruction or the terrifying metamorphoses to zombies that is promised in some other narratives). As such, the narrative stimulates credible, honest and realistic imagination instead of thrilling or cautionary sentiments which certainly arise the reader’s admiration but does very little to improve or deepen his understanding of the apocalypse as a *possibility* in

¹ The term neo-apocalyptic is used by Elizabeth K. Rosen, in *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination*, to explain “an alteration of the original narrative model” which resulted in stories about the future as “a reflection of fears and disillusionment about the present, a bleak shift in emphasis from the belief in an ordered universe with a cogent history to one in which the overriding sense is of a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe” (xiv). The term anti-apocalyptic is used by Douglas Robinson in “Visions of *No End*: The Anti-Apocalyptic Novels of Ellison, Barth, and Coover” in which he speaks about writers who seek “to reject the apocalyptic vision through the use of apocalyptic imagery”(6). Yet, he contends that such endeavor aims at encountering the apocalyptic vision per se rather than creating a subversive literary tradition.

contemporary times. Its depiction of the father's fading memory, the struggle with language and the survival instinct, for example, heightens its realism and closeness to actual life. So, the text requires from the reader to be attentive and retrospective in his reading. It also draws the reader's attention towards perennial issues, such as parenthood, humanity, ethics and faith, which demand—and deserve—profound contemplation instead of imagination solely. By avoiding excessive or superfluous details in plot and setting, *The Road* focuses the reader's effort on the analyses of questions that are central to existence from its genesis to its apocalypse and beyond.

As noted earlier, the apocalyptic designation is not the only generic appellation applied to *The Road*. Some reviewers regard it as a parable. For Michael Chabon, resort to terms such as “parable” or “fable” in an attempt to “mitigate[e] the science-fictional taint” is due to the prejudice against science fiction which some critics still harbour at heart. Yet, in the case of *The Road* it is not an altogether baseless claim: McCarthy's text is heavy in moral and religious allegories and allusions; hence, it may easily fall within the parabolic tradition. As is well known, the parable is originally a genre of the sacred scripture that is mostly associated with Jesus parables which are found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Though parables “have an existential-theological dimension”, as Dan O. Via demonstrates, “they are nevertheless genuine aesthetic objects” (70). So, literature borrowed the term with the form—but not the content—and the parable now appears in modern texts as a genre and a device. Just like metaphor or allegory, it is used for a range of (didactic) purposes. In *Tropes, Parables, and Performatives*, J. Hillis Miller explains that the modern use of the parable, as uprooted of its religious origin, keeps its essence in employing figurative language as an “indirect indication” for a meaning that “cannot be described directly” (135). In this sense, *The Road* is a parable. It not only evokes the original biblical genre through its moral and religious concerns, but is brief, abstract and allegorical. Many of the narrative elements that are expected in fully-developed novels are neglected. For instance, characters are—ostensibly—

reduced to mere caricatures which serve a symbolic purpose. The focus is put on the message of the story rather than its world or structure. However, the traditional parable's attempt to convey a transcendent or invisible meaning through an abstract tale is often governed by an authorial intention which is presented to the reader in order to figure out. In the famous "Good Samaritan", for instance, it is clear that the listener will reach the conclusion that the Samaritan is the best neighbour because the narrative highlights his good conduct as opposed to the others, and so it leads the listener to a predefined answer. Therefore, whatever challenge or dilemma is presented, it is readily solved without confusion or difficulty. As such, this literary genre is meant to accompany readers to specific meanings (metaphysical, religious or moral) that may not be explicitly stated but clearly figured out, just the same. *The Road*, however, does not adhere to such a generic convention. Its reductionism is not enough to align it strictly with the traditional parable genre because it purposefully turns down the attempt to direct its reader to any particular—moral or religious—stance. As such McCarthy's text is closer to the parable in its most refined modern usage which Richard M. Eastman calls "the open parable". The latter, he argues, is destabilized because there is no "single ethical motif" in the text but a wide range of references and interpretations (18). Works by writers such as Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett offer a good example of a writer's declination to "explain his work" because any explanation "simply defeats the artistic end of the form itself" (18). In other words, open parables such as *The Trial* or *Molloy*, though parabolic—that is abstract, allegorical and meant to indirectly express an invisible meaning—do not reveal or hint at any particular authorial intention. The reader simply cannot readily figure out the message. Similarly, *The Road* presents to the reader a reduced form of narrative—that is evocative of transcendent meaning—but refuses to guide him to a specific conclusion or interpretation. In so doing, it requires more thoughtfulness and reflection. Traditionally, the parable is a model of communication that positions writer and reader in a (hierarchical) dichotomy (in parallel of Jesus, the lord, and the Israelites, the disciples), yet the open parable de-constructs such an order through

its negation of intention. Thus, it created a more equal and balanced form of communication between the writer and the reader. By extension, McCarthy's unusual choice—and adaptation—of parabolic features stimulates the reader to fulfill a more active stance. The absence of orientation, which conveniently expected in a parabolic form, pushes the reader—through puzzlement and wonder—to find the hidden or invisible meaning which the text indirectly expresses. Without reaching such an end, the very purpose of *The Road*—as a parabolic text whose essence lies in its communicated message—will not be achieved. Consequently, the most important part of the text leaves the realm of the writer's intention and is ceded to the reader's interpretation. In other words, McCarthy's choice of the parable genre and his subversion of one of its main features, that is orientation, grant the reader a larger presence in the text and richer contribution in the final meaning.

In more ways than one, *The Road* is an indeterminate text. It ostensibly affiliates itself with well-known and popular literary genres, through its evocation of conventional features, yet it defies strict classification. So, it is simultaneously a (post)apocalyptic—or an anti-apocalyptic—novel and an open parable. It is unlikely that reviewers would resolve the dispute about such questions as “is it a novel or a parable?” because it is *both* and *none* at the same time. It is also very likely that average readers may not be deeply aware of such generic indeterminacy, but the implied reader is certainly supposed to understand its significance for it affects his experience of the text. Realizing such a responsibility early on, prepares the reader to exert more effort and encourages him to be more independent and creative. It is the concern of the following pages to further exemplify *The Road's* syntactic indeterminacy by examining its styles and their due impact on the reader.

2. *The Road's* Styles and the Reader's Aesthetic Roles

Style is a key aspect of every literary production or literary reception as it shapes both the writer's artistry and the reader's aestheticism. In previous chapters, we briefly described McCarthy's narrative style as hinging on a near-biblical decorum and a simple matter-of-fact style. In his later works—and *The Road* specifically—as noted in the second chapter as well, his style leans remarkably towards minimalism. However, it is a minimalism that weaves together prose and poetic elements. In the following pages, we return to those stylistic tendencies in order to better understand their impact on the reader's aesthetic experience of the text.

2.1.1. Biblical Lyricism: the Reader as a Listener and a Chorister

'Stilus virum arguit'. If this Latin aphorism, which means “the style proclaims the man”, is correct, then what proclaims McCarthy the most is the antiquarian lyricism of his narratives. His mastery of language, semantically and phonically, has been often praised and admired. His singularly forged style, which combines rhythmical cadence to uncommon vocabulary and syntax, falls midway between the bible and poetry. From the very first lines in *The Road*, McCarthy makes sure to show that his passion for mesmerizing prose has not waned away.

Notably, the *The Road's* opening passage is repeatedly anatomized for its metrical cadence. “When he *woke* in the *woods* in the *dark* and the *cold* of the *night* he'd *reach out* to *touch* the *child sleeping beside* him” (1) [emphasis added]. Treating this statement as though it were a verse, Kenneth Lincoln identifies in it “anapests, reverse spondaic feet and alliterative rhythms”, but even to an untutored ear there is a slow and attractive tone that cannot be go unnoticed (164). Other devices, that are common to poetry, are frequently used throughout the text. The following (randomly-chosen) passage, for instance, sounds like a piece of poetry because of its repetitive use of assonance, consonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia.

The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes. They wore gold rings in their leather ears and in the wind their sparse and ratty hair twisted about on their skulls. The teeth in their sockets like dental molds, the crude tattoos etched in some homebrewed woad faded in the beggared sunlight. Spiders, swords, targets. A dragon. Runic slogans, creeds misspelled. Old scars with old motifs stitched along their borders. The heads not truncheoned shapeless had been flayed of their skins and the raw skulls painted and signed across the forehead in a scrawl and one white bone skull had the plate sutures etched carefully in ink like a blueprint for assembly (94) ¹

Such euphonic effect is not uncommon in McCarthy's prose which, like an old English poem, begs to be *heard* rather than read, and so it attracts the reader's ear to its beautiful rhythm. Analyzing such lyricism, Sean Pryor points out its semantic significance. That is, it is not only musically pleasing, but also meaningful. For example, early on the father and his son are described as being "like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast" (1). First, such a description echoes a comparison to Jonas who "was three days and three nights in the whale's belly" (Matthew 12:41)². Yet, secondly, the rhythm in the rest of the statement, as Pryor notes, mimes other events. "His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease" (1). This description highlights the monotonous pace of inhalation and exhalation as an echo to the universe's even-paced movement: "for a time, the boy's chest, the man's hand, and the novels words share a rhythm" (Pryor 28). The last image steadily expands from drop, to minute, hour, day and *ad infinitum*. It is a muted image of the solar system that tolls in silence. In a marvelous combination, the narrative links "the biological rhythms that sustain human life to the celestial

¹ Here is a phonetic transcription of the passage:

/ðə wɔ:l brɪ'jɒnd hɛld ə frɪ:z ɒv 'hju:mən hɛdz, ɔ:l feɪst ə'lɑ:k, draɪd ænd keɪvd wɪð ðə tɔ:t grɪnz ænd 'frʌŋkən aɪz. ðeɪ wɔ: gəʊld rɪŋz ɪn ðə 'lɛðər ɪəz ænd ɪn ðə wɪnd ðə spɑ:s ænd 'ræti heə 'twɪstɪd ə'baʊt ɒn ðə skɑ:lz. ðə ti:θ ɪn ðə 'sɒkɪts laɪk 'dɛntl məʊldz, ðə kru:d tə'tu:z ɛft ɪn sʌm 'həʊm'bru:d wɔd 'feɪdɪd ɪn ðə 'bɛgəd 'sʌnlɑ:ɪt. 'spɑɪdɪz, sɔ:dz, 'tɑ:gɪts. ə 'drægən. 'ru:nɪk 'slɒgənz, kri:dz 'mɪs'spɛld. əʊld skɑ:z wɪð əʊld məʊ'ti:fs stɪft ə'lɒŋ ðə 'bɔ:dəz. ðə hɛdz nɒt 'trʌŋfənd 'feɪplɪs hɛd bi:n fleɪd ɒv ðə skɪnz ænd ðə rɔ: skɑ:lz 'peɪntɪd ænd saɪnd ə'krɒs ðə fɒrɪd ɪn ə skrɔ:l ænd wʌn waɪt bəʊn skɑl hɛd ðə pleɪt 'sju:ʃəz ɛft 'keəfli ɪn ɪŋk laɪk ə 'blu:prɪnt fɔ:r ə'sɛmbli /

² All subsequent Biblical quotations are taken from King James Bible.

rhythms of slowly turning planets [while it] so ostentatiously lament[s] the transformation of language occasioned by a single cataclysm [which might] snuff out human life, [but] leaves the constant cosmos unaffected” (Pryor 29). On the one hand, he who knows McCarthy’s close proximity to scientists, mathematicians, physicists and other researchers from the Santa Fe Institute will hardly be surprised at such vastness of perspective in his literature. On the other hand, the lyrical tone accompanying the novel’s postapocalyptic events saves the language from that destruction. Hence, the writer’s choice of such lyricism is not a random or superfluous choice; the rhythm requires as much attention as the words themselves because it emphasizes the expressed meaning. By extension, the reader, therefore, is asked not only to read but to *listen* since part of the meaning would be lost without listening. In a similar vein, in addition to its rhythmicity, the reader, like the characters, is deprived of sight. It is a dim and sightless world which features no colors or light; that is why listening is accentuated as a sensual faculty of survival because in darkness listening may compensate for an impaired sight. What may compensate for such impenetrable bleakness is to allow oneself to be absorbed in its lyrical bursts. That is, while it is difficult to see through the language—because of its density at times—meaning can be gained by paying attention to rhythm. Thus, the reader is invited to be more responsive as far as sound is concerned. By doing so, first, he moves closer to the characters and their world, since they both concentrate on acoustic sense; second, the text guarantees his attunement, captivation and absorption in the narrative.

As far as vocabulary is concerned, *The Road* is fraught with obsolete words and echoing literary allusions. For instance, McCarthy’s revival of the 17th century mystical “salitter” (279); the long-forgotten “middens”, “dolmen” (279); kennings such as “feverland” (94), “lampblack” (279) and neologisms like “deader” and “illucid” (123) are designative of his peculiarity of taste. One possible explanation to such peculiarity is the writer’s literary lineage which is often noted to be a diverse one. In a 1992 interview with Richard B. Woodward, McCarthy mentions among the “good writers” who inspire him: Melville,

Dostoyevsky and Faulkner. Ceding to “the ugly fact [that] books are made out of books”, he admits “the novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written”. That is why if we look at the patterns of vocabulary and syntax employed in *The Road*, in particular, we confirm that his antiquarian prose is *mostly* inspired by another text: the Bible. There are of course different opinions in this regard but they focus on intertextuality and allusion rather than tone, diction and structure.¹ The novel’s stylistic resemblance to the Bible particularly is highlighted in the poly-syndetic use of ‘and’, for instance, which creates a feeling of monotony and slowness. The opening of the Genesis reads, “in the beginning God created the heaven *and* the earth. *And* the earth was without form, *and* void; *and* darkness was upon the face of the deep. *And* the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. *And* God said, Let there be light: *and* there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3)[emphasis added]. Similarly, McCarthy (over)uses ‘and’ to coordinate his sentences. “... *and* the cold crept down *and* the dark came early ... Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down *and* fell over *and* died *and* the bleak *and* shrouded earth went trundling past the sun *and* returned again as trackless *and* as unremarked...” (192-3) [emphasis added]. As could be observed from this example, substituting punctuation with “and” appears a bit excessive at times because it elongates the sentence in a way that deprives the reader of a pause. Yet, it creates an uninterrupted line of thought empowering it with condensation and slowness of motion. In fact, such form of expression gives the text a powerful and authoritative allure. Regarding such a “transcendent authority”, Amy Hungerford notes that the readers are immediately fascinated “by the way the novel’s style radiated Biblical authority” (86). That is to say, the “borrowing” from scripture, especially after the 1980s, is—almost—empty of content; what interests a writer such as McCarthy in the Biblical text is instead

¹ For Lincoln *The Road* is poetically inspired by the works of “Shakespeare, Milton, and Yeats”; it crosses with *Waiting for Godot*, *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *King Lear* (164). For Pryor, it alludes to “past poets, from Dante and Milton to Blake and Eliot” (30). In a study of intertextuality and textual remembrance, Russell Hillier finds traces of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as well (670). The most exhaustive study, however, is Michael Crews’ 2017 publication *Books are made out of Books: a Guide to Cormac McCarthy’s Literary Influences*.

the form. So language offers his text a power and authority akin to the scripture's (xv). Regarding such an archaic and strange stylistic choice, Robert Alter argues, in *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*, that *The Road* "is less a novel than a kind of parable" which, for him, "provides very few of the pleasures and perceptions one ordinarily associates with reading novels" (172). While he is right about the parable-like nature of the text, he overlooks—or fails to see—its distinguished aesthetic effects. The heavy and archaic vocabulary, which in many instances forces the reader to consult a dictionary, merged with the paratactic style renders reading more like an act of chanting. Such a prose, as noted earlier, begs to be heard so that its rhythm could be appreciated. Likewise, the quality of language employed and the pace in which it is uttered—that is slow and uninterrupted—requires from the reader to be more immersed in that narrative prose as though it said by him because if left unpronounced—that is not read out loud—the novel's stirring effect would not be achieved. It will not even be noticed. Metaphorically, in such a case, the reader is like a chorister whose celebratory voice in the church extols the beauty of the scripture in front of an audience. In other words, if the text drives its powerful authority from its linguistic resemblance to the Bible, then it drives its mesmerizing effect from the reader's aesthetic reading in the same way the scripture's musical beauty is emphasized by the choir.

2.1.2. A Compact Prose: The Reader as an (Extra-Diegetic) Addressee

Alan Cheuse in his review of *The Road* humorously notes that "McCarthy could write instructions on a microwave that sounded like a version of the King James Bible", yet McCarthy could—of course—write simple and unsophisticated prose giving instructions on how to heat canned food or fix a cart. *The Road* employs, in addition to lyricism and poeticity, a crude and strait forward style which demonstrates an equally important tendency towards ordinariness and simplicity of expression. In a stark contrast with the sophisticated archaism and rhythmicity of the previously illustrated passages, the narrative develops through compact denotative statements which have no other purpose than reporting the

characters' journey with utmost accuracy. As a travel fiction, *The Road* follows the track of the father and his son in search of food, clothes and shelter, so the practical aspect of the journey is rendered more realistically through syntactic and linguistic crudity.¹

Like Hemingway, McCarthy does not write about things he doesn't know "[he] doesn't write about places he hasn't visited, and he has made dozens of similar scouting forays to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and across the Rio Grande into Chihuahua, Sonora and Coahuila" (Woodward). Confirming a similar point, Wesley Morgan showcases the geographical track followed by the father and his son as they start out somewhere near Middlesboro, Kentucky heading to the southern coast and passing through McCarthy's hometown Knoxville, Tennessee (39). Such a tendency to refer to specific places and describe the landscape with utmost accuracy indicates the writer's attentiveness to accurate details which contribute to the credibility of his tale. Moreover, the father's manual work, for instance, is frequently depicted with a patient preciseness. In the following example, the narrator meticulously reports the man's actions.

They collected some old boxes and built a fire in the floor and he found some tools and emptied out the cart and sat working on the wheel. He pulled the bolt and bored out the collet with a hand drill and resleeved it with a section of pipe he'd cut to length with a hacksaw. Then he bolted it all back together and stood the cart upright and wheeled it around the floor. It ran fairly true. The boy sat watching everything (15-16)

We notice, again, the repetitive use of the conjunctive 'and' while describing a sequence of skilful steps. The reader, much like the boy, sits "watching everything" with a discerning eye. Despite the distance that is maintained between the narrator, the characters and the reader, such close-up descriptions narrow the gap. At least the reader, here, feels included in the narrative by being allowed to witness their manoeuvre from a close angle. In another instance,

¹ An obvious objection to this statement highlights McCarthy's use of abstruse and arcane vocabulary which comprises geological terms such as "isocline" (237), "loess" (300); medicinal term such as "vestibular" (14), "rachitic" (65), colliculus (67), gyrus (67) and botanical words such as "woad" (95). However, the writer's use of such jargon terms, far from being a mere show of erudition or sophistication, reflects his keen emphasis on realistic (almost scientific) portrayal.

reaching the sea, the father goes “over the ship from bow to stern again” (255-256). In accordance with such movement and activity, the style shifts to a long and minutely descriptive prose which gives the impression that the reader actually accompanies the father in his labor. After his return to the shore, he finds out that “the tarp was gone. Their blankets. The waterbottle and their campsite store of food. The sailcloth was blown up into the dunes. Their shoes were gone. He ran up through the swale of seaoats where he'd left the cart but the cart was gone. Everything” (271). Depicting this earnest survival crisis in a different manner would have deprived the reader of perceiving the immense shock and horror felt by the father. Yet, enumerating every single object in a row gives the reader the impression that he, too, is gazing in search of those objects. So, the reader is drawn closer and addressed in a language that is close to his quotidian usage. Such a stylistic choice is certainly so effective that it makes one believe that the book could—or must—be read “as a survival manual” (Lincoln 165).

By addressing the reader in a simple and stripped-down manner, the narrator not only depicts the characters and their actions as accurately as possible but also reflects the world of the narrative; that is, a world where linguistic refinement and ornament can no longer stand. The novel's fragmentary descriptive mode is in accordance with the chaos and destruction of the world. Syntactical structures are scattered; only a minimum of grammatical connection is kept between fragments. In Mitchell's words, “syntax itself has come to embody the isolation it depicts” (210). In a similar vein, Lindsey Banco argues that such a minimalist style reinforces the “thematization of absence and lack” (276). Minimalism, however, does not reduce the abundance of meaning which is expressed in such a style. The following almost verb-less passage is a good case in point:

The remains of an old fire by the side of the road. Beyond that a long concrete causeway.... Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence (293)

Here, the rapid succession of words that are cast against each other signals some sort of reluctance about all structured acts, among them writing and perhaps even thinking. McCarthy drops some sentence-parts, such as verbs, conjunctions,

adverbs and prepositions, considering them unnecessary as long as the intended meaning could be reached with fewer words. On the one hand, such a tendency means that he—or his narrator—trusts the addressee’s understanding; that is to say, it is needless to fully structure every sentence because the reader can comprehend its meaning. On the other hand, such a fragmentation sharpens the effect of description and secures the reader’s immersion within the world of the narrative. Thus, the use of an “ordinary” language, besides the spontaneity of such form of address, indicates a desire to narrow the gap between the text and the reader. Though it is a postapocalyptic tale, and many of the narrative elements are missing, the reader is addressed in an inviting style that shows both mutual intelligibility and connectedness. Put differently, the reader is not merely *reported* to from a distance but rather *addressed* from a close proximity.

Briefly, *The Road*’s formal and stylistic features are in concordance with the world it depicts. Through its rhythm, tone and description it empowers an image of destruction, melancholy and struggle. Thus, the text strikes an unusual balance between the simplicity of prose and the complexity of poetry. Such a stylistic combination is certainly challenging for many readers, yet it enriches their reading experience by drawing them closer to the narrative, addressing them in a familiar manner and even attributing to them aesthetic and creative roles. The novel’s stylistic distinctiveness lies in its mobilization and enforcement of the reader’s interaction. It is no surprise that reading *The Road* is as multilayered an experience as the text itself. Part of that multilayered-ness is also discovered through its content.

3. Moral(e) Indeterminacy: Blanks, Perspectives and Judgments

The minimalistic nature of *The Road* does not appear—only—in its prose-poetic style, but also in the gaps between its textual perspectives. Though the novel has a minimum of characters—just like in a parable—the perspectives it presents are confusing and disharmonious. The absence of an overarching or orientational perspective, especially in regard to moral and ethical questions, which are central to the text, challenges the reader’s understanding and ability to

reach answers. The reader, hence, is divided between opposing standpoints which represent moral/immoral and optimistic/pessimistic dichotomies. Such semantic indeterminacy, as will be shown, stimulates the reader's judgment. Hence, the three initial subsections will explore the different perspectives of narrator, woman and son in opposition to the protagonist's (referred to alternately as man and father). The last subsection will highlight the reader's mobilization towards moral judgment as an active response to such textual blanks.

3.1. The Narrator vs. the Protagonist: A Dis-unified Perception of the World

We concluded in the previous section that *The Road* relies equally on two major tendencies; that is, a poetic density and a prosaic compactness. Observing such a stylistic pattern, we may further argue that both stylistic tendencies are 'distributed' in the text according to a given narrative choice. Differently put, the narrative mode changes in accordance with the protagonist's consciousness, action or mood. Terseness tends to reflect the protagonist's cognitive focus on practical issues whereas rhythmicity tends to reflect his profoundly meditative mood. Here is an illustration; "the ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone" (10). Just like nature, the narrative tone—slow, feeble and melancholic—mirrors the man's mental and emotional state. In other instances, when he is more attentive to practical issues, the style shifts to objective and emotive expression. For example, describing the man's worry about what ensures their survival and safety, the narrator says: "he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food ... they found a ham gambreled up in a high corner ... They fried it that night over their fire... Later he woke in the dark and he thought that he'd heard bulldrums... Then the wind shifted and there was just the silence" (16). Here, the man is less concerned with the destroyed landscape than with the danger surrounding them, so the narrator attempts to picture the outer appearances as precisely as possible in order to convey to the reader a sense of alertness and

practicality rather than meditation or contemplation. Moreover, the narrator seems sometimes to describe things from the man's viewpoint. For example, he tells us that "[the man] looked out through the trees toward the road. This was not a safe place. They could be seen from the road now it was day" (3). Here, it is unclear whether this is the narrator's remark that the place is dangerous because a panoramic view shows their vulnerability to passers-by or the man's own thought as he watches the road. Such a closeness, or even convergence, between narrator and protagonist—as emphasized through the duality of style—suggests a unity between the two perspectives. However, that—arguably—is not the case as far as semantic unity is concerned.

In a comparative article that discusses the linguistic features of *Suttree* and *The Road*, Rachel Furey concludes that the latter's narrator is more "true to the father's thoughts" because he makes the reader see the landscape "through the eyes of the father" (60). While her remark is largely true, as demonstrated above, such general impression may not stand close scrutiny. In effect, there is a fundamental disparity between the two perspectives. Despite the ostensible unity between the narrator's mode and the protagonist's mood, this unity persists no further than style. One of the simple—but very crucial—differences appears in their perception, and by extension, depiction of the world. This is evident in the way travellers on the road are portrayed. The narrator often compares them to "pilgrims in a fable" (1), "pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen" (24), or "pilgrims enroute" (213). Contrastingly, the man sees them as "creedless shells of men" (28). They are only "marauders" and "bloodcults"; they are "no godspoke men" (32). While the word "pilgrim" may not succeed in lifting those travellers to a sacred status, it at least attempts to debunk the evil impression suggested by the protagonist's diction. The dissimilarity between the two depictions reveals a critical difference between the narrator's and the protagonist's perceptions of the world. For the man, it is almost impossible to expect any goodness in this "hydroptic and coldly secular" "sweeping waste" (293). The world is "barren, silent, godless" (2). The narrator, however, draws an image of a world in which even an old man such as Ely is

described as “sitting like a starved and threadbare Buddha” (179). Despite all its desolation, the narrator surrounds such a world with a strange sense of transcendence. Thus, the narrative world is presented to the reader in a contradictory manner; the contradiction is not as glaring as the difference between a utopia and a dystopia but it is certainly befuddling. What accentuates the effect of this disunified view of the world is its non-hierarchy; that is, the reader is torn between both perspectives as neither the narrator nor the protagonist dominates over the text. So, the world of *The Road* remains largely indeterminate.

The indeterminacy, appearing at this level in the form a gap between two textual perspectives, namely those of the narrator and the protagonist, stimulates the reader’s interpretive efforts. First, when the reader notices the disparity in the perception and depiction of the narrative world, his attention is directed towards his own projections in the text. That is, he becomes aware that it is up to him to decide—or define—the world of *The Road*. The thesis and the anti-thesis are presented to him without ample evidence, so it depends on his personal judgment which of the two is more credible or convincing. In fact, McCarthy makes it clear that credibility is a central concern in his literature. He says, in an interview about the adaptation of *No Country for Old Men*, “it’s hard enough to get people to believe what you’re trying to tell them without making it impossible”, and adds, “you have to make it vaguely plausible”. Such a concern, of course, partially explains his use of minimalistic techniques, but also indicates the writer’s inclination to let his readers see themselves in the text. So, one reader may see the protagonist’s worldview as a realistic reflection of his corresponding circumstances. Another reader may instead regard the narrator’s perspective as the most reliable one because, for instance, the “good guys” eventually appear and rescue the man’s child. However, such interpretations are only one step forward. So—second—the realization that he has actually a role to play in the text is achieved when/if he attempts to connect both worldviews. This not only encourages the reader to take sides, so to speak, with the narrator or the protagonist but rather aims at highlighting the essence of the disparity between

the two. Bringing such a vacancy into view stimulates his reflection about the ongoing struggle between different views and convictions. As such, both textual perspectives represent opposing forces that meet in the text: sacred vs. secular, perseverance vs. surrender, morality vs. immorality and hope vs. despair. The discomfort, the uneasiness and the disturbance that the reader encounters when he attempts to reconcile such perspectives and fails makes him realize—even experience—the struggle. That is why instead of telling the reader about the different struggles that the protagonist and other characters go through, the writer includes him in such an atmosphere through the indeterminacy of main textual perspectives.

If actively perceived, the challenge that faces the reader because of the disparity between the narrator's and the protagonist's depiction of the narrative world becomes a key activator of ideation which in turn engenders deeper and richer understanding. As such, indeterminacy allows a more effective reading experience. The idea of struggle, therefore, is not a peripheral issue that appears marginally in the text. In the narrative, there is a continual struggle. Initially, there appears the struggle for survival: searching for food, shelter, warmth and safety. Then appears the identity struggle: the boy frequently asks “are we still the good guys? And the man repeatedly assures him “yes. We're still the good guys ... And we always will be” (81). There is as well a struggle for trust: the father worriedly enquires if his son believes him and the latter asserts “I believe you... I always believe you... I have to” (196). In such a way, struggle becomes not only a theme or motif but a horizon against which many other themes are perceived. In what follows, we will discuss the man's and the woman's opposing perspectives so as to understand another side of struggle in *The Road*.

3.2. The Man vs. the Woman: A Struggle between Hope and Despair

Readers learn from the man's disjointed recollections that he and his wife (used to) quarrel a lot. It is not a habitual sort of fight as it involves no disagreement about rearing, education, credit or vacation. Those are not arguments which postapocalyptic parents can have. Instead, for a “hundred nights they'd sat up arguing the pros and cons of self destruction with the

earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall” (60). The subject which brings the two perspectives to collide is suicide. The mother believes that they are “not survivors [but] the walking dead in a horror film” (57). For her, there is no use of clinging to a fake hope, defying a gruesome reason, and evading a glaring truth. She knows that sooner or later, they will be caught by cannibals, ripped to pieces, and swallowed. So, according to her, the right thing to do is to put an end to it. Living at a time and a place where one routinely comes across “bodies hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty” makes her stance a rational one (16). Even the father helplessly admits that “she was right. There was no argument” (60). He, nevertheless, cannot bring himself to do it. After she commits suicide, the man and his son are left alone “shuffling through the ash, each the other's world entire” (4). The question which is inevitably brought by the mother remains relevant, yet it remains more as an existential crisis rather than a mere question of parental devotion.

Through the man’s frequent remembrance of his wife, the stance she argued for and represented persists in the form of an internal conflict in which the man is torn between a hope for his child’s survival and a despair of the tragic fate awaiting them. Like the woman, he wishes that everything comes to an end, a peaceful “eternal nothingness”, but his compassion for his child prevents him from killing himself or the boy. Though his actions reveal no sign of conflict, his thoughts often betray a deep indecision. For instance, after shooting one of the bad guys, he “justifies” his act by explaining to his son that his job is to take care of him. He asserts “I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (81). In word and deed, the man shows that his determination to protect the child, despite all unfavorable odds, emanates from a sacred love. Yet, when the mother disappeared into darkness, because there were only two bullets left in the gun, the father’s case was less complex than it is now when only “a single round [is] left in the revolver”, (71). In one of the most terrifying moments of the novel, when realizing he unknowingly entered a house full of humans kept *as a food* to the bloodcults, the father faces a tormenting crisis. He whispers to himself: “can you do it? When the time comes? ... What if it doesnt fire? It has

to fire. What if it doesn't fire? *Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock?* Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be?" (120) [emphasis added]. So, now his mission is harder and more pressing than before. It increasingly pushes the man to the edge and forces him to make a decision which he, hitherto, evaded. Similarly, it invites the reader to delve deeper in the narrative in order to discover more about the—horrifying—question than its outer appearance.

As a postapocalyptic narrative, *The Road* presents to the reader two opposing alternatives: either the woman's total despair and eventual suicide, or the man's indecisive hope and combat for his son's safety and survival. The discrepancy between the mother's and the father's attitudes and the narrator's neutrality towards both confuses the reader but it brings him closer to the narrative. Numerous examples of a direct evocation of the reader through second person pronoun could be found throughout the text. For example, the night is described as so cold that it "[can] take *your* life" and so black that it "[can] hurt *your* ears with listening" while the day is the time for men to come and "eat *your* children in front of *your* eyes" (13,14,192) [emphasis added]. Such descriptions are different ways to integrate the reader in the fictional world. The reader, in Cooper's words, is no longer "watching the fictional events from the wrong end of a telescopic lens" (2). Such evocation of "you" re-familiarizes a (postapocalyptic) world that might have seemed unfamiliar at first sight. It, most importantly, prepares the reader to identify with the man's conflicting consciousness. Typically, the use of the imperative form is employed to substitute the first person viewpoint in moments of utmost confusion. For instance, when the man ponders about the old world and how it is "slowly fading from memory", he urges himself—and/or the reader—to think of a more colorful and lively past then "freeze this frame" (18). Other examples of the man's crucial resort to the imperative form are: "make a list. Recite a litany. Remember" and "evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (31, 78). He is constantly drifting between past and present, dream and reality, memory and fantasy, so the imperative form impels

him to act and fight back all urges of surrender and insanity. It simultaneously signals the protagonist's attempt to resist internal conflict and the narratorial inclination to draw the reader closer to the protagonist's interior world. Eventually, the man realizes that this 'new' world is so unknown and alien to him and as long as he survives he will struggle to cope with it externally and internally. He "[understands] for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed... Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. *Some part of him always wished it to be over*" (163) [emphasis added]. Again, such thoughts clearly indicate a consciousness that is divided between two conflicting states or desires. On the one hand, it is a consciousness that is extremely tattered by the new world's realities and on the other, it is deeply committed to a mission—parental or universal it is never distinguished—that ought to be accomplished. Through such revelations, the reader is able to see—very closely—the amount of struggle and courage in the protagonist's simplest actions. Cooper rightly summarizes a similar point; she contends that, first, "the father's fear and despair at moments when he physically behaves in direct contradiction to that despair" is an assertion of a profound fatherly love and, second, his perseverance is an indication of "the reality-creating power of language" (141). The closeness which is created, through such language use and narrative distance, between the reader and the protagonist could not have appeared without the disparity between textual perspectives which the text emphasizes through the opposition between the man's hopeful and resisting stance and the woman's despairing stance.

Upon initial inspection, the difference between their perspectives suggests an opposition, not only in view or attitude, but in character and belief as well. The reader may be immediately drawn to pigeonhole the woman's stance, for instance, as escapist, defeatist or perhaps rational whereas the father's stance could be regarded as stronger or weaker by another reader (depends on how one interprets his refusal to commit suicide). Yet, the inherent struggle between both tendencies becomes clear to the reader when both perspectives meet in the person of the man. Thus, whatever interpretation a reader may have previously thought

of as an explanation to their disagreement (gender, intellect and religious belief) is invalidated. By contrast, as the reader grows more familiar with the world of the narrative and finds himself included in such a world and witnessing the father's ongoing conflict, he may sympathize with his efforts or have an altered opinion of him, but he will certainly recognize the nature of his internal conflict and the depth of his struggle for survival. Thus, the reader's understanding allows him to perceive his judgment about questions of disagreement, such as suicide or parenthood, with more insight and with less dogma or superficiality.

3.3. The Father vs. the Son: A Struggle between Moral and Amoral Choice

In their journey, the father and his son go through physical hardships and are faced with challenges. At such times, they even come to confront each other. As beings from two different generations and two different worlds, their perspectives are more or less discordant. The eventual collision between the two, especially when moral uprightness is at stake, highlights another vacancy in the overall narrative. So, the challenges that face the two, and divide their moral stance, turn into a challenge for the reader as well.

Upon hearing a dog's bark, the boy instantly—almost instinctively—asks his father not to harm it. Later, the boy claims that he sees a glimpse of another boy; he agitatedly searches for him but he finds no one. Because of his stubborn willingness to help others, animals or humans, the boy opposes his father, but as the latter refuses the minutest risk of being exposed or delayed, an argument ensues (88). The boy repeatedly pleads: “What if that little boy doesn't have anybody to take care of him? he said. What if he doesn't have a papa?” (89); “we could go back, the boy said softly. It's not so far. It's not too late” (91). Unlike him, the father is watchful and cautious because he never forgets that everyone is “like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes” (65) and they—him and his boy—nothing but “two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover” (138). Therefore, he not only turns down his son's pleas, but refuses to even acknowledge his viewpoint. In a later occasion, he mentions the incident asserting that “the dog that he remembers followed us for two days... He doesn't remember any little boys” (91). He completely denies his son's perspective

considering it a mere illusion. However, the reader does not. Unlike the father's perspective, of the incident, which is told in first person, the boy's perspective is narrated in third person. That is to say, the latter is objective whereas the former is subjective. Such a shift in narrative mode, hints that the boy is not wrong about seeing a little boy. Whether his willingness to meet him is right or not remains open to question, but the facticity of his statement does not. By the end of the narrative, the boy meets a whole family that is comprised of a boy and a girl, too. So, the reader, eventually, ascertains that the son's opposition to his father is not groundless and his perspective not inferior. Such a realization shapes his perception of other disagreements which, again, brings two moral attitudes into question.

As a consequence to such disagreement, the boy withdraws in silence, refusing to talk to his father or listen to his stories. He explains: "in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (287). This disillusionment with notions such as "good guys" and "carrying the fire" makes him more assertive in his confrontation to his father (87). Seeing "an old man, small and bent", he hastens to offer help though his father warns him not to (171). Reluctantly agreeing to offer food, the father murmurs "perhaps he'd [the old man] turn into a god and they to trees" (173). Such an allusion to the myth of Baucis and Philemon indicates, again, the man's unchanged skepticism and distrust but it shows his acceptance of his son's opinion. The boy as well affirms that he does not expect the father to agree on keeping the old man with them (174). It seems, by now, both are well aware of the disparity between their perspectives. The father realizes that what motivates his son to act with so much optimism—and even nativity—is his untainted moral righteousness. He know that he will not "get over it" because he is sure that the stories he tells have instilled in him a profound trust in human goodness and a staunch disdain for cruelty and avarice (185). That is why the man shows respect to his son's perspective even if he is not entirely sure of the appropriateness of such a choice in such a world. So far, the reader may regard the boy's behavior as more worthy of admiration because, after all, the boy is a triumph to ideals and morals that are

preached in stories and tales. Thus, such a reader may see his perspective as superior to that of the father. However, that is only true because the boy, like the reader, acts upon a pre-apocalyptic code of conduct. In fact, the father inwardly retains the belief that “there's not a lot of good news on the road. In times like these” (186). In times like these, if you leave your few possessions unprotected, you will turn to find everything you own gone. When the father catches the thief who attempts to steal their food, tent and clothes, he leaves him there “standing there raw and naked, filthy, starving” while the boy sobs “and put his hands over his ears” (275). Though retaliatory in nature, the boy considers his father’s conduct as unscrupulous; he does not have any answer to his father’s question: “what do you think would have happened to us if we hadnt caught him?” (276). This demonstrates how unfit the boy is and how little chance he has to survive in such a world. Despite his attempts to act ethically and benevolently, the perspective he represents is the weakest one. Eventually, the boy realizes the gruesome nature of his world (289). Perhaps it is more beautiful and soothing to believe the world can be built again with intentions as pure and selfless as the child’s, but—as the late incident shows—even that idealism is hard to guard without a forceful precaution such as that of the father. Such a realization brings the reader to understand the father’s perspective. If he was seen before as immoral, now the reader understands that it is rather an obligatory choice to survive in the current circumstances.

3.4. The Reader as a Moral Survivor

Though at initial encounter, oppositions, confrontations and struggles give the impression that the text attempts to polarize readers’ responses pro or against a particular textual perspective, it in fact has no such purpose. First, the disunified world that is depicted by the narrator and the protagonist prepares the reader to be more responsive and active in his reading. Then, the opposition between the woman and the man in their attitudes to such a world, that is despair and hope, stimulates the reader to make judgment but it—more importantly—further his understanding of the nature of such a struggle. Both tendencies, as they forcefully torment the man, elucidate to the reader the impossibility—

perhaps unnecessary—to resolve that conflict. The boy’s confrontation with his father, on account of moral questions, creates another gap, yet it also deepens the reader’s comprehension of the narrative world and characters’ struggle with it. Thus, the blanks that arise between the different textual perspectives challenge the reader and complicate his reading experience, but simultaneously encourage his involvement and reflection.

For instance, the man—since he is a central part in all conflicting perspectives—fights an internal and external battle. The heart and kernel of that battle is the survival of his son which in turn ensures his survival. Expressing the point, the woman assures him that “[he] wont survive for [himself]” because “a person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love... and shield it from harm” (59). This is exactly what the father does; yet his survival is not envisioned as a personal but rather a universal affair. So, his skeptical view of the world, his attempt to overcome despair and instill goodness and hope in his son and his confrontation with him reveal the changing nature of his perspective(s). In other words, even though he sees the world as totally bad and godless, he attempts to take a stand hoping to protect his son whom he nurtures with moral and humane ideals. In so doing, he succeeds even when he seems to fail. He avows that his purpose is to “enkindle in the child’s heart what was already ashes in his own” (163). Thus, his struggle to save his son is not only natural because any parent would do so but is transcendent because through the child’s survival moral sanctity is safeguarded. While on the surface, the text seems to focus on physical struggle for survival, at a deeper level the struggle is moral. For the reader to reach such a level, he has to attempt first to make connections between perspectives which will eventually lead him to a referential network through which other layers could be unfolded. This may require a rereading of the text in order to be grasped; in any case, such a reading is more engaging and impactful than a reading which responds to initial stimuli by shallow judgment without making effort to bridge, resolve, and revise meaning(s).

The reader's struggles with such a text, accordingly, turn to be more effective than expected at initial encounter. The reader is all along provoked to think and take a stance regarding those contradictory textual segments, so his activity and contribution are enhanced. Moreover, in view of the issues brought to his notice, that is moral and morale conflicts, the reader is made aware of the conditions surrounding the narrative. In other words, without pulling the reader to the postapocalyptic world in which decisions are hard but necessary to make, he would not have felt the weight or gravity of such questions. From a safe distance, it is easier to judge but once in the midst of it, it is difficult to make right judgments. Therefore, when the reader is involved in that world—with all its contradictions, opposing forces and risks—his understanding of characters and their acts are more profound. He becomes a fellow survivor. Consequently, reading such a text involves the reader in an experience which changes him cognitively and emotionally.

4. Spiritual Indeterminacy: Between Negation and Affirmation

Spirituality is often present—implicitly or explicitly—in postapocalyptic literature.¹ In McCarthy's text it features very strongly not only through style but also through a content that brings religious questions to the fore. As theologian and critic, Robert Alter, notes "the Bible itself, beyond its function as a model of style, also offers [in *The Road*] various possibilities of interpretation and argumentation for responding to an encompassing catastrophe, which is a phenomenon repeatedly envisaged in the biblical texts" (Alter 178). The novel, in fact, is so fraught with spiritual concerns that expand well beyond Judeo-Christian belief and persistently draw the reader to a metaphysical realm. The present research, however, is not concerned with resolving *The Road's* stance in

¹The terms "religion" and "spirituality" are responsible for a number of unsettled interdisciplinary debates between anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, theologians and many others. So, it is necessary to explain the use of "spirituality" in the context of the present research. As Peter C. Hill and his peers contend, religion has become a "narrowband construct" that is restricted to institutions and denominations whereas "spirituality appears to be the favored term to describe individual experience" (60). Thus, the spiritual can be understood as including—and transcending—the traditional religious realm. It may stand for an existential belief, a worldview, a vision, an aspiration, a consciousness and it —may or may not—be inclusive of practice.

regard of religion or spirituality, because, first, such purpose is unattainable and, second, doing so does very little to improve our understanding of the reading experience. Instead, the present section discusses, first, the text's ambivalent representation of spiritual beliefs and, then, attempts to understand its impact on the reader's response and experience.

3.1. Belief Affirmed

Besides its biblical poeticism, the novel resonates with theistic notions. *The Road*'s most salient evocation of a Christian belief is found in the father's sacred view of his son. His very appearance, such as "his pale and tangled hair", arouses so many feelings of reverence and devotion in the father that he murmurs to himself: "[g]olden chalice, good to house a god" (78). The father believes his son to be, like in Christian tradition, the sacred godly savior of humanity; that is why he earnestly ventures to say "[i]f he is not the word of God God never spoke" (3). This statement directly calls attention to the opening of the Gospel of John: "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). So, both "sons" are seen as descending to a degraded earth with a word of "grace and beauty" (56). As such, McCarthy's postapocalyptic vision is a re-production of the biblical quest for a redemptive salvation. In a similar vein, Manuel Broncano argues that the father believes that the boy is a Christ figure because of his frequent allusions to the "anointing" (78). Like the Old Testament's Elijah, Ely warns of the Judgment Day which "shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers..." (Malachi 4:5-6). The eventual reconciliation between the man and the boy, after a number of disagreements, therefore indicates the fulfillment of such a biblical prophecy and, by extension, confirms "that the Second Coming has taken place in the person of the son" (Broncano 138). Likewise, some critics, such as Julian Murphet, consider the novel's only description of the apocalypse, "the clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (54), as a chapter-and-verse reference to Christ's Second Coming in the Book of Revelation. Moreover, commenting on the father's description of the boy as "glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (293), Allen Josephs explains

that tabernacle is “the singularly most ecumenical term imaginable to express the essence of God...” as it is held in great esteem by Hebrew and Catholics (139-140). So, the son encapsulates the essence of theism; that is why—being “the last god”—his survival in a post-apocalypse endows the father’s mission with a sacred meaning (183). He proudly declares, by the end, that “there is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today” (297). McCarthy’s text, in this regard, supports and even adheres to a Christian reading.

The Road seems as close to theistic doctrines as any Christianity-inspired narrative can be. However, to be sole-satisfied with such view is a deliberate dismissal of other—equally important—aspects in the novel which indicate opposite meanings. The narrative’s ecclesiastical tone is in many instances abandoned for a sort of cosmic ritualism. Though concerned with signs of sacrament in McCarthy’s fiction, Matthew Potts admits that “dogmatic theology” does not reign in the text (491). For instance, a deistic worldview is made manifest through the narrator’s perspective. Regardless of the characters, and unconcerned with humanity’s demise, the narrator often focuses description on the natural order sustaining planets, atoms and pulses while it continues its eternal pace without change or pause. Such a view creates a sense of indifference towards catastrophe as it pictures a magnificent and impeccable universal system in which “[by] day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp” and “on the roads the pilgrims sank down ... and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld ...” (32, 193). Non-doctrinal notions such as these are closely discussed by Petra Mundik in her offers gnostic study entitled *A Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy*. While Christian doctrines promise salvation from “capricious” fate through faith, in Gnosticism salvation is only attained through knowledge. Being aware of such deistic indifference to human suffering means that the course of history and the order of nature, which makes up such cosmic harmony, will not be altered in man’s favor. Hence, *The Road* strongly evokes the gnostic concept of Heimarmene which means “destiny” or “the law of the cosmos” (Mundik

106). In an epiphanic moment, the man realizes “the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth...The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover” (138). The absolute truth which he comes to see is no more than a total knowledge of—and surrender to—an order decreed by an absent deity. As no divine intervention can be hoped for, the likelihood of another life after the apocalypse is impossible. Thus struggle is futile. Even survival means very little above a mere prolongation of a bitter existence among ashes and rags which will eventually fade away just like animals and plants. In this regard, belief—as evoked by the narrator’s description and the man’s musings—shifts to a more esoteric view. Such Gnosticism however, is no more apparent than in the child’s “alien” worldview.¹

In a unique and recent article (2019), Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin, by referring to the draft version of *The Road*, suggest that the father and son are “believers in a God associated with the sun as a source of light and life, but who have trouble maintaining their faith in a darkening and dying world in which God seems absent” (1). The father’s ambivalence is clearly noted, for instance, when he sees the forest, and the snow “alight [as] if the lost sun were returning at last” he feels that “it moved something in him long forgotten” (78). Yet the son—perhaps because of his infantile consciousness—remains unidentifiable, as far as spirituality is concerned, and his reverence for the sun remains unascertained. Nevertheless, the researchers base their argument on a passage that is removed from the final version of the novel. It states a conversation between Ely and the father in which the latter admits “that on those days when there is just the faintest shadow at noon of the trees on the road then he [the boy] believes in a God of the sun”(Wittcliff Collection 91, 87, 4, p. 164-65). Such a sun, however, is often described as lost, dull and unseen which is “not much use” (ibid). In the published version, the boy asks his father about the possibility of “fly[ing] up high enough to see the sun?” if one were a crow (167).

¹ It has to be remembered that both the narrator and the man are ambivalent in their spiritual beliefs rather than solely Gnostics. As previously discussed, the narrative style is often biblical while the man frequently alludes to Christian notions such as salvation, anointment and Christ.

Such a question, in fact, confirms his father's assertion that though he does not know what the child believes in, he is well aware of the difference between them. The boy is simply a reflection and embodiment of his world. The father describes his "candlecolored skin" as "translucent" while "his great staring eyes" give him "the look of an alien" (138). This hints at the boy's alien nature which explains his search for hope and meaning in the sun because it is the only force which may bring any of the two. It is a "borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it" (138). These notions strongly support a gnostic reading of *The Road* as a mystic or a heretical text which contradicts the previously evoked Christian doctrines. Hence, belief in McCarthy's novel is sustained through different perspectives (the narrator, the father and the boy) and is divided into different directions (theistic and deistic) and levels (religious and mystical). As such, the representation of spirituality remains largely ambivalent.

3.2. Belief Negated

The world of *The Road* may easily fit a gnostic framework, because of its focus on cosmic metaphysics, but so it could befit a framework of absurdity, hollowness and nothingness. On the one hand, the narrative pays an overriding attention to the physical world while it neglects human suffering. Such a world demonstrates the senselessness of existence. On the other hand, though belief is central in the narrative, it appears in many instances to be an indefinable or unattainable object. Accordingly, the forthcoming readings—in an outright contradiction to the previously discussed readings—focus on the narrative's turn towards agnosticism and atheism as spiritual alternatives.

One night, the man gets up in "that cold autistic dark", he holds out his arms "for balance", "[To] seek out the upright... Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must" (14). The man's attitude in such darkness, as described in this way, may be read in gnostic terms as it suggests a conscious harmony with the universe; however, it aptly reveals a search for uprightness and balance in a world that is

reigned by desolation and hazard. In fact, once again the disparity between the man's outer actions and interior thoughts reveals an ongoing struggle. As previously discussed, the father places all his hope and affection on his son to the extent that he regards him as a Christ figure. Although this may suggest a scavenging of Christianity and its doctrines, the man debunks and refutes many of those notions inside of himself. The inward spiritual conflict becomes apparent in moments of heightened tension. For instance, when in utmost fear, he calls "Oh Christ... Oh Christ" or "Oh my God ... Oh my God" (116). However, he does not seem to know how—beyond a divine fatherly mission—can he sustain any religious belief in a totally godless country. One of the most significant instances where the man's agonizing spiritual crisis comes into focus is the moment when he crouches, kneels in the ashes coughing blood. "He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God" (10). The succession of those questions unveils his deep awareness of his inability to know what deity he is praying to/cursing. Such a realization pulls the man into a spiritual labyrinth. He is totally undecided: he does not know whether to curse or pray; he does not know whether to call for help or mourn his doom. So, despite his search for balance and meaning, the man finds no way—neither (spiritual) recollections of old days, old books and old forms, nor (spiritual) inventions in the new world—through which any soulful belief can be maintained. What remains of old belief, apparently, is only its lingering scent.¹

"The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone" (28). So, symbols, rituals, meanings are all

¹ In a slightly humorous analogy, the man thinks of "a lingering odor of cows" and thinks that "there could be a cow somewhere being fed and cared for" but then realizes "Fed what? Saved for what?" (127). Similarly, even if the old beliefs still exist—or did exist once—what, in the new world, feeds them? What sustains them? Who even cares about them? And why would anyone care about such a—useless—thing as faith? Such doubts are symptoms of the man's agnosticism.

irrevocably gone not because they cannot be retrieved but because they were no more than man-made illusions. The world of *The Road* is, therefore, dominated by creedless cannibals whose work is soon to exterminate the few retaining any creed. Those caught in the middle, such as the man, can hardly survive—physically and spiritually—in such a world. Others, such as the mother or the elderly man, who are creedless but not bad, choose another track. Thus, atheism, and its extreme twin nihilism, present an existing alternative. In her opposition to the father, the woman assures him that no matter how far he is willing to go in order to protect his family that will not amount to anything and it will make no difference at all (57). She considers the man’s notions—or fantasies—about survival “meaningless”, and his silence in response to her “faithless” arguments, an assertion that there is “no argument” against her view (59). Neither reason, nor preaching nor appeal to motherly emotions can efface the disempowering reality outside: the bands of cannibals roaming the wasteland and outnumbering whoever is still “vegetarian” will quickly become a self-consuming community. The mother concludes her final statement, and existence, saying “My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none. ... As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (59). Eternal nothingness, darkness, not-being, not-seeing, un-existing altogether is her choice. She is coldly gone, and “the coldness of it was her final gift” (60). So, her perspective is, *de facto*, the very embodiment of nihilistic thought which resorts to a violent conclusion. Through suicide, she incarnates, by definition, nihilism as a “despair about ultimate meaning along with a concomitant legitimation of violence in a universe where everything else is equally aleatory and self-assertive” (*Macmillan* 183).

The spiritual stance of Ely, whose oxymoronic statement “there is no God and we are his prophets” attracted a heap of critiques, is not as incomprehensible as his enigmatic declaration first suggests (181). Apart from the mother, this is the first adult with whom the man has any sort of conversation. Like the woman, he thinks that “in times like these the less said the better. If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we'd have

something to talk about. But we're not. So we dont" (182). It is not a time in which one can ask for luxuries, and luxuries for him include choice, belief and even knowledge; having any of these "wouldnt make any difference" (180). Therefore, their absence is no problem. With so much certitude, he asserts "there is no God" (180). Shortly after, he explains: "I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better ... " and "things will be better when everybody's gone" (183). In other words, the very state in which humanity—and even existence at large—has drifted is a proof on the absence or non-existence of any divine being, divine scheme or divine order. For Ely, it is not even an apocalypse; it is simply the extinction of species. As such, there is no sacred meaning to it.¹ Ely's words reinforce the mother's perspective. They both sustain a case against faith in any sort of transcendent meaning. They insist that human existence has become an impossibility on earth, and belief a mere futility so, nothingness is the ultimate solution.

In short, *The Road* presents to its reader a heterogeneous spiritual world. The narrator deploys all gnostic characteristics in describing the world of the novel while the son, himself subject to sacralizing notions, shows a faint belief in a transcendent cosmic order. The mother and Ely, however, choose the extreme end of the spectrum by debunking any belief in deity or divineness. The father, being caught up between such perspectives, simultaneously imbues such a world with a sense of faith that is derived from the biblical narrative of salvation and redemption but also casts doubt on it through his indecision and inability to settle on any definite answer. Thus, the text is fraught with theistic, biblical, gnostic, agnostic, atheistic and nihilistic notions which incessantly draw the reader to reflect on them.

¹ Allen Josephs interestingly contends that the name Ely alludes to "the city ...popularly believed to be built on Cromwell's Rock, on a meteorite that may have helped put the dinosaurs out of business" (135). This highlights Ely's view that the human race will simply disappear.

3.3. The Reader as a Spiritual Explorer

Because of its roots in religious belief, postapocalyptic fiction—even when based on mundane scientific speculation—can hardly dismiss all notions that are of a metaphysical or spiritual nature. As part of an old—no longer existing—order, such notions are generally re-evoked for the sake of social, moral or political criticism, so even their dismissal is a significant indication of a reconstructed religiosity, namely that of absence and negation. McCarthy's work, as previously seen, bears an unmistakable resemblance to biblical style; however, its address of spirituality as a subject matter is among *The Road's* most enigmatic aspects. The variety of interpretations triggered by the text includes the Christian readings of Marcel DeCoste and Matthew Potts; the less indoctrinated views of Manuel Broncano and Petra Mundik and the secular readings of Shelly Rambo and Vereen Bell. In fact, it is almost impossible to decide which of these—and many other—readings is the most accurate or the least valid because the text supports the all. From a reader-response point of view, however, right or wrong reading is unimportant; that is why, what interests us in the present research is more the dynamics of transaction between text and reader rather than anything else. Accordingly, in what follows we attempt to understand the reader's position in *The Road* as far as spirituality is concerned. Emphasis is laid on the text's negation of narrative features such a unity and resolution in order to heighten the reader's involvement and contribution.

As is the case with all literature, the reader expects to find unity and coherence in the text. Iser, in this regard, notes that a novel which “opposes the desire for consistency” annoys the reader because he expects the narrative world to be “cleared of contradictions” (*Prospecting* 27). A good case in point is *The Road* in which the narrator speaks like a biblical storyteller; the story is about a gnostic post-apocalypse; the mother is a nihilist; Ely is a prophetic atheist, and the father is agnostic and yet for him his son is as sacred as the anointed Christ. Therefore, the spiritual ambivalence of *The Road* is a good enough reason to provoke confusion and hesitation in the reader. The semantic insecurity, if we might say so, replaces the habitual feeling of assuredness and control which the

reader often experiences when dealing with less equivocal texts. In response to such textual challenge, the reader either gives up to irritation and rejects the text or resists through an interpretive violation which, to use Wayne Booth's word, is an act of "overstanding" (*Critical Understanding* 236). In other words, the reader may attempt to resolve that confusion of perspectives by resorting to a reading which he singularly imposes on the text. Hence, this lack of unity, which is an absent though expected feature, achieves a minus function in the overall interplay between text and reader. It, first, increases the reader's involvement. Because of its inconsistency and chaotic shift between religious language and irreligious content, for instance, the text forces the reader to exert more focused efforts in order to understand the narrative. A superficial or uninterested reading may lead to further complications (because of missing or misunderstood points) so the reader attempts to avoid any distraction by focusing his entire attention on the text. Second, and more importantly, the search for coherent meaning in an indeterminate text confronts the reader times and again with disappointment since the narrative defies such a function. Disappointment, in turn, becomes a source of motivation to reflect and ponder about the nature of the text and its demands. For instance, noticing that all spiritual perspectives are equal; that is, none of them is more dominant or held privileged by the author, the reader is encouraged to adopt his own perspective and make his own conclusion. In a text where the author is present and dominant, perspectives are generally bent in order to reach a given end or serve a given (predefined) purpose, yet when the author deliberately withdraws himself from the text and remains aloof and uninvolved in the textual conflicts, this gives a larger freedom to the reader. The latter, without outer (authorial) imposition, turns towards himself for guidance. In doing so, he achieves independence and even individuation. In other words, the text allows each reader to project his own spiritual views on the novel; that is why readings are rarely identical. The diversity of interpretations which each critic, scholar, reviewer or reader offered is an ample proof of the independence each of them achieved.

Out of that independence and freedom of interpretation comes a richer and more profound reading experience. The gap in the text's semantic fabric, which is created by its spiritual ambivalence, not only pushes the reader to make connections between various perspectives but also calls him to transform his attitudes and evaluations of those perspectives. In other words, while an expectation-fulfilling text only affirms the reader prior notions and judgments, a text such as McCarthy's attempt to push the reader outside of his comfort zone by forcing him to re-think and re-assess his conceptions. Thus, when reading *The Road*, it is not enough that the reader recognizes spiritual beliefs as pro or against from his own. On the contrary, the novel is more impactful as it accompanies its reader in recognizing the revelations, the truths, potentials, vulnerabilities and ineptitudes of those spiritual views. That is to say, regardless of his own predisposition or personal beliefs, the reader is able to engage critically with the text. For instance, a religious person may find truth in the mother's nihilistic views whereas an atheist may sympathize with the father's devotion to his son. As such, *The Road* mobilizes the reader, cognitively and emotionally, to move above categorical response and contribute to a transformative experience.

The novel ends as enigmatically as it started. The narrator concludes speaking about "... a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (307). Mystery, hence, is the beginning and end of *The Road*. The child survives and keeps his promise of talking to his father though he says he cannot talk to god. Though the narrative confirms in all possible ways the sacred bond between father and son, it fails—or refuses—to confirm or negate belief. Regarding the ambivalence that is woven into *The Road*'s semantic fabric, the reader is moved—to borrow an expression from Wayne Booth—by a "hope for semantic resolution" (*Critical Understanding* 8). Yet, the text denies the reader such a fulfillment and defies his expectation of a closure. Open-endedness, generally, invites the reader to be more imaginative, and that is true in the case of McCarthy's text as well. For instance, the reader may feel free to imagine an alternative or a more extended conclusion where a decent human community is

restored or else the extinction of human species takes place sooner than expected. Nevertheless, the irresolution of spiritual indeterminacy indicates a central concern in the text for it highlights an attempt to leave for the reader a large-enough space for contribution. That is to say, if the text eventually establishes a well-defined resolution which determines which of the spiritual beliefs is more accurate or more suitable to sustain postapocalyptic survivors, then the diversity of perspectives would have been meaningless. Yet, the conclusion of the novel is in accordance with the development of the narrative. Moreover, finding an (definite) answer to previously raised questions could satisfy the reader's need for assertion and resolution, but it would deprive him of intellectual and spiritual independence. In other words, such a conclusion would indicate that the author distrusts or doubts the reader's ability to think and judge independently and so act (the author) as a custodian. That is not the case with *The Road* as is consistently and steadfastly respects the space allowed for the reader. As such, the novel carries different meanings to different readers, but those different meanings are not the text's or the author's making and the reader's mere reaping; instead, those meanings are the reader's own making.

In response to the text's overwhelming fusion of perspectives, the reader feels confused and undecided. The feeling of puzzlement may linger too long to be considered comfortable, yet such an indeterminacy also focuses the reader's efforts on retrospection. *The Road* succeeds in stimulating the reader in a way that invites more profound and durable response than generally received. In other words, by disappointing the reader's expectation of unity and resolution, the text brings the reader to a closer position which allows him to form conceptions and make judgments as freely and as equally as the writer himself. Therefore, what appears at the beginning to be a difficulty and a challenge to the reader turns out to be a response-inviting opportunity which enhances the reader's reasoning, search and activity. In order to increase the recipient's role, the author is absent and none of the characters is permitted to achieve dominance over the text. By such absence and limitation the reader carves his way through the narrative. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the reader, in his exploration of the

novel's spiritual landscape, is totally guideless; that is why, some readers—especially those who are unwilling to seek profundity at the expense of comfort— never reach as far as some others, some emerge of the textual maze and some never do, but eventually each reader/explorer retains different ideas and images about the same explored object. This is part of the appeal and uniqueness of the text.

4. Pragmatic Indeterminacy: A (Re)definition of Faith and Reading

As a continuation to the previous analyses of stylistic and semantic indeterminacies, this last section moves to another level, pragmatic indeterminacy, in an attempt to deepen our understanding of the text's central meaning and the reader's role in its construction. First, it begins with a re-exploration of the novel's main concerns, namely spirituality and morality, in order to comprehend *The Road*'s fundamental purpose behind the (indeterminate) conception of the two. Such a conception, of course, is realized through the reader's complementary participation. Second, attention is focused on the reader's role as conceptualized in McCarthy's text along with its redefinition of reading. In so doing, the aim is to highlight yet another aspect of the text-reader interaction as envisioned or regulated by the author's—pragmatic—choices.

4.1. Faith as Morality

In his discussion of novels with a high degree of indeterminacy, Iser contends that “the process of reading unfolds itself as a continual modification of all previous conceptions” (*Prospecting* 27). *The Road* largely fits such a description as it makes use of various levels of indeterminacy which in turn shape the reader's reception—and understanding—of its communicated message. Spirituality, as a central question in the text, is presented through a disparity between perspectives which at times seems to affirm the idea of belief and at other times negate it altogether. In order to surmount the challenge of those blanks and establish—temporarily—a harmonious understanding of the text, the reader may have to eliminate certain options or focus exclusively on others. Whatever meaning the reader settles on, it must be realized that such a meaning

is his own projection. As long as the text remains silent about such debatable issue, no reader stance can be considered correct/incorrect. Such a lack of consistency, and the disorienting effect it makes on the reader, however, is purposeful. Since the negation of expectations is—as previously seen—not merely random, it results in an internally self-contradicting framework which mobilizes the reader’s imagination and forces him to come to grips with his own thoughts and convictions. Moving a step further and deeper, the reader realizes that his task is not that of a detector who barely identifies perspectives, instead his reading—if it is fruitful at all—marks a change in his own perspective. Put differently, the text attempts to draw the reader to exert his full powers so as to reach a modified understanding that is un-identical to his previous conceptions. In order to achieve such a purpose, the text gradually unfolds through a process of connection, disconnection and reconnection. That is to say, the interplay between belief and unbelief continually stimulates the reader to perceive the narrative (and the world) from different angles until he eventually realizes that all of those perspectives are—*simultaneously*—validated and invalidated by the text. So, if he is to overcome such spiritual antagonisms, he needs to resort to his own ideas not as they existed prior to the act of reading but as they are (being) transformed through reading.

As the reader’s projections are transformed, so does the meaning of the text. Hence, one of *The Road*’s achieved purposes is the un- or re-definition of faith.¹ Notwithstanding his belief and unbelief, the father who embodies the text’s ambivalent spirituality, (struggles to) retain a faith in his son and a hope for his future. Such a faith is maintained through an ideal that bonds the two together and renders their journey sacred in their eyes. “Carrying the fire” becomes the very faith the two hold on to in that spiritually and morally bankrupt wasteland (87). It is as well the only faith that persists till the end of the novel. Bereaved and left alone, the boy has to navigate his own way and make his own choices. So, when he meets another man on the road who offers to adopt and help him, he

¹ To avoid a confusion of terms, the word “faith” is used here to designate belief that both encompasses and transcends spiritual or religious conviction.

immediately—and innocently—asks “are you one of the good guys?”. The guy finds such a question to be a weird one, so the boy attempts to explain his query more clearly by saying “are you carrying the fire?” (303). Here, the son’s thoughts are a reincarnation of the father’s teachings. Though he many times seems to doubt those moral teachings and heroic tales, he eventually finds no other compass to direct him in his journey but what he learnt from his father. The latter’s final directions are to keep going south, do everything the way it has been done before, search for the good guys but take no chances (297). That is why the only definition the boy can give to the man in order to decide whether he is a bad guy or not is the following:

Do you have any kids?
We do.
...
And you didnt eat them.
No.
You dont eat people.
No. We dont eat people.
And I can go with you?
Yes. You can.
Okay then (304)

This minimal definition of morality is believed by the son to be the sole distinction between goodness and vileness. Perhaps, it is not only his innocence or limited mental abilities—as a child—that engender such a simple conception, but also his acquaintance with the world as such. That is to say, the only world he knows is made up of snow and ash, white and black, so it is logical to put such a light dividing line between good and evil. After all, there as very little that distinguished one person from another: they are all poor, sick, lost. Hence regardless of their color, tongue, intellect or faith, humans are either on the right or on the wrong side; and that is all what one needs to know about them according to the boy.

In a world where everything is:

... shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality ... (93)

In a world such as this, the very last-standing definition of morality is simply not eating a brethren's flesh. As we see the son carrying his father's legacy of moral uprightness, we are ascertained that the faith which sustained the man—though on the verge of despair—all along is his hope for a moment such as this when a (sort of) human community is established and mutually-intelligible on human terms only. Thus, the ostensibly absent definition of faith is present, *via negativa*, through moral choice. While the text decisively avoids extolling a given spiritual stance at the expense of another, it centralizes attention on the moral side of belief in order to establish a definition of faith that allows—and invites—the reader to reflect on the present and future human condition. In other words, readers may have disparate beliefs as far as their religious and spiritual allegiances are concerned but those differences shrink down around a single parsible entity, that is, morality or immorality. Humans' conduct towards one another (and towards their world) is what determines their spiritual standing. Such a view accentuates the many readings of McCarthy's text which suggest that the novel is concerned with the endangered ecosystem, future generations, and present threats of war and mass-destructive technology. In this regard, Diane Luce's contention that the ideal reader of McCarthy's works is "McCarthy himself—or someone who shared his knowledge and reading" may be true if one thinks of reading as an experience which can—in any case—reach perfection (ix). Yet, reading is an act of communication whose success varies between people and moments; that is, it succeeds in multiple ways.¹ So, speaking of an ideal reader does little to improve our understanding of the text's immense potentials for varied interpretation. However, her conclusion that "reading what McCarthy has read" and experienced such as "philosophy, literature, film, local histories, and newspaper accounts ... helps to open the readers to his work by preparing us to understand what he understands and to see the world in the same contexts as he does" is quite right as far as contextualized and informed readings are concerned (ix). Indeed, external connections focalize the reader's interpretive

¹ Such a view is well illustrated in the second theoretical chapter which explains the arguments of theorists such as Rosenblatt, Iser and Jauss who advanced such a conception of reading.

efforts by directing him towards more harmonious reading.¹ On the other hand, an implied reading may focus on *The Road*'s internal connections as the text sets for the reader a web of gaps to be filled less restrictively and more abundantly than allowed by merely looking at context. Though such a view may not draw a tightly-fitting costume for a reader, it certainly points at his most remarkable feature. *The Road*'s implied reader is a universal non-sectarian reader who is sufficiently concerned with the 'state of the human' to deal with such deeply unsettling queries and lead them out of the realm of fiction to the realms of consciousness. Thus, the text achieves a proximity to a reader that guarantees, first, his involvement and increasing participation in the making of meaning and, second, transforms his understanding of matters such as faith and morality.

4.2. Reading as a Filial Self-fulfillment

Books and stories are frequently evoked in *The Road*. The narrator rarely misses alluding to the act of reading though it no longer makes sense in that decadent world. There are numerous examples that show a mixture of nostalgic and intrepid feelings about literature. For instance, Ely, the old blind man, is likened to "some storybook peddler from an antique time" (185). The father feels "rage at the lies arranged" in soggy "blackened books lay[ing] in pools of water" amid "the charred ruins of a library" (199). However, he assures his son, who distrusts those "happy stories" especially when "real life is pretty bad", that their story is a "pretty good story. It counts for something" (287-88). There is a tinge of self-reflexiveness in *The Road* but it comes quite naturally both as a reflection of its content and as a reflection of its literary context. In fact, such evocations raise "suspicion" that the novel is the father's written, rather than read, story to his boy. The father's relationship with his son and with books suggests another possible identity or position for the man other than being the protagonist. To Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy confides that what inspired him to write the book was a thought he had looking out of El Paso hotel window and thinking of his little sleeping son and the city's future. The novel is dedicated to

¹ This explains the recurrence of certain interpretations among critics and reviewers because they link the text to the same external data.

his son John Francis McCarthy whom he calls, in a later interview with John Jurgensen, “the co-author of the book”. He also explains that a good deal of the dialogue between the man and the boy is “verbatim conversations [his] son John and [him] had”. In addition, the man’s spiritual ambivalence reflects McCarthy’s personal attitude as he once said “sometimes it’s good to pray. I don’t think you have to have a clear idea of who or what God is to pray. You could even be quite doubtful about the whole business”. So, arguably, the fictional father can represent McCarthy’s stance in the text. By extension, *The Road* as a text and as a book tells us the story of an old man who is deeply wretched with the miseries of the world and the fearful future in which his coming-late son will live; a man who is torn between the fakeries of language and the lies of literature, yet he believes in their ability to reconstruct a world from ruins and “enkindle in the child’s heart what was already ashes in his own” (163). In such a case, it is not far-fetched to consider the father in *The Road* as McCarthy’s second self or simply the implied author while the son, by the same token, could be considered the implied reader.

To many, “the mystery that lingers over much of the novel (where? when? to what end?) here culminates in the largest enigma of all, of who is telling the story” (Mitchell 219). Then, if we assume by implication that the father occupies such a position, we are led to another question: “to whom is the story being told?” Such a question is indeed disturbing as it involves some sort of categorization. Is it told to the son in the novel, to McCarthy’s son or to a universal son? These are three categories of readers which reader-response theories help us identify; they are a fictitious, intended and implied reader respectively. The latter is what concerns us in the present research. The image of such a reader is *partially* drawn in the likeness of the fictitious one. Put differently, the role that is attributed to the novel’s reader is similar to that of the son in the narrative. Such a position becomes most apparent by the end of the text. The boy refuses both to let go of his father or carry the journey on his own, the following exchange goes on between the two:

You cant. You have to carry the fire.
I dont know how to.
Yes you do.
Is it real? The fire?
Yes it is.
Where is it? I dont know where it is.
Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it(298)

The little boy is doubtful about his capacities to achieve the goal. He refuses to act separately from his father. So, for him his journey has come to an end because the father's life has ended. The father insists to push him forward to keep carrying the fire. By analogy, the reader is asked by the author to carry on the fire of meaning. Such a meaning is found inside. As the father cedes the mission to his son so does the writer cede authority to the reader. Thus, both the son and the reader are asked to bear the weight of a legacy and ensure its endurance. Independence and individuation has been nurtured into the son's soul all along the journey. His oppositions, his disagreements and his renewed understanding of the father's perspective bring the son to realize his own identity as "alien" and different but also as attached and connected to his father. In parallel, the reader is faced with reductions, omissions and negations which frustrate him and provoke his opposition to the meaning suggested by the text. Yet, in doing so, the narrative secures his individual construction of a meaning which turns to be more effective and memorable. Accordingly, the gist of the text is handed to the reader in the same way the torch of fire is handed to the son. Reading, hence, is redefined by *The Road* as an independent creative act which requires perhaps a minimum of direction but never custodianship or control from the author. As such, reading is a self-changing aesthetic experience and the reader is someone who is willing to achieve self-fulfillment through reading.

Conclusion

The Road stands in a unique position among its author's corpus; in both form and content it simultaneously marks a continuation to and departure from his previous works. In many ways, it closes the narrative circle—which began from a gothic Appalachia—by going back to a southern post-apocalypse. Thematically, it depicts a logical conclusion to the appalling violence depicted in his western novels. Aesthetically, it ventures into new generic and stylistic realms as it figures in a midway position between Hemingwayian-Beckettian simplicity and Joycean-Faulknerian complexity. Nevertheless, the text stirs feelings of confusion, irritation and puzzlement in its readers through a set of gaps and negations which hinder connection and impede understanding. Through such negative responses the text stimulates the fulfillments of positive effects. Its tendency towards reduction, indeterminacy and ambivalence mobilizes the reader to play a larger role in the construction of the novel's meanings. Contrary to the common inclinations to orient the reader—implicitly or explicitly—in his formulation of judgments and responses regarding the narrative, the characters, the issues explored or the question raised, McCarthy's text 'deprives' its reader of such a 'privilege' and turns down their expectations. So, the novel in a way defies passive and or inanimate readings. Its heightened degree of indeterminacy, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic, however, suggests that the reader is invited to adopt an equally authoritative standpoint. In other words, it is only through the writer's withdrawal from the text, as seen through minimalism and ambivalence, that the reader can find a space in which he can contribute his own projections on the meaning and the aesthetic shape of the literary work. That is why the reader of *The Road* is, among other things, a listener, a chorister, a moral and spiritual explorer who is a fully independent and distinguished individual.

Chapter Three

The Reader's Roles in an Existential Dramatic Novel: *The Sunset Limited*

This penultimate chapter is devoted to McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*. Its main objective is to explore the work's thematic and formal aspects as they impact on the reader's response. It begins with a discussion of the novel's rather ambiguous subtitle "*a novel in dramatic form*". The generic significance of such a designation is subject to study since such a dramatic-narrative mould shapes not only the writer's construction of meaning but also the reader's experience. After that, the discussion moves to the level of content. In other words, the second section deals with the text's divided structure between two characters.. The exchange between Black and White invokes underlying clashes and, as the novel proceeds, the divide between the two widens to reach other areas of opposition. In addition to the blanks between perspectives, the third section explores another form of indeterminacy by focusing on the narrative's negation of some features in order to understand the tasks that are attributed to the reader in McCarthy's text. Next, another level of indeterminacy is examined through the discussion of religious and philosophical questions which dominate—most clearly—by the end of *The Sunset Limited*. The last section eventually makes different ends meet as it examines the text's pragmatic indeterminacy and its implication on the overall role of the reader. In short, the present chapter attempts to explain a process of reading which focuses on indeterminacies and their due impact on the reader's experience of—and role in—the work.

1. Generic Indeterminacy: A Novel in Dramatic Form

The Sunset Limited centers on two characters whose unfortunate encounter leads to one of the most stirring and provocative debates in contemporary literature. They are named "simply" as Black and White. The two sit in a minimally-furnished kitchen in a New York tenement. White is a lean and extremely despairing university professor who attempts to commit suicide by throwing himself beneath the Sunset Limited crushing wheels, whereas Black is a reformed ex-convict who rescues him. Between them goes on an earnest discussion. Both are very thoughtful, intelligent and endowed with a peculiar sense of humor, yet their debate reveals tragedies and underway clashes. The reader of such a text is at times discouraged by the strangely motionless and

static ‘plot’. Yet, this is but one of the elements that affect the reading experience; the textual structure of *The Sunset Limited* is another. Therefore, the present section will offer a close-up look at the work’s genre, form and structure from a reader-oriented viewpoint. It begins with a brief overview of the text’s reception, as a play, a novel and a film, in order to pave the way for the study of its narrative and dramatic features and their implications on the reader’s generic role.

1.1. Reception: from Theatre Stage to Library Bookshelf

The Sunset Limited is a telefilm, a theatrical piece and it could be read as a novel. The play premiered in 2006 in the Steppenwolf Theatre (Chicago); later that year, the text was made available to readers by Vintage Books publishing house. In 2011, Tommy Lee Jones adapted the script for a television film co-starred with Samuel L. Jackson. How each version is different from the other, or which is the best, is a matter of personal taste. Whatsoever, its existence in three generic forms surely highlights the flexible—perhaps fluid—quality of McCarthy’s text.

As a play, *The Sunset Limited* is, in the words of theatre writer Jason Zinoman, “a debate of souls”. It is a profound representation of a soulful dispute, between Black and White, which illustrates the disparity between their worldviews. Chris Jones’s review for the Chicago Tribune is favorable. However, he states that it is “brilliant, but hardly a play”. His remark is very insightful given the unconventional nature of McCarthy’s text. To begin with, the entire play is an extended one act that takes place between two characters in a single setting with no changes on stage or scene. After half the time has elapsed, many observers comment that the discussion becomes tiring, repetitive and slightly artificial. There is no action or resolution to stir the audience’s attention away from the metaphysical debate, so it could be a discussion you listen to on the radio and that would not change much about its essence. It *de facto* is a play that lacks sophistication as far as dramatic features are concerned. Nevertheless, because dialogue is its most prominent component, it could be performed as a theatrical piece (with its own risks). While theatre critics such as Tom Williams

and Mary Barnidge praise actors Austin Pendleton and Freeman Coffey and director Sheldon Patinkin for their dazzling work describing it as “mind expanding theatre at its best”, reviewer Phil Kloer, commenting on the Theatrical Outfit’s realization of the play, claims it to be a “pretentious twaddle” for which neither the actors nor the director should be blamed. “The fault is entirely with the play” he says, “if it didn’t have McCarthy’s name attached ... it’s hard to imagine it being staged based on what’s on the page”. This leads us back to reassert the fact that the text is really open for a multitude of interpretations.

Similarly, the book version received an interesting variety of reviews. They in fact seem closer to understanding the nature of the text than those which deal with the dramatic performance only. For instance, Daniel Wood rightly notes that McCarthy’s addition of the phrase “*A Novel in Dramatic Form*”, in an attempt to distinguish it from the play script, is just a way to assert its “novelistic capacity for prosaic meditation”. However, he adds, “the formal ambiguities promised in its subtitle” remain unfulfilled as the prosaic text is a mere verbatim of the dramatic script that is “printed, bound, and dispatched to a less obscure section of the bookstore than the one it would land in if it announced itself as what it actually is”. The question is “what is it actually?” Why and how could it be seen as a novel when it is in a dramatic form? No satisfactory answer has been given so far, but it will be returned to in a while.

In the Home Box Office (HBO) commentary on *The Sunset Limited*, Jones—directing and co-starring as White—explains that the movie is different from the staged play in that it is similar to “commedia dell’arte, a narrative that is performed”. This draws attention to its narrative potential which guaranteed that it could be filmed successfully though—generally—the chances of a two-character-one-setting play being successful are very low. In his review of the film, Bill Brownstein emphasizes the dual nature of the work which shows through the success of the adaptation. He says, “theatre folk may feel that it plays more like a film, and film folk may feel it plays more like theatre. Both factions are right: *The Sunset Limited* plays like filmed theatre”. Again, the work is

described by a cluster of terms that combines two genres: drama with novel and film with theatre.

These comments, coming from different experts who occupy different standpoints, are heterogeneous in nature by they exemplify the work's hybrid identity. It seems McCarthy has created a literary text, which in all its forms and versions, wittingly draws attention to its own (undecided) nature without deliberate pronouncement i.e. without being—necessarily—a metafiction. More importantly, this diversity of opinions highlights the need to probe further into the nature of the text and its structure.

1.2. *The Sunset Limited* as a Dialogic Text

In order to examine *The Sunset Limited* and determine—for the purpose of the present research—its literary affiliation, reference is made to Mikhail Bakhtin's critical work on genres. Bakhtin's genre theory considers the novel to be, not only the newest and most adaptable literary form but also, less static and fixed than the rest. For him, the novel as a genre is “yet uncompleted” and so it “continues to develop” in ways that could be historically observed “before our very eyes” (*Dialogic*). Other genres, however, in their proto and skeleton-hard state, are “more or less fixed pre-existing forms into which one may then pour artistic experience” (*Dialogic* 19). Bakhtin's study of the novel, as compared and contrasted to the epic, is well known; what is less known, however, is his reference to drama as another starting point for the discussion of the novel's generic features. In the following pages, McCarthy's text will be subjected to Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, in an attempt to draw a distinction between the work's main dramatic and novelistic features.

The novel, according to Bakhtin, encompasses all other—older—genres. For instance, its focus on a central figure (the protagonist) as the subject of attention, evolution and rivalry is akin to the epic's centralization of a heroic figure as the driving force that stirs and sustains the extended narrative. The novel's multidimensional structure allows it to include different forms, styles and discourses without doing harm to its overall integrity and consistence. For example, the epistolary novel is made up of another form which is the letter; the

travel novel may include the memoir, and some parts of the autobiographical or historical novel resemble essay-writing. In this sense, Bakhtin imagines the novel—which is an “extra-generic” or “inter-generic” “unified whole”—as being immensely “multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking, reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch” (*Dialogism* 35). As such, its overshadowing of other genres is unsurprising. Its flexible nature and adaptation to changing times and places makes it the fittest genre which—though generically derived from the others’ cannon—influences literary productions the most. “In an era when the novel reigns supreme, almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent ‘novelized’” (*Dialogism* 19). Drama, Bakhtin illustrates, is one of those novelized genres; he names Ibsen, Hauptmann, and the whole of Naturalist drama as examples. The case nonetheless is intricate as the relationship between the novel and the play cannot be reduced to simple ‘novelization’ or ‘dramatization’. In fact, the relationship has grown more intricate and also tighter over time.

Dialogism, it appears, is simultaneously a point of commonality and difference between the two. In *Bakhtin and Theatre*, Dick McCaw explores the theorist’s stance regarding both genres, particularly his critical views on novelistic and dramatic dialogue. From a Bakhtinian perspective, a dialogic text denotes a polyphony of voices among which is the author’s. In other words, the author’s position or worldview is not the sole and supreme voice in the text; there are other voices from other languages, literatures and genres. Drama, McCaw clarifies, “cannot be polyphonic since its dialogue –like dialectics – resolves into one world-view, one set of values” (41). Because of such ideological closure and tendency towards resolution, drama can be considered a monological genre. Dialogue in the novel, however, is unfinished; it—the novel—can support an unimaginable variety of voices all of which are not necessarily unified with or identical to the author’s or any other authority (generic or canonical). In such a sense, drama is a self-contained genre whereas the novel is an open form that is always in dialogue internally and externally. This image could be pictured in the

following analogy: “the difference is between the single and closed dialogue of drama and the plural and open dialogism of the novel: one could compare it to the single line of a melody and the chordal layering of harmony” (McCaw 46). It must be noted, though, that Bakhtin’s critical views are valid as far as the prototype of the genre is concerned. Varieties exist; exceptions exist, and times change. The modern novel and the modern theatre prove the marginal error of such generalizations.

Modern drama and the modern novel continue to influence each other. With the growing urbanism, social unrest, class upheavals, and the increasingly mediatized and politicized societies, literature—dramatic and novelistic—closed the gap even between fiction and non-fiction as more space was allowed to ideas and ideologies than ever before. Thus, the role of art in general in modernity is different from its classically-prescribed role as a form of escapism, entertainment or intellectual luxury. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel and the play were seen as mediums for discussion, struggle, revolution and change. That is why the novel could circulate ideas more easily and hence reasserted its hegemony as a literary genre. In *Stage Fright*, Martin Puchner explains how such gradual movement toward reading has affected drama. He says, “in modernism theatricality becomes a term and value that occupies a central and often antagonistic role with respect to the dramatic text” (83). In other words, drama is not necessarily a performed art that is intended for theatre stage; it is instead a written form that could be read and appreciated as such. This anti-theatricality, also called closet drama, allowed room for more narrative features to be incorporated within the dramatic text. Consequently, stage directions were “literalized”, that is to say, considered part of the literary text rather than paratextual intrusions. Puchner aptly indicates that it took a great novelist such as James Joyce to highlight such a shift (through the novel form).¹ What was initiated by Joyce was daringly continued by Beckett. Extreme and brave in his

¹ The fifteenth chapter of *Ulysses*, ‘Circe’, is written in dramatic form with the narrator’s voice occupying the stage directions.

choices and convictions as he usually is, Beckett left a touch in modern drama that is comparable to none. His acts without words, also called pantomimes, consist entirely of gestures that are meticulously controlled through stage directions. Such a technique not only destabilizes the position of the actor on stage but also highlights the diegetic function of directions. Beckett's drama establishes a new medium of communication and a new circuit of dialogue—interestingly wordless—in the text. Hitherto, the play script was predominantly manipulated by the stage directors and actors, yet, by disturbing the theatricality of the text (through radio plays for instance), communication moved to include the reader as well as the viewer. The Irish playwright was apparently thinking “as much about the reader of his stage directions as about the viewer of their enactment, that he was concerned not only with isolating single gestures and objects but also with the language of the stage direction” (Puchner 164). Such experiments with the dramatic text endeavor to refocus attention away from the theatrical, namely the actor and the stage, towards the anti-theatrical, namely the text and its reader. It is remarkable that Beckett's strategy in writing drama consisted—most of the time—in experimenting with the minimum. Acts without gestures, acts without words and acts with almost no stage directions were part of his redefinition of drama and literature in general.

McCarthy seems influenced by such late modernism. Before this, he forayed into drama twice: *The Stonemason* (1995) and *The Gardener's Son* (1996). So, his third attempt is presumably more mature. Surprisingly, none of his other ‘dramatic’ works is as provocative or confusing as *The Sunset Limited*. Stacey Peebles, in his book *Cormac McCarthy and Performance*, argues that McCarthy considered *The Sunset Limited* to be “A Play in One Act” which was then crossed out before publication and substituted with “the odd equivocation ‘A Novel in Dramatic Form’”. He assumes such a qualification came from the publisher—for commercial and visibility reasons—because it is not McCarthy's handwriting (84). However, he also admits that the early drafts of the text indicate that it was intended as a novel. Dissimilarly, the present research regards *The Sunset Limited* as a novel for a number of considerations. First, stage

directions are, as previously noted, part of the text's narrative structure instead of being—as traditionally believed—theatrical elements. Therefore, McCarthy's brief and minimal use of such statements (in italics) does not function as a mere direction to the performers but also as an exposition of setting and action. This aims at helping the reader imagine the performance while reading. Hence, they serve a dual purpose, that is, they are both a dramatic and a narrative feature. As such, they cannot amply define the text as either a play or a novel. Second, what can be considered as the major distinctive feature is dialogue because it occupies the greater and most essential part of the text. The conversation between Black and White ends when the door is unlocked for the latter to leave towards an unspecified direction with unspecified intentions. Yet, the intellectual, ontological and metaphysical dialogue which is provoked by their conversation remains unfinished and continues in the reader's or viewer's mind. Such open-endedness and even ambiguity, Zinoman notes, may frustrate the audience but is part of the power and mysteriousness of McCarthy's vision which allows for "a multitude of interpretations". In other words, the irresolution at the end means that the work brings to each mind a different set of patterns—theological, historical, and personal—that renders the communicated message more polyphonic and varied. The text remains open to interpretation as it concludes with no unified worldview. Such dialogism, Bakhtin argues, is the necessary minimum of literature because it is the essence of existence as whole (*Dostoevsky* 40). So, in this sense, McCarthy's text meets the necessary and most fundamental criterion which Bakhtin sets for the novel. Ostensibly, *The Sunset Limited* can be seen as a play, and it actually is adaptable for theatrical performance, but this is achieved only because it belongs to a genre that is, by definition, multi-generic. Recourse to the text's basic structure; that is, dialogism, eliminates confusion about its nature as a novel.

In brief, McCarthy's insistence on minimizing all sorts of authorial involvement, in the form of narration, description and judgment indicates his will to efface all traces of monologic dominance from the text. The text begins as a dialogic literary piece and ends up as such. Because the writer reduces those

features which are generally associated with narrative, the result is a play-like novel. So, *The Sunset Limited* appears on the surface to be anything but a novel though it possesses one of the most essential attributes of the genre, that is dialogism. However, given the genre's flexible nature, "it is not a quibble to say that the novel is not a narrative form with dramatic moments, but a dramatic form within a narrative framework" (Dawson 80). Thus, *The Sunset Limited* can be regarded as a narrative text, that is certainly unique and unusual, but that can be affiliated with the endlessly evolving novelistic tradition. Nevertheless, what is more impressive than the text itself is its success in making us—readers, viewers, critics—pose the question "what is this literary work?" because in that way it draws us closer to its field of inquiry.

1.3. The Reader as a Viewer

Again, as previously noted, modernist experiments in drama resulted in unusual plays that succeeded in captivating the once-lost attention of the audience. Similar intentions were attempted by Jerzy Grotowski who formulated the idea of "poor theatre". Through concrete changes on stage, he hoped to increase the audience's participation in the play. He explains his purpose as creating a space for the play to be staged by actors whose "performance must be motivated by an impulse to communicate with something, some witness, outside the self, otherwise the work degenerates into self-indulgence" (339). This emphasis on the inclusion of the audience in the dramatic oeuvre explains some of the various types of drama that appeared with modernism. In a way, drama burrowed some of the features of the novel, precisely narrative, in order to achieve as influential a presence as that of the novel among its readers. Similarly, McCarthy, in *The Sunset Limited*, seems to attribute to the reader a dramatic function in order to lay more responsibility and individuality at the reader's hands.

Like Grotowski's, McCarthy's minimal, or poor, dramatic novel achieves closeness to its reader. In fact, two aspects of McCarthy's prose have always distinguished him from the rest of his contemporaries: fine narration and mastered dialogue. When writing *The Sunset Limited*, however, McCarthy seems

to abandon his skill of narration for the sake of dialogue. This shift of focus is remarkable to those who admire the Cormackian prose. For instance, the Welsh novelist, Niall Griffiths, observes that the author's "ear for nervous and energetic dialogue" is mostly overshadowed by the beauty of his narrative language. Hence, *The Sunset Limited*, as dialogue-driven work, reduces exposition, narration and description as in an attempt to highlight the potential of speech exchange and conversation in building a "story". In this sense, his novel—with its economized narration and absent narrative voice—can be read as a novel that is reduced to its minimum core, that is, a two-character dialogue. This sort of narrative minimalism cannot be considered without consequences. In fact, McCarthy's present authorial choices have a significant impact on the reader's reaction to the present text.

First, the generic indeterminacy of the text, which is initially introduced to the reader from the cover page, is a source of confusion. At the beginning, the reader is likely to start reading while simultaneously searching for elements of the novel since the dramatic form is already clear. Seeing his search to be fruitless, the reader begins to form more questions about the nature of the text. This may lead his thoughts away from the text, yet the dialogue is so engaging and heartfelt. It includes almost no unnecessary detail, so everything that is said by the characters is of utmost importance. In order to formulate meaning—that is mostly divided between two opposites—the reader is kept busy with questions about the content rather than the form. Because the reader is exhaustingly pushed to the edge of their intellectual and spiritual securities, the confusion that is caused by the text's form recedes momentarily to the background. Therefore, while stimulating the reader's curiosity about generic form, McCarthy's strategy refocuses the reader's attention and relocates his efforts through the selected content.

Second, such a strategy of omission and reduction is also effective in creating an unusual experience of reading. Usually, the viewer of a play is merely a spectator to a performance which is the visual concretization of the playwright's or director's imagination of the (written) play. With the 'rise' of

anti-theatricality, more emphasis was put on stage directions because they serve a narrative function, that is to say, they supply the reader with the necessary information to construct visual schemata. However, when McCarthy decided to publish the script, he made no changes whatsoever. The first implication of such a choice is that he regards (his) readers and viewers in the same light. So the text comes out as empty and minimal. After overcoming the difficulty that arises with the text's generic indeterminacy, as discussed above, the reader is stimulated by such emptiness. So, he attempts to fill in the blanks in order to form whole schemata. However his supplies (with information) are so reduced. This means that the reader is forced to activate his cognitive skills—visual, auditory and imaginative—to their fullest. In other words, the text demands from the reader a larger and more focused attention than is usually demanded from a reader of a narrative or dramatic text. Hence, he is treated in the text as if he were a viewer. The only difference, between him and the usual drama spectator, is that he is not a viewer of someone else's concretization but of his own ideation. *The Sunset Limited's* reader is a present narratee rather than an absent addressee to whom the story/dialogue is being reported.

Third, because of the dialogic nature of the text, the reader not only achieves closeness to the text but also establishes communication with the text. The minimal features—both narrative and dramatic—allow the reader the opportunity to exercise his individuality. That is to say, while theatrical performance implies that all viewers—more or less—watch the same play, the text—especially in its minimalist form—offers readers a larger space to occupy. So the reader can—speculatively—function as an actor or a director, i.e he not only perceives his role as watching but also may extend his speculation to include performance or direction. Moreover, the reader is not just passively receiving information; he is actively (re)formulating what he receives and hence (re)shapes the outcome of the text. In other words, McCarthy's reader is an active agent who affects the literary sum of the work as much as Grotowski's audience has a (physical) impact on his drama. This is achieved thanks to the multigeneric framework within which McCarthy situates his text, and here lies the abstract

potential of *The Sunset Limited*: it not only demonstrates the capacities of a text—generically stylistically—but also demonstrates the capacities of the reader for multitudes of roles. The latter will be discussed more thoroughly in the following sections.

2. The Reader as a Judge: Perspectives on Race, Social Class and Intellect

“So, what am I supposed to do with you, Professor?” (3). With this question Black opens—or rather re-starts—the conversation in *The Sunset Limited*. What happened between him and White prior to their sitting on the kitchen table is not known yet. The curtly introduction made by the writer scarcely prepares the reader to make any guess about the subject of their encounter and later discussion. Yet, McCarthy uses the allegorical “Black” and “White” to name his characters¹. Initially, this leads the reader to believe that these are not mere denotations but rather allegorical representations. This prepares the reader to see more of the tension between these two poles which are as distinct from each other as the colors black and white. The present section, hence, examines the textual opposition between Black’s and White’s perspective and its impact on the reader’s perspective. Such a polarization is represented in the form of a racial, social and intellectual disparity.

2.1. Black vs White: A Racial Dialogue

Why are they called Black and White? What do such pseudonyms stand for in terms of symbols, analogies and metaphors? What is their input on the meaning we make of the dialogue? And what are we—as readers—supposed to understand from such an authorial choice? These are some of the insistent questions which begin to arise as we read the novel. They most probably find no definite answers even by the end of reading. Yet, they definitely trigger the reader to read the lines and re-read between the lines in order to understand this polarizing dialogue which makes use of a well-known racial trope.

¹ In the italicized passages, he often refers to White as *the professor* while Black is thoroughly designated as *the black*.

Though it is unlikely that two persons may disagree on the colors black and white because simply black is black and white is white, it is very probable that these colors are regarded differently because people tend to associate different meanings to them. A number of stereotypes and prejudices have, therefore, been justifiably—or unjustifiably—linked to them and still continue to influence readings of texts and shape perceptions of literary discourses. For instance, Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom*, Twain’s *Jim* and Mitchell’s *Mammy* are—among others—black characters who enriched—and rendered eternal—a literature written by whites. But of course, universal literature—like light—is colorless. In *The Sunset Limited* is yet another curious example of such memorable character of color. He is “*a large black man*” who lives in a black ghetto in New York City (3) [italics original]. His small apartment, which is made up of a bedroom and a humble kitchen, is bizarrely locked with “*a collection of locks and bars*” (3) which does very little to keep intruders away. The man speaks in an impeccable black accent: a broken grammar and a twisted southern pronunciation. As the savior of the day and the owner of the (cheap) place, he addresses the professor in an energetic pastor’s manner that sounds much like T.D Jakes’. With their discussion proceeding longer, a few more details about their backgrounds are revealed. Black has a violent past; he was imprisoned for murder. Presently, he lives alone in a neighborhood with drug-addicts and burglars. His attempts to reform or save them from the abyss are all fruitless since he himself has repeatedly fallen prey to many of their attacks. Furthermore, his arguments with the professor initially show his determination and resolution but also reveal his mediocre education. He describes himself as “just a dumb country nigger from Louisiana” (75). He—initially—appears to be a typical African-American: violent, uneducated, naïve and chattery. White, on the other hand, is described as “*a middle-aged white man dressed in running pants and athletic shoes*” (3). A college professor, who has perhaps known nothing of ghettos’ life, appears all fatigued and worn-out as if he spent his entire life in misery. Though restless to leave the place and the conversation, he still manages to speak in a calm and sedate manner. His properly structured

statements reflect his higher education. He surely has grown up in a more prestigious and less troublesome environment being the son of a lawyer. Yet, his present state—his suicide attempt—indicates a hidden malaise of which he seems unwilling to speak. He seems unenthusiastic, aloof and reserved about his inner thoughts. Even his suicidal intentions are hard to shake off because they come from an educated and worldly-wise man who seeks peace by putting an end his life.

Despite White's repeated attempts to leave, Black strategically prevents him by serving him food, coffee and telling him a jailhouse story in order to divert his attention away from the idea of going back and re-attempting suicide. His insistence pushes White to question his motives: "why are you doing this?" "who appointed you my guardian angel?" (9). Indeed, Black thinks of himself as a guardian angel since he replies: "you *know* who appointed me. I didnt ask for you to leap into my arms down in the subway this morning" (10). This shows White that Black's insistence on helping others is not due to his fear of guilt or regret, but he wonders why such a man lives in that "moral leper colony"; he asks again: "why not go someplace where you might be able to do some good?" and argues that "even God gives up at some point. There's no ministry in hell" (76). Black has a different view of the matter. He sees that his presence there is needed though it might not have any mentionable results. He explains that "Ministry is for the livin. That's why you responsible for your brother. Once he's quit breathin you cant help him no more ... So you got to look after him now" (76). This philanthropic awareness is so impressive given Black's violent history. His firm belief in human brotherhood and devotion to the assistance of the needy is in fact not naïve or petty. His bizarrely locked door and his furniture-empty house are a proof that he is very aware of the evil that awaits him in such place. Besides, as someone who was in the penitentiary and perhaps seen the worst states of man, he is more likely to believe that these are men who cannot be saved or in the professor's words "unsalvageable". However, he believes a helping hand shall be stretched unconditionally and even when there are no prospects for hope or change because "Jesus is a part of this enterprise", he says

(77). These personality traits are starkly at odds with his initial appearance which suggests violence and unworldliness. Black proves to be deeply humane and determined to maintain his spiritual belief in universal brotherhood and indiscriminative fraternity.

Contrary to Black's benevolent stance towards his fellow humankind despite his being uneducated and unprivileged, White's attitudes towards people—and worse still even towards himself—reveal his deeply anti-social character. Though the reason behind his attempt of suicide remains as a big question, the symptoms of his dissatisfaction appear most clearly in his aversion towards human community. Those whom Black desires to help out of trouble, White calls “horrible people” who are “not worth saving” (76). Other people, such as colleagues and professors, he feels so different from and he even loathes them as—he thinks—they loathe him. His attempts to join therapy groups (for suicidal depression) all failed since he feels no kinship with any, including his parents. Black, seeing his errant and lonely state, suggests to him that “they could be out there. Maybe they's some other drugproof terminal commuters out there that could be your friends” (85). Yet, White finds that very unlikely to happen, saying “I'm not a member. I never wanted to be. I never was” (86). He does not want to be in any communion neither on earth nor anywhere else. As such, White appears to be a misanthropist loner who is so beyond recovery that he chooses the Sunset Limited as the final destination. When Black asks whether he tends to curse people who irritate him on the train or the streets, he answers in affirmative. Speaking in the language of mathematicians, Black concludes that the “forty thousand curses heaped on the heads of folks you dont even know” has something to do with the present situation (91). So, White has but to admit: “it's just symptomatic of the larger issues. I dont like people” (91). This particular aspect in White's character highlights his difference not only from Black who is affectionate and helpful but from the philanthropist white men who inhabit many literary texts. It is uncommon to find, in an allegorical text, a white who—instead of incarnating the ideals of enlightenment to the benighted—craves for isolation from humanity at large. This makes the professor appear as weak, depressed and

aggressive which does not fit his appellation as “White” the same way the designation “black” misfits Black.

It is unwise—and perhaps shallow—to think that McCarthy’s text can be read in the same way as other texts which make use of such symbols as ‘black’ and ‘white’. As previously discussed, Black who is culturally and educationally inferior to White shows more empathy and understanding of others despite his poverty and even low background. White, however, is vexed from human society and is unready to show sympathy even towards the weak and needy. As such, his position is degraded because of his rejection of “the white men’s” ideal benevolence, so to speak, which is often seen as a proof of racial, cultural and even religious superiority (and by extension a justification for imperial/dictatorial motives). This characterization reverses their conventional roles, and it shows that McCarthy’s use of the allegorical names intends not to offer a racial/racist discussion as many postcolonial and African-American texts do, but to draw attention to—and defy—these ‘conventional’ conceptions. Both characters, thus, have bright and dark sides, points of weakness and strength, and their association with preset stereotypes and prejudices is unmade. In this sense, *The Sunset Limited* itself is in a dialogue with other texts. By extension, the reader is drawn to contemplate—and focus on—Black and White’s *uncolored* dialogue instead of their colors. Just as they do not discuss race, discrimination or blame each other for any historical grudges, the reader is called to engage in a dialogue that is as deep as life itself and not merely skin-deep.

2.2. Black vs White: A Social Conflict

Works that deal with class conflict became a common phenomenon in literature since the nineteenth century. Tensions, for political or economic reasons, are treated in literary texts with varying extents of involvement and renunciation. Novelists such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Upton Sinclair, Ngugi wa Thiongo and many others depict in their literature the inherent antagonism between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, the colonizer and the colonized, the authority and the subordinate, the strong and the weak. However, most depictions focus on (predefined) elements of conflict; that

is, sides are already partaken. So, despite the fact that such depictions are certainly well-grounded, they offer the reader only a slight margin of interpretation or decision. On the contrary, McCarthy's dramatic novel, though it is in no way a social commentary, touches upon the issue of social gap in a subtle way that distinctly invites the reader to switch sides with "the other". Such a gap is seen not as a necessary source of conflict but rather as a constituent of misunderstanding.

When White meets Black, the starkest difference between them is their color; yet reading further, the reader notices other underlying differences which contribute in shaping their dialogue. One grew up comfortably in a well-to-do family and belongs to a circle of professionals and academics; the other spent his childhood and early adulthood in slums and now only interacts with "junkies and crack-heads". However, both seem to be deprived—financially, intellectually or emotionally—so they are, in a way or another, similarly miserable though on the surface they seem total opposites. Each one of them is aware of the other's situation though they cannot comprehend it. For example, Black wonders "how come you [professor] to get yourself in such a fix" while White asks him "why are you here? What do you get out of this? You seem like a smart man" (5; 75). These are valid questions. The reader as well feels the need to know about their past and how things piled up for them to reach their current state. However, no answers are given in the text. The deliberate "negligence" of such questions by the characters and by the author draws the reader to look beyond this surface of mutual unintelligibility.

In fact, the gap between them is so wide that the very occurrence of such a discussion is in itself surprising. Halfway though, the reader may begin to feel that the entire conversation is mismatched: these two cannot understand each other because there is a world of difference between them. Their experiences are not the same, their troubles are not the same and their attitudes are not the same either. So, it is puzzling for the reader to see that the discussion is meant to end in

an impasse¹. After all, one cannot help demanding what is the purpose of a discussion that neither reconciles, nor solves nor enlightens? Gradually, reading becomes a source of cognitive irritation to the reader. It is not the disparity or the gap between the two characters that is disturbing. Being unable to overcome such a gap or form a coherent connection between the two perspectives is disturbing because the impeded ideation, or the suspension of mental images, runs counter to the creative purpose of reading which continually seeks to construct coherent and complete ideas. However, when the reader becomes aware that the disparity between these perspectives is—purposefully—unbridgeable, his reading becomes more insightful. In other words, the reader is invited to adopt the same attitude of “negligence” by putting aside those social differences which hinder the discussion between Black and White, and concentrate instead on the nature of the dialogue itself. As hinted at before, both are miserable in their own ways though the text never clearly states or reveals the reasons for their misery. They, in fact, are companionless in the sense that they have no one with whom they can genuinely—and successfully—discuss. White rejects his academic peers whereas in Black’s entourage it is unlikely to find a compatible peer. Because both are—more or less—misfits in their respective groups, their exchange is stripped of all class-conscious notions. That is, if one of them pigeonholes the other in a restricted social category, this may put an end to the conversation before it begins because of the stereotypical load that often negatively affects cross-cultural interaction. Black is sincere in his attempt to understand White—and even help him—while the professor is respectful of Black’s efforts and is careful not to offend him. Hence, their dialogue is honest and unmarred with the habitual social barriers which may turn a simple talk into a confrontation.

Though their endeavors fail at the end, since neither of them is able to make the other comprehend his perspective, they both strive to create—temporary—moments of understanding. It is the act of communication and the sincere

¹ White uses the expression “need to go” or “have to go” more than fifteen times. Each time is an instance of the extreme difficulty of continuing the discussion.

aspiration to communicate per se which makes their exchange impressive and worthy of attention, regardless of the results. Black and White continue to talk though they are total strangers and belong to two different social spheres because they are free of prejudgments and are earnestly engaged in a jeopardizing debate. By the same token, the reader's communication with the text—regardless of the correctness or the meaningfulness of his connections—is the central focus of the work. More important than finding answers to the questions which form in the reader's mind, is the fact that he muses over them because thinking is the best indication of involvement and interest in an object. Gaps—social, intellectual, or even textual—hence, are not always elements to indicate disparity and disconnection but also opportunities for closeness and connection.

2.3. Black vs White: An Intellectual Crisis

Once the reader is familiar with the irreconcilability of Black's and White's perspectives in the text, further differences appear less discouraging (though equally challenging). The fact that the text still holds the reader's attention, despite the many gaps it laid in the way, is indicative of the reader's dire willingness to reach the conclusive stage of such a multilayered debate. The longer the debate lasts the sharper it draws these men's traits. As the racial and social differences recede to the background, the intellectual disparity between the two dominates the fore.

When asked "what is it you believe in?" White replies:

Lots of things. Cultural things, for instance. Books and music and art. Things like that ... Those are the kinds of things that have value to me. They're the foundations of civilization. Or they used to have value. I suppose they dont have so much anymore ... People stopped valuing them. I stopped valuing them. To a certain extent. I'm not sure I could tell you why. That world is largely gone. Soon it will be wholly gone ... The things that I loved were very frail. Very fragile. I didnt know that. I thought they were indestructible. They werent. (25)

This is very understandable. He is a humanities' professor (perhaps of German language or English literature), so his appreciation of arts and cultural things is paramount. Yet, his statements come as a shock. Black is surprised by such an explanation because those are not the usual reasons for suicide; drugs, violence,

loss, loneliness, betrayal, poverty and disorder are the usual inciters of suicide but never culture, music or arts! It is simultaneously startling and impressive that White's depression, loss of faith and refusal to be in the world any longer are "nothin personal" (26). Most probably, no harm was done to him—personally—but his aversion springs from his knowledge of the world and its course of history. He explains that "it is personal. That's what an education does. It makes the world personal" (26). As "a man of numbers" and as someone who spent years in prison and then turned to ministering the-sheep-gone-astray, Black finds no practical logic in the professor's suicidal scheme. He—almost rudely—sees this as a form of ignorance: "I was pretty dumb, but I wasn't dumb enough to believe that what had got me nowheres in forty years was all of a sudden goin to get me somewheres. I was dumb, but I wasn't that dumb" (107). Apparently, the discussion is moving towards the core of the question; that is, since White's motives are purely intellectual, the debate highlights the essential difference between Black and White: it is not a matter of race, or social status that complicates their dialogues but a matter of logic and way of thinking.

To refute White's arguments, one has to contradict the import of both the past and the present. Those are not mere personal misfortunes but rather world miseries, and it is hard to unsee them or disbelieve in their overwhelming impact. The professor seems to have spent a considerable time working those questions out; searching for answers that are not to be found anywhere. His logic in fact seems to combine the sensor with the intuitive. On the one hand, his views can easily be validated by history (wars, plagues, enmities and inequality among many other things); and on the other hand, his asceticism—his extreme reverence for culture, civilization, arts and deep grief for their loss—is a sign of an intuitive sense. That is why, it is befuddling to Black and he cannot find satisfactory arguments to prove him wrong. Nevertheless, White—though rational and backed with objectivism and historical accuracy—seems unwise in his intentions. Black, wonderingly asks: "what is the use of notions such as them if it wont keep you glued down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through at eighty mile a hour" (26). The professor can only reply by saying "I dont have an

answer to any of that either. Maybe it's not logical. I don't know. I don't care" (26). Black, then, jumps to the conclusion that it is the professor's education which is driving him to suicide. For him, White has "got more intelligent reasons. More elegant reasons" and "ain't even all that unhappy" (116-17). At the beginning, White finds this claim ridiculous and nonsensical, but—by the end—he partially recognizes some accuracy in it. He says "I gather it to be your belief that culture tends to contribute to human misery. That the more one knows the more unhappy one is likely to be" (110). Though he is not sure whether such a supposition is true or not, he knows that its origin is "in that book there [the Bible]. The Garden of Eden. Knowledge as destructive to the spirit. Destructive to goodness" (112). Black is quickly impressed by such resourcefulness, but White warns him saying "you'd better be careful. You see where it's gotten me" (112). The professor's insightfulness here proves that he is not "blind to the workings of his own psyche". On the contrary, what makes him so fastidious is, not some shortsightedness but, a belief in "the primacy of the intellect" (96) (this will be further discussed in the next section). So far, the reader can notice the very wide gap between the two: one is almost exclusively informed by religious notions and rational thought whereas the other is inspired by a philosophy of positivism and an aesthetic sense¹. No one of them is willing to relinquish his convictions; consequently, the debate—again—reaches an impasse. The reader is caught up in this intellectual exchange in which both speakers are potently persuasive but where their perspectives are unbridgeable. Agreeing with White's logic validates suicide, and agreeing with Black's logic turns a blind eye to the reality of the world.

This intellectual crisis, irresolvable as it remains, helps the reader to see hidden traits. Though their disagreement is not settled, Black and White reach a better understanding of each other. The reader, as well, is able to form a clearer

¹ In an interesting instance, White declares in German, "Ich kann nicht anders" (109). So, he cannot help thinking in that way, whereas Black asserts that he "ain't got no choice in the matter" (9) and that he cannot let White leave (126). For one it is the primacy of intellect that drives his action for the other it is the primacy of divine order that determines his actions.

image of both characters: an image that is less pre-judgmental and restrictive. White, for instance, who appears at the beginning as a snobbish anti-social person, is in fact very understanding and sympathetic with others' suffering. His introversion has nothing to do with discrimination or bigotry; he says "I view those other commuters as fellow occupants of the same abyssal pit in which I find myself. If they see it as something else I dont know how that makes me special" (115). Black's clever questions "force" White to actively respond though he seems reserved at the beginning. In other words, this uneducated man is intellectually more effective than White's elitist colleagues. Their comprehension of each other's perspective is clear when Black declares "the light is all around you, cept you dont see nothin but shadow. And the shadow is you. You the one makin it" (118) to which White replies "I dont have your faith" (118). The two are clearly able to accept each other and reach—not reconciliation—but a kind of intellectual "armistice" so to speak. The gap is not omitted at the beginning of the text—as way of countering certain widespread notions—and it is not ideally bridged by the end of the text. The gap between Black and White is still there; yet it is no longer a source of conflict (or irritation to the reader). Then, the symbolic "message" of the text—if there is one—is not some cliché or stereotypical representation of perspectives that aims at polarizing the reader's response either for or against one side; it is rather the emphasis on communication despite clashes, tensions and antagonisms. Thus, if the reader responds to the text's invitation actively, he will certainly dismiss that conventional drive to create—or even impose—coherence, unity and uniformity on the text. He may take sides according to his own disposition, but in such a case—that is, if he does not reach any understanding of other perspectives—this means that his reading added nothing to his experience which is, in other words, a failure of communication.

The present section has shown that the reading of *The Sunset Limited* is a process that centers on gaps and their significance. As suggested by their pseudonyms and antagonistic positions, Black and White represent two perspectives which can hardly be reconciled. On the surface, this invites a

polarizing response from the reader—based on identification or predisposition—yet such a way of reading does not surmount subsequent—social and intellectual—gaps. On the contrary, it creates more conflict and confusion. The maintenance of the dialogue, despite the many disparities and disconnections it evokes, is the core of the text as it calls the reader to overlook such differences. Such an idea is subtly implied through the process of reading, yet it is voiced as well in Black’s elaborate words. He says, as if recapitulating the essence of the text to those who may miss the point because they are too concerned with disconnections and abnormalities, that “the whole point of where this is goin ... is that they aint no jews. Aint no whites. Aint no niggers. People of color. Aint none of that. At the deep bottom of the mine where the gold is at there aint none of that. There’s just the pure ore” (95). Essentially, those racial, social and intellectual differences turn to be a mere pretext for disconnection and opposition for they substitute only superficial matters while deep down, there are plenty of opportunities for connection—as is shown by Black’s and White’s communication. The reader’s experience of such a text goes through different stages. It begins with an irritation that is caused by his failure to form a coherent image that facilitates his identification; then, it turns into a confusion between perspectives: sense or intuition, faith or reason, hope or depression, darkness or light. Eventually, as he manages to see past those gaps, reading slowly turns to an inward and outward communication that involves the text and the reader in a broader—more open—exchange(s). The next section will focus more on the structure of the narrative and its implication of the reader’s role.

3. Narrative Negations: Between Deception and Trust

Along with the many perspectival differences between Black and White, their dialogue inspires in the reader a number of questions that are answered differently in accordance with each reader’s individuality. So, as a whole, the text is perceived differently by different readers; however what is worth contemplating is that the text intentionally “surrenders” itself to an open interpretation. By negating some formal narrative features, *The Sunset Limited* creates a large-enough space for the reader to manifest his intellect and talent. As

discussed in a previous section, while emphasizing some dramatic features, the writer strips down some narrative traits to the minimum. For instance, almost no narrative voice can be detected in the text; that is why, *The Sunset Limited* could be read as a novel in which narration recedes for the sake of dialogue. Additionally, the open-endedness of the narrative increases the reader's participation by stimulating his imagination. Hence, this section will explore the reader's role as implied by such negations, namely narration and resolution, in order to demonstrate the ways in which the reader's active involvement is reinforced.

3.1. Narrative Voice Mute(d): The Reader as an Orchestrator

Holden's immature voice in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Jane's passionate storytelling in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Dr. Watson's keen recollections in Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, and the casual unnamed narrator's address of 'you' in McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* are, among other things, what make these narratives memorable to the reader. It is hard to imagine the stories told otherwise because the narrative voice—whether omniscient or not—is what defines the impact they leave on the reader. Empathy, rage, tearfulness, affection, despise or ridicule are responses excited by the narrator, but—one wonders—what sentiments or reactions are excited in the reader when the narrator is absent? Can we imagine a narrative without a narrator? Maybe not, but we can imagine a narrator whose omniscience is greatly limited/disabled. Such is the case with McCarthy's narrator in *The Sunset Limited*.

Statements—which serve as stage directions as well—such as “*the black takes up his pencil and licks it and falls to squinting at his pad, adding numbers laboriously, his tongue in the corner of his mouth, one hand on his head*” are kept to the minimum of reporting physical action rather than inner thought (15). They do not imply any significant authorial control or remarkable closeness to the characters; instead, they demonstrate distance and non-involvement. In fact, they could be dismissed altogether without making a notable impact on the main text. So, these authorial side-notes are marginal and constitute no narrative voice.

Their presence is not very important; yet their absence is. At the beginning of the dialogue, it is Black who seems to have the upper hand. His inquisitive “attacks” on White with questions, hypotheses and speculations go unanswered neither by his interlocutor nor by the narrator. Such a silence makes his stance and arguments appear to the reader as too strong to be defied. Black’s words win the reader’s empathy and admiration because he—contrary to White’s initial appearance as a misanthropic—portrays a keen devotion to be helpful, optimistic and sympathetic towards the other. He seems as self-effacing as any devoted Christian could be. As long as there is no direct answer coming from White or an indirect opposition coming from the narrator, Black’s argument—with its unpretentious and appealing humanitarian rhetoric—gives to the reader the impression that the text favors Black’s viewpoint. Robert Wyllie, for instance, sees that the dialogue between Black and White resembles a debate where Kierkegaard would “talk down” to Schopenhauer because Black seems to embody an existential Christianity which dominates over a Schopenhauerian thought that is embodied by White (168). Such a comparison, though valid only to a certain extent, demonstrates the influence of the narrator’s silence on the reader’s perception of the power-balance in the text.

In fact, the debate reaches a climax and the tension grows as they near the field of existential inquiry. White eventually relinquishes his reserve. Describing his current state, he says:

You give up the world line by line. Stoically. And then one day you realize that your courage is farcical. It doesn't mean anything. You've become an accomplice in your own annihilation and there is nothing you can do about it. Everything you do closes a door somewhere ahead of you. And finally there is only one door left (131)

And that is suicide. His use of the personal pronoun “you” not only makes Black feel the weight of those words but also the reader. They are both drawn closer to White’s inner thoughts. His heart yearns “for darkness”, for “Silence. Blackness. Aloneness. Peace. And all of it only a heartbeat away” (135-6). For him, all other alternative prospects are the ultimate nightmare. His reasons, he explains, go deeper than loss or inability to accommodate to it. He has finally opened his eyes

and realized that “the things [he] believed in don't exist any more. It's foolish to pretend that they do. Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but [he] was too infatuated to see it. [he] see[s] it now” (27). Because he has nothing to hold to and nothing to replace that lost belief, his case is that of “a gradual loss of make-believe. That's all” (120). A reader who is familiar with Nietzschean or Schopenhauerian thought, for instance, is more likely to feel a deeper understanding of the professor and his suicidal drive. Though his ‘enlightenment’ is leading him to a total darkness, his reasons seem so accurate that only a person blind to the reality of the world would consider them mere luxurious intellectualism. Any reader who—previously—shared Black's opinion of the professor or who considered him merely disillusioned and unwise is bound to re-evaluate his judgment in view of these new revelations. Since the German culture—which was a beacon to the world—went asunder and took with it the last remaining traces of civilization, the fakes and cruelties of the post-war world are known to anybody who cares to give it a thought. So, a contemporary reader—regardless of racial, social or intellectual status—will be so quick in identifying with White's world-weary thoughts. And even a reader who is totally estranged from such way of thinking is likely to feel overwhelmed by White's arguments not only because of their melancholic tone but because of the narrator's total withdrawal. The latter makes the reader feel—in a way—defenseless in his confrontation with the professor's ideas. Like Black, the reader would drop silent when White tragically pictures the world as “basically a forced labor camp from which the workers perfectly innocent—are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed” (122). This, momentarily, marks the triumph of White's rational and factual worldview, and flips again the power-balance in favor of the opposite side. While it previously seemed that the text—purposefully or not—creates a misbalance favoring Black, the same could be said when White turns the tables at the end of the conversation. Having reached such an existential crisis, the reader cannot remain undecided.

As far as the reader's indecision is concerned, the narrator's silence regarding the characters' arguments ultimately sustains balance though it seems

to create a misbalance in favor or against a given worldview. It may appear to a reader unfamiliar with such sparseness or silence that this is a narrative deficiency. Because there are no comments, no interpretive remarks and no hints as to which stance is more credible, the narrative may seem to have no coherent purpose or—worse—no morale at all. However, this is a gross and hasty accusation. Noticing the absence of a narrative voice is only half the answer; trying to figure out the meaning of such an absence is the answer. After all, it is near impossible to remain neutral or impartial regarding these existential issues, so when the narrator does not provide answers, the “responsibility” is shifted automatically to the reader. Without the authorial or narratorial endorsement of Black’s stratagems to convince White, and without validation or confirmation of White’s worldview, the reader is obliged to respond to those ideas according to his own convictions or beliefs. Achieving such a purpose—by involving the reader and his previous views and notions—is arguably more significant than making the reader take sides with one stance against another. In other words, the text exercises its fullest effect when it provokes the reader to be personally involved instead of merely contemplating the two characters’ debate. Therefore, though the absence of a narrative voice creates a confusion and loss of direction while reading the text, it makes the dialogue more balanced and less biased because the referee (i.e. the narrator) remains fairly uninvolved. The resulting void creates room through which the reader can move closer to the text.

Besides guaranteeing the reader’s involvement, such a silent narrative voice places both textual perspectives at a similar distance from the reader, so the latter is encouraged to formulate his viewpoint without the mediatory influence of a narrator or an author-disguised-as-a-narrator. In this way, he is protected from authoritative judgment or manipulative orientation; however, he is made to experience a loss of orientation. Feeling disoriented—or unguided—will highlight for him, first, a gap which needs to be filled and, second, a function which must be fulfilled. Put differently, the narrator’s silence not only helps the reader to listen to his inner voice but also gives him the opportunity to make his voice heard as one of the text’s instrumentalists. Such a function is, of course not

expressed explicitly in the text, it is barely figured out through the author's choice of muting the narrative voice. In his discussion of intertextual similarities between McCarthy's fiction and Kierkegaard's philosophical works, Wyllie draws attention to the Danish theologian use of "pseudonyms to efface his own authorial 'authority'" (188). Such a choice aims at 'provoking' the reader to make a decisive response that is entirely independent from the author's subjectivity. A similar choice is made in *The Sunset Limited* where McCarthy "indirectly presents two 'live hypotheses' on the table for many modern people: one, reasoning that human existence is ultimately futile, or, two, mustering a Christian faith that has lost the broad endorsement of academic inquiry and high culture" (Wyllie 189). Thus, when the reader is denied the (normal) narrative orientation and authorial influence, he has no other choice but to navigate his way without assistance or direction. This stimulates more interpretive effort, more autonomy and less dependence or consumption of ready-made answers. In other words, because the narrator is almost entirely absent from the text, Black, White and the reader are allowed to stand in equal footing. There is no hierarchy of perspectives which may decisively shape the final meaning of the work. Metaphorically, other instruments (the narrator's or author's) are muted so that the reader can orchestrate his own music which may fit or misfit the kind of music played by the other two characters. By any chance, he is better attuned to his own composition than that of any other composer. Thus, the overall meaning that he forms and the final understanding that he arrives at is the result of his own orchestration. Certainly, the negation of the narrator's function does not make the text easier to read, as it demands from the reader way more than a novel usually does, but it transforms the experience into a memorable one because it ensures the reader's involvement and contribution in the literary work.

3.2. An Unresolved Denouement: The Reader as a Writer

Wondering about who will win by the end is a question that guarantees the reader's engagement in any sort of a text which—like *The Sunset Limited*—relies heavily on a suspenseful dialogue. As long as White is kept 'captive' in Black's apartment, the conversation is maintained and so is the reader's interest. However, when he exits the room, Black—who appears as the stronger and most determined of the two—collapses to his knees half-weeping. This marks the unceremonious—and unexpected—end of the debate and the novel. It is indeed a conclusion that is more confusing than the body of the text itself. So, every reader attempts to surmount that impasse according to his own disposition and understanding. The result is a different set of conclusions to the same text.

White's final (and farewell) words are: "I've heard you out and you've heard me and there's no more to say ... And there is no going back. No setting things right. Perhaps once. Not now. Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope. Now open the door. Please" (141). On the one hand, the most obvious interpretation of this denouement is that White eventually wins the debate, and Black loses. It is not only a triumph to White's rhetoric and intellect but also—and most importantly—to his unwavering will. Despite the give-and-takes between the two, the professor's resolution to carry on his scheme of suicide remains unshaken. Black, on the contrary, is terribly shaken by this end. He cries out: "I dont understand what you sent me down there for. I dont understand it. If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words? You give em to him. What about me?" (142). So, he not only is shaken up by his failure to convince White but he also reaches a state where his own conviction is destabilized. In other words, in attempting to restore White's belief—in God or humanity—Black is nearly suffering a loss of belief himself. This indeed can be seen as a sweeping victory for White and his nihilistic worldview. However, on the other hand, it is White who is about to take his "celebrated leap" under the *Sunset Limited*. It is him who has gradually lost everything he valued and cared for. And if their discussion is—as they say—like playing the dozens, then White certainly loses the game by his retreating first

(73). Therefore, White is from the very beginning a loser; he has nothing more to lose. Black can be seen as a man who still struggles for his faith and refuses to be discouraged. His concluding words are addressed to an unspecified listener (most probably God): “That’s all right. That’s all right. If you never speak again you know I’ll keep your word ... Is that okay?” (142-43).¹ His mission is not accomplished, yet he shouts after the professor promising him that he will go to the station again and wait for him. According to such an interpretation, the text ends without refuting Black’s evangelical worldview.

The reader is naturally prone to expect more fulfillment and completeness by the end of the text. That is why this open-endedness translates into a feeling of irritation. As John Vanderheide notes, “instead of the reciprocal buffering and formal elaboration of a single point of view, we find a collision of incompatible and opposing discourses that ends in an impasse” (110). However, the reader who tried to respond to the various invitations made by the text to increase his acts of constitution, will find the conclusion consistent with the overall narrative. Put differently, the end is but the accumulation of the rest of the text, so the writer cannot impose on the reader a meaning which he did not formulate through previous decisions and judgments. The writer’s self-effacement through the absent narrative voice is consistently carried out through the indeterminate denouement. “Any hope or despair must come from outside of the text” (Wyllie 201). That being observed by the reader, it becomes clear that whatever meaning is made of the text is entirely the reader’s making. If the text is to achieve any enduring impact on the reader then it has to become part of the reader’s lived experience. *The Sunset Limited*’s unresolved denouement is another opportunity to activate the reader’s imagination. The variety of interpretations that can be generated from such a conclusion indicates that the novel purposefully—and explicitly—allows the reader to personally contribute in its meaning. In other words, had McCarthy chosen another structure for his narrative, the reading

¹ If this, as Wyllie demonstrates again, is in accordance with Kierkegaard’s view, then Black does not suffer a loss of faith but is rather inclined towards a sort of Christian existentialism which deems the silence (of God) as necessary for the freedom of belief.

experience would have consisted essentially of perceiving another person's ideas; however, by choosing to remain uninvolved and keeping his views totally unidentifiable, the writer cedes the text to the reader in a way that allows him and demands of him to be just *himself*. He is not supposed to embrace views which are alien to his character or formulate judgments that are not his own. Because the text is not controlled by the author, the reader can authorize his own work. There is no better way to make the reader's experience more affective and memorable than to involve him as a writer.

In brief, negations, in the form of a silent narrator and an unresolved denouement, aim at increasing the reader's roles. The negated narrative features, by dissatisfying the reader and turning down his expectation of assistance and completeness, provoke him to be more active. This involves him in the dialogue and increases his independent judgment and response. Hence, *The Sunset Limited*'s refusal to support monologic interpretations—either as could be presented by the narrator or imposed at the end—demonstrates not only the equal distance between narrator and character but also the equal standing between author and reader.

4. Spiritual Indeterminacy: Between Belief and Unbelief

Discovery, Iser says, is “one form of aesthetic pleasure” (*Implied* xiii). Interestingly, *The Sunset Limited* offers its reader a distinct possibility for discovery thanks to its existential and spiritual concerns which give the reader the opportunity to discover himself, (his) text and his world. The indeterminate nature of such a dialogic text—besides its minimal narrative features—heightens the complexity of the reading experience and challenges the reader—especially—at the spiritual level. Therefore, this section will explore the text's semantic indeterminacy as it is represented through the characters' mutually-negating spiritualities. By doing so, it demonstrates the ambivalent nature of the text and its implication on the reader's dual characterization, as a believer and a non-believer, and duality of roles as a knower and a seeker.

4.1 The Reader as a Believer

The previous sections attempted to highlight a number of textual features which pose certain challenges to the reader but also contribute in creating a diverse and intriguing experience of reading. The gaps that mark *The Sunset Limited*'s texture are, as previously shown, activators of ideation in the reader through successive de-and-re constructions of meaning regarding social, racial and cultural issues. As the debate between Black and White seems to come to an end, all their previous arguments and counter-arguments appear to fall apart leaving behind but a single spine around which all human debates seem to revolve, that is, belief and unbelief. Most probably, no other issue has produced as much gore or ink—in humanity's entire history—as this one.

It is clear to the reader, from the outset, that the text is heavy in religious images, so this could be readily interpreted as a characteristic that is common in dialogues between—as White notes—the rustic man of faith and the world-class atheist. In this regard, both Black and White can be considered as representatives or spokesmen for two opposing spiritual positions, namely belief and unbelief. The reader, thus, is placed in the middle of a spiritual dilemma and his identification with one of these attitudes determines his understanding and reaction to the text. For instance, a Christian reader who shares Black's reverence of the Bible and its creeds will most likely consider Black to be the winning party at the end. Since, for him, the argument of a priest-like figure is always stronger and more righteous than that of a suicidal atheist, interpreting the text is not even a matter of dispute. Similarly, a non-religious person is likely to read the text as an exposition of the frailty and limitedness of a religious-man's beliefs. Consequently, such a reader considers that the text favors White's more knowledgeable and worldly attitude to be the victorious one. Though the text accepts both interpretations, since it leans towards none, such readings are superficial. Such responses might be too simplistic since Black's and White's spiritualities are not strictly speaking conventional. That is to say, their positions are not two religious categories, simply, but they constitute a set of existential convictions and individual judgments.

Black for instance seems—at the beginning—to be the very typical image of a reformed Christian man. He is devoted to the teachings of Jesus which entreat all Christians to be helpful, kind and caring towards each other. His willingness to save White resembles an embodiment of the divine commandment to the Israelites that “thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother” (Deuteronomy 15:7). His charitable endeavor is as well an attempt to atone for his past sins and seek his way to repentance. However, some of the ideas he expresses are unorthodox, which makes his position as an “advocate of religion” a little awkward and confusing to the reader. Black’s mysterious search for redemption, salvation and divine love (in desperate places) becomes—after some time—comprehensible to White and to the reader; yet what remains hard to comprehend is his heretic views on religion. As an un-educated man, it is surely anticipated that his only source of knowledge is the Bible which he confirms by admitting that a lot of things are beyond his understanding and “if it aint in this book then they’s a good chance that [he] dont know it” (106). Nonetheless, he has some very “outlawed” notions regarding the Bible and Christianity. He explains, for instance, that he disagrees with the notion of original sin, saying that he believes people to be good and “evil is somethin you bring on your own self” (67). This sets him apart from the majority of Christians who—since St Augustine’s time—believe in Christ’s grace and salvation as a necessary cure for humanity’s ancestral sin.¹ Moreover, unlike White whose observations of human history led him to believe in the bigotry, cruelty, vileness or else insufferable weakness of his fellows, Black believes in the innate goodness of all humankind. He even goes as far as to assert that Jesus, for him, is not seen as a divine being but is “understood as that gold at the bottom of the mine” (95). Put differently, if Jesus is in everyman, then everyman is himself a Jesus. This big heresy, he believes, is more acceptable than “sayin that a man aint all that much different from a rock. Which is how [White’s] view looks to

¹ “As in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.” (Corinthians 15:22)

[humans]” (95). Seen so, Black represents a defiant and—perhaps—eschewed image of the devoted believer who unquestionably embraces all scriptural beliefs. A theistic reader, and a Christian reader particularly, who initially identifies with Black—assuming his position is in accordance with traditional religious doctrines—may find himself re-considering such a choice because it no longer suits his convictions. Because Black’s views are largely derived from a religious source, yet fundamentally aligned with humanism, this makes him a less traditional or dogmatic figure. In other words, he is not the stereotypical “preacher” whose voice we hear at the beginning. By the end of the narrative, though he is still seen as a pious man who is kneeling down in prayer, the reader cannot help but admire his optimism, charity and humanitarian outlook, regardless of his religiosity. Some of his beliefs, therefore, may well appear relatable to a non-religious reader as some of his other views may offend a religious reader who presumably pigeonholed him as a Christian fundamentalist.

Again, McCarthy’s text deprives the reader of the usual orientation that is expected whenever two opposing theses are presented. If compared to a canonical text such as *Pilgrim’s Progress*, for instance, *The Sunset Limited*—though spiritual and allegorical to some extent—does not offer the reader the same sense of guidance and righteousness that is associated with Bunyan’s protagonist Christian. Since the reader is often prepared to side with one position to ensure a consistent and smooth reading, he is very likely to feel lost and confused with this multi-faceted Black. Thus, the indeterminate status of Black as a believer in the text is an element of anxiety and confusion. However, it also ensures that the reader’s attention is captured longer and his judgment is not a mere superficial response. When Black—who argues all along in defense of faith against despair and perhaps blasphemy—says that even as “a man with a powerful belief. [he] aint a doubter. But [he is] a questioner”, the reader is called—either provokingly or inspiringly—to be more questioning and self-searching (67). The reader—specifically as a believer—is encouraged and stimulated to adopt the same critical attitude not only regarding faith but also regarding himself and the text he is reading. With such an increased

indeterminacy, reading becomes indeed an experience of confusion and indecision but it also presents the reader with the opportunity to interact with the text in more developed and enriching ways than usual.

4.2. The Reader as a Non-Believer

White is an enigma not only to Black—who is an open book by comparison—but also to the reader. His reclusive nature prevents him from displaying his beliefs, so it is arguably Black's function in the text to make him reveal them. Had the narrative been told or structured differently, Black could serve as a foil character whose presence merely intensifies and starkly contrasts White's traits. Yet, there is no main or secondary character in McCarthy's dialogic text; both characters stand at an equal distance from each other, from the author and from the reader. This means that the reader should not see White through the eyes of Black rather he must approach him from his own standpoint.

Initially, White is seen as an intellectual who has surrendered to depression and silence. Though it is gradually understood that his disillusionment with culture and weariness with the postmodern age are largely the shadows that loomed over his ostensibly-shadowless life, it is only when he breaks his silence moments before leaving the room, that Black and the reader catch a glimpse of his interior struggle with darkness. White clarifies his reason(s) for choosing *The Sunset Limited* as a final destination. In a half-monologue half-soliloquy, he declares: "I dont believe in God. Can you understand that?" (137). Such a statement comes as no surprise since it is inferred that he and Black are antagonists as far as religion is concerned. However, his choice to begin his lengthy explanation with such a 'confession' indicates that belief is the central issue in his enigma and all other issues are perhaps merely peripheral. He continues as if doubting Black's—or any religious man's—sense and sight; he says "look around you man. Cant you see? The clamor and din of those in torment has to be the sound most pleasing to his ear. And I loathe these discussions. The argument of the village atheist whose single passion is to revile endlessly that which he denies the existence of in the first place." (137). So, at once, White distances himself from both religious and non-religious cults. For

him, the very—antagonistic—discussion between the two is despicable and he clearly does not identify with any of them. He regards the second cult, which is represented by the village atheist, as being excessively obsessed with the non-existence of a certain entity, and thus he sees any affiliation with such a group as an insult to his intellect. The first cult, which is represented by Black, inspires worse feelings. He elaborately explains:

Your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. And if that pain were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash. And justice? Brotherhood? Eternal life? ... Every friendship. Every love. Torment, betrayal, loss, suffering, pain, age, indignity, and hideous lingering illness. All with a single conclusion. For you and for every one and every thing that you have chosen to care for (138)

The reader—as does Black—needs a few minutes of silence to recover from the gravity of these mind-blowing words. Having them absorbed, he realizes that White's irritation, disgust, rage and powerlessness are sheer emotional responses which spring from his meditative look at humanity and his deep intellectual disturbance with what he has seen through that look. So, his rejection of religion, as a divine word about a world divinely-ordered, is a reflection of his existential malaise. In other words, White is not only dissatisfied with the world and depressed because of its tragic course, but he also deploys a deep sense of rebellion against the indoctrination and sacralization of such morbid order through religion. The latter he sees as a form of damned and doomed fellowship. He concludes, "you tell me that my brother is my salvation? My salvation? Well then damn him. Damn him in every shape and form and guise. Do I see myself in him? Yes. I do. And what I see sickens me. Do you understand me? *Can* you understand me?" (138). These words leave Black speechless but they intrigue the reader to attempt again to understand White not—simplistically—as a depressed man but as the voice of a non-believer who has—perhaps—known enough of life and of the world to reject it entirely (belief is but a single object among the worldly things he rejects).

White's hypersensitivity towards human suffering and misery is impressive. Though he seems cold and unsympathetic, he is acutely aware of the fate of humans as laborers, sufferers, prisoners and victims of a futile order that only leads to nothingness and senselessness. He bears a profound understanding of life, the workings of the present world and its unchanging reality. The tragedy is that this is not a mere crazy moment that will fade away; he confides "rage is really only for the good days ... there's little of that left"(139). Apparently, White is in an irrevocable—nihilistic—stage where neither rhetoric nor persuasion can bring him back to see meaning or purpose in life. Speaking like a Nietzschean figure, he explains that he has seen "the forms ... slowly emptied out. They no longer have any content. They are shapes only. A train, a wall, a world. Or a man. A thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void", and so he lost all trust and interest in the world (139). As a well-read person, White is, thus, able to rebuke and debunk all attempts to make him believe in any form of salvation. His furious questioning of Black's ability to understand his perspective is then justified. While he rejects the very foundation of the world upon any meaning, Black's attempt to restore his hope about life or afterlife must appear naïve or ridiculous not only to White but to every postmodern man who gives it thought. In such a context, White's views are symptomatic of the twenty-first century with its decentralized thought and fragmented culture rather than a representation of a given religious stance. The reader, therefore, is prone to see the accuracy of White's view regardless of his religious belief and so may identify with that feeling of loss, disillusionment and depression instead of the overly optimistic—almost priestly—outlook of Black. Notwithstanding White's position as an atheist, his arguments take on an existential sagesness that forces even a theistic reader, who may rigidly classify White as "a lost lamb", to reconsider his judgment. A non-believer, who approaches the text expecting to find in White's arguments some theological leaning or perhaps—as is the trend—some scientifically-inspired view of the world which invalidates the religious arguments, will be disappointed because White ventures in none of those territories. He simply is a soul in torment. Of course, such a disappointment or

loss of orientation gives the reader the impression that he has no control over the text and that the latter is unnecessarily overwhelming. However, it is only in attempting to gain back direction or control over the text that the reader mobilizes himself and exerts more efforts aiming to construct meaning out of this ostensibly meaningless fusion of spiritual perspectives. The indeterminate nature of White's unbelief, hence, moves the reader to be more reflective and discerning in his judgment of spirituality and in his understanding of his position as a reader.

So, the question that begs to be asked is: is *The Sunset Limited* a call for suicide? Atheism? Christianity? The answer is: certainly not. McCarthy succeeds in evading such an effect by creating a dialogic text which does not overwhelm the reader neither by White's perspective nor by Black's. The novel presents to the reader an intricate opposition between two spiritual positions; however, it offers no easy—or even no—answer at all. It introduces these positions in a conventional way which leads the reader to presumably affiliate with one or the other. Yet, it subverts its characterization of both Black and White who are deemed to be the representatives of the opposing camps (that could be named “belief” and “non-belief”). Because of Black's humanitarian intentions, even a non-religious reader may be drawn to the appeal of his words; similarly, White's representation of cultural and existential woes is close to the reader's contemporary disturbances and so a religious reader is not unlikely to share his perspective. In other words, this is a case of an ambivalent convergence between the two spiritual positions. Thus, the dogmatic, stereotypical or allegorical association of each of them with a predetermined category is subverted and the reader is called to make greater efforts in deciding which of the two positions is more convincing, more accurate or perhaps more believable. Whether reading *The Sunset Limited* as a believer or as a non-believer, with such a maximized indeterminacy, the reader's involvement with the text is maximized, and—more importantly—his desire to discover more about the text and about himself is maximized as well.

5. Pragmatic Indeterminacy: A Dialogue between Truth and Reality

A surface reading may lead to (an automatic) alignment with Black or White based on their association with a given race, class, intellectual affinity or spiritual position. A more careful reading, however, may discern the intricacy in each position and so engender an unexpected response. Indeterminacies are therefore a challenge that testifies the reader's independence and—perhaps—competence. Divergence from the norm (of reading); that is, being unbound by predetermined (textual, authorial or contextual) judgments, may be the ultimate purpose behind such a challenge. In other words, achieving a deeper understanding of the text and “constructing” its meaning goes through the trail of indeterminacies, which eventually reveals the novel's essence, namely the dialogue between truth and reality. In accordance with such purpose, the reader is pulled towards two distinct roles, namely knowing or seeking.

5.1 Reading as an Act of Knowing

Though Black and White can be seen as outright antagonists, they in fact can be regarded as belonging to the same category. Both of them are knowers rather than seekers. They both consider themselves to have reached an ultimate knowledge or awareness about the world beyond which they do not wish to search. White, for example, refuses to look for “alternate views” believing that they will not “stand close scrutiny” (122). He asserts “I dont think that this is just the way I see it. I think it's the way it is”, and adds “I dont regard my state of mind as some pessimistic view of the world. I regard it as the world itself” (122, 136). He is totally not inclined to change his perception of the world because, for him, the primacy of empirical/positivistic/historical knowledge cannot be subjugated to personal opinions. Hence, he regards himself as a knower of (a known) reality which he is simply expressing and not inventing. Black, on the other hand, contends that “if God walked the earth when he got done makin it then when you get up in the mornin you get to put your feet on a real floor and you dont have to worry about where it come from” (66). But, he continues, “if he didnt then you got to come up with a whole other description of what you even mean by real. And you got to judge everthing by that same light. If light it is.

Includin yourself. One question fits all” (66). So, for him, ahead of the believer lies a rewarding journey whereas the unbeliever is doomed to a fruitless wandering. In other words, unbelief is a state of questioning and even deconstructing given assumptions (that could be dogmatic or inherited) while belief is acceptance and (co)-existence with them. The latter appears more comfortable and less arduous while the former seems irritating and even risky because it may—in extreme cases—involve either loss or insanity. That is why he prefers what is more secure—and perhaps guaranteed—instead of what is risky and problematic¹. When White asks him “do you really think that Jesus is in this room?” Black replies “no. I dont think he’s in this room”, and adds “I *know* he’s in this room” (10). Again, he—like White—is a knower and not a seeker.

Through his multilayered and sometimes—seemingly—inconsistent characterization of the two characters, McCarthy draws the reader to see not only the difference but also the similarity between them. For instance, in order to demonstrate that both White and Black are not antitheses to each other but rather two faces of the same coin, McCarthy—ironically—speaks through Black who says “belief aint like unbelief. If you a believer then you got to come finally to the well of belief itself and then you dont have to look no further. There aint no further. But the unbeliever has got a problem. He has set out to unravel the world” (65-66). But what if that firm belief is a wrong stance and unbelief is not merely a futile wandering? What if ‘faith’ is a static blindness whereas ‘infidelity’ is a path to discovery? These questions may be the starting point of the reader’s journey; a journey neither Black nor White is willing to take since both are apparently satisfied with the answers they have reached so far and are unwilling to search further. Black is content with what he knows through the word of the scripture while White is content with what he knows through the World. So, when Black uses the words “questioner” and “doubter” to emphasize

¹ This, of course, does not intend to demean belief; it rather intends to highlight the difference between the effortless acceptance of belief (in the form of dogma, tradition and prejudice) and the endeavor to *search* for belief.

his awareness of the difference between the two attitudes, McCarthy indirectly alludes to the reader that the words “knower” and “seeker” may be used instead: “the [seeker] wants the truth. The [knower] wants to be told there aint no such thing” (67). Realizing the disparity between the two roles, the implied reader may set out to unravel the text not simply as a knower (of a stated and determined meaning) but as a seeker (of an unstated indeterminate meaning).

5.2. Reading as an Act Seeking

In fact, *The Sunset Limited* may seem an allegory for spiritual belief and nonbelief—which to a certain extent true—but it also analogizes the finality of belief and the infinity of unbelief in general. Waking up to a finalized certitude of one’s worth, mission, and destination is obviously different from coming up “with a whole other description” of the human condition. Realizing such a difference, the reader projects his conception of the knower and the seeker on his act of reading.

In addition to the novel’s meditation on spiritual issues, it meditates on—as Quirk demonstrates—a “complex array of ideas” (34). Among these is the question of literary canonicity and reading. For instance, in their discussion, Black and White mention *War and Peace*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and, of course, the Bible. These are three different kinds of books: literary, historical and religious. Put differently, the three examples represent the main texts namely: fiction, non-fiction and revelation and assumptions about them. Two of them are man-made: the first is self-professedly a lie while the second is self-pronouncedly accurate. The third is (self-proclaimed to be) divine and so it transcends earthly reality. Reactions to these texts are defined by such assumptions. For instance, readers consider a historical book such as *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to be a valid account of the past, so they believe its content to be factual. A fictional tale such as *War and Peace* is considered beautiful, entertaining and perhaps realistic but—of course—not true. The Bible, as an example of a religious scripture, is believed to be the true word of God. This leads us to assume that belief and unbelief are not only a reflection of the

human condition between faith and infidelity, so to speak, but also a reflection of the reading condition. Therefore, by analogy, there is a difference between an act of reading that presumes the text to be the well of the truth and so believes in its innate superiority and completeness and an act of reading which starts from the assumption that meaning does not reside in a single source but is rather the accumulation of different sources coming together. Metaphorically, meaning is not a fruit to be picked in a single moment of reading but a tree that will not be fruitful unless nurtured through stages. That is why a reader who approaches the text from a position of self-doubt is likely to accept what the text “serves” as *the truth*—authoritative, absolute, unchanging and divine. However, a reader who regards the text as one—among many—constituent of truth and himself as another one is likely to respond differently. By characterizing Black and White as spiritual antagonists, McCarthy seems to suggest that regardless of the nature of the text, it does not compel its reader to believe in it. However, even such a meaning or view is not imposed on the reader of *The Sunset Limited*. Black’s and White’s (spiritual) attitudes towards the world are a reflection of the reader’s dual roles in the text. That is to say, by siding with one of them, the reader chooses to believe what the text presents as a reality beyond which he does not venture. Independence from their perspectives, either by impartiality, rejection or elaboration, means that the reader chooses the role of a seeker who searches for a truth that lies beyond the ink-spots. So, being a knower of reality or a seeker of truth is inherent neither in the world nor in the text but is rather a matter of choice that is left to the reader. Hence, such a duality of roles is an effective way to enhance the reader’s involvement in the text because—analogically—it is the multiplicity of choice, between dependence and independence, which renders freedom all the more valuable.

Conclusion

As a dialogic text which combines both narrative and dramatic features, *The Sunset Limited* is a unique novel to read. The distinctiveness of such reading experience is largely the result of the reader's interaction with stylistic minimalism (form) and ambivalent spirituality (content). The generic indeterminacy prepares the reader, early on, to be more active as it places him in the position of a viewer which demands from him a larger involvement. The main textual perspectives are represented—almost allegorically—through the characters Black and White. The dialogue that goes between the two brings racial, social and intellectual questions to the fore. On the one hand, the blanks between those perspectives increase the reader's act of judgment while the silence of the narrator and the absence of resolution demand from the reader further effort. This not only accentuates his involvement and contribution but also engenders a diverse set of interpretations. On the other hand, the semantic indeterminacy, which is highlighted through the subversion of belief and nonbelief, indicates another response-inviting aspect in the text. Because of its unusual characterization which negates common expectations, such a spiritual ambivalence destabilizes the reader's (pre)disposition in reading as a believer or a nonbeliever. Eventually, the gap that appears between textual perspectives and the non-fulfillment of expected features all aim at increasing the reader's engagement and participation in the text. They also lead to the discovery of the novel's virtual theme. Indeed, it is a dialogue between racial, social, intellectual and spiritual opposites but it is—more importantly—a dialogue between two distinct worldviews, namely knowing and seeking. The latter genuinely reflects the reader's role in the text either as a knower or a seeker of meaning. Thus, reading *The Sunset Limited* creates a variety of responses, ranging from confusion, disappointment, non-comprehension and loss of orientation, but it challenges the reader and excites him to be more engaged, independent and creative in his reading. Eventually, the novel becomes a reflection of its readers and its overall meaning is the result of his own making.

Conclusion

We have begun this research with a main question: how can a minimalist text involve the reader in a rich(er) reading experience? In our search for how ‘less’ can be ‘more’, we have studied three literary works, namely *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*. These are texts which display, on the one hand, an increasing presence of minimalistic features, such as terseness, omission and condensation, and on the other hand, a growing indeterminacy regarding spiritual and moral issues.

One of the two major goals we have set out to achieve was gaining a better understanding of Cormac McCarthy’s oeuvre. In order to meet such a goal, the changes in his stylistic and thematic choices, which take place in his later texts, were traced. *No Country for Old Men* could be considered as a turning point in the writer’s literary evolution, so its main thematic continuities and stylistic discontinuities were examined. Thereby, we noted that McCarthy moves away from attendance to regional matters and maximalist style—which was more in resonance with an older literary lineage—towards a more universal concern which is accompanied by a significant authorial withdrawal. In *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*, such an intention is highlighted through a fusion between minimalist style and ambivalent spirituality. In fact, McCarthy alludes in both texts to the journey he has undertaken in his oeuvre. His first published novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, portrays a strange story of revenge where the son—unwittingly—befriends his father’s murderer; thus betraying his father’s legacy. (Dis)similarly, *The Road*—also begins somewhere in the Appalachian mountains—depicts the journey of a father and son towards the southwestern coast. The boy, after the man’s decease, carries on his father’s footsteps with a promise to gracefully succeed him. Therefore, McCarthy turns to the same place to revisit the same theme(s) albeit in a different tone and with renewed insights. The title which he gives to his novel in dramatic form, *The Sunset Limited*, inspires further intertextual resonances. The name of the train which travelled the western states symbolizes McCarthy’s parallel journey into—and back from—western texts. In effect, this latest work delves into the depths of questions which

he has often wrestled with in his border narratives. Violence, human degradations, ethnic antagonism and the frailty of faith are laid bare—not as regional or cultural constructs but as universal phenomena—in a black-and-white existential dialogue. In many ways, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* suggest conclusion; the closing of a literary circle which has begun decades ago. It is all the more significant that McCarthy opts for a self-effacing style in his later works as if he wishes to hand the torch to his reader. No lecturing, imposition or control is intended in these novels. On the contrary, the texts are open for an unconstrained interpretation.

Besides noting McCarthy's literary evolution, which is marked by a movement towards universality, such aspects (minimalist style and ambivalent spirituality) indicate also a crucial increase in indeterminacy. McCarthy's later texts are, in this regard, largely indeterminate. According to Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response, the more indeterminate the text, the more it is contingent upon the reader. Thus, by employing a transactional approach, which studies the text in order to understand the reader's response, we have traced different forms of indeterminacy at different levels (semantic, syntactic and pragmatic) so as to comprehend the demands and opportunities ceded to the implied reader. In doing so, we have shown, first, the difficulties which face readers such as disappointment, provocation, irritation, and disorientation. These are signs of negative reception which—as Hans R. Jauss avouches—are the result of the reader's horizon of expectations. The closer the text is to the reader's expectation the easier it is to read, but the less valuable it becomes. Texts which create a horizontal change are more challenging—and likely to be faced with little admiration—but they are gradually appreciated for their aesthetic merits. As such, McCarthy's later texts, just like their minimalist antecedents, may be subject to disinterested or prejudiced readings. However, such texts are not condemned to a sole way of reading: a shift of focus or perspective proves efficient in highlighting their interpretive potential. So, second, we have shown that the challenges, which confront the reader whenever certain (stylistic or thematic) expectations are defied or negated, are stratagems to augment the

reader's participation. For instance, the absence of a narrative voice, the open end, the blanks between perspectives, the gaps and omissions are all present in McCarthy's later texts in a way that invites the reader in. Eventually, it is not despite—but because of—such minimalism and ambivalence that *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* reach a heightened level of communication with their reader. They do not simply tell the reader or dictate to him what to think; they instead trigger him to be active and more responsive. Each individual respondent is allowed enough freedom in the interpretation of the text, yet certain cognitive and emotional responses are stimulated throughout these texts. Together, these main responses substitute a successful interaction. The analyses reveal that involvement, identification, independence and introspection are thoroughly encouraged in McCarthy's later texts. Once such responses, which are presupposed by the text, are realized by the reader, reading turns into a rich aesthetic experience.

In *No Country for Old Men*, for instance, the reader is involved in the narrative from its very beginning. As a late western, the text dismisses many of the elements, such as nature, which are recurrent in the popular western genre. Seeing such absence, the reader is pulled to make use of his visual memory or imagination to construct the world of the narrative. Thus, he reads as a cognizant who is familiar with the landscape and the neighborhoods in the text. Along the way, the reader is likely to identify with the character of Moss, yet the latter turns to be an anti-hero who lacks many of the qualities that are bound to the frontier man. Despite his courage and spirit of adventure, Moss is undecided and seems to have no particular code of conduct. Therefore, sheriff Bell is regarded as another alternative figure to identify with. His moral uprightness attracts many readers who share his dissatisfaction with the ongoing violence and bloodshed. His stance is more conservative and—though unlikely to be contested with—it may seem too shallow or old-fashioned for some readers. Running against the flow, such readers find in the character of Chigurh, the villain, many relatable aspects. Although he is a furious assassin who inspires fear more than anything else, his understanding of the current state of humanity not only in the American

west but in the whole globe is certainly more insightful and less pretentious. He seems to see the world with a naked eye without concealment or embellishment. The reader is, thus, offered three pathways and though he is—ostensibly—invited to follow them; he is likely to lose track. Such disorientation is emphasized by the ambiguous end. Bell continues his musings, Moss is murdered and Chigurh carries on as if nothing happened. The text's suspension of judgment not only destabilizes the reader's search for identification but also increases his will for independence. In so doing, McCarthy's text beckons the reader to be more reflective about his own thoughts and actions especially in a fast-paced world where thoughtlessness and unscrupulousness reign supreme.

With a more accentuated minimalism, *The Road* depicts a wasted world in which a few things are left and even fewer actually matter. The post-apocalypse is wrapped up in an elliptical narrative dismissing several details. Segments of language, parts of quotidian life and certain plot elements are dropped down. The reader is well aware of their absence because he—so far—inhabits a pre-apocalyptic world. Such reductions and omissions are enough to draw the reader's attention to the significance and magnitude of the waste. In fact, the novel's style—terse, brief, and full of gaps—mirrors the world that is depicted, so it involves the reader in the same impoverished atmosphere. Without overt exposition or narratorial commentary the reader is able to envision *The Road's* world. His involvement leads him, by extension, to comprehend and identify with the father's struggle to safeguard his son or the boy's struggle to conjoin any meaning to a meaningless world. In fact, the whole narrative is divided between two opposite stances: hope, morality and belief versus despair, amorality and unbelief. As the characters struggle to survive, the reader struggles to figure out the right stance. However, the 'available' choices are presented in a detached and neutral manner, as no particular stance is asserted or validated by the conclusion, the text remains open. The reader's gained knowledge is controlled by his own interpretations and judgments, so the text imposes no determined meaning on the receiver. In this regard, the ambivalent spirituality, which is in play throughout the entire narrative, creates the opportunity for the

reader to engage with the text, and the ideas it presents, freely and independently. Realizing that he is uncompelled to side with or against a given textual perspective, the reader is encouraged to seek meaning elsewhere—most importantly—in his own person. In other words, *The Road* stimulates the reader's introspection, and that is one of its most remarkable achievements.

As a novel in dramatic form or a play in one act, *The Sunset Limited* may suggest little potential to involve the reader in a distinct reading experience; however, through close examination we found that the text is indeed rich. The blanks between Black's and White's perspectives and the negation of some narrative functions such as narrator and resolution intensify the reader's involvement. On the one hand, such indeterminacy disturbs, disappoints and confuses the reader; yet on the other hand, it creates for him a larger space for activity. His cognitive and emotional involvement is secured through the indeterminate discussion of racial antagonism, social conflicts, intellectual disparity, existential difference and spiritual opposition. Because answering such questions is fundamentally a matter of individual choice, the text—justifiably—defies collective or reiterative decisions about them; that is why, it does not validate or discredit any of the two. The writer effaces his own convictions from the text and presents the reader with an ambivalent text. So, the reader has but to contemplate the highs and lows of that dialogue and give in to its soulful allure whenever its intellectual, spiritual and philosophical charm defies resistance. His engagement and response to the arguments of each side force him eventually to reconsider many of his prejudgments and convictions. In other words, McCarthy's text positions the reader in the midst of a dialogue and allows him enough freedom to cope, react and respond to the ideas presented without outer imposition or orientation. As such, reading *The Sunset Limited*, with all its enforcement of judgment, deferral of perspective, critique, meditation, self-search and self-discovery is an experience that brings earthly and heavenly matters into question. Consequently, it could be read as a commentary on the reality of the world which leads White—the professor who has read and seen many of man's work on earth—to choose to disbelieve in goodness and instead

throw himself to the *Sunset Limited*, or it could be read as a eulogistic dramatization of Black's search for salvation. It could also be read as an ambivalent text which intrigues the reader to embark on a personal quest for meaning. The text is meant to gain 'life' and endure with the reader—in more impactful ways—even after closing the hard copy.

In the first part, we have presented different theoretical opinions which regard literary minimalism as a mode of writing that minimizes the writer's production/control of meaning so as to maximize the reader's reception/modulation of such meaning. Such a hypothetical result could be attested through reader-oriented criticism. Hence, by adapting Jauss' and Iser's theories of aesthetic reading to analyze McCarthy's later texts, we have confirmed that, indeed, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* involve the reader in a variety of activities. The roles that are attributed to the implied reader indicate these texts' will to increase the reader's aesthetic contribution in the making of the literary work. Such a contribution is secured by their openness, indeterminacy and ambivalence. In fact, a text which limits the reader's interaction to mere acceptance or rejection is likely to be tedious, for it offers the reader a slight or no chance of participation; however, a text which presents various—intricate, contradictory, ambivalent—choices invites the reader to participate in the composition of its meaning. This makes the text more effective and reading becomes as real and effecting as a real life-experience. That is why, throughout our examination of McCarthy's texts, we focused on the reader's perspective and his realization of a set of roles without which the text would have less significance and lesser appeal. By way of illustration, we noted the reader's oscillating position between the roles of spectator, viewer, listener, chorister, orchestrator and writer. These aesthetic activities are a proof of not only a fortified interaction but also an investment in the reader's capacities. It is a token of trust which is further strengthened by the freedom that is allowed to the reader. The latter is, in these later texts, not defined in terms of his historical or racial background. On the contrary, McCarthy's (late) implied reader is defined by his cognitive faculties. Besides his cultural universality and transcendence of

religious boundaries, such a reader is encouraged to be an observer, judge, explorer and seeker. If such invitations are courteously accepted by the reader—for they can be rejected—the experience of reading turns from a mere impassive, effortless and ineffective “activity” to an *act* which is individuated, creative and impactful.

In its focus on the reader of McCarthy’s later texts, the present research set out to explore the reader-text dynamics. As the findings suggest, such a relationship is distinguished through its increased communication and heightened impact. First, it could be asserted that minimalist style and ambivalent spirituality—as featured in McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*—are aspects which facilitate the reader’s participation. Though they may provoke negative responses, such as confusion or disappointment, they are not insurmountable difficulties. Their effectiveness, however, depends on the reader’s concretization of required/implicit roles. The same stimulus does not always produce the same response; that is why, the present research does not enforce a given reception of minimalist texts, in general, or McCarthy’s texts in particular. On the contrary, it exemplifies the utility of shifting perspective, from author-text to reader-text relationship, in revealing the underlying significance of certain textual aspects and receptive roles. By understanding the interplay which takes place between text and reader—which is also necessary for the construction of a whole aesthetic object—we can, second, evade pejorative judgment of less conventional texts. The history of literature is replete with literary creations that defy the common norms of taste (such as minimalist texts). Their exploration from a reader-oriented viewpoint may not necessarily unveil their value (if any), but it surely throws a new light on such literary phenomenon. Third, the present research could be of particular interest to post-graduate students and teachers of undergraduate literature classes since they encounter texts, such as McCarthy’s, which ostensibly resist readability. Taking into consideration the nature of such texts and their demands on their implied audience helps the instructor to deal with students’ difficulties. By adjusting one’s perspective, aim and reading

strategies (aesthetic rather than efferent), the study/teaching of literary texts becomes more enjoyable and effective. In other words, the study is an illustration of how multiple interpretations are supported by the text; thus, stifling creativity in reading such texts runs against their very essence.

As part of reading studies, McCarthy studies and research about minimalism, the present thesis situates its endeavor humbly between these fields. Yet, like every academic work, it has its own limitations. First, it does not cover many of the intertextual and thematic concerns in *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*. For instance, it does not discuss McCarthy's intricate literary lineage or his probing into questions such as late capitalism, eco-criticism, national myths, contemporary culture, etc. The reason for our limited scope is double-fold: on the one hand focus on the reader overshadows contextual elements and, on the other hand, several of those themes are widely-tackled in other studies. Therefore, we centered attention on one particular theme in McCarthy's fiction—spirituality—which is handled differently in his later texts (in parallel with a changed style). Second, it must be admitted that studying a text from a reader-oriented perspective may inevitably seem subjective and perhaps too personal. However, despite the negative associations of such an impression, no criticism can be entirely objective or detached from the critic's consciousness. Put differently, the writer of this research is—to reverse Richard Stein's words—not a wolf in a lamb's clothing, not “an interpreter dis-guised as a reader” (Stein 218). Essentially, the present thesis offers just a simple reading: one among many others; that is why, more research is needed. A future work may examine, in more details, McCarthy's implied reader(s) throughout his early and middle texts. The adaptation of his minimalist texts into films, such as the Coen brother's *No Country for Old Men* (2007), John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009) or Tommy Lee Jones' *The Sunset Limited* (2011) may be the subject of fruitful investigations as well. In brief, these areas of research are relatively under-explored and so a new light—no matter how dim—is certainly of benefit.

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Résumé

Cette étude est consacrée aux textes ultérieurs de Cormac McCarthy; en particulier, on propose une analyse de *Non, ce pays n'est pas pour le vieil homme* (2005), *La route* et *Le train du coucher du soleil* (2006) en nous basant sur le point de vue du lecteur. Autrement dit, ces derniers romans posent des défis à leur lecteur non seulement en raison de leur mode narratif qui se situe entre prose et poésie mais aussi en raison de leur ambiguïté vis-à-vis des questions morales et spirituelles. Leur minimalisme et leur ambivalence sont donc considérés comme un obstacle à l'acte de lecture. A cet égard, Hans Robert Jauss et Wolfgang Iser proposent un ensemble d'outils critiques pour mieux comprendre la relation entre le pôle texte et le pôle lecteur. Notamment, des concepts tels que "l'expérience esthétique", "l'horizon de l'attente", "lecteur implicite" et "l'indétermination", facilitent l'analyse de ces récits car ils défient les attentes du lecteur en subvertissant quelques éléments narratifs, comme le narrateur et la résolution. Leur indétermination sémantique, syntaxique et pragmatique, cependant, crée un espace vide dans le texte littéraire pour que le lecteur puisse le remplir en fonction de son caractère individuel et de ses potentiels cognitifs et esthétiques. Donc, la réduction, le silence et l'omission passent d'un obstacle à une opportunité qui permet au lecteur d'exercer sa liberté et sa créativité. L'analyse de ces textes montre que le lecteur est encouragé, à travers un style minimaliste et une spiritualité ambivalente, à apporter sa contribution à la littérature non seulement en tant qu'interprète du sens, mais en tant que créateur de sens. Un tel lecteur joue les rôles de spectateur, d'auditeur, d'orchestrateur et d'écrivain.

Mots clés : expérience esthétique, Cormac McCarthy, Hans R Jauss, lecteur implicite, indétermination, minimalisme, spiritualité. Wolfgang Iser

ملخص

تهتم هذه الدراسة بالنصوص الأدبية لكورماك مكارثي و تُسلط الضوء على تفاعل القارئ مع روايات "ليس بلدا للمسنين" (2005) ، "الطريق" و "قطار الغروب" (2006). تشترك الروايات الاخيرة ،على وجه الخصوص، في ميلها الى أدنوية الاسلوب الروائي وازدواجية المعتقد الروحي بحيث تُشكل تحديات لقارئها ليس فقط بسبب طرحها الساخط لإشكاليات ثقافية و أخلاقية و دينية ولكن أيضا بسبب طابعها النثري-الشعري الذي يعد مُربكا للقارئ. يلجا البحث ،بغرض فهم هذه التحديات بشكل أفضل، إلى نظرية المتلقي التي تسهل فهم العلاقة بين القارئ والنص. في هذا السياق، يُقدم الكاتبان و الناقدان الالمانيان هانز ريباوس و فولفغانغ إيزر جملة من المفاهيم النقدية ،ك "افق التوقع" ،"اللاتحديد" و "التجربة الجمالية" ، من اجل تحليل خيارات الكاتب النصية وانعكاساتها على توقعات و ردة فعل المتلقي .على وجه التحديد، تُمثل فراغات النص البنيوية ،المعنوية والقصدية فضاءً تتراجع فيه سلطة الكاتب و يُفسح فيه المجال للقارئ. اعتماد مكارثي في اعماله على اسلوب روائي يتميز بالإيجازو الحذف ،التناقض و الغموض يُساهم في تحفيز القارئ على الاختيار، التحكيم، التنسيق، الاستكشاف و التأمل. من خلال شرح تجاوب القارئ الضمني مع التعقيدات الأسلوبية والدلالية في الروايات الثلاث تكشف الاطروحة عن تعزيز مشاركة القارئ و مضاعفة دوره التأويلي، التصوري و الابداعي. القارئ في نصوص مكارثي الاخيرة ليس مجرد قارئ. إنه مشاهد ، ومستمع ، ، و مبدع ، وكاتب.

الكلمات المفتاحية : التجربة الجمالية، كورماك مكارثي، القارئ الضمني، اللاتحديد، الأدنوية ،المعتقد الروحي. هانز ريباوس، فولفغانغ إيزر