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## Frontiersman's Identity in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*: A Contrapuntal Reading

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to offer a contrapuntal reading of Cormac McCarthy's Western novel *No Country for Old Men* (2005) by drawing on the notion of frontiersman's identity. McCarthy has been predominantly viewed as a revisionist in his politics of representing the myth of American West, yet little attention has been given to the way in which this novel calls into question the public view of him as a writer who revises and critiques the myth of the West. From a contrapuntal perspective, we argue that although the text depicts the failure of the frontiersman, in particular Sheriff Bell, in contemporary society, through nostalgia for older times the writer keeps the frontiersman's dream and hope alive. Furthermore, we problematize the very older times for which the protagonist Bell expresses his nostalgia for. We argue that these nostalgic older times have been also a period of bloodshed and violence regarding other nationalities and ethnicities whose voice is not heard in this narrative. McCarthy's text is indeed silent about the sufferings of those represented as the other, the Vietnamese for instance, in the text.

**Keywords:** *Frontiersman, identity, Cormac McCarthy, No country for Old Men, Contrapuntal Reading*

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### 1. Introduction

The contemporary American novelist Cormac McCarthy has often been identified as a revisionist in his representation of the myth of American West. Mayne (2001), for instance, observes that "McCarthy's western work is routinely heralded as 'revisionist' for its postmodern 'anti-Western' tendencies" (p.4). Set in the borderlands of Texas and Mexico in 1980, McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) as "one of the best-known neo-westerns of the twenty-first century," (Parker, 2017, p. 30) is an inquiry into elements informing the identity of his characters, in particular his frontiersmen. The movie version of the novel, directed by Coen brothers, was released in 2007 and won scores of awards, hence the novel's further critical reception. The narrative relates the interconnected destiny of three

main characters-Ed Tom Bell, the sheriff of a Texas county, Llewelyn Moss, a veteran of the Vietnam War, and Anton Chigurh, a psychopathic killer--as they are engaged in a case of drug trafficking. Llewelyn Moss, hunting antelope in the Texas desert near the Mexican border, comes upon a drug deal gone wrong. He finds a load of heroin and more than \$2 million in drug money. He is subsequently pursued by an assassin named Anton Chigurh who is hired to retrieve the money; Sheriff Bell, who sees that the life of Moss and his wife Carla Jean is in danger, in turn pursues Chigurh. Consequently, the narrative becomes a chase story in which a hunter is hunted by a bounty hunter. By the end of the novel, Moss is murdered by a gang of Mexican drug dealers, the money is retrieved by Chigurh who returns it to its owner, and Moss' wife is murdered by



Chigurh. Feeling defeated and disillusioned by his own ideals as a lawman, Sheriff Bell retires from his post. A large number of critics have focused in particular on the identity of the frontiersman Sheriff Bell in this narrative.

Sheriff Bell has been identified essentially as a figure of failure by many critics, one who expresses his nostalgia for older times when seemingly everything was perfect. In this respect, Lincoln (2009) refers to McCarthy's narrative as a sorry tale (p. 141). As he observes, it is "an old story of a desiccated wasteland, a deafening horizon, an unbearable burden, a tarnished memory, a broken heart and cracked mind, a conscience that can't stand to make choices anymore" (p. 149). Similarly, Estes (2013) notes that McCarthy in "*No Country for Old Men* presents us with a world that is broken and much of the text is devoted to different characters' thoughts on why this is the case (p. 179). In the same vein, Hawkins (2017) sees McCarthy's frontiersman as a figure of failure. "One of the most damning aspects of *No Country for Old Men* is how it renders both Bell and Moss small," states Hawkins (p. 17). This study addresses frontiersman's identity in McCarthy's narrative from a contrapuntal perspective.

By presenting a contrapuntal analysis or, to use the words of Burney (2012), a "reading against the grain" (p. 128) we will examine the extent McCarthy's text is informed by revisionist criticism in relation to the notion of frontiersman's identity. We will begin by a discussion of the concept of contrapuntal reading and will proceed to the analysis of the novel from this perspective. We will focus in particular on the work's title and the motif of nostalgia in it. Finally, we will argue that McCarthy's text refuses to delve deep into the true nature of older times for which his aging cowboy Sheriff Bell expresses his nostalgia. It also silent about the sufferings of those nationalities and ethnicities represented as the other, the Vietnamese in particular, in the text. We will further illustrate although the novel mainly depicts the failure of its protagonist Sheriff Bell, the writer reinscribes the values it apparently critiques with regard to the history of American frontiersman.

## 2. Contrapuntal Reading

In his classic book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1993) engages in a contrapuntal reading of Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*. As dubbed by Said, "contrapuntal reading" (p. 66) or analysis

provides postcolonial critics with a proper strategy for addressing colonial texts. In Said's view, texts "are protean things; they are tied to circumstances and politics large and small, and these require attention and criticism" (p. 318). Texts, Said highlights, "are never neutral activities: there are interests, powers, passions, pleasures entailed no matter how entertaining or aesthetic the work" (p. 318). Said uses the phrase "a structure of attitude and reference" (xxiii) in this regard. As Wilson (1994) notes, this structure functions as "the base from which a contrapuntal reading chiefly proceeds" (p. 266). Through a contrapuntal reading, Wilson states, "interpreters move back and forth between an internal and external standpoint on the work's imaginative project, with special attention to the structure of reference and attitudes it contains" (p. 266).

In analyzing a colonial text, Said proposes, "we begin to reread it not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (p. 51). In this process, "hidden structures of colonialism and empire reveal themselves through the play of several oppositional themes" (Burney, 2012, p. 127). In Austen's narrative, for instance, the heroine's benefactor Sir Thomas Bertram is the owner of a plantation in Antigua. As Said argues, no matter how insulated and isolated Mansfield park, it "requires overseas sustenance. Sir Thomas's property in the Caribbean would have had to be a sugar plantation maintained by slave labor" (p. 89). Thus, Said draws on an aspect of Austen's text that there is just a passing remark on it in the narrative. He gives voice to the fact that Sir Bertram's family profits from colonial slave trade. In this context, Said points out that contrapuntal reading means reading "with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England" (p. 66). The term contrapuntal, as highlighted by Said, is derived from music. "In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one;" Said notes, "yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives

from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work" (p. 51).

"Contrapuntal analysis is a form of re-reading texts from the margins to the center, from the point of view and perspective of the Other," observes Burney (p. 126). "It has been a technique of oppositional close reading," Burney states, "that has been applied extensively as a postcolonial strategy for critique of literature, arts, and texts" (p. 126). As Said suggests, contrapuntal analysis must give voice to all aspects of a text, in particular its ideology: "We must therefore read the great canonical texts with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented ... in such works" (p. 66), Said proposes. As Burney highlights:

a reading of a text will not be complete unless a critic probes not only what the author included but also what she excluded from the writing. ... In this sense, contrapuntal analysis probes a text's multiple, sometimes contradictory, layers of perspectives and visions that are inlaid in the textuality. (p. 131)

### 3. Nostalgia for Older Times in *No Country for the Old Men*

An important aspect of McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* is his protagonist's dissatisfaction with the present condition of his society and his nostalgia for older times. "I'm not the man of an older time they say I am," Sheriff Bell states, "I wish I was. I'm a man of this time" (p. 279). An investigation into the nature of this nostalgia makes a contrapuntal reading of this novel possible. In this regard, a discussion of the title of the novel as well as a consideration of Sheriff Bell's musings on the problems of his society are of prime significance.

The title of McCarthy's novel is taken from the first line of William Butler Yeats' poem "Sailing to Byzantium" in which the speaker of the poem expresses his meditations on the old age and its implications:

That is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
– Those dying generations – at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unaging intellect, (lines 1-8).

The young generation, which the old speaker of the poem addresses, care only for sensuality. They are so involved in the "sensual music" of life that "neglect / Monuments of unaging intellect," (lines 7-8)

by which the speaker means works of art. The speaker in old age prefers the holy city of Byzantium in which, unlike the natural world, nothing is subject to death, decay and change. Thus the stanza establishes a contrast between the temporal world of sensual music and the permanent world of art. The speaker's meditation on the old age continues in the next stanza: "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress," (lines 9-12). The speaker in old age feels like being a scarecrow, like a "tattered coat upon a stick," (line 10) unless his soul transcends the limits of everyday physical world. There is no place for the aged speaker among these young sensualists whose temperament is out of tune with his aspirations. The lines mentioned above are evocative of the mood which McCarthy develops in his novel. Similar to the speaker of Yeats' poem, the protagonist of McCarthy's narrative Sheriff Bell feels quite alien to the violent environment in which he is caught. "Yeats' reference to the 'aged man' and the 'tattered coat upon a stick' has an obvious analog in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*," Frye (2005) points out, "specifically in Sheriff Bell and Uncle Ellis. McCarthy works deliberately to emphasize their age and in Bell's case his preoccupation with a fading life and its ultimate meaning in a violent world" (p. 15). From the very beginning, Sheriff Bell finds himself in a universe which is at odds with his ideals as a lawman. Bell's italicized monologues at the beginning of each chapter of the novel are integral to an understanding of his thoughts regarding the present situation of his community.

In his first monologue, Sheriff Bell narrates the story of a boy he sent "to the gaschamber at Huntsville," (p. 3) Texas, to be punished. The boy, Sheriff Bell says, might have been "*some new kind*" (p.3) of criminal in the region. Then, Sheriff Bell adds, "*But he wasnt nothin compared to what was comin down the pike*" (4). Here, Sheriff Bell foreshadows the story of the main villain of the narrative Anton Chigurh. The crime committed by the boy was insignificant compared to what was committed by Chigurh, the "*true and living prophet of destruction*" (p. 4). In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy is concerned with the problem of evil in the contemporary society. Drug trafficking is the very projection of this phenomenon. As Sheriff Bell says: "*I think if you were Satan and you*



were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics” (p. 218). In another of his monologues, Sheriff Bell laments how things are getting worse every day in the society. The main problems with teaching in the schools in the 1930’s, he says, were “things like talkin in class and runnin in the hallways. Chewing gum. Copyin homework. Things of that nature” (p. 196) But in Bell’s community of 1970s and 1980s, “Rape, arson, murder. Drugs, Suicide” are main problems that teachers are worried about in schools (p. 196). Thus, Bell longs for older times when society was not much void of moral principles. He remembers his father’s advice to him: “My Daddy always told me to just do the best you knew how and tell the truth.... And if you done somethin wrong just stand up and say you done it and say you’re sorry and get on with it” (p. 249). The society which Sheriff Bell depicts is lacking in its moral standards. “People anymore you talk about right and wrong they’re liable to smile at you” (p. 159), he says. He cannot find any answer to the maladies of this society; he thinks that only something like resurrection of Christ can save the society: “I wake up sometimes way in the night and I know as certain as death that there aint nothin short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train” (p. 159). McCarthy’s reference to the second coming of Christ is evocative of the themes of another poem by Yeats. In his poem “The Second Coming,” Yeats draws on the brutality of modern culture and its disintegration in terms of the image of a falcon which has flown out of the range of falconer’s call or whistle, hence out of the control of its keeper. Similarly, as Bell gets older, he feels that as a lawman, he has no longer any control over drug dealers. As he complains, “Ever day is against you. Time is not on your side. I don’t know as it’d be any compliment if you was known for second guessin a bunch of dopedealers” (p. 216). Sheriff Bell’s nostalgia for older times and his critique of the condition of contemporary society can be further addressed with regard to his identity as a frontiersman.

#### [4. Frontiersman’s Identity in No Country for Old Men](#)

The Frontier is a key term in the tradition of American literary Western. The European colonizers of the New World created frontiers between themselves and indigenous inhabitants of the land. These

were often the site of violent confrontation between them. To the historian Turner (1998), the frontier was more than a physical borderland; it was “the meeting point between [Indian] savagery and [European] civilization” (p. 3). In his essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” delivered on July 12, 1893, Turner stated that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement Westward explain American development” (p. 1). Basic values of American society such as individualism, according to Turner, were created and developed in the course of interaction with the frontier. As he stated, “the frontier is the line of most rapid Americanization” (p. 37). Interaction with it gives Americans “that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things ... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism” (p. 37). Turner’s views articulated a very specific conception of the American frontiersman recognized, in the words of McVeigh (2007), as “a quintessential American figure of action and heroism, embodying notions of masculinity, strength and individualism” (p. 14). In discussing the portrait of the frontiersman in McCarthy’s fiction, Hawkins refers to “McCarthy’s dialectical stance toward the frontiersman”, and “the push and pull of attraction and revulsion, celebration and condemnation” that readers find in his Southwestern works (p. 5). Hawkins is of the opinion that “McCarthy’s fiction clearly respects, even lauds, the qualities for which the frontiersman is esteemed—e.g., toughness, loyalty, honesty, and courage” (p. 5). Nevertheless, Hawkins claims, “McCarthy’s fiction clearly is deeply suspicious of the frontiersman, as well as the American society he extends and defends” (p. 6). To have a better understanding of McCarthy’s stance toward the frontiersman, as an agent of American cultural identity, analysis of the figure in relation to his antagonists is indispensable. In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy places his principle frontiersmen Sheriff Bell and Llewelyn Moss in conflict to the antagonist Anton Chigurh. In view of Arthur (2017), McCarthy’s rhetoric has “Judeo-Christian underpinnings” (p. 30) in this respect. Color discrimination and racial othering are also suggested in the narrative. Upon investigating the carnage down in a

canyon where a drug deal went wrong, a deputy sheriff called Torbert poses the question, "Who the hell are these people?" (p. 79); Sheriff Bell's response is as follows,

I don't know. I used to say they were the same ones we've always had to deal with. Same ones my granddaddy had to deal with. Back then they was rustlin cattle. Now they're runnin dope. But I don't know as that's true no more. I'm like you. I ain't sure we've seen these people before. Their kind. I don't know what to do about em even. *If you killed em all they'd have to build and annex on to hell* [Emphasis added]. (p. 79)

As Arthur notes, Bell's statements demonstrate, "the othering that pervades the area ('they,' 'these people,' 'their kind'), "the binary morality that separates people like Bell and Torbert from those committing the crimes and murders" about which they are conversing, and furthermore, "the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of that morality via the mention of Hell" (p. 30). McCarthy's narrative underscores the pervasiveness of evil forces in the community and beyond that. It presents Chigurh, a non-white person, as its villain. Its protagonists, Sheriff Bell and Moss, are white-skin frontiersmen. Chigurh, as the personification of evil or a "living prophet of destruction," (p. 4) finds exotic attributes in the narrative. In the gas station scene, where he forces the guy behind the counter to toss a coin for his life, his eyes mark him out as the other. "The man looked at Chigurh's eyes for the first time. Blue as lapis. At once glistening and totally opaque. Like wet stones" (p. 56), the narrator says. Similarly, in the scene picturing the confrontation between Chigurh and Moss in a hotel, the narrator gives exotic attributes to Chigurh:

The man was no more than ten feet away. **The whole room was pulsing slowly. There was an odd smell in the air. Like some foreign cologne. A medicinal edge to it. Everything humming.** ... The man turned his head and gazed at Moss. Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly exotic. Beyond Moss's experience. (p. 112)

As Benjamin Barber notes, Chigurh's "foreign appearance and staid manner mark him out as other from those around him" (p. 165). Chigurh, as assassin of McCarthy's narrative, engages in what Barber terms as a "ritual of chance" (163). He justifies the murdering of his victims by highlighting the principles of chance and fate. This is best evident in scenes depicting Chigurh's confrontation with the gas station attendant and Carla Jean Moss, where he flips a coin to decide for their lives. Chigurh, "as a

willing instrument or representative of the sovereign judgment," (Bannon, 2016, p. 92) indeed becomes the voice of a nihilistic and fatal worldview in the narrative. Bell prefers not to confront this real embodiment of evil: "*I don't 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*" (p. 4). To confront Chigurh, Bell admits, "*a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that*" (p. 4). This accounts for lack of direct confrontation between Chigurh and Bell in the narrative. As a lawman, Bell anchored his hope in administering justice in Terrell County, Texas, for more than 30 years but now he suffers from serious doubt regarding his ability to deal with the issue:

Part of it was I always thought I could at least someway put things right and I guess I just dont feel that way no more ... I'm bein asked to stand for something that I dont have the same belief in it I once did. Asked to believe in something I might not hold with the way I once did. That's the problem. I failed at it even when I did. Now I've seen it held to the light. Seen any number of believers fall away. I've been forced look at it again and forced to look at myself. For better or worse I do not know. ... I never had them sorts of doubts before. (p. 306)

Drug trafficking is the primary problem that Sheriff Bell has to deal with in the borders. As he says, drug dealers "*dont have no respect for the law? That aint half of it. They dont even think about the law. It dont seem to even concern em*" (p. 216). But the problem is worse than this: "*And this may sound ignorant but I think for me the worst of it is knowin that probably the only reason I'm even still alive is that they have no respect for me. And that's very painful. Very painful*" (p. 217). Bell feels that his cultural identity as a frontiersman with a mission to keep order in the region is not well acknowledged. His failure to save the lives of Carla Jean and her husband Moss is another factor which adds to his doubts regarding his abilities as a lawman. This leads to his retirement finally. Llewelyn Moss is another frontiersman whose character embodies some traits of American identity.

Referred to as "a Texas everyman" (p. 80) by Welsh (2009), Moss is also the voice of the American dream in McCarthy's narrative. Tyrer and Nickell (2009) describe him as,

one who is neither good nor evil but who accurately represents a modern citizen, a person who wants his share of the American dream and is willing to sacrifice his principles



to get it. Moss, a young man, wants to retire in financial ease, and the audience, while divided over what he ought to do with all that money, wants Moss to survive. Poverty is no country for old men any more than violence is. (p. 86)

Moss' character adds also historical dimensions to McCarthy's narrative. In a scene of the novel, Moss is seen among the ancient pictographs chiseled in the rocks: "The rocks there were etched with pictographs perhaps a thousand years old perhaps a thousand years old. The men who drew them hunters like himself. Of them there was no trace" (p. 11). From this vantage point, Hage (2010) argues that McCarthy's "borderland novels place humanity on a historical continuum" (p. 35). The scene is similar to that of Anasazi ruins, described in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, where Judge Holden gives his lectures. It lets McCarthy to add historical resonance to his western narrative.

#### *4.1 Frontiersman's identity: Historical Resonance*

"[T]his country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too" (p. 284), observes Bell in a passage of the novel. In addressing the cultural identity of the frontiersmen, McCarthy's narrative adds historical dimension to them. McCarthy's Sheriff Bell and Llewelyn Moss are veterans of World War II and the Vietnam War respectively. In harmony with his nostalgia for older times, Sheriff Bell expresses his regret for not living up to his frontiersman's codes of conduct as a soldier in the World War II. Upon visiting his Uncle Ellis, Bell tells him a story about his past as a soldier in that war. He tells him how he was awarded a Bronze Star for combatting a group of German soldiers in the war. Bell's meditations on the topic lead him to confess that he did not deserve the Bronze Star. As Bell tells his uncle, in the face of enemy forces, he ran away as it got dark and left behind some of his fellow soldiers. Although he could have stayed, he was of no help to them and certainly he would have lost his life staying in the battlefield. Now, he regrets his flight from the scene of war: "But you go into battle it's a blood oath to look after the men with you and I don't know why I didn't" (p. 278), says Bell. Uncle Ellis' comments on the costs and consequences of war are also illuminating. Addressing Bell, he observes that: "I was too young for one war and too old for the next one. But I seen what come out of it. *you can be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more*

*than what they're worth* [emphasis added]. Ask them Gold Star mothers what they paid and what they got for it. You always pay too much" (p. 267). Through the voice of Ellis, the narrator expresses his dissatisfaction with war without ignoring his patriotism. Llewelyn Moss is another frontiersman and veteran of war in McCarthy's narrative. Moss was a sniper in the Vietnam War. By introducing characters like Moss and Carson Wells, who are veterans of Vietnam War, McCarthy's fiction allows him to express his meditations on the nature of war generally and on the Vietnam War in particular. In a scene of the novel, Sheriff Bell visits Moss' father who tells him about the impact of the Vietnam War on the young veterans and their problems in the aftermath of the war:

A lot of them boys that come back, they're still havin problems. I thought it was because they didnt have the country behind em. But I think it might be worse than that even. The country they did have was in pieces. It still is. It wasnt the hippies' fault. It wasn't the fault of them boys that got sent over there neither. (p. 294)

Referring to what he calls the "antiwar theme" (p. 266) in the narrative, Chen (2016) is of the belief that in this case "Moss's father criticizes the government's indifference to those veterans and emphasizes how war contributes to the moral decline and brutalization of American society in general" (p. 265). Yet, Moss's father delves deeper into this issue:

People will tell you it was Vietnam brought this country to its knees. But I never believed that. It was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just the icin on the cake. We didnt have nothin to give em to take over there. If we'd sent em without rifles I dont know as they'd of been all that much worse off. You cant go to war like that. *You cant go to war without God* [emphasis added]. I dont know what is goin to happen when the next one comes. I surely dont. (pp. 294–295)

In his comment on this passage, Hawkins remarks that here McCarthy through the voice of Moss' father "effects a reversal of the dominant cultural memory of the Vietnam War" (p. 19). "Rather than figuring the war as that which birthed cultural anxiety about America's legacy and future," observes Hawkins, "McCarthy argues that there is something wrong with this legacy itself that may be the cause of American defeat" (p. 19).

However, to Moss' father eventually the problem is that of a moral crises in

American society as he says one cannot go to war without a belief in God.

### **5. The Dream is Alive: A Vision of Hope**

*No Country for Old Men* ends with Sheriff Bell's two dreams about his dead father. In the first dream, Bell says "he give me some money and I think I lost it" (p. 309). His second dream is as follows:

*It was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothing. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and his head down and when he rode past I seen he 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. (p. 309)*

As Hage states, dreams are an integral component of McCarthy's literary vision" (p. 75). The first dream is evocative of the theme of money in the narrative. "The world I've seen has not made me a spiritual person," says Bell in one of his monologues. He continues, "I think I know where we're headed. We're bein bought with our own money. And it aint just the drugs" (p. 303). In contrast to the first dream, the second dream has an overtly spiritual element attached to it. It is evocative of Bell's nostalgia for an older times tinged with cowboy principles when he and his father rode on horseback through a mountain pass. "Employing the Promethean motif of striking and conveying fire," (Bannon, 2016, p. 94) the dream offers a beacon of hope to Bell. This is suggested in the image of his dead father carrying fire in a horn. As Frye observes: "The image of his long dead father carrying a beacon concludes the novel on a note of illumination in darkness" (p. 16). Along the same lines, discussing the image of carrying the fire in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, Pugh (2017) argues that "the motif itself stems from a distant past, a memory of a home and of hope in a collective ethic" (p.47).

### **6.No Country for Old Men: Contrapuntal Analysis**

According to Hawkins, one of the functions of the frontiersman in American culture has been traditionally "to justify the United States' Manifest Destiny of geographical and cultural expansion" (p.

15). As he observes, the frontiersman, in part,

through his strange combination of artifice and guilelessness, assures Americans that unlike other great civilizations, the United States will expand the reach of its 'city upon a hill' the world over, even as the country remains young, innocent, and free—in implicit or direct contrast to the European empires of old. (p. 15)

The frontiersman also, explains Hawkins, is "a figure who embodies a combination of righteousness and power, living a symbiosis between them" (p. 16). In Hawkins' view, this "vision of the frontiersman largely held sway in American culture from the days of James Fenimore Cooper up until the debacle that was the American War in Vietnam" (p. 16). In other words, the traditional vision of the frontiersman in the post-Vietnam War era underwent a change. The Vietnam War, argues Hawkins, "forced Americans to confront a landscape in which American power and American righteousness appeared anything but symbiotic" (p. 16). Moreover, adds Hawkins, in the decades following United States "combat forces' 1973 withdrawal from Vietnam—the decades that have been McCarthy's most productive—neither a new nor a reconfigured national mythology has arisen with sufficient force to move Americans beyond the trauma of that war's assault on the frontier myth, among other key constructions of American identity" (p. 16). This is why, Hawkins maintains, one finds "in the best of America's post-Vietnam War representations of the frontiersman... an open-ended questioning about the moral status of the frontiersman and his efficacy in a post-Vietnam War age" (16). As we discussed in the Introduction, from this vantage point, Hawkins sees McCarthy's frontiersman as a figure of failure. In part, Hawkins' claims are supported by a passage describing Bell's last work at work:

he walked out of the courthouse for the last time. He walked down the steps and out the back door and got in his truck and sat there. He couldnt name the feeling. It was sadness but it was something else besides. And the something else besides was what had him sitting there instead of starting the truck. He'd felt like this before but not in a long time and when he said that, then he knew what it was. It was defeat. It was being beaten. More bitter to him than death. You need to get over that, he said. Then he started the truck. (p. 306)

In the same vein, Saxton and Cole refer to Bell as "an aging, ineffectual



cowboy who has retired, renounced the violence that sustained his male dominance, and lost the moral certainty that ensured his identity” (p. 97).

What is missing from these representations of the identity of Bell as a frontiersman and a figure of failure, is the negligence of another side of Bell’s identity, that is, his identity as a figure of nostalgia and longing. Although by the end of the novel Bell feels that he is defeated and beaten, his nostalgic longing for older times is with him to the end. This is also suggested in his second dream which offers a vision of hope. A close analysis of Bell’s nostalgia sheds more light on the issue under discussion. Historically speaking, the older times for which Bell expresses his nostalgia has been colored by, among other things, violence, bloodshed, and racism toward other ethnicities and nationalities. The colonization of the New World was equal to the United States’ encroachments upon the lands of Native Americans and it led to their genocide. Bell’s nostalgia for older times in the context of American frontier history is thus open to question. Sheriff Bell’s confession to Uncle Ellis was that he did not deserve the commendation he received in the World War II; Hawkins reads the scene as follows:

When we read Bell’s confession in light of his status as frontiersman, what we should see is that his survivor’s guilt and his unwillingness to accept praise for his actions are par for the course—part of the humility the frontiersman is supposed to display. (p. 21)

Hawkins’ reading misses the fact that here Bell expresses his regrets for not acting according to his cowboy ideals and codes of conduct by leaving the scene of war. Stone and Kuznick (2012) shed a better light on the harsh realities of World War II. As they observe,

*Most Americans view World War II nostalgically as the ‘good war,’* [emphasis added] in which the United States and its allies triumphed over German Nazism, Italian fascism, and Japanese militarism. The rest of the world remembers it as the bloodiest war in human history. By the time it was over, more than 60 million people lay dead, including 27 million Russians, between 10 million and 20 million Chinese, 6 million Jews, 5.5 million Germans, 3 million non-Jewish Poles, 2.5 million Japanese, and 1.5 million Yugoslavs. Austria, Great Britain, France, Italy, Hungary, Romania, and the United States each counted between 250,000 and 333,000 dead. (p.87)

In the case of the Vietnam War, which was the subject of a conversation between

Moss’ father and Bell, the narrator has the voice of Moss’ father to express his critique of war because so many young American veterans of the war suffered the consequences of it. As it was mentioned, critics such as Chen have referred to the antiwar theme of McCarthy’s rhetoric. Again, what is missing from such readings is that here Moss’ father’s sympathy lies firmly with American citizens and he is concerned mainly with the problems of American veterans in the aftermath of the war. McCarthy’s narrative, we argue, is essentially silent about the consequences of the war for the Vietnamese. It does not also question the role of Americans in the destruction of the lives of millions of Vietnamese. Zinn’s (1980) views on the catastrophe of the Vietnam War are illuminating in this regard:

By the end of the Vietnam war, 7 million tons of bombs had been dropped on Vietnam, more than twice the total bombs dropped on Europe and Asia in World War II—almost one 500-pound bomb for every human being in Vietnam. It was estimated that there were 20 million bomb craters in the country. In addition, poisonous sprays were dropped by planes to destroy trees and any kind of growth—an area the size of the state of Massachusetts was covered with such poison. Vietnamese mothers reported birth defects in their children. Yale biologists, using the same poison (2,4,5,T) on mice, reported defective mice born and said they had no reason to believe the effect on humans was different. (p. 469)

From the point of view of Moss’s father, the American society suffered not just from the Vietnam War; the problem had also a moral dimension. As he says, “You can’t go to war without God” (p. 295). Ironically, his statement has the aura of moral crusades through which American policymakers pursued their ideals of manifest destiny. McCarthy’s personal stance toward the issue of war in the novel is perhaps suggested best through the voice of Uncle Ellis: “you can be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more than what they’re worth,” (p. 267) Ellis says to Bell. As it was elaborated, a contrapuntal reading of a text engages with “not only what the author included but also what she excluded from the writing” (Burney, p.131). McCarthy is himself patriotic; he does not question, for example, the role of Americans in the destruction of the lives of Vietnamese. His critique is indeed directed against the consequences of the war for American citizens. This hegemonic and patriotic

perspective is of course silent about the trauma of the war for non-American citizens.

## 7. Conclusion

The predominant view of McCarthy is that of a writer who revises and critiques the myth of American West. With regard to his novel *No Country for Old Men* scholars have focused on the way that the writer depicts the failure of his frontiersmen Bell and Moss. In particular, Bell is presented as a figure of loss and longing in the narrative. As a nostalgic figure, Bell longs for older times when everything was seemingly uncorrupted by the sort of evils that he sees in the contemporary society. In this study, we have mainly argued that the older times for which Bell expresses his longing for have been also one of bloodshed and violence regarding other ethnicities and nationalities. McCarthy's text, for instance, is silent about the consequences of the Vietnam War for Vietnamese. It focuses just on the pains and sufferings of American citizens during and after the war. Although the frontiersman Bell looks lost and defeated, through nostalgia for older times, he keeps the frontiersman's dream alive. Thus, McCarthy's narrative reinscribes some of the values and visions that it seemingly critiques with regard to the history of American frontier and frontiersman.

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