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Destiny of female characters in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy

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Abstract

One of the prime criticisms leveled at McCarthy's work is his portrayal of women. Female characters are rarely the focus of his novels, and when they do appear, they are not as fleshed-out and complex as the male characters. McCarthy exaggerates female absence and it is this absence which could be seen as the cause of the barbarism of the men, who are also, after all, severely punished with psychological and physical dismemberment.

This paper examines the theme of the absence of female characters and their fate if they exist. And seeks to explore how the female characters face their destiny in different ways in some of Cormac McCarthy's novels. It also explores the role of determinism in the major novels such as *Cities of the Plain*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*.

Keywords: Destiny, Woman, Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road*

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy is one of the most important living novelists in contemporary American literature. He is a poetic storyteller whose challenging novels explore themes of violence, good and evil, and human survival. Cormac McCarthy's work explores the darkest shadows of human nature, but McCarthy himself had a remarkably conventional childhood. One of McCarthy's better-known novels is the first installment in his so-called Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*. For this novel, he won both the U.S. National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award. McCarthy won also the Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *The Road* (2006). From the violence of America's westward expansion, *Blood Meridian*, to our present-day capacity for bloodshed *No Country For old men*, to the possibility of a post-apocalyptic future, *The Road*, McCarthy's novels take a decidedly dark and pessimistic view of American life. Although he is now widely read, criticism devoted to his work has been limited. The dark conclusions of McCarthy's early novels and the often extreme and horrifically violent behavior of his characters left critics struggling to find a critical approach that could give meaning to the works.

However, even in light of attention to the author, a number of problematic critical absences remain. Some critics focus on McCarthy's work regarding the absence of female characters in most of his work. Although a number of commentators mention the intensely male nature of McCarthy's fiction, very few pay extensive attention to issues of gender in McCarthy's novels. The obviation of women is central to McCarthy's theme in his novels. His tendency to treat women as mere devices to further the plots of men could be fairly compared to the tendency of that other great American writer Philip Roth. "McCarthy's characters tend to inhabit predominantly masculine settings. His female characters are all flat" (Greenwood 19). As in McCarthy's third book, *Child of God*, Women do not fare nearly so well. The novel tells the grisly story of Lester Ballard, a mentally disturbed man who eventually comes to inhabit a system of caves along with the corpses of women he has murdered and then kept as sexual partners.

In the interview in 2007 McCarthy appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show, she reminded him that critics have commented on his inability to create believable women characters are widespread, to which he replied, "Women are tough...I don't pretend to understand women. I think men don't know much about women; they find them very mysterious." The criticism generally is benign and concerns the lack of development of the female characters,

a characteristic that Ann Fisher Wirth describes positively, “McCarthy’s female characters become more interesting the less he attempts to develop them, for their power is poetic, gestural” (127). Nell Sullivan takes a more aggressive stance: “Each novel in the trilogy ultimately excludes the potentially significant female characters as part of a process of the obviation of women” (Boys 229). Susan Kollin argues “[t]he lack of fully developed female characters in [McCarthy’s] Westerns” and the author’s “obsession with Anglo-American masculinity,” but she then suggests that perhaps McCarthy “erase[s] the presence of women in order to argue a case about the place of Anglo masculinity in [American] nation-building projects” (Wood 172)

Moreover, Female characters in McCarthy’s novels are doomed to a painful fate. “A number of feminist critics point out the absence of significant female characters in McCarthy’s texts and draw attention to the unhappy fate of most of those who do appear. That this is so cannot be denied” (Cant 16). *The Road* is the best example which contains only a few female characters who themselves serve only a minor role in the story, the text provides insights into how the road tale might in fact differ for men and women, and why some characters might wish to forego the journey itself. In *The Road*, the mother of the boy appears briefly at the beginning of the story before she kills herself. She only exists as a memory, as she chose to take her own life rather than face the brutal post-apocalyptic world of the novel. She tells the man that she cannot see herself as a survivor, but instead regards them as “the walking dead in a horror film” (McCarthy 55). Here the woman speaks her own version of the truth about their gruesome situation to the man, telling him that sooner or later they will be caught and killed: “They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it,” she tells him (McCarthy 56). The absence of women in his stories limits McCarthy from joining the company of canonical writers such as Shakespeare and Faulkner. McCarthy’s male characters, while they are complex, are not offset by any fully imagined female ones, and in this way, he not only departs from an important convention of modern fiction, but also limits the imaginative scope of his narratives. Therefore, the female characters that do appear in most of his novels tend to be peripheral, and to represent essentialized aspects of femininity.

In *No Country For Old Men* Women exist mainly to show primordial attraction and inarticulate loyalty toward men. Carla Jean accepts her fate after confronting Chigurh who haunts her husband, Llewellyn Moss. In this novel Llewellyn is forced to escape after he found 2million dollars. He preferred to keep money than to give police and save his life and his wife’s life. Carla Jean declares both her ignorance of her husband’s plan and her general innocence in this matter. Ultimately, Chigurh helps her to accept her fate, and kills her. “Chigurh personifies fate, destiny, and even death on the prowl for Moss and the others.’ Chigurh tracks down and kills his employer, Wells, Llewellyn Moss, then Carla Jean Moss for good measure.”(Nelson 183)

There are some aspects are noted through which we can know how female characters are absent or slightly represented in McCarthy’s novels. The escape from women is one of the reason that reduce the appearance of female characters. Historically, as Michael S. Kimmel points out, since the early 19th century, American men have been escaping to the frontier, the mountains “the forests, high seas, battlegrounds” in order to locate and reclaim

something that they felt was missing; some essential part of their identity or their manhood (History 20).

What the American novel typically concerns itself with is adventure, escape, a journey undertaken by a male away from society into the wilderness, or “some place, at least, where mothers do not come” (Fiedler 181). Such as in *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady’s journey is an effort to escape from society and also from women: denied of his mother’s ranch he travels down to Mexico with little chance of seeing his mother or his sweetheart, Mary Catherine, again. Females have also suffered from the isolation due to the males must escape in order to venture alone into the wilderness to find in isolation a basic truth about their identity and by extension, the society that they have left behind and to which they (may) return. Billy’s departure from the family home in *The Crossing* can be read as an example of this same type of masculinist retreat from feminization, whether this feminization comes in the form of females themselves or the larger social effects of increasingly industrialized urban culture which “denies men the opportunities for manly adventure” (Kimmel, History 20).

In *Cities of the Plain* Magdalena is the central female character and she is a young epileptic prostitute who spends the novel waiting for John Grady Cole to marry her and free her from her grim existence. Magdalena is murdered by Eduardo’s sidekick, Tiburcio, who cuts her throat, after she steals away from the brothel to meet John Grady at a crossing of the Rio Grande and leave Mexico. Magdalena’s destiny shows how violence occurs most vividly in mistreatment with female characters in McCarthy’s novel. Erik Hage argues “in McCarthy’s vision destiny is the thing that was created for us long before we or our world existed” (62).

The absence of fully developed female characters, and the implied destructive potential of most females who do appear (Alejandra, Magdalena, La Criada, John Grady’s mother, the nameless girl who takes Boyd away from Billy, La Duefia Alfonsa) and the subtext of homoerotic relationships between men, suggest either full-fledged misogyny or allegory. McCarthy’s women, on the other hand, are less characters than useful representations, representing either betrayal or victimization, or in some very few cases, such as the character Betty in *Cities of the Plain*, the maternal. While McCarthy does have certain sympathies toward women, I suggest that in the novels their function is mainly to characterize the betrayal, either willed or as a result of forces beyond their control, which is equated with his western protagonists’ sense of loss and abandonment in the western landscape.

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