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Southern Gothic and the Uncanny: Nature Symbolism in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

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Poděkování

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of nature in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, arguing that both novels construct natural settings that shape, mirror and sometimes dominate human experience. Both novels are rooted in the Southern Gothic tradition and share many similarities. The study offers a comparative analysis constructed through close reading and supported by existing critical works on *As I Lay Dying* and *Bloom Meridian* and their Southern Gothic symbolism, psychology, and the uncanny.

The findings suggest that *As I Lay Dying* presents a natural environment that 'acts' like an oppressive sentient agent, while the attitude and descriptions of nature and animals by the protagonists reveal their inner struggles and overall psychological decay of the Bundren family after the death of the matriarch. The desert in *Blood Meridian* is an indifferent force. Compared to nature in *As I Lay Dying,* it exhibits similar qualities, while putting more emphasis on violence, radicality and lawlessness of the frontier. It represents the clash between the passive and moral views of the protagonist, the Kid, and the desire of the novel's enigmatic antagonist, Judge Holden, to dominate nature. Animal symbols and natural imagery in both *As I Lay Dying* and *Blood Meridian* are intermediates between the internal and external worlds of the characters. Zoomorphism and anthropomorphism blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. Animals like horses, mules, dogs and buzzards, join water and fire in conveying symbolic meanings of mortality, innocence or futility that are usually specific to the character or characters. This thesis argues that Faulkner's treatment of nature and its effect on the human condition is both continued and changed by McCarthy.

Key words: animal symbolism, Southern Gothic, psyche, zoomorphism, sentience

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá roli přírody v románech *Když jsem umírala* od Williama Faulknera a *Krvavý poledník* od Cormaca McCarthyho a soustředí se na způsob, jímž přírodní prostředí v obou románech formuje, zrcadlí a někdy ovládá lidskou psychiku. Oba romány vycházejí z tradice jižanské gotiky a sdílejí mnoho podobností. Studie nabízí srovnávací analýzu vytvořenou na základě podrobného čtení obou textů a podpořenou existujícími kritickými pracemi o symbolice, psychologii a fenoménu „uncanny" v románech *Když jsem umírala* a *Krvavý poledník.*

Zjištění práce naznačují, že kniha *Když jsem umírala* líčí prostředí jako omezující a současně vnímavou sílu, zatímco vztah jednotlivých členů rodiny k přírodě a zvířatům odhaluje jejich osobní vnitřní boje a celkový psychologický rozklad rodiny po smrti matky. Poušť v knize *Krvavý poledník*, působí naproti tomu jako lhostejná síla. Přestože vykazuje podobné vlastnosti jako příroda ve Faulkneově románu, klade větší důraz na násilí, radikalitu a bezpráví amerického západu. Popisy pouště vyjadřují střet mezi pasivními postoji a jistou morální integritou protagonisty románu, Kluka, a zřejmou touhou jeho tajemného antagonisty, přezdívaného „soudce", ovládnout přírodu. Zvířecí symboly a přírodní obrazy v románech *Když jsem umírala* i *Krvavý poledník* jsou prostředníky mezi vnitřním a vnějším světem postav. Techniky zoomorfismu a antropomorfismu stírají hranice mezi lidským a nelidským, živým a neživým. Zvířata, jako jsou koně, muly, psi a supi, se spolu s vodou a ohněm stávají nositeli symbolických významů smrtelnosti, nevinnosti nebo marnosti, které jsou obvykle specifické pro danou postavu nebo postavy. Tato práce tvrdí, že McCarthy přejímá a zároveň posouvá Faulknerovo pojetí přírody a jejího vlivu na vnitřní život podstav.

Klíčová slova: zvířecí symbolika, jižanská gotika, psychika, zoomorfismus, vědomí

Obsah

1. Introduction

Nature and its creatures can often serve as a mirror of the human mind in literature, especially in American Southern Gothic literature, where characters face forces of nature that are far beyond their understanding or control. Whether they are members of closed rural societies or wanderers, they live surrounded by nature, which profoundly affects them, as they find themselves far from civilisation's help and in situations where their life and death depend on natural elements.

The Southern Gothic genre became prominent in the postbellum 19th-century America.[1] In this period, dark Romantic, grotesque and naturalistic themes started to permeate literature. Bjerre remarks that "Characteristics of Southern Gothic include the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses; grotesque characters; dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation".[2] Flannery O'Connor defines three predecessors of modern Southern Gothic literature: Romantic Gothic represented by E. A. Poe, "the comic-grotesque tradition" and lessons from the naturalists.[3]

The last predecessor, naturalism, is especially useful for the study of the importance of natural forces and the natural environment in Southern Gothic novels, since it helps us pay attention to how closely the theme of the struggle of survival, prominent in so many of these works, is intertwined with the representation of larger transcendental forces ruling the human characters' lives. The "deterministic conventions of naturalism"[4] are thus often applied to define the role of nature and its connection to the "violent actions of primitive characters who respond to but do not understand the environmental forces", while they also struggle to understand their internal conflicts and instinctive drives.[5] Along with the grotesque and elements of Romantic Gothic, naturalism can be considered a cornerstone of the Southern Gothic genre.

In the words of the authors of *The Companion to Southern Literature*, the element of 'gothicism' in the literature of the American South makes a way for

> the frank and clinically direct presentation of the fundamental urges and violent actions of primitive characters who respond to but do not understand the environmental forces, internal conflicts, and biological drives that motivate their brutal struggle for survival and over which they have no control.[6]

The Southern Gothic genre often expresses the psychological struggles of characters who are hopeless against their environment, conflicted and full of urges. This is visible in the works of William

[1] Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick Mackethan, and Todd W. Taylor, *The Companion to Southern Literature : Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 305.
[2] Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, "Southern Gothic Literature," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, June 28, 2017, abstract, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.304.
[3] Flannery O'Connor qtd. in Flora, Mackethan, and Taylor, *The Companion to Southern Literature,* 315.
[4] Flora, Mackethan, and Taylor, *The Companion to Southern Literature* 320.
[5] Flora, Mackethan, and Taylor, *The Companion to Southern Literature* 315.
[6] Flora, Mackethan, and Taylor, *The Companion to Southern Literature* 315.

Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy. Both Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* use animal and landscape symbolism to externalise the psychological traits and inner conflicts of their characters. However, as this thesis demonstrates, apart from this shared, determining feature, and despite the fact that Faulkner was one of the major influences on McCarthy's work, there are also major differences between how both authors incorporate animal motifs and landscape symbolism in their works.

Faulkner is often considered one of the founding figures of Southern Gothic. As the editors of *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic* note, "the legacy of William Faulkner, like that of Poe, looms large over subsequent writers, but it is equally true that Faulkner is the inheritor of Poe and the gothic tradition".[7] William Faulkner, as a modernist, drew on traditional Gothic and the previous developments of the American Gothic, but transformed these approaches through the grotesque and naturalism to create modern Southern Gothic. His work paved the way for authors like Cormac McCarthy, who is often considered "one of his primary literary heirs".[8] There are many similarities between the works of the two authors as a consequence of McCarthy's inspiration by Faulkner. Indeed, as Jay Watson notes, "comparisons with Faulkner's work have been irresistible in the discussion of McCarthy's fiction".[9] Both of them not only depict the specificities of life in the South through morbid themes and the image of nature as an unforgiving, fateful force, but also exhibit formal and stylistic similarities. For example, the meditations on existence blend into ornate descriptions of nature, and the use of stream-of-consciousness is evident. Since, as Tom Pilkington remarks, "[i]n his formative years [McCarthy] was steeped in southern literature and culture, and the influence on him of southern writers like Faulkner […] is clear,"[10] many scholars identify the first stage of McCarthy's writings as "Faulknerian".[11] Even if McCarthy later seemed to deviate from this style, transforming it into more nihilistic and existential writing, the traces of Faulkner are still visible.

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* are suitable material for a comparative analysis, especially due to their adherence to the Southern Gothic genre. Both novels are set in Southern or borderland landscapes and countryside, where characters of low social background live in close connection to nature, depend on it as a source of livelihood, but sometimes struggle with the perilous aspects of nature. *As I Lay Dying* presents the social and moral decay of the postbellum South on the Bundren family of farmers who keep domestic animals for trade, sustenance, or transport. This close coexistence of the Bundrens and other people in their rural community with mules, chickens, cow, fish or a horse is a reason for the common occurrence of zoomorphic or

[7] Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow, "Introduction" in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, eds. Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47774-3.
[8] Scott D. Yarbrough, "Faulkner, McCarthy, Pop Culture, and Reading," *South Atlantic Review* 83, no. 3 (2018): 6, https://doi.org/10.2307/90024978.
[9] Jay Watson, "William Faulkner," *Cambridge University Press EBooks*, December 12, 2019, abstract, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108772297.006.
[10] Tom Pilkington, "Fate and Free Will on the American Frontier: Cormac McCarthy's Western Fiction," *Western American Literature* 27, no. 4 (1993): 312, https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1993.0005.
[11] Castillo Street and Crow, "Introduction," 370.

anthropomorphic imagery in the narrative. The idea of decay, referred to above in terms of social decline and moral corruption, is also literal, since "The pivotal monologue in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) is spoken by a decaying corpse",[12] the matriarch. This biological process of material degradation is accompanied by natural forces, such as floods and fires, which threaten the characters' lives but also mirror the corrupted relationships within the Bundren family and the individual family members' psychological disintegration.

Blood Meridian shows many similar features, despite being separated from *As I Lay Dying* by over half a century. It could be said, with Robert Brinkmeyer, that "*Blood Meridian* [is] perhaps the touchstone for understanding McCarthy's gothic vision,"[13] and remains the most famous of McCarthy's novels. In his works, and especially in *Blood Meridian*, he deploys the image of decay to provide a broader meditation on humanity and its propensity to violence, while the expressions of nature as a deterministic force remain present. In this way, "The savage and brutal setting allows McCarthy to explore questions of animal-human identity and what it means to participate in 'place' and ecological ecosystems."[14] The novel's characters spend most of the time in desolate landscapes, having correspondingly positive relationships with domestic animals, since they are dependent on horses and mules for survival. But it is also the wild animals, often connected to the characters through zoomorphic or anthropomorphic metaphors, that can reflect brutality and existential struggle. The extreme conditions of the desert in *Blood Meridian* can be as lethal as elemental disasters *in As I Lay Dying,* and as the characters survive them, their minds undergo significant transformations.

The characters in both novels are not only socially marginalised but also emotionally opaque. Therefore, their inner world may be articulated through symbolic animals or landscapes. Both novels highlight the importance of animals by frequently using zoomorphic and anthropomorphic imagery in the form of comparison, by ascribing traits or imagining a human character as an animal or vice versa, as we see, for example, in the uncanny and animalistic descriptions of the Judge in *Blood Meridian*.

The strange agency of the environment that the novels exhibit can be connected to Tzvetan Todorov's notion of the uncanny, which destabilises the divide between nature and mind, the real and the unreal. In Maria Tatar's definition, the uncanny is "[t]he feeling [that] seems to involve both fear and eeriness, a sense of supernatural potential."[15] In Faulkner's and McCarthy's writing, ordinary elements of the world take on seemingly supernatural autonomy, which may be explained through psychology. The environment inflicts a strange, enigmatic power on the characters, both oppressing and empowering them. In *As I Lay Dying*, as well as in *Blood Meridian*, the natural world is an

[12] Castillo Street and Crow, "Introduction," 22.
[13]Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr., "A Long View of History: Cormac McCarthy's Gothic Vision," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, ed. Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 175.
[14] Timothy Bardin, "Ecological Borderlands and Animalistic Identity in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian," *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* 15 (2018): 14.
[15] Maria M. Tatar, "The Houses of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny," *Comparative Literature* 33, no. 2 (1981): 167, https://doi.org/10.2307/1770438.

indifferent presence, yet through the engagement with nature, the most repressed parts of the human mind are made visible.

This thesis performs a comparative analysis of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* in order to reveal how each work employs natural and animal symbolism to reflect the complex psychology of its characters. A close reading of selected passages illustrates how the often fragmented, conflicted and conflicting, disparate and existentially desperate psyches of individual characters are externalised through animal and environmental symbolism. The analysis, which focuses on the similarities and continuities between Faulkner's and McCarthy's works, as well as some of the major shifts between their approaches, is divided into two chapters, each of which is devoted to one of the two novels. The first chapter examines *As I Lay Dying* and the role of sentient landscape tied to determinism, that is, a concept based on the idea that all behaviour is driven by an external course and subject to external limitations and thus incompatible with "free will".[16]

Next, the chapter examines symbolism of domestic animals, zoomorphism and anthropomorphism and finally, addresses the phenomenon of the uncanny. The second chapter focuses on *Blood Meridian* and its equally dominant topography of violence, filled with domestic and wild animals and their determining practical value and symbolic implications, and the use of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic imagery. Through exploration of the shared motifs and the differences between the two novels in terms of the treatment of nature and humans' emotions, *Blood Meridian* can be viewed as both a continuation and a transformation of Faulkner's Southern Gothic style in *As I Lay Dying.*

2. William Faulkner: As I Lay Dying

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* can be considered an essential text of Southern Gothic literature. Its main themes are literal and moral decay, the grotesque, morality, and existential crisis with the background of an unforgiving natural world. This chapter examines how *As I Lay Dying* employs the symbolism of animals, natural elements and landscapes to articulate the characters' deep psychology, individual or collective suffering, dilemmas, and overall character traits. The minds of the members of the Bundren family are individualised through different styles of narration, as well as through their interactions with nature. The novel employs the stream-of-consciousness technique, assigning each character a distinct narration style that incorporates unique natural metaphors and imagery. Along with character-specific behaviour towards animals and descriptions of nature, the narration helps to reveal the psychological turmoil of the Bundrens. As Reuben Ellis writes, "Faulkner's narrative montage develops all members of the Bundren family through analogies with

[16] Nel Grillaert, "Determining One's Fate: A Delineation of Nietzshe's Conception of Free Will," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 31, no. 1 (2006): 42, https://doi.org/10.2307/20717872.

animals, plants, and other elements of the natural world".[17] The natural symbols externalise the inner world of characters and help to interpret the complex verbal system of the novel through which the characters express themselves.

As I Lay Dying follows the Bundren family's journey to fulfil the dying wish of their matriarch, Addie Bundren, to be buried in Jefferson, Mississippi. As they travel with the grotesque, decaying body, the physical landscape becomes not only an important agent in the story, but entangled with the psychology of the characters. The first big crisis comes when the Bundrens attempt to cross a swollen river with the wagon carrying the body, but the mules drown, and Addie's eldest son, Cash, injures his leg trying to save the coffin from floating away. Anse, Addie's husband, then uses his children's money and trades a horse of his stepson Jewell to replace the mules. Jewell is enraged. As the journey progresses, Darl, the most introspective of the sons, gradually loses touch with reality and sets fire to a barn in an attempt to destroy the coffin inside, but Jewell saves it. Finally, the Bundrens arrive in Jefferson, and each character's true or side motivations for having taken part in the journey come to the surface. For example, Addie's daughter, Dewey Dell, hopes to buy abortion pills, and the youngest son, Vardaman, who struggled to comprehend the death of his mother, longs for a toy train sold in Jefferson. Darl is sent to an asylum, and Anse remarries almost immediately, which undermines the emotional weight of the journey and Addie's burial.

The disasters that the family faces throughout the novel seem nearly biblical, leading to either a revelation of the inner worlds of the characters or their psychological transformations. The characters' fate is actively shaped by nature. In *As I Lay Dying*, nature becomes a powerful sentient force that contributes to the notion of inescapable fatalism. Elemental forces like fire and water are agents of both destruction and purification of the land and, correspondingly, of the psyches of Bundren family members. Some characters may perceive this fatalism or contribute to it. What helps to reveal their spiritualism is "*As I Lay Dying*'s zoosemiotic register,"[18] as Christopher T. White suggests, and the animal symbolism attached to human characters. The animals that appear in proximity to the Bundrens, whether domestic or wild, can be seen as having a symbolic connection to the family members. This symbolism also underscores the primal instincts of humans. However, it is strictly personal, and the meanings of animal symbols vary depending on the character they are connected to.

2.2. Nature as a Character

The sentient role of nature in *As I Lay Dying* is encoded in its active role in the shaping of human destiny through elemental disasters. As a result, it often seems in the narrative as if nature had

[17] Ellis, "Faulkner's Totemism," 409.
[18] Christopher T. White, "The Modern Magnetic Animal: 'as I Lay Dying' and the Uncanny Zoology of Modernism," *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 3 (2008): 82, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25167555.

its own will. As John K. Simon suggests, many of the "impressions which we might otherwise explain psychologically are attributed to the land as though it were an autonomous agent."[19] While travelling across the rugged terrain of the countryside and being subjected to powerful weather, the minds of the Bundrens link with the sentient agent of nature until they appear to be blended beyond distinction. The "interplay between the inanimate and animate",[20] as Simon explains, soon reveals that human choices do not cause hardships alone, but that nature reacts to them. Faulkner's world seems to have a unified will to push events in a certain direction. It starts with the natural death of Addie, and nature continues to create obstacles on the family's journey to Jefferson, as if to mock them. The flood, heat and terrain make the landscape look hostile. The landscape reacts symbolically to the characters' inner faults and mutual grudges, and their inability to communicate with each other in a productive way and seeks to punish them. Some characters seem to be able to perceive the natural agent.

Addie, whose voice remains present after the event of her death in her posthumous monologue, is clearly deeply connected to the land. She reflects on her loveless marriage to Anse, her affair with a local pastor, Whitfield, the birth of her children and how she understood that "words are no good".[21] Like other human constructs, Addie perceives words as meaningless in the face of elemental truths. Addie talks of "hearing the dark land talking the voiceless speech".[22] She recognises the land expressing itself without words. She suggests the river, trees, the earth and even human emotions like fear are more real than language, arguing that nature governs the truest things on earth. She personifies the land, as she hears "the dark land talking of God's love and His beauty and His sin"[23] while lying next to her husband. Addie may think of her adultery and suggests that the land knows of "sin" and God is expressed through this landscape.

Other times, Anse personifies the terrain: "Durn that road".[24] He utters his frustration about being subject to nature's whims. His curse may refer to the road, but it could also be extended to the journey or inanimate nature itself. He "curses an antagonistic inanimate world because of his own habitual inertia"[25] and that way subconsciously acknowledges a certain degree of agency of the land. Simon suggests that what Addie's and Anse's words have in common is that "they both call forth a scene in autonomous disorder".[26] They get mad about the natural background as if their hardships were its fault. This assertion draws on Kenneth Burke's notion of dominance of "scene" over "agent".[27] Faulkner's setting– the river, weather, decay or terrain– shows as much agency as any other

[19] John K. Simon, "The Scene and the Imagery of Metamorphosis in 'as I Lay Dying,'" *Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1965): 11, https://doi.org/10.2307/41938373.
[20] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 4.
[21] William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935), PDF eBook, Faded Page, accessed August 6, 2025, https://www.fadedpage.com/link.php?file=20171024-a5.pdf, 106.
[22] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 108.
[23] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying,* 107.
[24] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying,* 26.
[25] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 4.
[26] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 3.
[27] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 4.

character. One of the clear examples of this can be found in a description of a muddy road, which is portrayed as "healed" and "unscarred",[28] by which it is "humanized".[29] As a metaphorical skin, the inanimate mud regenerates as the Bundrens pass over it. The earthly element of nature, like roads or the ground, exhibits human characteristics or sentience.

Another element with an even more prominent role in *As I Lay Dying* is water. As Simon observes, "it is of course the water itself which is constantly referred to as animated by a life of its own".[30] Water is the first natural force that "actively" redirects the plot and halts its linear development: heavy rain raises the water and causes the destruction of a bridge to Jefferson. As a result, the Bundrens must cross the raging river with a wagon loaded with Addie's coffin. Tull narrates the moment with obvious unease:

> Only it [the river] kind of lived. One part of you knowed it was just water, the same thing that had been running under this same bridge for a long time, yet when them logs would come spewing up outen it, you were not surprised, like they was a part of water, of the waiting and the threat.[31]

In this passage, water is personified to enhance the sense of it as a threatening and hostile force. The logs passively participate and fulfil the water's will by making the river more deadly. The association of "the waiting and the threat" with water highlights its antagonistic "behaviour". To the characters, it seems as if unknown intentions drove water's will, and this facilitates the terror. But there is much more to be observed, since, as Simon remarks, the floodwaters that overturn the Bundrens' wagon symbolise disorder and apocalypse.[32] Human ambition is helpless against a natural force this strong. The flood disorients not just the body but also the mind, as the family members are divided on two sides of the river, they feel as if "space between us were time [...] now runs parallel between us like a looping string".[33] Through these impressions, the physical permeates the psychological and breaks the linear perception of temporality. The river evokes "fatalistic nature of time, embodied in the drama of a dangerous landscape",[34] strengthening the position of the environment in *As I Lay Dying* as a shaper of destiny. The water kills two of the mules, and Addie's coffin is almost carried away by the river. The impact of those events on the psyches of the characters is enormous. But as they fear for their life and the coffin, the water also affects them in a much deeper sense. Specifically, as Simon argues, a certain part of the mind "finds the menace of the elements familiar" and that feels "potential violence locked into the atmosphere and ready to manifest itself"[35] The elemental threat thus becomes internalised. The psyche and wild nature mirror each other.

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[28] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 68.
[29] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 10.
[30] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 11.
[31] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 86.
[32] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 4.
[33] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 92.
[34] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 10.
[35] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 11.

2.3. Nature as Reflection of Inner States

The characters not only recognise the sentient role of nature and its elements, but they also come to be metaphorically identified with nature itself, its rhythms and vegetation. For Addie Bundren, nature is a force that defines her very being. She says: "My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth, of me and of all that lived; of none and of all".[36] In this assertion, she positions herself as part of an elemental order rather than a moral or familial one. Maternity for her is not tender but violent and primal. The "wild blood" links her to the earth's cycles, to the fierce generativity that is indifferent to human sentiment.

"Faulkner moves away from animal analogies to vegetative imagery",[37] especially regarding the characters of Addie and Dewey Dell. In her chapter, Addie says, "I would hate my father for having ever planted me".[38] She refers to her conception and birth as being "planted" like a seed. Ellis argues that Addie "seems to go through a complete cycle of vegetative growth and decay".[39] As she lies on her death-bed, she is depicted like a dying tree with "her hands laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up" while "beneath the quilt she is no more than a bundle of rotten sticks".[40] The parts of the human body are likened to parts of plants, further emphasising not only the family's tie with nature but also Addie's personal relationship with it. After her death, Addie's body becomes an item to be transported. Marshal, an official authority in Jefferson, tells the Bundrens to move on because the smell of a decomposing body bothers the townspeople, and refers to Addie's corpse in the coffin by saying, "get this thing buried soon as you can".[41] She becomes "it", a thing.

The metaphor of the seed used by Addie is later reiterated by her daughter Dewey Dell, as seen in: "I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth".[42] The botanical metaphor hints at Dewey Dell'syouthful pregnancy and suggests the complicated view of motherhood expressed by both women. A "wet seed" caught in a "hot blind" soil, seems to suggest both fertility and entrapment. Ellis points out that Dewey Dell "(like her mother) is most often associated with plant life, with generative, sexual energy".[43] But this fertility comes with a lot of struggles. Hiding her pregnancy also means killing a potential baby. The possible future "death" also intertwines with the passing of Addie. This could be the reason why Dewey Dell describes nature as: "The dead air shapes the dead earth in the dead darkness […]. It lies dead and warm upon me, touching me naked through my clothes. […] I dont know whether I can cry or not. I dont know whether I have tried to or not."[44] In

[36] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying,* 108.
[37] Ellis, "Faulkner's Totemism," 409.
[38] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 105.
[39] Ellis, "Faulkner's Totemism," 409.
[40] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 30.
[41] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 125.
[42] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 42.
[43] Ellis, "Faulkner's Totemism," 409.
[44] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 42.

this passage, the mentioned sexual energy of the words "touching me naked" mixes with grief and fear. Dewey Dell feels trapped and laments that the worries of her pregnancy keep her from dedicating her emotions to mourning her mother. She narrates: "I heard that my mother is dead. I wish I had time to let her die. I wish I had time to wish I had. It is because in the wild and outraged earth too soon too soon."[45] Dewey Dell expresses her feelings and thoughts by way of describing nature as capable of emotions, while also perceiving her bodily experience as one with the processes of material nature. and her body in connection to it.

However, even the men in the novel are linked with the landscape, each in a different way. As already mentioned in the section on sentience, Anse relates to the land through blame: "[t]hat's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long".[46] Anse claims that nature of the country has betrayed him. He willingly disconnects from nature, just like he unknowingly alienated himself from Addie. He is not part of it like Addie or shaped by it like Dewey Dell. His journey ends in a cycle, as he remarries.

Darl, on the other hand, has a very different relationship with nature. He often has his eyes fixed on the surrounding nature, which also influences the thoughts and emotions of those around him. Anse describes Darl's supposedly distracted, solitary self as a problem multiple times: "road come and switched the land around longways and his [Darl's] eyes still full of the land, that they begun to threaten me out of him, trying to short-hand me with the law."[47] Darl having "eyes full of the land" is a threat to Anse because Darl's connection to the land, self-reliance and refusal to conform to the community's changing order lead to neighbours being suspicious of Darl to the point that Anse feels they will "short-hand" him out of his son or land.

Another aspect of Darl's inclination to "stare" reveals itself when Dewey Dell narrates that "his [Darl's] eyes gone further than the food and the lamp, full of the land dug out of his skull and the holes filled with distance beyond the land"[48] To her, Darl's stare seems so profound that he becomes connected with the horizon and goes beyond it. And at the same time, just like Dewey Dell describes that he sees beyond the observable land, he sees under her emotional mask: "Darl's eyes; they swim to pinpoints. They begin at my feet and rise along my body to my face, and then my dress is gone."[49] It is suggested that Darl is the only Bundren who knows of Dewey Dell's pregnancy and that he can see through the surface of things, just like his eyes seem to be capable of seeing beyond the horizon. This inherent connection to the land also expresses his connection to Addie. Another character insists that Darl was the only child that "had his mother's nature"[50] and that there was a deep understanding between Addie and Darl. He also loved her most deeply, although Addie's favourite child was Jewel.

[45] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 76.
[46] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 31.
[47] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 26.
[48] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 21.
[49] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 76.
[50] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 18.

Darl often came to check on his mother on her deathbed, even if she could not see him, and when Dewey Dell called Darl, "[h]e didn't answer. He just stood and looked at his dying mother, his heart too full for words".[51] His rejection of words aligns with Addie's thoughts on the pointlessness of speech and the superiority of nature. However, Darl still uses very lyrical language while describing nature. He observes: "Even the mud there is not still. It has a chill, scouring quality, as though the earth under us were in motion too."[52] He imagines a certain power in the earth moving, just like Addie describes that there is wild blood in earth. It is something unstable, which can also hint at his own psyche. Due to his insightfulness, which seems to detach him from reality, Darl is perceived as alien and "queer" by the other Bundrens.[53] As the novel progresses, Darl's vision becomes more abstract. He describes the blending of water and soil: "a runnel of yellow neither water nor earth swirls […] dissolving into a streaming mass of dark green neither of earth nor sky."[54] These hybrid images can underscore the blend of several categories, like sky, earth, water and even Darl's own psyche as he experiences mixed feelings about the journey to Jefferson. This reaches a climax during a barn fire that Darl sets. Although it is a horrifying sight, when people try to save the horses and a cow, Darl's perception of fire becomes progressively more abstract. At times, he describes the sound of the fire as "quite peaceful" and likens it to the river.[55] There are screaming people and animals, and yet Darl watches "through the dissolving proscenium of the doorway".[56] He describes a theatrical, detached scene. Darl also narrates how his stepbrother Jewel runs "through the rain of burning hay like a portière of flaming beads."[57] This image merges beauty, violence and estrangement. When Jewel saves the coffin with Addie's body from the burning barn, Darl describes: "thin smell of scorching meat [and] the widening, crimson-edged holes that bloom like flowers in his [Jewell's] undershirt".[58] Darl illustrates the painful injury poetically, while comparing the inanimate holes in the shirt to animate flowers. All this does not directly confirm that Darl does not regret trying to burn the barn with the coffin but suggests it might be true. His description of the fire element externalises his desire to end the cycle he finds unbearable. Despite this, Seltzer and Viscomi suggest that Darl might oppose nature in a certain way. In their interpretation of *As I Lay Dying*, "Faulkner suggests his approval of those characters who accept the spatial and temporal rhythms of nature, [...] he indicates his practical rejection of those characters who move against natural cycles."[59] Darl is presented as an example of the latter due to his anomalous behaviour and a style of thinking that surpasses other family members and sometimes transcendents mortal abilities. As noted by Seltzer and Viscomi,

[51] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying, 20.*
[52] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 98.
[53] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 19.
[54] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 33.
[55] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 134.
[56] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 134.
[57] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 135.
[58] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 135.
[59] Leon F. Seltzer and Jan Viscomi, "Natural Rhythms and Rebellion: Anse's Role in 'as I Lay Dying,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 24, no. 4 (1978): 557, https://doi.org/10.2307/26282116.

"Darl Bundren, whose morbid self-consciousness propels him in a direction counter to the natural rhythms of his family's journey", seems to be on a "quest for absolute value".[60] Such a value is unattainable. He burns down the barn with his mother's coffin, and his motives remain unknown or at least ambiguous. Whether or not he has descended into madness, the family decided to have him transported to a mental institution at the end of the novel. Seltzer and Viscomi note that the "greater the commitment to this futile search, the more tragic the consequences".[61] Therefore, it could be argued that Darl was ultimately punished in a fatalistic manner for trying to stop the cycles he perceived as destructive. It could have been the cycle of returning Addie to her homeland, which cost the family many misfortunes and led to the overlooking of Cash's injury and dishonouring her body by letting it become a transported, decaying goods they try not to lose. Another "vicious" cycle that Darl could have recognised and wished to disrupt the psychological hypocrisy of the family members, who hide their own intentions behind a noble act of fulfilling Addie's wish. Eventually, Darl fails, and the circle closes with Anse's introduction of a new wife.

2.4. Animal Symbolism: Omens

As I Lay Dying frequently employs animals in its narrative to serve various functions. They are part of the atmosphere, symbols of personal or non-personal meanings, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic metaphors and similes, and they also transmit the sense of the uncanny to which I will return towards the end of this chapter. The symbols are best viewed as reflecting the Bundrens' psyches, including their desires, fears, morality and "animal imagery in *As I Lay Dying*", which, according to White, is frequently invoked to convey affects and states 'too profound... for even thought.'"[62] This leads to the notion that "the animal is the novel's figure par excellence".[63] In *As I Lay Dying*, animals are not only physically present at all times but they are also central elements in the figurative language that the characters use in their narrations. These associations are either implicit or explicit. In the case of the implicit association, the character trait commonly linked to the animal symbol may be extended further to portray a more specific personal meaning for a certain character or group of characters, while the original conventional meaning of the symbol is still traceable. Regarding explicit associations, characters are often directly likened to animals through metaphors or similes, constructing zoomorphic and anthropomorphic imagery.

Among the implicit associations, buzzards serve as persistent symbols of decay and inevitability. Their presence above the family house lets Darl and Jewell know their mother is dead. Darl points the birds out to Jewell:

[60] Seltzer and Viscomi, "Natural Rhythms and Rebellion," 557.
[61] Seltzer and Viscomi, "Natural Rhythms and Rebellion," 557.
[62] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 83.
[63] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 82.

> "See them?" I say. High above the house, against the quick thick sky, they hang in narrowing circles. From here they are no more than specks, implacable, patient, portentous. "But it's not your horse that's dead." […] Motionless, the tall buzzards hang in soaring circles, the clouds giving them an illusion of retrograde.[64]

Due to the buzzards, the sons find out that their mother died before learning the news directly. As the Bundrens travel with Addie's decomposing body, the scavenger birds circle above them, signalling an impending doom. The buzzards not only symbolise death, but they also suggest the elements of suffering and the grotesque, which are so prominent in Southern Gothic. Their presence reinforces the idea of nature in a role of an inescapable force that both witnesses and contributes to human deterioration.

Another type of bird symbol present in *As I Lay Dying* is a goose, or, in this case, a flock of geese. This symbol occurs when Addie reflects on the struggles in her marriage to Anse in her posthumous chapter. She remembers: "And then he died. He did not know he was dead. I would lie by him in the dark, […] cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights."[65] Anse dies in Addie's eyes only metaphorically, emotionally. The distant geese can symbolise unreachable freedom, and it is important to note that, for example, Chinese culture uses the symbol of "a wild goose in connexion with marriage" and there are similar traditions in Europe, where geese are a part of marriage rituals.[66] The distance of the geese suggests Addie's growing distrust in the institution and conventions of marriage, as she feels drifting apart from her husband and realises she does not love him.

The novel frequently employs symbols of animals to emphasise the instincts of the characters, their hidden traits, such as through the image of the geese, or they signify a meaning personal to a few people, like with the symbol of the buzzards. The inner lives of the characters are, however, the most visible through zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurative language.

2.4.1. Zoomorphism and Anthropomorphism: Motherhood

Zoomorphism refers to "the attribution of animal-like mental states to humans", [67] and anthropomorphism is the converse of such attribution. In *As I Lay Dying*, "characters are likened to animals".[68] through zoomorphic imagery. At the beginning of the novel, Jewel sees neighbours gathering around his mother's bed "like buzzards",[69] which lends the death-bed scenes grotesque proportions. Later, another character refers to Vardaman as a "drowned puppy" and an "owl".[70] This

[64] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 60.
[65] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 108.
[66] Edward A Armstrong, "The Symbolism of the Swan and the Goose," *Folklore* 55, no. 2 (1944): 56, https://doi.org/10.2307/1256902.
[67] Bence Nanay, "Zoomorphism," *Erkenntnis* 86 (December 19, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-018-0099-0.
[68] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 83.
[69] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 14.
[70] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 45.

imagery underscores that Vardaman, however eloquent in his chapters, is still a child whose behaviour and appearance are reminiscent of young animals. He is seen as perplexed and helpless as a puppy and with eyes wide and curious like an owl.

However, both André Bleikasten and Christopher T. White agree that "the most animalised of all the characters is undoubtedly Anse".[71] Addie's husband is repeatedly compared to an animal by other characters in the narration. Addie describes him as "a tall bird hunched in the cold weather" with " and Peabody as "a dipped rooster".[72] In Darl's section, Anse leans over Addie's bed at night, while she dies, and he tries to smooth the duvet with "his hand awkward as a claw" with "his humped silhouette partaking of that owl-like quality of awry-feathered, disgruntled outrage within which lurks a wisdom too profound or too inert for even thought".[73] While these examples suggest that Anse is most frequently portrayed as different species of birds, there are other instances as well. For example, after the death of Addie, he is described in terms of a fresh beef carcass: "like right after the maul hits the steer and it no longer alive and dont yet know that it is dead".[74] This simile contains the additional element of human violence on animals, which paradoxically emphasises the human character's helplessness when faced with fate and existential realities. Throughout the novel, "Anse is also likened to a dog, a bull, and a horse".[75] Most of these descriptions are not flattering or poetic. Younger Bundrens perceive Anse as someone who is restlessly policing them, like a dog, or observing them, like a bird, while not working himself, not contributing to the household and having very little human decency.

However, one of the most striking examples of zoomorphism in the narrative is Vardaman's attempt to comprehend mortality by imagining human identity in an animalistic form. The child's declaration, "my mother is a fish",[76] is a seemingly absurd statement, which "merges the horrific and incomprehensible event of his mother's death with the eminently *familiar* [...] event of his catching and eating the big fish".[77] After its death, the fish turns into "not-fish",[78] which helps Vardaman to understand what the death of his mother and dying itself mean. Thus, "animals operate as originary metaphors, the 'natural' means of making sense out of the surrounding chaos"[79] and "Vardaman is linked with the image of the fish as if it were his totem".[80] The fish is slippery and elusive, which represents the nature of life and death. This introduces the notion of instability of existence in the story.In contrast to zoomorphism, *As I Lay Dying* features many instances of anthropomorphic

[71] André Bleikasten, *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying"* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 73, https://archive.org/details/faulknersasilayd00blei.
[72] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying,* 30.
[73] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 33.
[74] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 40.
[75] Bleikasten, *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying,"* 73.
[76] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 64.
[77] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 83.
[78] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 36.
[79] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 83.
[80] Bleikasten, Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying," 73.

imagery where "animals take on human characteristics".[81] This lifts their role closer to human characters, highlights them, and reflects the intertwining of the animal and human world in the novel. For example, a horse is portrayed as "moaning and groaning like a natural man",[82] and a buzzard is seen as an "old baldheaded man".[83]

Moreover, some animals and characters are tied firmly together through both zoomorphism and anthropomorphism, mirroring each other's qualities. It is, for instance, the symbol of a horse for Jewel or a cow for Dewey Dell. Most characters perceive Jewel's tie with his horse and are affected by it. Not only because he secretly worked to be able to afford it and elevate his social status above his poor family that rides on mules, but also because he transferred his emotionality to this animal. Therefore, throughout the novel, it is evident that "Jewel is at one with his horse".[84] The horse symbolises his independence, since he bought the horse with his own money. It mirrors his untamed will, harsh, bad-tempered nature and underscores his alienation from the rest of his family.

The line "Jewel's mother is a horse"[85] carries several meanings. First, Addie visibly treated Jewel as her favourite child; therefore, she could be seen as a different kind of mother than the one she was to her other children, which is denoted by the use of a specific animal metaphor. Second, just like Vardaman metaphorically finds his dead mother in a fish, Jewel's emotional connection to his mother transfers into his horse. This strengthens the affection that already linked him to the animal before her death and "the strange alloy of violence and affection that he lavishes on the horse stands as a hallmark of the contradiction in his personality [...] further heightened by yet another animal analogy".[86] His relationship with the horse mirrors his deep, unspeakable connection to Addie, which transcends conventional expressions of love and could manifest as struggle and defiance. The complex of instincts and emotions that the horse represents can be seen in the following passage:

> The horse enters the stall, Jewel following. Without looking back, the horse kicks at him, slamming a single hoof into the wall with a pistol-like report. Jewel kicks him in the stomach; the horse arches his neck back, crop-toothed; Jewel strikes him across the face with his fist and slides onto the trough and mounts upon it.[87]

Although getting the horse cost Jewel endless sleepless nights, and even though he loves it, he still beats the animal and struggles with its nature. Both Jewel and his horse are bad-tempered and wild, so Jewel's never-ending struggle to tame the animal could symbolise his own inner struggle to maintain self-control when triggered.

Third, Jewel's alienation from the rest of the family is not only emotional but also genetic, due to his being an illegitimate child. His father is not Anse, but local pastor Whitfield, who is one of the few

[81] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 82.
[82] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 96.
[83] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 74.
[84] Bleikasten, Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying," 73.
[85] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 60.
[86] Ellis, "Faulkner's Totemism," 409.
[87] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 13.

characters who ride a horse: "'Whitfield crossed it a-horse-back.'"[88] These notions provide clues to the secret of Jewel's conception, Addie's adultery and to the greater degree of emotional distance we can observe between Jewel and Anse's legitimate children. Moreover, "Jewel's own vitality is recognized by Anse as a threat to family stability, and he rightly associates his illegitimate son's rebellious movement with his acquisition of a wild horse".[89] Even his stepfather recognises the connection between Jewel's psyche and the horse's wild energy. At the same time, the different kind of upbringing he received from Addie, and her open preference for him, may have led to Jewel's wild, almost aggressive temperament.

Finally, Dewey Dell, the only daughter of Addie and Anse, could be identified with a cow. As Bleikasten remarks, "Dewey Dell's bovine, ruminant femininity calls in two scenes for the actual presence of a cow".[90] In one of the scenes, Dewey Dell goes to milk the cow while she thinks of her lover Lafe and her struggle with a secret pregnancy: "The cow lows at the foot of the bluff. She nuzzles at me, snuffing, blowing her breath in a sweet, hot blast, through my dress, against my hot nakedness, moaning."[91] The "nakedness" suggests the intimate level of bond that ties Dewey Dell to the image of a cow. The very milking of the cow is symbolic of femininity and evokes Dewey Dell's fear of motherhood.

Additionally, when the new Mrs. Burden enters, she is described by Cash as a "duck-shaped woman" and the "representation of Bundrens seems to enter a new cycle".[92] Her description as a bird may parallel Anse's frequent portrayals as a bird. Moreover, as Seltzer and Viscomi observe, this epithet for "the new short-legged Mrs. Bundren serves to align her with slow-moving nature and intimates her acquiescence to Anse's own mule-like approach to reality".[93] They seem much more alike visually and mentally than Anse and Addie, and animal imagery is the way that the novel expresses it.

Seltzer and Jan Vicomi identify the animal metaphors as "images that function generally to establish the priority of [...] instincts",[94] which is something that we can identify in all the characters.. By living an agrarian life, the Bundrens may consider themselves as being in control of the land, yet they are part of their immediate environment, thus being no different than the animals or the land itself. These references also function sociologically, since, as Ellis points out, "[m]embers of this family understand each other largely in terms of personality traits and physical features that they connect with the natural, ostensibly nonhuman world".[95] This degree of understanding seems to be the strongest tie in otherwise distant and silent relationships of the Bundrens.

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[88] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 90.
[89] Seltzer and Viscomi, "Natural Rhythms and Rebellion," 559.
[90] Bleikasten, Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying," 73.
[91] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 40.
[92] Ellis, "Faulkner's Totemism," 409.
[93] Seltzer and Viscomi, "Natural Rhythms and Rebellion," 559.
[94] Seltzer and Viscomi, "Natural Rhythms and Rebellion," 559.
[95] Ellis, "Faulkner's Totemism," 409.

2.5. The Uncanny in *As I Lay Dying*

The sense of the uncanny, mentioned above, can also be observed in references to animal cries in *As I Lay Dyi*ng. White understands the uncanny in the modern context as a concept tied to how communication and representation are transformed, particularly through animality. In his view, the uncanny is invoked by the interchange of voices in *As I Lay Dying*.[96] Freud's notion of the uncanny identifies it as something unknown or previously known and estranged, but either way creating a terrifying effect.[97] It can also be seen as relevant and as feeding into White's conception, especially in the case of Addie Bundren, when the geese crying at night in the scene mentioned in one of the above sections bring to mind something repressed within her. Animals here are not just a narrative device, but a material presence that exceeds human language. According to Christina Colvin, Faulkner critiques "the divide between the ontological category 'animal' and the lived, embodied lives of material animals,"[98] leaning towards a less anthropocentric approach. This is relevant to the novel's experimentation with non-verbal communication. As Colvin notes further, "Faulkner's effort to represent animals in part as members of lived, material worlds invites an interrogation of the ways Faulkner's animals resist human systems of discourse."[99] It can be seen in the uncanny "animal magnetism" between Darl and Dewey Dell, who seem to be able to speak "without the words".[100] In Cash's reasoning, "[t]he animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting".[101] White notes that the "'animal magnetism' as the chief rationale for building Addie's coffin on a bevel mobilises central preoccupations of the novel under the sign of the animal",[102] since the transportation of the coffin is the main plot of the novel. White further connects animal magnetism to 19th-century pseudo-sciences like phrenology and mesmerism, emphasising how Faulkner's novel "links to a broad turn-of-the-century fascination with paranormal phenomena and the subconscious self".[103] We find an example of this in Vardaman's violent encounter with Dr Peabody's horse, which illustrates the phenomenon of mesmerism.[104] In reaction to Addie's death, the six-year-old Vardaman, who believes the doctor killed his mother by coming too late, comes to the stables and starts beating Peabody's horse with a stick. Vardaman speaks of the "life in him [the animal] run[ning] under the skin, under my hand".[105] Mesmer believed invisible forces passed through

[96] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 82.
[97] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 220.
[98] Christina M. Colvin, "'His Guts Are All out of Him': Faulkner's Eruptive Animals," *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 1 (2014): 95, https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.38.1.94.
[99] Colvin, "'His Guts Are All out of Him,'" 95.
[100] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 21.
[101] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 53.
[102] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 82.
[103] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 94.
[104] For a definition of the term, see Gastón A. Ludueña, "Mesmerism," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions*, ed. Henri Gooren (Cham: Springer, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08956-0_40-1.
[105] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 36.

physical touch. This moment "recalls Mesmer's practice of manipulating vital 'animal' fluids through the passing of hands along the body of patients in a magnetic state."[106] *As I Lay Dying* presents not merely a child's awe but a dramatization of communication that surpasses language or, in White's words, "the text's own striving for a means of literary transmission gesturing beyond language itself to the realm of 'life'".[107] Ultimately, *As I Lay Dying* is a novel about transmission between minds, bodies, times and spaces. "Animal magnetism" is a metaphor for the fusion of consciousnesses and the borders between the living and the dead. The novel presents "unsettling metamorphoses of proximity and distance through animal signs and signals".[108] The animals' cries or presence may also symbolise degrees of psychological distance. This confirms the crucial role of animals as symbols, reflections of inner states of characters and comprehensive natural mirrors of incomprehensible human realities. Their cries amplify the feeling of the uncanny and the novel's exploration of modes of communication.

3. Cormac McCarthy: *Blood Meridian*

The novel *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy shows the American Southwest as a mythic space with nature in the role of a violent, autonomous force. Pilkington states that the setting of many of McCarthy's books, including *Blood Meridian,* is the "frontier in its most literal sense: the settings of these books are the marginal lands on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border. *Blood Meridian* begins in 1849"[109] and follows an unnamed teenage runaway known only as the Kid, who wanders through the borderlands and joins a group of US Army irregulars under the leadership of Captain White. Most of White's men are killed by Comanche Indians, and the Kid struggles to survive, accompanied by an injured man, Sproule, who eventually dies. When Mexican forces imprison the Kid, he meets Toadvine, who arranges their release, and the two of them join Glanton's gang of men, who are contracted to scalp Apaches. Among them are Judge Holden and ex-priest Tobin. However, the gang soon starts killing allies and innocents. Pursued by General Elias's cavalry, the Kid is ordered to kill gang member Dick Shelby but refuses to do so. At one point, the gang comes upon Cloyce Bell and his disabled brother, "the idiot," and agrees to escort them west, in return for payment. Later, Glanton betrays the Yuma Indians to enrich his gang, for which he is killed. The Kid, Tobin, Toadvine, the Judge, and the "idiot" survive. The Judge wants to buy Kid's pistol, and Tobin says the Kid should kill the Judge. Kid refuses, and they nearly escape the Judge. When the Judge finds the Kid in prison, he accuses him of weakening the gang's will by being merciful. Years later, the protagonist, who is now referred to as "the man", meets Judge again in a Texas saloon but refuses to be associated with

[106] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 92.
[107] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 92.
[108] White, "Modern Magnetic Animal," 94.
[109] Pilkington, "Fate and Free Will," 315.

him. That night, the Judge awaits the man. The novel's final image shows the Judge dancing, declaring that he will never die. As is clear from this summary of some of the novel's key events, on his travels, the Kid often finds himself close to death, is stranded in the desert, experiences warfare directly, and witnesses many horrifying scenes of cruelty to both men and animals. The lawlessness of the frontier and the harsh natural surroundings have a significant impact on his psyche. The lawlessness of the frontier and the harsh natural surroundings have a substantial effect on him. The Kid is a quiet figure, new to the desert environment, which shapes his psyche. Judge Holden, on the other hand, seems to coexist with nature, inflict its brutality on others, and observe it with almost scientific interest.

Unlike Faulkner's world in *As I Lay Dying*, McCarthy's desert is vast and impersonal, which heightens the feeling of the sublime. Already, the words of Judge Holden, "Only nature can enslave man",[110] indicate that in *Blood Meridian*, nature is the only enduring power. Similarly to *As I Lay Dying*, the brutal landscape of *Blood Meridian* is full of symbols and, as Alexander McLauchlan suggests, specifically the "animals themselves can be interpreted as textual signifiers that denote the social, material, and psychic conditions of the humans".[111] These animal symbols mirror humanity's base instincts and existential insignificance. They are key to our understanding of the novel's use of violence as the main mode of communication. The following analysis of the text identifies several types of animal symbols as well as instances of zoomorphism and anthropomorphism.

3.1 The Sentience of Hostile Nature

Nature in *Blood Meridian* emphasises the fleetingness of. It has its own agency and holds a degree of control over human destiny. Dan Gjelten writes, "McCarthy's [mythology] would probably be one based on the human journey through the natural world, a world composed of living, sentient stones and trees".[112] In *Blood Meridian,* the "sentient stones" are especially significant, as the inanimate parts of land seem to be equally agentive as animal parts in the novel's world. As David Abram reminds us, it resonates with "Merleau-Ponty's late description of sensuous reality," which say that "'the Flesh,' [is] both sensorial and sentient".[113] Commonly, only a complex organism is commonly considered sentient, but the Merleau-Pontian notion that even the material that constitutes bodies is sentient suggests that the land has a metaphorical flesh as well. These two ideas are intertwined, as Abram explains: "our sentient bodies are entirely continuous with the vast body of the

[110] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Random House, 1985), PDF eBook, https://altair.pw/pub/lib/Cormac%20Mccarthy%20-%20The%20Blood%20Meridian.pdf, 166.
[111] Alexander McLauchlan, "Anything That Eats: Animal Symbolism Communicating Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian," *The Albatross* 14 (April 14, 2024): 61.
[112] Dan Gjelten, "Another Kind of Clay: A Reading of Blood Meridian," *English Master's Essays 1* (January 1, 2000): 7.
[113] David Abram, "The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More than Human World," *Colonial Waterbirds* 20, no. 1 (1997): 58, https://doi.org/10.2307/1521797.

land, that 'the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh.'"[114] Not only is the land of *Blood Meridian* exceptionally powerful, but it could be likened to a giant organism of its own will.

The autonomous agency of the environment is visible in passages that refer to natural phenomena as if they had human characteristics and could, for example, make conscious decisions. For example when a boy named Slout joins the group of riders, we read: "He rode near the head of the column and he must have counted himself well out of that place yet if he gave thanks to any god at all it was ill timed for the country was not done with him"[115] The personified land is expected to undermine the man's strength. Similarly, as the long journey under desert sun drains the travellers, we get the following description: "They grew gaunted and lank under the white suns of those days and their hollow burnedout eyes were like those of noctambulants surprised by day. Crouched under their hats they seemed fugitives on some grander scale, like beings for whom the sun hungered."[116] The sun is described as wanting to devour the riders to metaphorically convey the intensity of its rays. Not only the sun, but the stars are also personified: "A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets."[117] The natural elements like stars are present in the form of animal eyes. Many other elements take on agentative roles, as seen in: "fire was roaring in the blast like a thing alive".[118] Even a small and man-made fireplace seems to express its own will, joining the powerful, untamed forces.

The sentience of nature can also be expressed through the descriptions of strange, mythic or ancient qualities of the landscape that radiate from it and that may also be perceived by the travellers. Sometimes, sentience is explicitly mentioned:

> Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron filings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon that harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality.[119]

The sediments seem sentient and aware of the passage of the riders, and the land seems to have a hostile attitude towards them. Perhaps nature resents the type of violence that Glanton's gang enacts. It is a violence different from the brutality that nature inherently presents as a part of the food chain and ecosystem, because Glanton's gang hunts scalps for money. This seems to be recognized by nature.

Moreover, the landscape evokes sublime feelings of something ancient: "Crossing those barren gravel reefs in the night they seemed remote and without substance. Like a patrol condemned

[114] Abram, "The Spell of the Sensuous," 49.
[115] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 170.
[116] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian,* 208.
[117] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 180.
[118] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 88.
[119] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

to ride out some ancient curse."[120] The reference to an "ancient curse" heightens the atmosphere to something almost uncanny and mythical. Freud explains that the notion of the uncanny may not only signal something unknown that may be viewed as supernatural by the observer, but also to "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar¨" and what could have been repressed in the past.[121] This effect may be individual, as well as societal, as reflected in another passage in *Blood Meridian*:

> Nothing moved in that high wilderness save the wind. They did not speak. They were men of another time for all that they bore Christian names and they had lived all their lives in a wilderness as had their fathers before them. They'd learnt war by warring, the generations driven from the eastern shore [...] If much in the world were mystery the limits of that world were not, for it was without measure or bound and there were contained within it creatures more horrible yet and men of other colours and beings which no man has looked upon and yet not alien none of it more than were their own hearts alien in them, whatever wilderness contained there and whatever beasts.[122]

The riders are "men of another time", who lived "all their lives in wilderness", which breaks the temporal boundary and separates them from humans living in civilised communities, as if nature assimilated them. The narrative refers to the movement through this dangerous landscape by "creatures more horrible yet", "men of other colours", "beings which no man has looked upon" and yet, none of this is as foreign as the estrangement the men carry inside themselves. This comparison shows that their minds are as unknowable as their environment and the territories they traverse.

The mentioned likeness of inner human state and the outer landscape constitutes one of the main ideas of *Blood Meridian*: the loss of all distinctions, which occurs not only between man and animal, but also between man and matter. Through this, as Timothy Bardin argues, "*Blood Meridian* lends itself to an ecocritical reading that analyses liminal spaces, McCarthy's concept of 'optical democracy,' and the characters' constant proximity to animals and the harsh natural environment."[123] In *Blood Meridian*, the "optical democracy" is a phenomenon of natural equality. Hobbes proposed that all people hold equal rights, since they naturally possess the same potential to harm one another. This can be related to Locke, who maintained that every human inherently holds the natural right of freedom. Additionally, Rousseau stated that social inequality was influenced by the pursuit of perfection and property and emerged from a deterioration of natural equality in humanity's original harmonious condition.[124] These ideas can all be read into the idea of "optical democracy" in *Blood Meridian*. It is described in the following passage: "here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships."[125] Optical democracy is

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[120] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 130.
[121] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 220, https://uncanny.la.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/freud-uncanny_001.pdf.
[122] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 120.
[123] Bardin, "Ecological Borderlands," 12.
[124] Stefan Gosepath, "Equality," in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2025 Edition), "Moral Equality," para. 1, accessed August 10, 2025, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/equality/.
[125] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 208.

the notion that in the desert, all parts of landscape, animate or non-animate, are equal. The light and distance make them appear the same. As Dianne Luce points out, "all objects dazzle the eye equally and a man might be given no preference over a rock".[126]

The agency of nature can affect individuals through determinism. The environment holds power over life and death, and it is uncaring. The desert, mountains, and sky diminish human ambition. The fire seems to move "As if beyond will or fate he and his beasts and his trappings moved both in card and in substance under consignment to some third and other destiny."[127] But at the same time, determinism is not absolute. "Notions of chance and fate," recognises *Blood Meridian*'s narrator, "are the preoccupations of men engaged in rash undertakings."[128] Although fatalism is present in the novel's world, it is not fully deterministic. As Pilkington remarks, "Humans do make choices – frequently bad choices, but choices nonetheless – that critically affect their destinies".[129] They may change the trajectory of their life while also being subjected to the control of the wilderness. Drawing on Lacan, Hoberek connects this with language itself: "'In the same way that [McCarthy's] characters realize a paradoxical freedom within the determinism of their landscape, so too we as readers—similarly subjected to the determinism of plot and language—find an impressive, qualitative 'dynamic space' within the confines of the text".[130] Within the space of repetitions that express determinism, the characters are not fully in control, but do have their own choices, morality and inner worlds.

3.2 The Individual and Non-human Nature

In *Blood Meridian*, the landscape also illustrates otherwise hidden inner states of characters. In Julius Greve's view, it is undoubtedly "a novel which raises questions about human will, the relationship between humans and the natural world,"[131] especially the Kid's silent development and Judge Holden's will to dominate the material world. Their opposed inner worlds are revealed through the description of the same environment and their interactions with it. The Kid seems to occupy an environment that is "changed and strange".[132] There is an ever-present "howling wilderness" or "crater void" consisting of "pure pumice where there grew no shrub, no weed, as far as the eye could see".[133] The novel often describes stillness and silence, as "nothing moved in that purgatorial waste save carnivorous birds", which points to the fact that "death seemed the most prevalent feature of the

[126] Dianne C. Luce, "The Bedazzled Eye: Cormac McCarthy, José Ortega Y Gasset, and Optical Democracy," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 17, no. 1 (2019): 64, https://doi.org/10.5325/cormmccaj.17.1.0064.
[127] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 88.
[128] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 131.
[129] Pilkington, "Fate and Free Will," 315.
[130] A. Hoberek, "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (July 9, 2011): 484, https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajr019.
[131] Julius Greve, "'Another Kind of Clay': On Blood Meridian's Okenian Philosophy of Nature," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 13, no. 1 (2015): 31, https://doi.org/10.5325/cormmccaj.13.1.0027.J
[132] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 41.
[133] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 207.

landscape".[134] Although the Kid is mostly silent and passive, he also has a buried compassionate and moral side. It surfaces, for example, when he refuses to abandon a man, whose horse is injured or when he agrees to pull an arrow out of a man's leg and afterwards finds out the man would have killed him if it was unsuccessful. Towards nature, however, the Kid is mostly observant and does not interfere with it. There are moments where: "The rising sun found him crouched under a rocky promontory watching the country to the south. He sat so for an hour or more. A group of deer moved up the far side of the arroyo, feeding and feeding moved on".[135] The Kid sits there as if becoming a part of the terrain. He does not take actions that involve nature but only men. Although he is not outspokenly against it, nowhere in the narrative is he seen as directly involved in killing animals. When the Judge decides to kill a horse with a rock, the Kid "stood holding the horse", but the Judge did the killing.[136] Moreover, the Kid's decision to participate in the act was motivated by the need to show others he was not afraid of the Judge. The Kid does not interfere with nature in any way, unless it is necessary. The quietness also plays into McCarthy's portrayal of the desert as a mystic place of reflection. Gjelten explains this:

> The desert itself is a symbolically rich, and deceptively simple, landscape. It is an ancient place for the meditative or ascetic religious soul. It is the place of trials and initiation, a place where the individual seeks self-knowledge. It may also be a place where one might attempt to expiate sins—a kind of purgatory.[137]

The closeness of death in the desert is a catalyst for meditating on one's life and sins. Additionally, the mentioned sentience of land contributes to the overall mysticism intertwined with possible hallucinations. The men travel through the desert's void, which is also hallucinatory. At first, a mirage shows them an image of a huge lake in front of them and a city appearing against the shady mountains. But when they wake up, they find there has been "no city and no trees and no lake, only a barren dusty plain".[138] The faded vision can be viewed as a metaphor for the illusion of human agency, since the human will and ambitions have a much lesser effect here than expected. The disappearance of the lake and city, representing an oasis, also underscores the actual emptiness of their surroundings. It resembles the radicality of change, as the southern landscape transitions to the southwestern desert.

Another image of an almost spiritual quality is the burning tree that the Kid encounters in the desert, and the shadowy figures that pass around it. The narrator describes the Kid as a "solitary pilgrim", kneeling with his "numbed hands out".[139] The term "pilgrim" evokes a meaning of spiritual quest and a certain kind of transformation. The Kid is separated from Glanton's gang, and he expresses his unspoken but unquestionable morality by giving Shelby his water. He resembles a Christ figure by

[134] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 42.
[135] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 178.
[136] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 184.
[137] Gjelten, "Another Kind of Clay," 12.
[138] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 58.
[139] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 180.

the associations of his kneeling down and the burning tree, which resembles the burning bush in Exodus.[140] There are no references to God in this passage, and yet it alludes to "gods" in the form of rich animal life, the "attended companies", surrounding the tree: "small owls that crouched silently [...] and tarantulas [...] and beaded lizards with mouths black as a chowdog's, deadly to man, and the little desert basilisks that jet blood from their eyes and the small sandvipers like seemly gods, silent and the same, in Jeda, in Babylon."[141] The animals resemble "gods", but these gods are predators and venomous beasts that belong to Earth. They coexist together, just like they coexist with the Kid, who is to the desert what another kind of animal is to optical democracy.

Exploring the optical democracy is crucial when examining the character of Judge Holden and his relationship with nature. Judge Holden is perhaps the most enigmatic character of *Blood Meridian*. He possesses a similar amount of knowledge of human culture and languages as he does of the natural world around him. He seems to admit there is a God, but insists his will is not expressed through books like the Bible:

> Books lie, he said.
> God dont lie.
> No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.
> He held up a chunk of rock.
> He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.[142]

The Judge assumes almost a transcendental position. He also emphasises that nature's violence is sacred, perhaps the only sacred thing in the "godless" land,[143] which lacks moral guidance. In his eyes, the world might not need a human moral principle, suggesting that animals are not inferior to humans, but participate in the same struggle for power. He recognises the land already has its own power, which stirs up his desire to dominate it: "'everywhere [...] are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation".[144] Due to this claim, Joshua J. Masters identifies Judge Holden as an image of an "overlord or hegemonic force who commands all other forms of power"[145] or wishes to do so by his "ordering of […] ancient chaos".[146] Judge's behaviour in the wilderness resembles a scientist and a god combined, but without a sign of empathy in his actions. He shoots with his "rifle loaded with the small hard seeds", observes bats, kills birds and stuffs them and drowns puppies by throwing them off a bridge. Some evenings he "pressed the leaves of trees and plants into his book and he stalked tiptoe the mountain butterflies", while speaking to them in a whisper,[147] asserting dominance through classification. As soon as he finds ancient artefacts, he sorts, sketches and describes them in his

[140] N. Wyatt, "The Significance of the Burning Bush," *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1986): 361, https://doi.org/10.2307/1518419.
[141] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 180.
[142] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 104.
[143] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 247.
[144] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 166.
[145] Joshua J. Masters, "'Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World': Judge Holden's Textual Enterprise in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 40, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 32.
[146] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 104.
[147] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 166.

notebook. After that, he "gathered up the other artifacts and cast them also into the fire" and "seemed much satisfied with the world".[148] This reflects an Enlightenment logic, in which knowing and naming are equated with control. Perhaps by destroying and ensuring he is the only one able to describe the artefact, Holden positions himself above everyone else as a figure of utmost control. He mimics some of the natural utilitarian violence of animals. His duality as a naturalist and killer mimics the will of nature, indifferent to human sentiment and horror. Because of the equality in nature, *Blood Meridian* seems to argue, there is no difference between a person, stone, spider or blade of grass.[149] And the Judge does not treat them much differently, because "the judge's conception of science as indifferent to its objects of inquiry equals the indifference of nature with respect to mankind."[150] Greve calls this the "indifference of judge's practice of a scientific naturalism", which is quite literally the same as "indifference of the deserts and plains toward its nomadic marauders".[151] The inherent brutality of nature enables the Judge to be incredibly cruel as well. The Judge thus personifies the will of the natural world in an exaggerated way.

3.3 Animal Symbolism: Innocence and Brutality

In *Blood Meridian*, animals participate as psychological symbols. There is a permeable boundary between human and animal, which makes a way for the use of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic metaphors. Through them, the novel portrays how humans are reduced to wild creatures, but also how animals may be viewed as equals of humans, due to their interdependence. Bardin calls this the "ecological frontier" of the novel, which is identified as "spaces where human/non-human identity is in flux, where men and women are neither fully animal nor fully human, and where the struggle for dominance is every bit as violent as the conflicts between ethnic groups and nations."[152] The struggle for bare survival connects men to their horses, but also to all the wild animals they encounter, and their identities seem to mix. Alexander McLauchlan writes that the main function of animals in *Blood Meridian* is not to represent the contrast between savagery and civilization but to communicate violence by embodying truth about existence that is pre-linguistic.[153] As Holden's assertions suggest, animals are part of the same system of consumption and decay, along with humans. Animals in *Blood Meridian* serve as recurring symbols of violence, fear, innocence, cruelty and instinct. Contrariwise, comparing them to human characters helps to illustrate how animal symbols serve to insinuate psychological traits of characters who themselves reveal very little of their inner world.

[148] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 122.
[149] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 208.
[150] Greve, "'Another Kind of Clay,'" 42.
[151] Greve, "'Another Kind of Clay,'" 42.
[152] Bardin, "Ecological Borderlands," 12.
[153] McLauchlan, "Anything That Eats," 61.

Just like in *As I Lay Dying*, the novel features many domestic animals; however, there are also numerous instances of wild animals that form an equally large group but portray different meanings. The domestic animals, which McLauchlan calls "beasts of burden", could be seen as "symbols of peaceful innocence and corruptive violence".[154] Although the characters encounter cows, goats, pigs and dogs, the most ever-present domestic animals are mules and horses since they are necessary for survival in the desert. However, there is a sharp contrast between the symbolism of mules and horses in the narrative.

The Kid bought a mule for labour, and it came from a relatively tranquil family environment. A mule thus symbolises his innocence and early life. When the Kid goes for a saddle, one of the corporals who is about to be his companion says: "Wait till you get one of these [horses] You ain't never had no fun".[155] This is a warning about horses being wilder in nature than mules, but also about the transformation and radicalisation of psyche experienced by the men who ride with the group. The innocence represented by the mule begins to be dismantled. A sign of it is a mule carcass that the group encounters upon entering the desert:

> They saw halfburied skeletons of mules with the bones so white and polished they seemed incandescent even in that blazing heat and they saw panniers and packsaddles and the bones of men and they saw a mule entire, the dried and blackened carcass hard as iron.[156]

The remains of mules among human bones signify entering a territory much harsher than the Kid had known, physically but also psychologically.

The recurring scenes of animal death, especially the senseless killings of domestic animals, highlight the materiality of the *Blood Meridian*'s world. As a commonplace, "American fighters not only shoot 'fowls,' 'goats,' and 'deer' to eat, but they also shoot 'cats,' 'dogs,' 'sick horses' and frequently 'beat the screaming horses into submission,'".[157] Mahmoud argues that the killings are random, unplanned and ever-present.[158] When driving through mountains, the gang encounters a company of twenty-two mules, carrying quicksilver for the mines, and they begin to push them to their death: "The riders pushed between them and the rock and methodically rode them from the escarpment, the animals dropping silently as martyrs, turning sedately in the empty air".[159] The gang has no reason for the murder of numerous animals that represent innocence itself. It shows the dismantling of any kind of empathy in the hearts of men who travel the land of *Blood Meridian*. But even when the men kill out of hunger, the innocence of the animals is further emphasised by their youth. As seen in: "One of the mares had foaled in the desert, and this frail form soon hung skewered on a paloverde pole over the raked coals while the Delawares passed among themselves a gourd

[154] McLauchlan, "Anything That Eats," 62.
[155] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 36.
[156] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 43.
[157] Jihan Mohammed Zakarriya Mahmoud, "An Ecocritical Reading of *Blood Meridian* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*." *American Studies Journal*, no. 66 (2019), https://doi.org/10.18422/66.
[158] Mahmoud, "An Ecocritical Reading."
[159] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 163.

containing the curdled milk taken from its stomach."[160] This quote shows that in this novel, bodies matter, but not morally. They only matter because they can be utilised, they bleed and return to the cycle of life. Critics like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin explain that the relationship between men and prey was not hierarchical for Indians, but it certainly was for the English, who believed hunting verified their supremacy.[161] The same effect takes place even when the animals are domestic and not wild. However, Mahmoud adds that, "[t]he adoption of anti-animal colonial practices, though, exposes deeper identity problems."[162] The need for violence stems from a psychological lack of other fulfilments. These psychological problems of white men also come forward metaphorically when analysing the second group of animal symbols – the wild beasts. Wild animals like buzzards, wolves or bears serve different kinds of meanings.

Wolves in *Blood Meridian* represent wild companions of the travellers, and they are often present only audibly. The "wolves cry all night", while the Kid sleeps hidden after a violent encounter.[163] The Kid's inner turmoil, in that moment, seems connected to the external wilderness through the wolf's "cry". Wolves are often symbols of solitude, danger or instinct,[164] and these qualities align with the vulnerability and isolation the Kid experiences. The wolves are not shown hunting; they only follow the gang for the leftovers:

> Now wolves had come to follow them, great pale lobos with yellow eyes that trotted neat of foot or squatted in the shimmering heat to watch them [...] their eyes shifted and winked out there on the edge of the firelight [...] they could hear the snarling and the pop of their mouths behind them as they sacked the camp for meatscraps.[165]

Their yellow eyes, that "shift" like conscience itself, remain present but inaccessible. This may mirror the Kid's passivity as an observer. Moreover, wolves are told to "hunt both in packs and alone", while the younger and more "transient" wolves without a family group are often alone.[166] The Kid has no family and can survive alone. Emotional loneliness is not a huge obstacle for him, but he joins others out of a need for material security. Thus, some qualities associated with the symbol of a wolf may be applied to the Kid's inner mindset. But they are not the only predators in the landscape that have their own symbolic.

The bear encountered by the men is described as an active predator: "The bear had carried off their kinsman like some fabled storybook beast and the land had swallowed them up beyond all ransom or reprieve."[167] The bear symbol evokes myth and fairy tale, as well as the inescapable natural law. Commonly, a bear can symbolise the natural cycle, due to its hibernation, or, for

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[160] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 138.
[161] Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism : Literature, Animals, Environment.* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2015).
[162] Mahmoud, "An Ecocritical Reading."
[163] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 13.
[164] Karen Elizabeth Bukowick, "Truth and Symbolism: Mythological Perspectives of the Wolf and Crow" (2004), 36, http://hdl.handle.net/2345/489.
[165] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 42.
[166] Bukowick, "Truth and Symbolism," 30.
[167] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 120.

example, war.[168] In indigenous cultures or tribes, parts of bear bodies were used in rituals, as they believed "the strength of the bear is transmitted to humans, for healing and shamanism, but also for war and hunting".[169] These meanings of the bear symbol are can be connected to fatality. Hibernation inevitably returns, and in Judge Holden's eyes, war is like a stone: "It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. [...] Before man was, war waited for him".[170] Fatality is not disturbed by men, just like they cannot stop the bear from attacking and taking a victim, despite wounding it with weapons and following it for three days. Their decisions mark fate minimally, and nature reminds them that human dominance is an illusion. As Cornwell remarks, *Blood Meridian* "unseat[s] the anthropomorphic perspective that privileges humanity over the rest of nature."[171] Nature rules the land, as everything enters life, death and decay.

Buzzards play the role of passive witnesses to physical degradation. Their apparent ever presence serves as a reminder that death and violence are something mundane and anticipated. Unlike wolves or bears, buzzards do not act. At first, they indicate the barrenness of the land, since the travellers see "no birds save buzzards."[172] Here, they function as warnings that the desert brings nothing but death; it is a land stripped of life. Indeed, their presence is recognised when the men feel injured: "He looked at the sky. Very high, very small, a buzzard. He looked at the man. Is my neck broke? he said."[173] The buzzard is a small witness in the distance, yet it is there, and it waits for a chance to eat the corpse. Their behaviour is the most predictable, almost ritualistic. They fly away when scared, but eventually they will "feed again".[174] Therefore, the common symbolism of death is extended, and buzzards can be viewed as part of the fatalism of the land of *Blood Meridian*. Buzzards join the other symbols of wild beasts and assume a different position in the narrative than domestic animals, because they much more frequently partake in zoomorphic or anthropomorphic imagery.

3.3.1. Instances of Zoomorphism and Anthropomorphism

From the beginning of *Blood Meridian*, the human position in nature's hierarchy is destabilised. As Bardin remarks, there are "frequent references to animals, and McCarthy often describes his characters—and the people they encounter—as having animalistic qualities."[175] Through this, the novel shows the most primal parts of human minds, whether they are predatory or not. As Cornwell argues, the novel "unseat[s]" anthropocentrism and rejects the "perspective that

[168] Oliver Grimm, "'Bear and Human' - Introduction, Discussion and Synthesis," *Brepols Publishers EBooks*, January 1, 2023, 19, https://doi.org/10.1484/m.tane-eb.5.134323.
[169] Grimm, "'Bear and Human', 42.
[170] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 208.
[171] Gareth Cornwell, "Ambivalent National Epic: Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56, no. 5 (October 20, 2015): 531, https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2015.1019393.
[172] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 40.
[173] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 8.
[174] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 153.
[175] Bardin, "Ecological Borderlands," 12.

privileges humanity over the rest of nature".[176] The landscape continually pushes men to forget the comfort of civilisation and become animalistic in order to survive, although it is not what men originally expected from the frontier. Pilkington directly points out this switch: "McCarthy's characters, then, search out frontiers, those fluid zones of freedom and opportunity, of action and destiny that Americans traditionally have sought. What they often find is an actual and metaphysical horror."[177] The horror leads to the blending of human and animal visual or behavioural characteristics, and it is one of the tools the novel uses to dismantle human superiority.

The zoomorphic lens allows us to see especially the similarity between dogs or wolves and people's behaviour. Canine animals are mirrors for the group with which the Kid travels in *Blood Meridian*, since "Glanton gang is textured as a collection of pack animals, aligned in their base need for hunting and feeding while maintaining a minimum amount of social organization".[178] The recurring images of dogs and wolves begin to symbolically echo the behaviour, values, and social structure of the gang. Their hierarchy is hinted at when an aggressive dog is calmed down by Glanton, who gave it a piece of jerky and said: "I can man anything that eats".[179] Eventually, Glanton is correct, and shortly after, the dog is "trotting with a slight limp at the heels of Glanton's horse",[180] and continues to accompany Glanton for the rest of the book and even to his death. This emphasises that Glanton leads people via the most powerful of their longings, the need for property. Like wolves, the gang members are "marginally partnered to a leader bearing noted animus for others".[181] Galton represents this animalistic leadership to them.

The gang's journey through the landscape of the West is accompanied by a gradual descent into a bestial kind of being. Their decrease of morality, that the analogy to feral animals might represent, can be seen in killing and taking the scalp of an old, lonely woman: "He took a skinning knife from his belt and stepped to where the old woman lay and took up her hair".[182] Just like wolves choose a wounded animal, the gang profited from the weak. Furthermore, the gang members are often described as a pack, and they themselves may not mind such a label. They seem to hold a respect for wolves: "We left little more than bones for the lobos, but I would never shoot a wolf and I know other men of the same sentiments".[183] The men view wolves as kin despite having no social relationship with them, so the respect may stem from the feeling of likeness between them. Being compatible with the violent animals in this way shows that, in the eyes of the men themselves, only the wilderness can match the degree of the gang's brutality. A striking example of zoomorphism comes later in the narrative: "they buried their stool like cats and they barely spoke at all".[184] They are regressing and

[176] Cornwell, "Ambivalent National Epic, 531.
[177] Pilkington, "Fate and Free Will," 315.
[178] McLauchlan, "Anything That Eats," 64.
[179] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 129.
[180] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 129.
[181] McLauchlan, "Anything That Eats," 65.
[182] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 90.
[183] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 114.
[184] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 130.

becoming controlled by instincts. They begin to resemble the terrain they cross, and it transforms them into animals. The men also brought their animals – horses and mules and they soon started to merge with them metaphorically: "At a desert well they dismounted and drank jaw to jaw with their horses and remounted and rode on."[185] Drinking "jaw to jaw", sharing vulnerability, as if men were horses or horses were men.

Zoomorphism may be used to portray the oddity of the Native Americans. One scene describes Apache warriors as "eleven men perched on the topmost rim of that scalded atoll like misflown birds".[186] They seem to have birdlike postures, which makes them appear as awkward or misplaced creatures in the eyes of white men. To show how alien the Natives are, they are many times described as birds: "From time to time one of the company would dismount with rifle and wiping stick and the indians would flare like quail".[187] Their grouping and reactions may resemble a covey of quail, which appears ridiculous to them.

Moreover, the Natives are also purposefully animalised by the white men. The animal imagery used to portray the Natives can sometimes be connected with Greg Garrard's concept of "crude zoomorphism", which refers to the controlling practice of animalising humans to belittle or sexualise them.[188] Not only are the Natives reduced to wild beasts and hunted for scalps so that the white man can justify their dominance and colonial pretence, but Native women, alive or dead, are often sexually assaulted for the same purpose. Mahmoud points out that "war-related rape" of Native women in *Blood Meridian* is not only a political tool of humiliation, but through "Animalizing and sacrificing women, American fighters get their self-esteem and value in life from their sexual and military domination over others".[189] The purposeful animalising is connected with the fragile psyche of men. They use violence because they perceive the natural food chain or the chain of hunt and death as the only way to dominance in the wilderness of the land.

There are only very few instances of white men in Glanton's gang who act differently and express morality. For example, after the judge took an Apache child along on his horse and played with it, he killed it without mercy and took its scalp. One of the men saw it and stepped up: "Toadvine put the muzzle of his pistol against the great dome of the judge's head."[190] In the end, he does not fire the shot, but although Holden was not punished for his crime, he was at least deemed exceptionally immoral, which, for a moment, lifts up the heavy atmosphere of moral numbness permeating the whole novel. However, it is important to note that the judge is not the only one who participates in killing premature humans or animals. Despite their occasional thoughts of morality, the members of Glanton's gang are connected to the disturbing deaths of infants as they fight the

[185] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 131.
[186] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 117.
[187] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 141.
[188] Greg Garrard, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
[189] Mahmoud, "An Ecocritical Reading,".
[190] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 141.

Natives.[191] They only seemed reluctant when the Apache child was humanised by spending some time with them; otherwise, they may consider the Natives sub-human things or animals that morality does not apply to.

Zoomorphic imagery is sometimes also employed when the judge appears on the scene. This is ironic, because he appears to possess more academic and cultural intellect than other present humans, but his moral principles are often nonexistent and could be called animalistic. Furthermore, he is sometimes presented through animal imagery, for example, when Toadvine warns the Kid about the judge, he says: "The man will hear ye. He's ears like a fox".[192] Many other animals are symbolically linked to having good ears, but the symbol of the fox underlines the judge's cunning nature. He is smart, able to adapt and knows how to keep his place as a favourite of authorities like Glanton. Similarly, in an explosion of violence, the judge is said to be "like a cat,"[193] while fighting a man with a knife. The judge executes a brutal revenge. He is a man of reflexes, but his animalism is calculated. Intelligence in *Blood Meridian* is not the opposite of savagery but corresponds with predation. The judge, often described in civilised but also bestial terms, is an example of this. It is also evident that "McCarthy implies Holden has a special relationship to animal life".[194] The judge whispers to his horse in a similar manner that Glanton does to his dog, but he also does so to butterflies while they are under his observation.

In several scenes, Holden is portrayed half-naked as an animal. He sits "pale and naked"[195] on sandstone, surrounded by bats flying at night. He learns obsessively about these creatures, but does not seek partnership or connection, only a way to control. This is also underscored by appearance, since he is naked as an animal, but, at the same time, he is "that great hairless thing".[196] Therefore, the judge is neither fully human nor an animal, but rather a being that falls somewhere between, drawing back to Bardin's notion of "flux" identity.[197] He is cultured but brutal, naked but furless, scientific but destructive. The judge's relationship to animals is founded on domination and emotionless sacrifice. Before he kills a horse with a rock, it is said that "his teeth glistened in the firelight",[198] portraying him as a ruthless predator.

Elsewhere, the judge buys puppies from a town boy and almost immediately throws them from a bridge, without disclosing his motivations for such a deed. These animals are not killed for survival, that is, to provide food or to avoid being attacked by them. However, even if the Judge's motivation may be to assert control over life without, it does not necessarily invite moralising Perhaps he attempts to mimic nature, which itself is not merciful. Both the puppies and the Apache child were

[191] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 134.
[192] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 119.
[193] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 151.
[194] McLauchlan, "Anything That Eats," 66.
[195] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 155.
[196] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*,109.
[197] Bardin, "Ecological Borderlands," 12.
[198] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 184.

in a helpless position when they needed rescuing, and for this, the judge deemed them as weak. If he considers nature to be the highest order of reality and wishes himself to be the controlling figure at the top, his actions must reflect nature's actions. This is why he says that the correct way to raise children is that "they should be put in a pit with wild dogs. […] They should be made to run naked in the desert".[199] This might be the Judge's reason for throwing the puppies from the bridge without killing them immediately, because there was a chance nature would let some survive, although we cannot know this for sure. However, one of the onlooking men viewed the death in the water as exceptionally violent, so he fired at the puppies with a gun to save them from pain. From the moment that the puppies were held by a human, and the Apache child needed to be rescued, the Judge considered their existence to be unnatural. As Ken R. Hanssen writes, "the judge affirms […] the blind, amoral state of nature within which destruction, as the agent of change, is intrinsic to the human condition".[200]

Importantly, in his eyes, the morality of saving these youthful lives can weaken the rescuer as well, which is undesirable. This is why the judge blames the Kid's morality for the gang's downfall, and it could also be the reason why the judge kills both the puppies and the Apache child (and, at the end of the novel, possibly also the protagonist). Moreover, the judge's treatment of the living beings resembles his treatment of objects. After he was done observing the child, he decided on its death, as if it were an inanimate thing he found in the desert.

Anthropomorphism also occurs several times throughout the novel. Just like animalising women, anthropomorphism may be intentionally inflicted. The tie between humans and animals is even spiritually recognised by the Natives, who view dogs as partners and accomplices of their enemies. When Natives burned the bodies of Glanton and the doctor, they "tied his dog to his corpse and it was snatched after in howling suttee".[201] Both dogs are tied and thrown to the fire to accompany the men, and one dog nearly escapes "crawl[ing] charred and blind and smoking from the fire and was flung back with a shovel".[202] The dogs are horrifyingly anthropomorphised through the description of their suffering, but also through the word "suttee", which refers to a Hindu ritual. During a suttee, a widow would burn herself alive with her deceased husband's body.[203] The dogs are put into the position of those women in a ritual to show the brutality of the Natives, but also to elevate dogs' pain to human pain, connecting it to culture. They may be seen as "martyrs" in a similar way that the mules pushed off the cliffs are.

Other animals, such as birds, are also often present in anthropomorphic metaphors. This is seen, for example, in this: "Callaghan's headless body floated anonymously downriver, a vulture

[199] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian,* 127.
[200] Ken R. Hanssen, "'Men Are Made of the Dust of the Earth': Time, Space, Matter, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 15, no. 2 (2017): 188, https://doi.org/10.5325/cormmccaj.15.2.0177.
[201] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 231,
[202] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 231.
[203] Dorothy K. Stein, "Women to Burn: Suttee as a Normative Institution," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 2 (December 1978): 253, https://doi.org/10.1086/493605.

standing between the shoulderblades in clerical black, silent rider to the sea."[204] The vulture is illustrated as a priest-like figure, a "silent rider to the sea" and a witness of death. Other times, buzzards are likened to girls that may also be connected to religious practice: "The bodies had been partly eaten and rooks flew up as the riders approached and a pair of buzzards began to trot off across the sand with their wings outheld like soiled chorines, their boiled-looking heads jerking obscenely."[205] Their wings resemble the clothes of girls in a chorus. The religious associations and anthropomorphism of the scavenger birds are common in *Blood Meridian*. Vultures or buzzards are often present in abandoned churches where they feed on corpses, whether human or animal: "Three buzzards hobbled about on the picked bone carcass of some animal dead in the chancel."[206] Their presence at religious places, which are simultaneously places of massacres in the novel, symbolises the failure of religion or the spiritual decay of the land, along with the decay of the bodies. The disillusionment and vanity of searching for religious protection in this world is communicated through the switch of priests for buzzards. This challenges the borders between species to convey more complex meanings. As Cornwell writes, militarism contributes to the turning of the human order in *Blood Meridian* into "animal-like rather than god-like".[207] Thus, in *Blood Meridian*, animal imagery shows the collapse of distinctions between humans and beasts, because their worlds are not separate; it is the same world of the same order. And religion is depicted as succumbing to this order as well.

3.4. The Uncanny in Blood Meridian

In *Blood Meridian*, the uncanny manifests in various ways. Citing Alan Bourassa, Ronja Vieth states that in "*Blood Meridian*'s world the human is rendered 'uncanny and grotesque', both of which are Gothic attributes".[208] The uncanny and grotesque can be so interconnected that they almost become the same thing, as we see in Philip Thomson who identifies the uncanny as one of the elements, alongside the comic and the abnormal, that constitute the grotesque. He calls the element "*the terrifying* (uncanny, supernatural to disgusting and repulsive)".[209] The uncanny is associated with the repulsive. Accordingly, the main uncanny quality often ascribed to *Blood Meridian* relates to the novel's emphasis on graphic violence. The brutality of the actions of the characters constantly tests "the limits of endurance and acceptability"[210] for the reader. Deaths become ever-present and increasingly gruesome as innocent men, animals, women and children are subjected to cruelty.

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[204] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 219.
[205] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 184.
[206] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 24.
[207] Cornwell, "Ambivalent National Epic, 531.
[208] Ronja Vieth, "A Frontier Myth Turns Gothic: 'Blood Meridian: Or, the Evening Redness in the West,'" *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 8, no. 1 (2010): 56, https://doi.org/10.2307/42909410.
[209] Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), 20, https://archive.org/details/grotesque0000thom_a6b1/page/60/mode/2up.
[210] Hüseyin Altındiş, "Grotesque and Southern Gothic in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *SEFAD* 41 (2019): 97, https://doi.org/10.21497/sefad.586589.

Inevitably, as Altındiş points out, this "depiction is visually horrifying to a sane mind and psyche. It is primitive and uncanny",[211] and it leads to the condemnation of brutality by the reader. At the same time, the novel also juxtaposes the descriptions of violence with comical moments, as as, for example, when one of the members of Glanton's gang "passed [by] with a collection of heads like some strange vendor bound for market, the hair twisted about his wrist and the heads dangling and turning together".[212] The addition of the comic imagery to such a dark moment emphasises the effect of the grotesque. As McElroy writes, the grotesque is evoked by the transformation of "the world from what we 'know' it to be to what we fear it might be".[213] This ties to the concept of the uncanny as well. Terror is not only produced by that which is unknown, but is associated as well with horrors that are only too well known, like interpersonal or inter-species violence, war, or body rupture represented with unpleasant clarity.

Violent physical acts are only one of the sources of the uncanny in *Blood Meridian*. Others are found in the distorted psychology of the characters and the narrative structure of the novel. A character closely connected to the uncanny is Judge Holden. At the end of the novel, the text describes decades of the Kid's life in just a few pages, including his possible silent death at the hands of Judge Holden. These events are narrated in syntactically complex prose of "violent intensity" and "an uncanny, almost scriptural stateliness."[214] The mixing of divergent linguistic features, like formal or lyrical expressions, with the "violent intensity" of the described events, creates an atmosphere that is both elevated and disturbing. Through this, the uncanny arises. In connection with the Judge, it is also relevant to mention Alan Bourass' notion of the "nonhuman". He argues that only by passing beyond human and exhibiting the nonhuman can the novel become truly haunting.[215] The judge, who is intellectually prodigious and physically intimidating, considering his large, pale and hairless physique, embodies this grotesque nonhuman presence. He is both cultured and monstrous. As already mentioned in the previous section, Judge's descriptions in *Blood Meridian* portray him as not fully human.

The uncanny can also be evoked through omissions and ambiguities. The Judge's killing of the Kid in the outhouse in the final scene of the novel is never explicitly described, as compared to other instances of violence that are portrayed in detail. The horror in this case lies in the elision itself, in the unknown. Altındiş identifies the "good-evil dichotomy and the world of human [portrayed] through the uncanny and grotesque characters of 'the kid' and 'the judge'", which allows consideration of "alternative narratives".[216] The uncanny can thus emerge not just through horror, but through the destabilisation of meaning itself, where language, identity and history dissolve and

[211] Altındiş, "Grotesque and Southern Gothic in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," 97.
[212] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 134.
[213] McElroy, *Fiction of Modern Grotesque* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1989), 5.
[214] Dana Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian," *American Literature* 68, no. 2 (June 1996): 434, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928305.
[215] Vieth, "A Frontier Myth Turns Gothic", 63.
[216] Altındiş, "Grotesque and Southern Gothic in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*", abstract.

become part of the grotesque. Caryn James notes that McCarthy "invents a world hinged between the real and surreal," which demands that the readers "witness evil not in order to understand it but to affirm its inexplicable reality."[217] Evil is positioned as something that must be seen, not comprehended. It suggests Freud's notion of Uncanny as the return or resurfacing of repressed experiences, thoughts and memories, or the appearance of something once familiar that now feels terrifyingly estranged, like the evil that *Blood Meridian* presents. Moreover, we need to bear in mind that the horrifying scenes emerge against the backdrop of the frontier, once known as the promising symbol of Westward expansion. The socially set vision of The American Dream, which portrays the frontier as a land of opportunity,[218] contrasts with the reality in *Blood Meridian,* which provides a more accurate and disturbing view of the frontier as a sphere of lived experience rather than a myth. In *Blood Meridian*, the uncanny serves as a tool to unsettle the reader, emerging from graphic violence, but also from the collapse of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, the familiar and the repressed and other ambiguities. The character of Judge Holden and his actions, combined with the surreal mode of narrative, reveal how *Blood Meridian* uses the uncanny to expose evil as something that may be recognisable, but is impossible to fully grasp.

4. Conclusion

Examining nature in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* shows how the two novels employ elements of nature and animals in their use of figurative language to externalise the inner psychology of their characters. Thematically, both novels dissolve boundaries between the animate and the inanimate and pay attention to moral decay on a wide range of scales. While both works present nature as a sentient force that shapes human fate, the novels also differ significantly in how the agency is characterised and related to characters in the respective narratives. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner's Mississippi landscape "reacts" to the Bundrens' actions and emotional state by floodwaters, muddy roads and heat to punish or mock the family's emotional and moral dysfunctions. The setting's sentience is filtered through the subjective views of multiple narrators. This extremely variable and fluid structure reinforces the close connection between the personalised descriptions of nature and the inner world of the characters. The interior monologues by the individual protagonists allow nature's agency to "interact" with the consciousness of individuals, and nature's "mind" and the individual's psyche may infiltrate each other.

By contrast, in *Blood Meridian*, the desert represents a more impersonal force and individual perception is mostly rendered through the Judge's active and Kid's passive engagement with nature.

[217] Vieth, "A Frontier Myth Turns Gothic", 56.
[218] John Tirman, "The Future of the American Frontier: Can One of Our Most Enduring National Myths, Much in Evidence in the Recent Presidential Campaign, Be Reinvented Yet Again?," *The American Scholar* 78, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 1.

The narrative voice is rather omniscient and less fragmented than in *As I Lay Dying*, which allows for a more universal levelling or dismantling of distinctions between man, animal, and matter. It seems that, in comparison to the function of nature in Faulkner's text, nature in *Blood Meridian* is a morally neutral agent. Its world operates according to principles beyond human notions of good and evil. Human minds are gradually changed or even merged into a pre-existing order, rather than having a form of elemental catastrophes as in *As I Lay Dying*.

4.1 Nature as a Sentient Force

In both cases, the natural environment becomes a sentient force shaping human destiny. However, nature's role differs between the two novels. In *As I Lay Dying*, nature is an active, often antagonistic force, which seems closely intertwined with the Bundren family's fate and aligns with John K. Simon's category of an "autonomous agent".[219] The elements of water, heat and rugged terrain in *As I Lay Dying* physically hinder the family's journey but also symbolically reflect their internal conflicts. Addie Bundren's posthumous monologue offers insights into the connection of her identity to nature and her opinion that natural expressions are more "real" than human constructs. Her own personified idea of the land as someone who talks at night and Anse Bundren's cursing of the road illustrate that the characters acknowledge nature's agency. This is supported by Kenneth Burke's idea of the dominance of "scene" over "agent."[220] The terrain and mud are often humanised through descriptions. Examination of the flooding river's psychological and physical impact on characters reveals how the flowing waters not only behave like a living thing, but also terrify and disorient the minds and bodies of the Bundrens. At the same time, they "find [...] the menace of the elements familiar"[221] and thus internalisation represents a connection between the human psyche and wild nature in Faulkner's world.

In contrast, *Blood Meridian* portrays nature as an overwhelming force that encloses human existence in an "optical democracy,"[222] where distinctions between animal, human, and matter lose their relevance. This destabilises anthropocentric hierarchies. Gjelten's description of McCarthy's mythology consisting of "sentient stones and trees"[223] can be further supported by David Abram's interpretation of the Merleau-Pontian framework of the sensuous, sentient "flesh" that is continuous between human bodies and the land.[224] The sentience of nature is also expressed by frequent personification of natural phenomena like the sun, stars or fire. The landscape in *Blood Meridian* appears to "resent" the gang's violence, and its hostility becomes a "purgatory",[225] which seems

[219] Simon, "Scene and the Imagery of Metamorphosis," 11.
[220] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 4
[221] Simon, "Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis," 11.
[222] Bardin, "Ecological Borderlands," 12.
[223] Gjelten, "Another Kind of Clay," 7.
[224] Abram, "The Spell of the Sensuous", 58.
[225] Gjelten, "Another Kind of Clay," 12.

similar to the idea that nature's agency in *As I Lay Dying* wants to punish the failings of the Bundren family, although in the case of *Blood Meridian,* the punishment seems to be effected in a rather a passive way. As noted by Pilkington, nature in *Blood Meridian* exerts control, but human agents still make morally significant choices.[226] The determinism of *Blood Meridian* exercised through nature is thus less absolute and active than the determinism of the elements in *As I Lay Dying*.

4.2. Nature's Reflection of Psychology of Characters

Both novels present a nature that becomes an extension of the characters' inner worlds. Addie Bundren identifies with the wild blood in the earth, while being associated with persistent botanical imagery– she is "planted" like a seed, and her hands are likened to roots. This imagery of plants and natural cycles is also tied to Addie's daughter Dewey Dell, as she describes feeling like a seed, which captures both fertility and entrapment. She articulates her grief over the loss of her mother and fear of her pregnancy by referring to natural phenomena as being "dead". Even Darl, whose gaze passes the horizon and sees through Dewey Dell's emotions, projects his own psyche into natural abstractions. His lyrical or even theatrical descriptions of mud and of the destructive barn fire render nature as a reflection of his mind. Darl acts to stop what he perceives as destructive (human) cycles, and is punished for his perceptiveness and difference by being sent to an asylum.

In *Blood Meridian*, the vast landscape reveals and transforms the psychology of characters as well, but it is rather through a more consistent impact than in *As I Lay Dying*. As he watches feeding deer, The Kid exhibits observer's passivity toward the nature around him since he does not try to shape it, nor does his morality become fully subsumed by it. This contrasts sharply with Judge Holden's urge to dominate the natural world. He sees elements like stones as the language of God, and yet approaches them through the prism of scientific naturalism, as Greve argues,[227] and the same also characterises his behaviour towards animals. He is as indifferent to the autonomy of any kind of object in which he becomes interested as the desert is to all life. By naming, classifying or destroying what he finds in nature, the Judge asserts control reminiscent of enlightenment or utilitarian logic and enacts an exaggerated version of nature's own non-moral violence. Thus, while both novels foreground nature in relation to the human condition, *As I Lay Dying* presents it as an extension of the self, whereas *Blood Meridian* frames nature as an indifferent order, through which the human character is revealed but by which it is never fully absorbed. If in Faulkner, the biological rhythms are internalised and contested, in McCarthy's work, they remain external, as nature serves to test human will and morality.

[226] Pilkington, "Fate and Free Will," 315.
[227] Greve, "'Another Kind of Clay,'" 42.

4.3. Animal Symbolism

Similarities can also be found in the use of animal symbolism, since the presence of animals in both novels reveals characters' emotions and existential states, which are often left unspoken at the level of the text. In *As I Lay Dying*, animal symbols work within the intimate sphere of family life while in *Blood Meridian*, they operate as part of an "ecological frontier",[228] a desert where human and non-human identities blur as they engage in the processes of survival and violence. In *As I Lay Dying*, animals mirror the Bundrens' minds through implicit association, where traditional meanings are reshaped to reflect a character's personal perception or explicit association that likens humans to animals through metaphors and similes. Buzzards signal death, and Darl identifies them as clear signs that his mother has died; while geese, a symbol of marriage, suggest for Addie her alienation from Anse and a yearning for freedom.

In *Blood Meridian*, domestic animals like the Kid's mule evoke innocence, a symbol that is later corrupted as the travellers encounter mule skeletons in the desert. Wild animals show different meanings usually connected to the fall of human exceptionalism. Wolves can reflect the Kid's isolation and occasional socialisation. The bear that carries away one of the gang members is wounded and pursued by Glanton's men, but ultimately never found. This encounter with a bear could symbolise fatality. Overall, violence toward animals, which can lack a purpose, shows a collapse of empathy and human nature shifting from the need to survive to the need to assert dominance. While *As I Lay Dying* uses animal symbols to characterise individuals, *Blood Meridian's* animal symbolism more often shows collective psychological effects. Last but not least, it is also worth commenting on some of the animal symbols shared between the novels, as these often diverge in meaning. In this way, the buzzards in Faulkner's work serve as personal omens of domestic tragedy, while in McCarthy's work, they are ever-present reminders of death and nihilism.

4.4. Zoomorphism and Anthropomorphism

Moreover, both *As I Lay Dying* and *Blood Meridian* frequently use zoomorphic and anthropomorphic imagery in order to blur boundaries between humans and animals, but their aims are different. *As I Lay Dying* employs zoomorphism to highlight characters' psychological traits and the perception of the character by others in an agrarian world of the Bundren family. Anse is often likened to various types of birds, but also a dog or steer, to convey his attempt to fully control his children, while never truly contributing to work. The new Mrs. Burden echoes the birds' metaphors used to describe Anse. At the same time, Vardaman's words, "my mother is a fish",[229] function as a

[228] Bardin, "Ecological Borderlands," 12.
[229] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 64.

tool to comprehend his mother's death. Anthropomorphism connects animals closer to human traits; for example, a horse is described to make human-like noises, and buzzards look like bald men. There are also instances when characters can be fully identified with an animal. For example, Jewel's horse embodies Jewel's tie to his mother, his bad-tempered nature, but also the connection to his biological father, Whitfield, who is shown to be riding a horse. Jewel's relationship with the horse is both violent and affectionate, mirroring his own struggle to control his outbursts of anger. Similarly, Dewey Dell's connection to a cow expresses her fears of motherhood.

Zoomorphism in *Blood Meridian* is applied in the description of Glanton's gang as a pack of wolves, based on its own hierarchy and the tendency to choose the weak as their "prey", as the gang kills and scalps a defenceless old woman, and as supported by the men's respect for the wolves themselves. Men and horses drink beside each other in the harsh terrain, erasing distinctions between species. It shows mutual dependence, vulnerability, but also the need of men to embrace animalistic behaviour for survival. Colonial violence is reinforced through the "crude zoomorphism" of Native Americans.[230] They are often described as birds and sometimes in a comical way, reducing them to subhuman prey to justify the domination and rape of Native women. Such imagery shows that colonisers animalise the Natives and use violence as a means of control, which reflects their own existential terror. Zoomorphism is also sometimes used to portray Judge Holden, as he is linked to the cunning nature of a fox or a cat and is described in bestial terms despite his deep knowledge of culture. His identity especially seems to be positioned somewhere between the human and the animal. While Faulkner's work uses figurative language with animals to articulate family dynamics and instinctual behaviour, McCarthy's work shows humanity's place within a natural order that is not anthropocentric.

4.5. The Uncanny

Both *As I Lay Dying* and *Blood Meridian* employ the uncanny as one of the central elements, but they do so in different ways that reflect their distinct narratives and styles. In *As I Lay Dying*, the uncanny emerges through communication. White's interpretation of the uncanny emphasises its representation in animal voices and cries. The distances of animal cries can also emphasise the psychological alienation of characters and the limits of verbal expressions. At the same time, Darl and Dewey Dell seem to communicate without words. The uncanny here is also intertwined with the concept of "animal magnetism,"[231] which can be a metaphor for the porous boundaries between life and death and even between minds. This is also illustrated in Vardaman's interaction with Peabody's horse, which invokes mesmerism and the transmission of vital forces through physical touch.

[230] Garrard, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*.
[231] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 53.

The world of *Blood Meridian*, representing the American frontier, expresses the uncanny through graphic violence and images of the unknown. Drawing on Thomson, it can be argued that the novel positions the uncanny alongside the repulsive and the comic, which are elements of the grotesque.[232] The horrifying depiction of death unsettles the reader through the Freudian estrangement of something as familiar[233] as violence and evil. The sense of the uncanny also arises from ambiguities, such as the elided murder of the Kid by Judge Holden, who embodies a "nonhuman" grotesque presence. This is consistent with Freud's notion of the uncanny as the return of the repressed or the change of the familiar into something terrifying and strange. Both novels use the uncanny to unsettle the reader. *As I Lay Dying* does so through "animal magnetism", non-verbal communication and subconscious forces, and *Blood Meridian* through primal grotesque violence, ambiguity and the monstrous figure of the Judge.

4.6. Faulkner's and McCarthy's Southern Gothic

The analysis of instances of natural symbolism in *As I Lay Dying* and *Blood Meridian* reveals many similarities, but also some differences between the novels. Their partially fatalistic settings foreground the theme of death and moral decay while providing access to the isolated, psychologically complex characters, determined by their low social status and the proximity of the natural world, and whose identity metaphorically merges with animalistic. This aligns Faulkner's and McCarthy's work with the genre of Southern Gothic. Through close readings, the passages can be grouped into several categories to show similarities between the portrayals of nature in *As I Lay Dying* and *Blood Meridian*. Examining the categories of the sentient nature, the reflection of characters' traits through their engagement with nature, animal symbolism, zoomorphism and anthropomorphism, as well as the notion of the uncanny, proved that these elements play a similarly significant role in constituting the meanings in each of the novels. This validates the argument that McCarthy was likely influenced by Faulkner's work. However, the meanings that *As I Lay Dying* and *Blood Meridian* convey are different, and nature affects the psychology of characters in dissimilar ways. This shows that McCarthy was indeed inspired by Faulkner's Southern Gothic but that we should consider his *Blood Meridian* a profoundly transformed expression of the Southern Gothic genre, compared to how the same conventions are applied in Faulkner *As I Lay Dying*.

[232] Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 20.
[233] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 220.

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