Early in his writing life, Cormac McCarthy renovated a dairy barn as a living space, salvaging bricks from the boyhood home of James Agee. In building a new house from old stones, he was mirroring practice that would define his writing for the next forty years. In an interview dealing primarily with *Blood Meridian*, Harold Bloom argues that the novel is defined by “a surge of narrative propulsiveness . . . an astonishing charge of language, which, finally, in spite of its clear Faulknerian and Melvilean affinities and sources, goes back . . . to their source . . . Shakespeare.”1 In his many works, McCarthy selectively dismantles and reconfigures the great landmarks of literary art—the King James Bible, Shakespeare’s tragedies, the novels of Melville, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, and Hemingway—and out of the shards and raw material he makes something distinctively his own. McCarthy’s early novels are set or at least drawn from experiences in his home state of Tennessee, often in the rural regions of the Appalachian Mountains near Knoxville, but they always occupy a nameless landscape rich in image and symbol, rendered in evocative and lyrical prose. This mythic quality made his transition to the West a natural one, and many readers encountered his work for the first time with his best-selling novel *All the Pretty Horses*, which won the National Book Award in 1992. In many ways his novels and plays are uniquely American, and their nationality is marked by the narrative forms and thematic
preoccupations typical of the American romance. His enigmatic characters are real and supremely human; yet they are richly symbolic as well. He is an energetic literary stylist who explores a host of themes rooted in a diverse array of philosophical perspectives. As an author concerned with the formal nature of his art, he participates, in dynamic retrospective, in the tradition of Western world literature from its beginnings to its late manifestations in the twentieth century.

Life and Career

Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr., the son of Joseph McCarthy and Gladys McGrail McCarthy, was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1933 and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he was first exposed to the people and the places that would occupy his southern works. He later took the name “Cormac” (the Gaelic equivalent of Charles), which was a family nickname given to his father by his Irish aunts. McCarthy was raised a Roman Catholic and was educated in Catholic schools until he entered the University of Tennessee in 1951. He was always active intellectually, though in his early years he was not necessarily bookish. Still, when asked by his grammar school teacher if he had any interests, he discovered that “I was the only one with any hobbies, and I had every hobby there was.” But reading and writing were not initially among them, and it was only later—after leaving the university in 1953 for the U.S. Air Force and being stationed in Alaska—that he discovered books, primarily as a way to indulge his varied intellectual interests and mollify the tedium in the barracks. He returned briefly to the University of Tennessee in 1957. He soon discovered his literary talents, later winning the university’s Ingram-Merrill Award for creative writing. Two of his short stories, “Wake for Susan” (1959) and
“A Drowning Incident” (1960), were published in the school’s literary magazine, the Phoenix. He left the university without taking a degree to begin work on his first novel, The Orchard Keeper, which was ultimately published by Random House in 1965 under the guidance of Albert Erskine, William Faulkner’s editor.

Although they sold only sparsely, McCarthy’s early novels generally received positive reviews. Eschewing a conventional working life, he dedicated himself to the Spartan simplicity he felt was necessary in order to devote himself fully to writing. As a young man, he married twice, having one son with his first wife. For two decades he survived primarily on awards earned for his early novels, including grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the William Faulkner Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and later the Guggenheim Foundation. Throughout his career he remained private, rejecting lucrative offers for speaking engagements. In 1976 he moved from Tennessee to El Paso, Texas. He was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship in 1981, and he later married Jennifer Winkley and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, as a fellow at the Santa Fe Institute, working primarily among scientists, both writing and exploring a range of interests at least partly outside the intellectual mainstream, including, among other things, chaos and complexity theory. Described by Robert Coles of the New Yorker as a novelist of religious feeling, McCarthy in all his works engages the ultimate questions—the nature of the real, the possibility of the divine, the source of ethics and identity—but always in a richly philosophical context and with an active interest in secular science. In his midsixties he became the father of John Francis McCarthy, to whom his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, The Road, is dedicated.
Overview: Influence and Innovation

In coming to terms with Cormac McCarthy’s works, readers face two principal challenges. First, McCarthy sometimes employs narrative techniques that are unconventional, involving frames, inversions, digressions, dream sequences, and extended interior or exterior monologues. One must explore how these various layers integrate or remain purposefully distinct. McCarthy, then, must be approached aesthetically, always with an eye toward the themes implied in literary form. His narrative textures mirror the mysteries of the natural world. The three interwoven stories in *The Crossing*, spoken at length by characters, suggest a metaphysical source and an underlying order in nature, which he renders in detailed description. The dream monologue that concludes *Cities of the Plain* implies the complexities of the unconscious and the role of beauty in providing a compensatory order to the chaos of human perception. The formal features of each of McCarthy’s works must therefore be charted and explored, and he becomes genuinely distinctive in the context of individual sentences, which are characterized by a unique voice, a lyrical and descriptive style, and a vocabulary rife with uncommon and often archaic words. In a rendering of the nighttime world surrounding Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, he describes that world as “some vortex in that waste apposite to which man’s transit and his reckonings alike lay abrogate. 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” (96). His purpose here is to emphasize the power of language to treat philosophical ideas poetically, to heighten the reader’s sense of the primordial mystery in nature, and to explore the complex ways human lives are bound with others. First and foremost then, coming to terms with McCarthy’s
works requires close and dedicated attention to the intricacies of form, as well as to the complexities of language, style, and voice. Individual passages must be read, reread, and pondered, always with a playful acceptance of their ambiguity.

The second challenge is simpler yet perhaps more formidable. All the author’s works, especially *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, *Blood Meridian*, and *The Road*, deal directly with violence, human degradation, and both human and natural evil. These are some of McCarthy’s primary concerns, and he more than confronts darkness—he seeks its deepest recesses. In Herman Melville's terms he is “a man who dives.” While many readers are immediately drawn to the intensity of McCarthy’s prose, others find the subject matter tremendously difficult to absorb. One must come to understand that McCarthy, though reclusive, has given clues as to his evolving worldview. Though in brief interviews he expresses uncertainty about the answers to essential questions—the existence of God, the relationship of good and evil, the nature of transcendent moral purpose and order—McCarthy is by no means devoid of hope. On the contrary, if genuine hope is to be found by honest and thoughtful people, it must be found by acknowledging the harshest realities and the darkest of human circumstances. In *Suttree* the sordid social outcasts face degrading physical and economic conditions, but they find meaning in the sense of community they form among themselves. In *The Road* the prospect of cosmic annihilation must be seen alongside the touching intimacy of the father and the son, and one must consider the possibility that “goodness” and “luck” may in the end preside. In his only television interview, McCarthy was asked what he wanted his readers to take away from *The Road*. His answer: “That we should be grateful.” When reading even the most disturbing of McCarthy’s
works, one must understand that the author seeks truth and value. Sometimes these things prove elusive, but always he leaves readers with beautiful, sometimes incomparably evocative prose. The concluding paragraph of *All the Pretty Horses* stands as one of many examples: “He touched the horse with his heels and rode on. He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land and the small desert birds flew chittering among the dry bracken and horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come.”

In his most extended print interview, “McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction,” which was conducted by Richard B. Woodward of the *New York Times Magazine*, McCarthy discusses the role of influence in the creation of new works of literature. He says, “The ugly fact is books are made out of books. . . . The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written.” Woodward gives a sense of McCarthy’s mind, his voracious appetite for an eclectic range of interests—scientific, philosophical, and literary—from Mojave rattlesnakes with neurotoxic venom, to Gnostic cosmology and chaos theory, to the intricate narrative structures of the American romance. The author is unapologetic in acknowledging his literary forebears, prizing specifically Melville, Dostoyevsky, and Faulkner, and expressing some distaste for Marcel Proust and Henry James. He takes in the past, its forms, preoccupations, and language, but his own work is infused with the historical weight of the twentieth century—the traumatic social transformation of the American South in the postbellum period, the human carnage of two world wars and the genocidal waste that attended them, as well as the
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angst that emerges from the development of the technological and nuclear age.

McCarthy’s telling comment in the Woodward interview can be illuminated by considering T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920). Eliot suggests that literary history is dynamic, and the contemporary writer actively participates in the tradition that precedes him. It is certainly true that authors read, are profoundly moved and inspired, and out of that experience, they create. McCarthy is very much this “traditional” author in the terms Eliot articulates. He evokes the past in all its forms and connotations, and he “builds” his works out of a life-long reading practice that absorbs and reenvisions, apprehends and recontextualizes. Critics both popular and academic have noted echoes of Homer and Dante in McCarthy’s works, as well as the lyrical cadences of the King James Bible and Shakespeare, but the tradition he engages most directly involves the American romance, from its inception in James Fenimore Cooper and William Gilmore Simms, to its later and more complex manifestations in Melville and Hawthorne, and finally to the postbellum modern romances rooted in the South, primarily the works of his immediate predecessors William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor. Thus he can be understood in part in the context of literary history, as an author who works with, at the very least, three forms and movements: the frontier romance; the philosophically preoccupied yet ambiguous narratives of Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, and Dostoevsky; and the tradition of the southern gothic and the southern grotesque. In all his works McCarthy is concerned with the human drama in all its facets, the forces of history, and with the role of violence in the life of the world writ large. Again, in
the Woodward interview, he says, “There is no such thing as life without bloodshed. . . . I think the notion that the species can be improved some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea.” For all his fascination with science, which continued at the Santa Fe Institute, he is no positivist, no vanguard supporter of eighteenth-century Enlightenment notions of human perfectibility. Violence is a reality endemic to the world’s existence; depravity and avarice are central to human nature; and meaning, purpose, and value, if they are to be found, must be sought in darkness. These themes pervade his work, and they are central to his unique contribution to the development of the American novel, which is marked by his distinctive integration of style, language, and a rich array of compelling philosophical and religious perspectives.

McCarthy’s reconfiguration of the frontier romance can be seen in the southern works as early as *The Orchard Keeper* and in the western works as late as *Cities of the Plain* and *No Country for Old Men*. In America this genre harkens back to the early nineteenth century, in John Filson’s “nonfictional” accounts of Daniel Boone, the revolutionary war novels of William Gilmore Simms, and, most notably perhaps, the *Leatherstocking Tales* of James Fenimore Cooper. Central to these works were mythology and the mythic hero. Characters were created to embody human traits but were larger than life, emblematic of a culture’s values, aspirations, ambitions, and self-perceptions. In early American epic romances, the mythic hero finds himself a player in a sweeping drama that pits the forces of historical progress—the settlement of the frontier by European civilization—against the forces of reaction, which involves the attempts made by Native Americans and white frontiersmen to preserve older and simpler ways of living. Thus the inevitability, the mixed benefit, and even the
tragedy of these events emerge as central concerns. McCarthy’s works can be understood as “revisionist” frontier romances, but one must take care in defining this term. *The Orchard Keeper, Child of God, Blood Meridian,* and the novels of the Border Trilogy are not overtly political; yet they are often rooted in the historical concerns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The forces of civilization are by no means portrayed in a celebratory light, as industrial technology, American business interests such as Texas oil, even the building of the interstate highway system, often leave the hero displaced and bereft of purpose. Incidents of greed and malevolence abound, as scalp hunting, drug running, even nuclear apocalypse, all find their way into McCarthy’s epic vision. But the forces of reaction—those players in the drama who stand against the new order—are by no means ethically pure. The issue of morality stands in the foreground of these novels, but the precise pathway to right action is never easily charted.

The wilderness is of course the setting of the frontier romance, and many McCarthy novels take the American landscape, often in its roughest yet most pristine form, as not only setting but subject, as a context through which the human impulse to physical brutality may be explored. In rural Tennessee in the 1930s, *The Orchard Keeper’s* John Wesley Rattner takes Arthur Ownby as a mentor, and from him he learns the principles of self-reliance, a code of individualistic heroic action founded upon a preindustrial dependence on the land. But these lessons lose their value as each man faces modernity—specifically the political power of the Tennessee Valley Authority—and as Ownby ends up in that darkest and most humiliating of all modern mazes—a mental institution. *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy evoke the conventions of the frontier most
directly, at least most recognizably. Set in the West, they are journey novels, coming-of age stories involving young heroes seeking identity and a sense of place. *Blood Meridian* is unflinching in its “revisionist” account of the darker realities of westward expansion, as the Glanton Gang begins with a legal mandate to take scalps and assist in quelling the alien land. But any attempt to read the novel as a single-minded political allegory revealing the avaricious impulses of Manifest Destiny is undermined by the character of the judge. He is a ubiquitous figure who transcends race, nationality, or political purpose, and he becomes many things, among them, the richly symbolic incarnation of “mindless violence,” a propensity that lies latent even in the kid, in spite of his stoic resistance. *All the Pretty Horses*, the first novel in the Border Trilogy and McCarthy’s most popular novel until *The Road*, involves a momentary softening of perspective, and the story’s appeal lies in part from a stark beauty of description and a sense of nostalgia often characteristic of the frontier romance and the western genre. But even here, the central subject is the violence present in the human heart, as the hero John Grady Cole kills another young man in self-defense, fights his impulse to take brutal revenge on a cruel Mexican captain, and seeks moral exoneration and secular absolution from a kind and benevolent judge in his home state of Texas. This softening is less prevalent in the second two novels of the trilogy, both of which remain rooted in the western genre and the frontier romance, but engage philosophical issues recontextualized and deeply ensconced in the historical settings of the twentieth century—in brothels, on decaying ranches and rancheros, along highways with blood-red sunsets perhaps brought on by the nuclear tests in the American Southwest. For McCarthy, the frontier romance in all its historical scope is simply, or not so simply, a means to
explore the human potential for violence, avarice, blindness, self-gratification, and depravity. The author infuses the genre with a philosophical content, using what begins as a popular form to enrich his characters both psychologically and ethically. Protagonists such as John Wesley Rattner, the kid, John Grady Cole, and Billy Parham, each engage in a personal quest, but with a pressing moral urgency.

McCarthy has often been characterized as a philosophical and even religious writer in the broadest, most eclectic, and unorthodox sense. Academic critics have observed the echo of worldviews ranging from Platonism, Neoplatonism, the Existential Christianity of Søren Kierkegaard, Gnosticism, Nietzschean materialism, to the mystical and heterodox Christianity of Jakob Böhme. The metaphorical and symbolic systems McCarthy employs suggest ancient Judaism, and the elements of the divine found in his novels, which are always represented suggestively rather than definitively, imply Yahweh the lawgiver, the Gnostic demiurge (the evil force that governs the material world in Gnostic philosophy), and Elohim (the benevolent fertile crescent God who appears first in the Old Testament and achieves full expression in the incarnation of the Father in Christ). The paradoxical range of perspectives McCarthy explores, sometimes in a single work, suggests not confusion but instead his rich and complex set of formal and thematic concerns. Works such as Blood Meridian, The Road, and The Sunset Limited systematically position characters in order to permit contentious interaction, as they deal with the deepest and most vexing questions. Judge Holden in Blood Meridian has been compared to Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamazov, specifically in his antipathy to any concept of human decency. He stands in contrast to the kid, who clings however tenuously to a faith in the
generative effect of moral action and benevolence. In *The Sunset Limited*, a street preacher by the name of Black debates a suicidal, atheistic college professor on the existence of God, the possibility of finding purpose in self-sacrifice, and the reality of love. For McCarthy, perhaps unlike Dostoyevsky (who tends to resolve his complex narratives within a Christian framework), these questions must be asked, pondered, articulated, recast, and provisionally explored. But they are never fully resolved, and the final word that concludes *The Road* expresses the human condition as McCarthy sees it—physically, spiritually, and intellectually. That word is *mystery*.

It is this emphasis on the unanswerable that draws McCarthy to another subgenre of the novel that dominates in American literature from the early nineteenth century forward. There is no generally accepted name for this form, though it is clearly a category of the romance. Its major practitioners are Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and later Faulkner. One can associate many of their works with the high gothic romance in the ambiguous mode, involving novels and short stories that explore densely psychological, metaphysical, and religious issues, always with an emphasis on a darkness that implies not pessimism but radical skepticism, the notion that there are boundaries to the human intellect, realms beyond which the human mind cannot travel. This engagement with darkness as mystery explains in vivid terms McCarthy’s affinity for the romance genre and for Herman Melville. In his contemporary context, McCarthy is more forthright and aggressive as he intensifies his renderings of death, fear of cosmic annihilation, and even the confusion that emerges from the diversity of the twentieth-century intellectual climate. His works seek this darkness and foreground mystery, not necessarily with any presupposition of nihilism or emptiness, but in
an attempt to engage actively in a modern context the human dilemma in its most distressing and challenging manifestations. The sometimes unconventional nature of McCarthy’s narrative structures is one method for enacting this process. In novels such as The Orchard Keeper, Outer Dark, The Crossing, Cities of the Plain, and No Country for Old Men, he uses multiple interlaced strands, frames, and evocative dream sequences to unsettle the reader’s faith in a distinctly perceivable world. Circumstances both interior and exterior to character are seen from many viewpoints, and there is often the mysterious, omniscient McCarthy persona that intercedes in strange, lyrical, and sometimes italicized passages to complicate and lend ambiguity to the most tactile and visual situations. The narrative intricacy can be seen in Blood Meridian in the distinct perspectives of three characters. In extended monologues, the judge espouses the malevolence that defines his own heart. In the middle stands the former priest Tobin, who encourages violence in the service of survival. In contrast to both is the kid, who resists the seeming omnipotence of evil in an attempt to retain his soul through guarded, albeit limited acts of service and self-sacrifice. This cosmic evil is prefigured earlier in Outer Dark’s mysterious triune, the three figures that follow Culla Holme, seeing into his heart and exceeding it in a cruelty and malevolence that seem beyond space and time. In all these works, McCarthy employs both character and literary form in the service of a complex of ambitious themes, all of which attempt to explore human nature under the stress of instinct, impulse, and the external forces of time and historical change.

Especially in the initial reviews of his early novels, McCarthy has been associated with the regional literature of the South. Again, McCarthy shares an affinity with William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O’Connor, Carson
McCullers, and Walker Percy, among many others. These authors are distinctive both thematically and formally, since they explore the historical conditions of the South following the Civil War, as well as the traumatic psychological and social circumstances that became more acute in the modern period. Central to the evolving aesthetics of southern literature is the southern gothic and the southern grotesque. Speaking to a group of librarians at the University of Virginia in 1936, Ellen Glasgow coined the term “southern gothic” to describe what she saw as a disturbing feature of the new southern writers, specifically Caldwell and Faulkner. These authors employ many of the conventions of the gothic romance—decaying edifices, bleak settings, psychologically tortured protagonists—and place them in recognizably southern settings. In part, the purpose is to evoke both terror and horror, to externalize the emotional distress that attends social transformation, and to connote the perversity inherent in human nature. Tennessee Williams once described the southern gothic as “an intuition, of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience.” Ancillary to this genre is the southern grotesque, which involves obscene and often comic exaggerations in character and situation, sometimes involving physical deformity and sexual deviance.

In emphasizing the theme of mystery, McCarthy certainly draws from this southern tradition. In The Orchard Keeper, the murder of John Wesley’s father is made horrific yet comic as the body is guarded in the orchard by Uncle Ather. There is an irony in Arthur Ownby’s ignorance of the corpse’s identity and in the fact that the young man unknowingly befriends the murderer. In Outer Dark the evil embodied in the grisly triune is strangely justified by Culla Holme’s incest and the abandonment of
his infant child. In *Child of God* the southern grotesque takes center stage as the necrophiliac Lester Ballard—after losing his land—precipitously descends into a psychological abyss, into realms of cruelty and perversion unimaginable. In a distinctively southern style, McCarthy explores the absurdity of certain social conventions and the basic weakness and fallibility of human nature.

To understand and come to terms with Cormac McCarthy’s novels and plays, one must engage the intricacies of each individual work—the narrative layers, the linguistic complexity, the erudite vocabulary, even the profound nature of his philosophical themes. This task is made less formidable for readers as they understand the manner in which he creatively reenvision the traditions that precede him, most notably the frontier romance, the densely philosophical and ambiguous romances of the nineteenth century, and the literature of the American South in the postbellum period.

McCarthy’s passion for the life of the mind is palpable, and his eclectic interests often find their way into his works. Thematically, he is varied, difficult to pin down, often changing philosophical masks within a single work. But even here one may map at least part of the terrain. The ethics and metaphysics of Judaism and Christianity, the Gnosticism of the Ancient Near East, and the more modern considerations of Böhme, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, are all ideas he chooses to consider, and in many cases he integrates them into coherent if complex character configurations that stand alone as literary creations, ultimately independent of influence. In the end, however, McCarthy’s works should be approached with the simple anticipation of beauty, for in each case readers experience an avalanche
of words, images, and richly embodied landscapes and characters. Equipped with some grasp of aesthetic form, tradition, and the history of ideas, readers may come to a satisfying understanding of this important contemporary author.