

STRIKE THE SUN: THE SATANIC LEADER, MANIFEST  
DESTINY, AND AMERICAN CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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My thesis examines the influence of John Milton's portrayal of Satan in *Paradise Lost* on Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick* and Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*. Specifically, I examine the way in which a satanic figure can be portrayed as morally ambiguous and potentially heroic, and why such figures are the driving forces of the works they inhabit. To answer this, I argue that Milton's Satan may be viewed as a colonist, and that Manifest Destiny and American expansionism can explain his influence on Ahab and Holden. Ultimately, I assert this is indicative of an ongoing frontier mentality in the American psyche.

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*For Gemma,  
who always sees the angel in me when I feel myself the devil.*

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## Introduction

“Ramblin’, where to begin?” –The Decemberists

Though it’s not something I adhere to anymore, my Lutheran upbringing continues to influence my life in often strange and unexpected ways. As I got into my teen years and started to explore avenues of thought which were often in conflict with Christianity, one of the most irking and troubling questions that haunted me was the psychology and morality of the devil. In the Christian Book of Genesis, God tells Adam and Eve that they may eat from any tree in the Garden of Eden, save for The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, with the warning that if they do so, they will “surely die.”<sup>1</sup> Enter Satan, who by tempting Eve who then tempts Adam, the Fall of Man is wrought and sin is introduced to the world.

So, Satan tricked Adam and Eve. “Well Montana,” you may be saying, “what’s so curious about that? Satan’s clearly a total creep. Case closed.” Well, perhaps not entirely. One could view God’s commandment here as really one more of tyranny than protection; that by keeping Adam and Eve from knowledge of good and evil, God effectively keeps them ignorant. If one interprets God as a tyrannical force who desires to have Adam and Eve blissfully subjugated to him, then Satan is not the tempter but the liberator, freeing the first humans from their bondage. It follows then, that one by proxy must consider Satan’s attempted usurpation of God as a radical act of liberation, rather than selfish desire. And, of course, one must consider all this is permitted by God to some degree.

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<sup>1</sup> Gn 2:16-17.

And yet this is hard to swallow. Satan's actions in the Christian tradition are consistently villainous: in addition tricking Adam and Eve, he tortures Job extensively (with God's permission, however) and attempts to damn all mankind by tempting Jesus to sin. These potentially confused and conflicted notions of Satan's role in Christianity are undoubtedly best illustrated by John Milton in his 1667 epic poem *Paradise Lost*. As Harold Bloom notes, "(Milton's) Satan is *both* Iago and the ruined Othello, *both* Edmund and the maddened Lear, *both* the exalted and the debased Hamlet, *both* Macbeth posed on the verge of regicide and Macbeth lost in the ensuing web of murder"<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some scholars have viewed Satan as an unintentional hero, rebelling against the tyranny of heaven, while others have argued that Satan's presence as a heroic figure is only Milton's own genius in portraying the Devil as a master deceiver, tricking the reader into believing that he is the poem's main figure. Whatever position one takes on Satan, it is impossible to deny that he is the central driving force of the first several books of the poem. In fact, Satan's presence in *Paradise Lost* is so effervescent that it has spawned several other literary characters who echo Satan's desire to rebel against what he perceives as a tyrannical system.

In the novels *Moby-Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville and *Blood Meridian* (1985) by Cormac McCarthy, both authors employ a satanic figure at the head of their works who acts as the engine of the plot. For *Moby-Dick* it is the monomaniacal Captain Ahab, relentless in his desire to destroy the titular white whale in revenge for taking his leg. Ahab's lust for vengeance is an echo of Satan's own in *Paradise Lost*. After being cast into Hell, Satan focuses only on vengeance, stating "[a]ll is not lost: the

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994) 180.

unconquerable Will /And study of revenge, immortal hate, /And courage never to submit or yield (...) That Glory never shall His wrath or might/ Extort from me.”<sup>34</sup>

And, indeed, much like Satan, Ahab views Moby-Dick as the incarnation of a cruel God. T. Walter Herbert Jr. puts it eloquently, arguing that Moby-Dick is for Ahab “the symbol of a malignant God, who, according to ‘an internal aforethought of ferocity,’<sup>5</sup> created the race of men in order to destroy the greater part of them”. In killing Moby-Dick, Ahab ultimately seeks to revenge himself on God for creating what he feels is an unjust world.

In *Blood Meridian* this figure is Judge Holden, an ambassador of chaos and violence who desires to bend the entire natural world to his subjugation. Holden is reminiscent of Milton’s Satan in his embodiment of destruction, who states later on in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, “...to be weak is mis’rable /Doing or suffering: but of this be sure: /To do ought good never will be our task /But ever to do ill our sole delight.”<sup>6</sup> Much like Satan, Holden values destruction and war as the essence of his being. Michael Walonen notes that it is “in his consummate embrace of the forces of destruction, upheaval, and non-productive expenditure that marks the malign and imposing Judge Holden as, in a sense, satanic”<sup>7</sup> And indeed, Holden himself states to the Kid near the end of the novel that “if war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005) 1.106-08;110-11.

<sup>4</sup> Note: the rendition of *Paradise Lost* which I use has updated spelling and punctuation; all else is as the original.

<sup>5</sup> T. Walter Herbert Jr., “Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*,” *Modern Language Association* 84 (1969): 1615, accessed May 6, 2017, doi: 10.2307/1261508.

<sup>6</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.57-60.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Walonen, “Old Nick Crossed the Mississippi: The Figure of the Devil in Late Cold War Era Novels of the American West,” *The European Journal of American Studies* 9 (2014): 14, accessed May 6, 2017, <http://ejas.revues.org/10335>.

<sup>8</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 319.



But why are these characters so interesting to us? Moreover, why is it that these satanic figures are the engines and leaders of the novels in which they inhabit? Additionally, why Melville and McCarthy? Why do two American writers have such a fascination with an Englishman's portrayal of the Devil? The answer to these questions, I would argue, has to do with Manifest Destiny and American expansionism.

While I doubt it was his prime intention, I assert that Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* with a subtle colonial allegory, with Satan as the text's head colonizer. If we examine *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* with this same scrutiny, it becomes clear that not only do Melville and McCarthy borrow many of the qualities of—and form direct parallels with—Milton's Satan, Ahab and Holden inhabit a similar position: that is, not only as the satanic rebel leaders of their respective groups, but also as agents of Manifest Destiny and expansionism. I argue that this fascination demonstrates an inherent desire in the American psyche to continue expanding and conquering, and confirms what Frederick Turner wrote in his now-famous "Frontier Thesis" many years before:

...the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves...<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Overland Park: Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), 26. Kindle edition.

Turner's consideration of the contemporaneous US-held land to be "free" is both problematic and puzzling, but his point that conflict will inevitably follow further expansion is correct. To paraphrase and simplify, America was built on aggressive expansion, and it has become a part of our national consciousness. This will continue inevitably until our destruction, or our mentality changes.

## **Methodology**

Because of the nature of my thesis, my methodology is rather straightforward. I will use direct evidence from my three primary texts, supplemented with a wealth of books and articles to support my arguments.

## Main Text

### Part One: Milton's Satan

“Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell” –Satan, *Paradise Lost*

#### *Hero or Villain?*

Milton's Satan is perhaps the most controversial figure in all of English literature. Since *Paradise Lost* was written some 350 years ago academics have continuously debated whether or not Satan occupies the space of hero or villain. Scholar Michael Bryson tells us “Satan is, of course, a great villain (with emphasis on the word *great*, not *villain*) (...) Satan is a hero-villain, or to use a modern cinematic phrase, an *antihero*.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Romantic poet William Blake famously wrote that “the reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it.”<sup>11</sup> Really, no matter what interpretation one takes of Satan, his presence in the poem is troublesome: why can a hero be so villainous, or why can a villain seem so attractive? In order to understand my argument for Satan as a colonial figure, it is important to understand the nature of Satan's potential “heroism,” as well as a brief context for the England which Milton inhabited.

#### *Satan as Hero-Villain/Epic Hero*

I agree with Michael Bryson that Satan is a “hero-villain,” or an antihero. Before any analysis however, it's important to note the way that “hero” is being defined here. I

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Bryson, *The Tyranny of Heaven: Milton's Rejection of God as King* (Newark: Associated University Press, 2010) 77.

<sup>11</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) xvii.

and other scholars do not mean morally upright and a protector of the weak and innocent when we say “hero.” In this case, the term refers more to the heroic epic tradition, of heroes who are tragic and often fatally flawed, but are valued for their feats of arms and leadership abilities. In this sense the term “epic hero” I would argue is also applicable to Satan.

Bryson is also correct when he states that Milton’s Satan “more closely resembles a character from Greek drama or Homeric epic than one from the Bible.”<sup>12</sup> Bryson seems to echo Stella Revard, who refers to Satan as “proud but magnificent, unyieldingly resolute in battle” and a “potentate with great name and high degree.”<sup>13</sup> Going further, Revard calls Satan a “classical battle hero” and adds that he is “in demeanor like Agamemnon, in tactics like Odysseus.”<sup>14</sup> However, Michael Bryson also tells us that Satan’s most admirable quality is that he is “determined to stand up and fight for what he believes in (...) For Satan, the war against God is not an allegory of good and evil, but a real and present struggle against a tyrant.”<sup>15</sup> This perhaps more than anything else is what most closely aligns Satan with a more modern interpretation of a hero. But where does this all actually show up in the text? *Paradise Lost* begins with Satan waking up chained in the “fiery gulf”<sup>16</sup> of Hell after nine days of languishing there. Milton tells us that Satan is tormented by “the thought /Both of lost happiness and lasting pain” and that “[r]ound he throws his baleful eyes /That witnessed huge

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<sup>12</sup> Bryson, *Tyranny of Heaven*, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Stella Purce Revard, *The War in Heaven: Paradise Lost and the Tradition of Satan’s Rebellion* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980) 198, 200.

<sup>14</sup> Revard, *The War in Heaven*, 220.

<sup>15</sup> Bryson, *Tyranny of Heaven*, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.52.

affliction and dismay /Mixed with obdurate pride and steadfast hate.”<sup>17</sup> Clearly, Satan is in a lot of pain.

Satan knows that his rebellion has failed, he knows that he will never enter Heaven again, and he’s now trapped in a horrid and abysmal place. But—much like an epic hero of old—he manages to rally his troops. Satan states that he bears an “unconquerable will” to fight his “Grand foe” who “sole reigning holds the tyranny of Heav’n.”<sup>18</sup> After freeing himself from the lake of fire, Satan addresses his fellow fallen angels, saying:

Princes! Potentates! /Warriors! the flow’r of Heav’n once yours, now  
lost, /If such astonishment as this can seize /Eternal Spirits! Or have ye  
chos’n this place after the toil of battle to repose /Your wearied virtue for  
ease you find /To slumber here as in the vales of Heav’n? /Or in this  
abject posture have ye sworn /T’ adore the Conqueror, who now beholds  
/Cherub and seraph rolling in the flood /With scattered arms and ensigns  
till anon /His swift pursuers from Heaven gates discern /Th’ advantage  
and descending tread us down, /Thus drooping, or with linked  
thunderbolts /Transfix us to the bottom of this gulf? /Awake! Arise, or be  
for ever fall’n!<sup>19</sup>

Let us take a moment to admire Satan’s rhetoric. Satan plays on his soldiers’ pride in order to rally them, asking them if they prefer to “slumber” and reside in “abject posture” to “adore the Conqueror” who has just defeated them. Notice also how he addresses them as “princes” and “potentates,” reminding them that though fallen, they were once glorious. Satan also points out that if shame isn’t enough, the fear of “linked thunderbolts” to “transfix (them) to the bottom of (the) gulf” certainly should be. Here we can see what Stella Revard means when she compares Satan to Odysseus, a great warrior to be sure, but one whose tongue is just as deadly as his sword.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 1.54-58.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 1.106, 124.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1.315-330.

Skipping ahead here to a later section of the poem, let us examine Book 6, in which Satan teaches his fellow rebel angels how to make gunpowder. The context here is that Satan has just lead his troops against the loyalist forces of Heaven, and his armies were routed. At their battle camp later that evening, a rebel angel named Nisroch suggests that superior firepower could be the key to victory. Satan thinks this is a splendid idea, and comments that “Not uninvented that which thou aright /Believ’st so main to our success I bring (...) Deep underground, materials dark and crude /Of spirituous and fiery spume (...) Shall yield us pregnant with infernal flame /Which into hollow engines long and round (...) shall send forth.”<sup>20</sup> These lines are interesting for a couple reasons. First and foremost, here we see Satan invent the cannon and gunpowder, which speaks to his ingeniousness as a leader and improviser. They also show that Satan is one to never admit defeat, and will act tenaciously to prevent it.

Finally, let us examine Satan’s triumphant return to Hell. In Book 10, after tempting Eve and securing Earth as a seat for the fallen angels, Satan returns to Hell like a decorated war hero: “clad /With what permissive glory since his fall /Was left him, or false glitter. All amazed /All that so sudden blaze the stygian throng /Bent their aspect and whom they wished beheld: /Their mighty chief returned. Loud was th’ acclaim.”<sup>21</sup> Here, we see Satan return to Hell in a burst of glory, very much the conquering hero returning to his troops. He goes on to say that he has “returned /Successful beyond hope to lead ye forth /Triumphant out of this infernal pit” to “[n]ow

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 6.470-71; 478-79; 483-84;486.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 10.450-455.

possess /As lords a spacious world to our native Heaven /Little inferior.”<sup>22</sup> Here probably more than anywhere else in the poem, Satan seems a true hero, a Prometheus returning with stolen fire, Achilles dragging the slain body of Hector behind his chariot to the Achaean armies, and even—in an interesting inversion of roles—a Christ figure smashing the bonds of Hell. In this way, we can see Satan as an epic hero struggling against what he perceives as a very real tyrant. However, this scene of Satan’s greatest glory quickly becomes his ultimate debasement as well.

Immediately after he finishes the speech I just discussed, Satan and his fallen angels are turned into serpents. Milton writes that “[h]is visage drawn he felt to sharp and spare, /His arms clung to his ribs, his legs entwining /Each other till supplanted down he fell /A monstrous serpent on his belly prone /Reluctant but in vain: a greater pow’r /Now ruled him, punished in the shape he sinned.”<sup>23</sup> Though Harold Bloom called this scene “Milton’s most ruthless act of editorializing,”<sup>24</sup> it is still hard to firmly imagine Satan as the hero of the poem when the final image we have of him is as a serpent writhing in Hell as poetic justice for his temptation of Adam and Eve. I am not sure if I entirely agree with Bloom here, as Satan *does* do some rather reprehensible acts throughout the poem.

For example, scholar John M. Steadman thinks of Satan more as a villain, and argues that “the image of the Satanic hero is a conscious pretense (...) it is an illusion deliberately fostered by the father of lies.”<sup>25</sup> Let us return to the first book, and examine

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 10.462-64, 466-468.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 10.511-16.

<sup>24</sup> Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 172.

<sup>25</sup> John M. Steadman, “The Idea of Satan as the Hero of *Paradise Lost*.” *American Philosophical Society* 120 (1976): 255, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uoregon.edu/stable/986321>.



Satan's words to Beelzebub shortly after rising from the lake of fire: "Fall'n cherub, to be weak is mis'rable, /Doing or suffering, but of this be sure: /To do aught good will never be our task /But ever to do ill our sole delight."<sup>26</sup> Here, Satan explicitly states that he and his demons literally intend to do no good. Even those who rest within the Satanist<sup>27</sup> camp of *Paradise Lost* scholars must admit that Satan cannot be viewed as entirely "good." Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley—one of the most famous Satanists—famously admitted that Satan is not "exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement."<sup>28</sup> Yet even if Satan is tainted by these things, it's still no excuse for his desire to cause only harm.

Next I want to examine what is perhaps the most famous section of *Paradise Lost* in regards to the debate over Satan. Harold Bloom, ever the erudite scholar, calls Satan's speech atop Mount Niphates "the text upon which the anti-Satanist, Satanist, or some comparable attitude must finally rest."<sup>29</sup> Looking at the speech, one of the most striking sections to me is where Satan states "[God] deserved no such return /From me, whom He created what I was /In that bright eminence and with his good /Upbraided none. Nor was his service hard (...) Lifted up so high /I'sdeigned subjection and thought one step higher /Would set me high'st."<sup>30</sup> Here, Satan admits that his main crime was pride. Perhaps Satan *does* believe that God is a tyrant, but here he reflects that his "service" was not difficult or demanding. Additionally, Satan's comment that

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<sup>26</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.157-160.

<sup>27</sup> Scholars who view Milton's Satan positively, as opposed to anti-Satanists, who view him negatively.

<sup>28</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002) 206-207.

<sup>29</sup> Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Paradise Lost*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 1987) 5.

<sup>30</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.42-45, 49-51.

“one step higher” would have put him as “high’st” in Heaven seems to imply a desire not for equality, but to subject other angels to *his* will instead of God’s. Further on down the speech, Satan comments “which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell.”<sup>31</sup> Scholar Bernard Paris comments on these words, arguing that Satan “is bound to be miserable whatever he does, for he can escape neither God’s anger nor his own self-laceration.”<sup>32</sup> I agree with this, but I also think Paris misses something. I think Satan speaks not only of himself, but of those he encounters as well. Satan does not only experience Hell for himself, he *brings* Hell to others as well.

Now that we have fully examined Satan’s character, and with this last point in mind specifically, it will be far easier to explain/analyze how Satan functions as an imperial figure within the poem. But first, a brief note on Milton’s world and the state of England is necessary.

### *Satan the Emperor*

Milton’s England was one of great turmoil and change, not just at home, but abroad as well. As scholar J. Martin Evans notes:

Indeed, the crucial first phase of English empire-building in the New World coincided more or less exactly with Milton’s lifetime. The year before he was born the first English settlers dispatched by the Virginia Company of London arrived in Chesapeake Bay. The establishment of the Plymouth colony took place when he was eleven, the widely publicized Virginia massacre when he was thirteen, and the great puritan migration to Massachusetts Bay while he was in his twenties. He was thirty-five when the second Virginia massacre occurred, forty-six when

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 4.75.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard Paris, *Heaven and its Discontents: Milton’s Characters in Paradise Lost* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010) 54.

Cromwell acquired Jamaica. By the time he had reached his fifties, England was the dominant colonial power in North America...<sup>33</sup>

Not to mention a civil war! There's a lot of information there, but the essence of the message is that England during Milton's time was incredibly imperialistic, and such a zeitgeist would not have gone unnoticed by Milton. Evans goes on to say that Milton's epic, "seems (...) to be (...) a poem about empire."<sup>34</sup> Going further he comments that Satan "rehearses virtually all the major roles in the repertoire of English colonial discourse. By turns buccaneer, pilgrim, and empire-builder, he embodies not only the destructive potential of imperial conquest but its glamour and energy as well."<sup>35</sup> This is why it was necessary to explore how Satan functions in the poem, as many of the arguments of how he functions as an epic hero, or hero-villain/antihero can be applied to how he acts as a colonizer as well. In fact, the traits that make a good epic hero and a good colonizer are very similar. Bryson reminds us that "classical heroes themselves thought in terms of military prowess: those who had it were noble (Achilles, Odysseus, etc.), those who didn't were barely worthy of contempt (...) heroes equated honor with the ability to conquer one's enemy or suffer gracefully in defeat."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Satan's battle prowess, his cunning speech, his unwillingness to admit defeat—are these not all ideal traits for a colonial agent?

Let us examine early on in the poem shortly after Satan and his fellow demons have established Pandemonium. Satan refers to Heaven as the fallen angels' "just inheritance of old" and speaks to them of his intention to claim it for them "with

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<sup>33</sup> J. Martin Evans, "Milton's Imperial Epic," in *Of Poetry and Politics: New Essays on Milton and his World*, ed. P.G. Stanwood (New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1995) 230.

<sup>34</sup> Evans, "Milton's Imperial Epic," 229.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>36</sup> Bryson, *Tyranny of Heaven*, 80.

monarchal pride.”<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Satan’s language suggests imperialist desires. The fact that he calls Heaven the fallen angels’ “inheritance” implies it is something they deserve, something that *should* be theirs. This is one of the central ideas of Manifest Destiny, though that name did not yet exist. In his book *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*, author Frederick Merk writes that when it was first introduced, Manifest Destiny meant “expansion, *pre-arranged by Heaven*, over an area not clearly defined.”<sup>38</sup> Notice that I italicized the phrase “pre-arranged by Heaven,” which I would argue is the kernel of this definition, and speaks well to Satan’s insistence that Heaven is the angels’ inheritance. Next, consider Milton’s description that Satan sets out with “monarchal pride.” This again is an inherently imperialistic description as a monarch by definition must rule over something or someone.

Skipping around a bit, I want to take another look at Satan’s return to Pandemonium in Book 10. Recall that Satan tells the fallen angels that he has returned to lead them back to Earth which they shall “possess as lords,” and that this area was by Satan’s “adventure hard /With great peril achieved.”<sup>39</sup> Satan also comments to Death and Sin shortly before that “[t]riumphal with triumphal act have met /Mine with this glorious work and made one realm /Hell and this world, one realm, one continent.”<sup>40</sup> Again, Satan’s tone is strongly imperialistic, as he speaks of uniting Earth with Hell as “one continent,” the possibility of such made manifest by his “great peril.” Evans comments on this section as well, telling us that “during the course of his triumphant

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<sup>37</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2.38, 428

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) 24.

<sup>39</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 10.466-67.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 10.390-91.

speech in Book 10 announcing the conquest of Eden, the devil sounds at times very much like Amerigo Vespucci reporting back to Lorenzo Pietro di Medici on his latest voyage to the New World.”<sup>41</sup> Though the example is rather specific, framing Satan as an adventurer makes sense: Satan *does* sound very much like a renaissance explorer returning to tell his employers of what he found.

Evans also draws attention to Satan’s idea to attack Eden in Book 2, where he says that even though “Heav’n be shut(...)this place may lie exposed, /The utmost border of his Kingdom, left /To their defense who hold it. Here perhaps /Some advantageous act may be achieved /By sudden onset.”<sup>42</sup> Evans tells us that this speech “momentarily transforms Satan into a demonic Sir Francis Drake setting off to singe God’s beard. On one level, at least, the assault on Eden will be a daring naval raid by an infernal buccaneer.”<sup>43</sup> I really like the comparison of Satan to a pirate raider here, as the attack on Eden is in many ways like a raid: Satan moves in clandestinely and rapidly, completes his objective, and egresses before alarm can be raised. I also want to examine that way that Satan functions as someone seeking religious freedom. Satan says in Book 2 that by making his venture to Earth from Hell, he will “seek /Deliverance for us all!”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Satan positions himself as a brave pilgrim, setting out into the New World to seek sanctuary for himself and his ilk. Evans agrees, commenting that “in a diabolic parody of the pilgrims on the *Mayflower* he presents himself as the ultimate separatist, a

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<sup>41</sup> Evans, “Milton’s Imperial Epic,” 233.

<sup>42</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2.358-64.

<sup>43</sup> Evans, “Milton’s Imperial Epic,” 233.

<sup>44</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2.465.

victim of religious persecution.”<sup>45</sup> But never doubt that Satan’s true purpose is territorial expansion. Consider that even though the pilgrims sought refuge from tyranny, they and their descendents became conquerors. In fact, Satan reveals this himself as he approaches Eden in Book 4, stating that though Heaven be lost, he can at least hold “[D]ivided empire with Heav’n’s King (...) and more than half perhaps will reign.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, Satan explicitly states that he wants to *take* from God what he does not already possess, starkly placing himself in the role of conqueror.

Of all these things, however, I think the most compelling piece of evidence for Satan functioning as a colonial agent comes near the end of the epic. Consider when Satan returns from his successful temptation of Adam and Eve, and orders Sin and Death to go and subjugate the Earth. He instructs them specifically on what to do with Man, saying “[h]im first make your thrall and lastly kill.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Satan clearly commands Sin and Death to subjugate and then kill man. I argue that we can see an impressively imperial tone in Satan’s rhetoric. Satan’s use of the word “thrall” starkly indicates a will to rule over the earth and humanity, and implies an inherent, assumed (one may say racial) superiority over Man. In these ways, it is clear that while Satan functions in the poem primarily as a kind of epic antihero, he also acts as an agent of Manifest Destiny and territorial expansion. I assert it is for these reasons primarily that his character was so interesting to Melville and McCarthy. As we move on and examine how Ahab and Holden function as satanic rebels in their own works, their significance

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<sup>45</sup> Evans, “Milton’s Imperial Epic,” 234.

<sup>46</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.110-11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 11.402.

as agents of Manifest Destiny will also become clear, which we must then conclude speaks something to American cultural consciousness.

## **Part Two: Captain Ahab**

“Talk not to me of blasphemy, man, I’d strike the sun if it insulted me.” –

Captain Ahab, *Moby-Dick*

“Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from Hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee.” –Captain Ahab, *Moby-Dick*

### *Ahab as Satanic Rebel*

Writing to Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1851, Herman Melville said of his yet unpublished book *Moby-Dick* that “this is the book’s motto (the secret one), -- *Ego non baptiso te in nomine* – but make out the rest yourself.”<sup>48</sup> The rest of the phrase as it appears in his novel is “*patris, sed in nomine diaboli!*”<sup>49</sup> This all translates to “I do not baptize you in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil.” Perhaps Melville thought it a bad omen to write the whole phrase without the novel’s context around it, or perhaps he simply wanted Hawthorne to be guessing at what the rest of the phrase could be. Either way, Melville’s assertion that this is the book’s motto speaks volumes about Captain Ahab’s importance as a character, and as a satanic figure. These lines are spoken by Ahab shortly before his final duel to the death with the novel’s titular whale, and seem to be a final and full embrace of his blasphemous quest to destroy Moby-

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<sup>48</sup> Herman Melville, “Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, June 29 1851,” *The Life and Works of Herman Melville*, last modified July 25, 2000, <http://www.melville.org/letter5.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2002) 402.

Dick. But it is important to understand firstly how Ahab comes to this point, and understand how exactly he functions as a satanic figure. Ahab's quest can then be understood in its entirety not only as an heir to Satan's own in *Paradise Lost*, but also as an imperialist allegory.

Scholars have long noted similarities between Milton's Satan and Captain Ahab, such as John Freeman who wrote in 1926 that "the never-to-be-ended combat typified by Milton's Lucifer and Archangels is typified as boldly by Melville's *Moby Dick* [sic] and Captain Ahab."<sup>50</sup> For indeed, there is something to be said of the relationship between the two characters. One interesting aspect of Ahab is that long before we see him, Melville makes us anxious for his appearance. This is primarily due to the air of mal-intent and foreboding surrounding his name. As Harold Bloom somewhat sheepishly admits, "when I was a boy, and first read *Moby-Dick*, my sympathy for Captain Ahab's heroic quest was overwhelming, despite my uneasy sense that his name had very dark Biblical overtones."<sup>51</sup> Dark indeed. To summarize the reign of King Ahab as told in the Bible: he married a foreign woman whose people worshipped the god Baal and erected an altar and temple for him, and allowed her to kill God's prophets. Sometime after that Ahab coveted the vineyard of a man named Naboth, and through schemes had the man killed and took it. Then he was slain in battle and dogs licked his blood. Up to that time, no king had evoked the ire of God more than Ahab.<sup>52</sup>

All of this does not go unnoticed by Melville, who makes the audience aware of Ahab's unfortunate namesake through Ishmael. After having signed up for the voyage,

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<sup>50</sup> John Freeman, *Herman Melville* (London: Macmillan, 1926) 116.

<sup>51</sup> Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Major Literary Characters: Ahab*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991) 1.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Kings 16:29-22:40.



Ishmael asks one of the other captains who are seeing off the *Pequod* where Ahab is, as he has not yet been sighted on deck. Captain Peleg tells Ishmael that Ahab is “a sort of sick(...)in fact he ain’t sick; but no, he isn’t well either(...)he’s a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab(...)Ahab’s above the common; Ahab’s been in colleges, as well as ‘mong the cannibals(...)he’s *Ahab*, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was crowned king!” To which Ishmael replies, “And a very vile one.”<sup>53</sup> Here, even before the audience is physically introduced to Ahab, we are given some rather startling information about him. We know that there is *something* wrong with him, but that’s yet unspecified. We know he is an “ungodly, god-like man,” and we know he is named after an evil king.

These pieces of information, though limited, already position Ahab as satanic in the Miltonic sense. Firstly, Ahab’s very name implies that he is someone who will stand against God, as evidenced by what was just discussed. Next, there is the peculiar phrase “ungodly, god-like man.” This calls to mind the idea of the hero-villain I discussed earlier in Part One. The fact that Ahab is “ungodly” suggests that he will act like his namesake and do evil in the eyes of God, or at the very least want nothing to do with him, whereas the phrase “god-like” implies a certain self-elevation. For Ahab to in fact be “god-like,” he must elevate himself to a status above what any mortal should be able to achieve. As scholar Maurice Friedman notes in his essay “Captain Ahab: Modern Promethean,” Ahab is “like every hero(...)a mixture of the divine and the demonic. His very opposition to the order of things gives him a certain grandeur and nobility.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 68.

<sup>54</sup> Maurice Freedman, “Captain Ahab: Modern Promethean,” in *Major Literary Characters: Ahab*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991) 81.

Indeed, this blend of the “divine and demonic,” the “ungodly” and “god-like,” the debased man with an immortal soul who aspires for something beyond that which is permissible, is what places Ahab in the realm of antihero, and more specifically, as an heir to Milton’s Satan.

Now let’s take a look at the first time Ahab appears in the novel. Here is what Ishmael tells us about his appearance:

His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini’s cast Perseus. Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish. It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it(...)leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded.<sup>55</sup>

There is much worth examining here. First consider how Ahab’s form is of “solid bronze” and “unalterable.” These words indicate a stubbornness or resoluteness in Ahab’s will, reminiscent of Satan who is unwilling to admit defeat. But what is really interesting in this passage is the description of Ahab’s scar, which resembles the scarring when lightning hits a tree. This is in fact a direct reference to Satan in *Paradise Lost*: “[b]ut his face /Deep scars of thunder had entrenched and care /Sat on his faded cheek, but under brows /Of dauntless courage and consid’rate pride /Waiting revenge(...)as when Heaven’s fire /Hath scathed the forest oaks or mountain pines.”<sup>56</sup>

In both cases here, we see powerful figures who have been wounded, but still stand strong and ready to fight. Scholar Leslie E. Sheldon tells us that “both the Miltonic and

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<sup>55</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 20; 1.601-04, 612-13.

Melvillean tree similes actually underscore a sense of reduced and atrophied stature.”<sup>57</sup>

Here we have two powerful beings who have been somehow reduced: Satan was cast out of Heaven and thus lost his angelic splendor, Ahab was maimed by Moby-Dick.

But what connection—you may be asking—could there possibly be between Satan’s enemy (God) and Ahab’s (Moby-Dick)? The answer to this is that Ahab takes the attack from the whale as a cosmic affront from God, and we can surmise this from his language. When Ahab makes clear to the crew of the *Pequod* that the real purpose of their voyage is to slay the titular whale, Starbuck is the only one to raise his voice in objection, telling Ahab that Moby-Dick is no more than “a dumb brute!(...)that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous.”<sup>58</sup> Starbuck’s assertion seems a bit ridiculous, but when expounded upon, it becomes clear. Ahab replies to Starbuck that:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ‘tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale the agent, or be the white whale principle, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man, I’d strike the sun if it insulted me.”<sup>59</sup>

There are several things worth examining here. Firstly, that Ahab describes Moby-Dick’s “inscrutable malice” as that which he hates most. Herbert Walter Jr. points out

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<sup>57</sup> Leslie E. Sheldon, “Messianic Power and Satanic Decay: Milton in Moby Dick,” *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 4, (2002): 33, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://muse-jhu-edu.libproxy.uoregon.edu/article/495703/pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 136.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

that “Captain Ahab’s monomaniacal fixation on the white whale is the madness of one who refuses to submit to the ‘inscrutable.’ Ahab seeks to know more than mortal man is permitted to learn of the infinite God. He is determined to ‘strike through the mask,’ to challenge the justice of the ‘reasoning thing’ that has such a terrible bearing on his own life.”<sup>60</sup> Harold Bloom goes further, saying that “to strike through the mask is to break what the ancient Gnostics called the *Kenoma*, the cosmological emptiness into which we have been thrown by the creation-fall. The *kenoma* is a prison, the wall of which is Moby-Dick himself (...) Ahab has been injured and insulted by Moby-Dick or by the White Whale’s normative creator.”<sup>61</sup> Here, we can understand more what Starbuck means when he says that vengeance on a “dumb thing” is “blasphemous.” The dumbness that Starbuck describes can really be understood as blankness, nothingness, whiteness; it is a blank canvas of nature holding behind it divine and wrathful implication.

It is important to understand that though Ahab is a Quaker, Ahab’s God is actually Melville’s God, that is, the Calvinist God. Calvin taught that the fate of all mankind is predestined to Heaven or Hell, and that individual deeds bear no weight. For Ahab, Moby-Dick is “the symbol of a malignant God, who, according to ‘an internal aforethought of ferocity,’ created the race of men in order to destroy the greater part of them.”<sup>62</sup> Ahab’s God is also the God of Job, the God of the Old Testament. He is the God who speaks to Job from the whirlwind, telling him “gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and thou answer me. Where wast thou when I laid the

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<sup>60</sup> Herbert Jr., “Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*,” 1617-18.

<sup>61</sup> Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>62</sup> Herbert Jr., “Calvinism and Cosmic Evil,” 1615.

foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.”<sup>63</sup> God’s instruction for Job to “gird up [his] loins” is a reference to what wrestlers would do at the time before a match: God is telling Job to prepare for a rhetorical fight. God’s first question, and the several following that I have not quoted here, are all rhetorical—of course Job wasn’t there when the earth was formed. This is God’s way of reinforcing his inscrutability to Job—he reminds Job here that there are simply things man is not meant to know.

But Ahab is not Job—to quote Captain Peleg—“*he’s Ahab, boy.*” Harold Bloom tells us that “more Job’s wife than Job, Ahab chooses to curse God and die (...) Ahab’s reply to the voice of God in the whirlwind is to insist he *will* draw out Leviathan with a hook.”<sup>64</sup> Ahab does not accept that there are some things he cannot know. Ahab has been maimed by something he *is sure* is representative of something greater, in this case—a God Ahab views as malignant. Later on in the book, Ishmael tells us that “[Ahab] piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down.”<sup>65</sup> Ishmael’s assertion that Ahab’s rage is that of “his whole race from Adam down” heavily suggests that the whale is representative of God for Ahab. This is further supported by the fact that Ahab states he would “strike the sun.” The sun has long been associated not only with God, but with life itself. By suggesting he would hit the sun if it displeased him, Ahab is not only saying that he would fight with God, but that he would willingly destroy everything else in doing so. This desire is very reminiscent of Satan’s own in *Paradise Lost* in which he states that

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<sup>63</sup> Job 38:3-4.

<sup>64</sup> Bloom, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>65</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 153.

the fallen angels' "sole delight" will be "to do ill." Here, we can see the connection between Ahab and Satan in their desire to achieve self-vindication through destruction.

I want to return now to the section of *Moby-Dick* that I used to open this part, in which Ahab forges his tri-pronged harpoon to kill the titular whale. After the harpoon has been forged, the blacksmith asks Ahab for water to temper it, to which Ahab replies:

'No, no – no water for that; I want it of the true death-temper. Ahoy, there! Tashtego, Queequeg, Daggoo! What say ye, pagans! Will ye give me as much blood as will cover this barb?' holding it high up. A cluster of dark nods replied, Yes. Three punctures were made in the heathen flesh, and the white whale's barbs were then tempered. 'Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!' deliriously howled Ahab, as the malignant iron scorchingly devoured the baptismal blood.<sup>66</sup>

This passage is interesting for several reasons. Consider that Ahab asks specifically for *pagan* blood with which to temper his harpoon. This is itself an affront to God, as Ahab intends to kill what he views as the incarnation or agent of God with a weapon tempered in the blood of those ignorant to Him. I would also argue that the three barbs can be viewed as a mockery of the holy trinity, and thus as a further insult to God. Secondly, I want to draw attention again to the book's "secret motto" as Melville put it. Ahab's statement that he baptizes his harpoon in the devil's name instead of God's is a direct inversion of the traditional baptismal process. This is an extremely satanic and blasphemous act, and seems to solidify Ahab's fate.

The last thing I want to talk about regarding Ahab as the satanic rebel of Milton's tradition are his final words to Moby-Dick before they sink. Ahab addresses Moby-Dick directly, saying "towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 402.

whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from Hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee."<sup>67</sup> With these words, Ahab seems very much like Satan at the end of *Paradise Lost*. Consider specifically the phrase "all-destroying but unconquering." Though Ahab and his crew will die, he remains "unconquered" in that he has not submitted to the inscrutable. Ahab has stood against the divine and brought it to its knees, though he has lost himself in the process. Herbert writes that "we may take Ahab's final assault as the climax of a heroic boldness in the face of divine injustice, or we may take it as an expression of egoistic vindictiveness goaded into frenzy. But few readers can sympathize with (...) the ultimate malignity that whale has come to symbolize for Ahab."<sup>68</sup> Much like Satan, who lies writhing in Hell as a serpent when we last see him, but is vindicated by his success against Eden, so do we leave Ahab, who sinks with *Moby-Dick*, but is unconquered. Now, with Ahab firmly established as a satanic figure, let's examine how he functions as an expansionist.

#### *Captain Ahab the Expansionist*

"Whaling is imperial!" –Ishmael, *Moby-Dick*

As I did with Milton in Part One, I think it first necessary to give a brief overview of the political events that surrounded America up to and while Melville was writing *Moby-Dick*: The Mexican-American War started in 1846 and lasted until 1848. Victory in the war resulted in the United States gaining a large amount of land, what is now virtually all of the American Southwest. This increased the size of the United States by "virtually 100%." Now the only issue was what to do with all the land

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 468.

<sup>68</sup> Herbert Jr., "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil," 1619.

acquired from Mexico. Slaveholders in the South wanted the territory to become slave states, while abolitionists in the North wanted the areas to be free states. Ultimately, congress decided that if California could join the Union as a free state, southerners would have the prospect of forming slave states in Utah and New Mexico sometime in the future. Another stipulation of what became known as “The Great Compromise of 1850” was The Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed any US citizen to be deputized and forced to catch any *suspected* runaway slave. This essentially allowed for free blacks to be forced into slavery. Naturally, abolitionists were furious, and the so-called “Great Compromise” really only served to divide the North and South even further.<sup>69</sup> *Moby-Dick* was published a year later.

With this in mind, we can now return to Captain Ahab and *Moby-Dick*. One of the first ways we are made aware of Ahab as an expansionist is through Melville’s description of the *Pequod*. He tells us that:

She was apparelled like any barbaric Ethiopian emperor, his neck heavy with pendants of polished ivory. She was a thing of trophies. A cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies. All round, her unpanelled, open bulwarks were garnished like one continuous jaw, with the long sharp teeth of the sperm whale, inserted there for pins, to fasten her old hempen thews and tendons to.<sup>70</sup>

One thing to note here is that the ship is described as a “cannibal of a craft” and a “thing of trophies.” These terms inherently position the *Pequod* as an agent of expansionism and violence. The *Pequod* is in essence a manifestation of what Richard Slotkin calls “regeneration through violence.” Slotkin tells us that “the first colonists saw America as

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<sup>69</sup> “How the Mexican-American War Affected Slavery,” *American Experience: The Abolitionists* video, 3:26, Oregon Public Broadcasting, <https://opb.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/amex25.socst.ush.mexwar/how-the-mexican-american-war-affected-slavery/#.WQEbbNlyvIU>

<sup>70</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 59.



an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence.”<sup>71</sup> To go a bit further, in order for the early American colonists to survive in the New World, they had to adapt to it. In order to expand further, they had to kill those who were already living there, and in killing them, in taking what they owned, in a way they *consumed* them, they became like them, they regenerated themselves into something new. Frederick Turner writes in his “Frontier Thesis” that “[t]he wilderness masters the colonist (...) It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.”<sup>72</sup>

Problematic terminology aside, I would argue that this is what the Melville presents to us through the *Pequod*. Being a “cannibal” of a craft, decked out in the bones of whales, the ship is a literal representation of this idea, that the *Pequod*’s trophies identify it as a ship of expansion, changed and perhaps empowered by what it has slain. This idea is further advanced by the *Pequod*’s name. Ishmael tells us that the ship’s namesake was “a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct as the ancient Medes,”<sup>73</sup> which is telling on its own, but there is more. Scholar Mark Niemeyer tells us that the Pequot natives were a threat to the expansion of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and that the “resulting Pequot War of 1637 led to the tribe’s

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) 5.

<sup>72</sup> Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 59.

annihilation and virtually all members killed.”<sup>74</sup> That Ahab sails on a ship outfitted in the bones of whales it has killed and named after a tribe of natives massacred for *territorial expansion* is very telling. Additionally, there are numerous references to ivory with regard to the ship and Ahab (twice in its initial description and several other times in the book)<sup>75</sup> which seem to suggest “a racist strain to the belligerent mission of the ship.”<sup>76</sup>

Another interesting thing is the direction in which the *Pequod* sails. Initially, it might seem to speak against the idea of westward expansion that the ship sails east rather than west, but this is not so. This nuance is, in fact, a subtle nod to a part of the political zeitgeist in America during Melville’s time. To paraphrase Harvard Professor Alan Heimert, many Americans well into the 1840s still considered US expansion to be inherently linked to conflict with England. Largely because of the War of 1812, but “even the annexation of Texas and war with Mexico” were considered “as parts of a ‘deadly encounter’ with England.” In the 1840s, many Americans viewed westward expansion as revenge on England and as a means of “raising a new American empire from its ruins,” which was often represented in the US at the time *as a whale*.<sup>77</sup> In this context, we may understand the *Pequod*’s eastward mission as playing on this notion,

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<sup>74</sup> Mark Niemeyer, “Manifest Destiny and Melville’s *Moby-Dick*: Or, Enlightenment Universalism and Aggressive Nineteenth-Century Expansionism in a National Text,” *Q/W/E/R/T/Y* 9 (1999): 306, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://illiad.uoregon.edu/illiad/oru/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=606249>.

<sup>75</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 59; 87; 132; 187; 193.

<sup>76</sup> Niemeyer, “Manifest Destiny and Melville’s *Moby-Dick*,” 306.

<sup>77</sup> Alan Heimert, “*Moby-Dick* and American Political Symbolism,” *American Quarterly* 15 (1963): 506-507, accessed May 1, 2017, [http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uoregon.edu/stable/2710971?sid=primo&origin=crossref&seq=10#page\\_sc\\_an\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uoregon.edu/stable/2710971?sid=primo&origin=crossref&seq=10#page_sc_an_tab_contents).

and in fact another way which Melville indicates Ahab's mission as being representative of Manifest Destiny.

But this is not all. For the *Pequod* actually has an even more concrete connection to the real world expansionism of Melville's time. Heimert also tells us "when in the 1840s the citizen of the United States pictured his nation's development and situation, he imagined the Republic as a ship, its history a voyage."<sup>78</sup> Recalling the brief history lesson at the beginning of this section, many Americans considered the so-called "Ship of State" to be at great risk in the late 1840s. For example, citing from the Congressional Globe, Heimert relates that some congressmen felt that the ship's "captain" had run the ship "into the whirlpool of the Mexican War," and many worried the ship would sink "'Deeper than plummet ever sounded,' carrying with it the last, best hopes for mankind."<sup>79</sup> In 1849, Henry Longfellow published his poem "The Building of the Ship," which was extremely well-received by unionists, and had its last stanza often quoted in its entirety by orators. By "autumn 1850 it could be sung with jubilee by the majority of Americans."<sup>80</sup> Heimert notes that since this poem was well-known during Melville's time, it is no coincidence that Melville created a ship "strikingly similar to the vessels which rode the oratorical seas of 1850."<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, the *Pequod* sails under a red flag<sup>82</sup> (the *Union*'s is red, white, and blue)<sup>83</sup>, and is built in "democratic dignity" containing a "deputation from all isles of

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<sup>78</sup> Heimert, "Moby-Dick and American Political Symbolism," 499.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 499.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 501.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 501.

<sup>82</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 463.

<sup>83</sup> Henry Longfellow, "The Building of the Ship," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed April 27, 2017, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/44626>.

the earth.”<sup>84</sup> This is reminiscent of the way that Longfellow’s shipbuilder requests that “every climate, every soil, /Must bring its tribute, great or small, /And help to build this wooden wall!”<sup>85</sup> Additionally, the *Pequod* is put together “from all contrasting things”<sup>86</sup> from the three sections of the Union: “oak and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp.”<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Longfellow’s *Union* is composed of “timber of chestnut, and elm and oak(...)and crooked cedar trees.”<sup>88</sup> And the *Pequod* is manned by thirty men—also the number of US States at the time—“federated along one keel.”<sup>89</sup> If we consider the *Pequod* to be inspired by Longfellow’s *Union* and as representative of the “Ship of State,” then we must conclude Melville’s tale to have an anti-expansion message: The *Pequod*’s pursuit of Moby-Dick results in its destruction. Here, Melville subtly suggests that if the United States continued with its obsession with Manifest Destiny, it would share the same fate.

Leaving the *Pequod* behind, I want to return again to Ahab. As I already discussed, Ahab is named after a wicked, biblical king, among whose chief sins was the murder of a man named Naboth and theft of his vineyard. Effectively, this is territorial expansion. By killing Naboth and seizing his vineyard, the biblical Ahab becomes essentially an agent of Manifest Destiny and expansionism. Interestingly enough, the theft of Naboth’s vineyard was also a prevalent analogy used in the late 1840s to

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<sup>84</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 97;100.

<sup>85</sup> Longfellow, “The Building of the Ship.”

<sup>86</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 454.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 454.

<sup>88</sup> Longfellow, “The Building of the Ship.”

<sup>89</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 100.

describe the relationship of the United States to Texas and Mexico. Scholar Michael

Rogin writes that:

Opponents of the Mexican War turned to the Bible (...) Theodore Parker attached a 'scripture lesson' to his 1848 sermon on the Mexican War. It was the lesson on the fate of King Ahab (...) Parker's audience already knew the implications of that story. It had been used first against the seizure of Indian land, and then applied to Texas and California. *The Taking of Naboth's Vineyard* was the title of one pamphlet against Texas annexation.<sup>90</sup>

Since this analogy had been applied several times already to *other* prospective US territories, *and* was extremely popular during the years he was writing *Moby-Dick*, it would be absurd to say that Melville had no knowledge of it. In naming his satanic character after Ahab, in compound with the context of his time, Melville aligns Captain Ahab and his *Pequod* with aggressive 19<sup>th</sup> century expansionism.

But let us examine Ahab's character as well. Ahab is called the "absolute dictator" of the *Pequod*, and a "khan of the plank, and a king of the sea."<sup>91</sup> Niemeyer notes that phrases like this "strongly suggest an imperial (...) mission," and that "several characteristics of Ahab cast him in the roll of slaveholder"<sup>92</sup> as well. Melville tells us that Ahab is "lord and master"<sup>93</sup> over of the steward, Dough-Boy, and Flask is described as "[a]bjectus, or the Slave"<sup>94</sup> in his servility to Ahab. Fedallah is also referred to as Ahab's "slave"<sup>95</sup> and Pip, the black boy, often refers to Ahab as

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Paul Rogin, "Moby-Dick and the American 1848," in *Major Literary Characters: Ahab*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991) 132.

<sup>91</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 82; 107.

<sup>92</sup> Niemeyer, "Manifest Destiny and *Moby-Dick*," 306.

<sup>93</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 122.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 438.

“master.”<sup>96</sup> Additionally, Alan Heimert astutely points out that the *Pequod*'s harpooners “are representative of the three races on which each of the American sections, it might be said, had built its prosperity in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stubb's squire is an Indian; Starbuck's comes from the Pacific Islands. And Flask, perched precariously on Daggoo's shoulders, seems, like the southern economy itself, sustained only by the strength of the ‘imperial negro.’”<sup>97</sup> In summation, Niemeyer then tells us that “when one considers this symbolism of slavery, in and of itself an act of aggression, in the light of the knowledge that many southern nineteenth-century expansionists desired more territory for the express purpose of expanding slavery, Ahab once again seems a perverted and out-of-control version of Manifest Destiny.”<sup>98</sup>

Additionally, much of the imagery surrounding Ahab and the *Pequod* seems to recall images of America's westward expansion. Melville writes that Ahab has a “fixed purpose laid with iron rails,”<sup>99</sup> which Niemeyer points out recalls America's “rapidly growing railway system that was aiding significantly in the conquest of the West.”<sup>100</sup> Additionally, there is one section in which Ishmael describes ships as though they were wagons, moving “not through high rolling waves, but through the tall grass of a rolling prairie: as when the western emigrants' horses only show their erected ears, while their hidden bodies widely wade through the amazing verdure.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, this directly recalls images of westward expansion and manifest destiny, “specifically the great

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 436; 462.

<sup>97</sup> Heimert, “*Moby-Dick* and American Political Symbolism,” 502.

<sup>98</sup> Niemeyer, “Manifest Destiny and *Moby-Dick*,” 306.

<sup>99</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 140.

<sup>100</sup> Niemeyer, “Manifest Destiny and *Moby-Dick*,” 306-307.

<sup>101</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 403.

migration to Oregon that began in 1843, three years before the boundary dispute between the United States and Great Britain had been resolved,” and is therefore a form of passive territorial aggression.”<sup>102</sup>

Yet perhaps the most striking and relevant piece of evidence for Ahab’s quest being allegorical for US expansion at the time comes from Ishmael’s discussion of “Fast-Fish” and “Loose-Fish.” To summarize the concept, in the American whaling industry, a Fast-Fish was a fish that a ship had somehow marked as its own, whether the whale was actively towing a whaling boat behind it, or marked with a standard from the ship, and thus, it would be improper for another whaling vessel to seize the whale. However, the second option would only apply if the ship were nearby, for a lone whale, flag-marked though he might be, would qualify as a Loose-Fish. That is, a whale that is entirely “up for grabs,” so to speak. Thus, Ishmael rhetorically asks:

What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus stuck the Spanish standard by way of waiving it for his royal master and mistress? What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish.<sup>103</sup>

Ishmael (or Melville’s) assertion that Mexico will eventually become a “Loose-fish” to the US is especially alarming because it is essentially Melville communicating to the audience his apprehension that the US will soon take *all* of Mexico, not just what was won in the Mexican-American War. Niemeyer points out that “such, however, was the kind of game the more aggressive proponents of Manifest Destiny were playing, and it [is] also the kind of whale hunting Ahab [is] engaged in.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Niemeyer, “Manifest Destiny and *Moby-Dick*,” 307.

<sup>103</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 330.

<sup>104</sup> Niemeyer, “Manifest Destiny and *Moby-Dick*,” 307.

Here, I have demonstrated that Ahab exists not only in the tradition of Milton's Satan, but also as a continuation of the colonial undertones presented by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Much as Ahab leads his crew to doom fighting Moby-Dick, "America, too, chases its passions toward new frontiers, which in turn define the character of the nation. When frontiers disappear, Americans invent new ones."<sup>105</sup> Indeed, I assert that Melville was fascinated with Milton's Satan largely because of the colonialism and territorial expansion happening in his own country at the time of *Moby-Dick's* composition. Next, I will demonstrate how this trend continues with Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, and finally, I will conclude with an account of what all of this suggests about the American consciousness.

### **Part Three: Judge Holden**

"War is god." –Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian*

Holden is entirely in the vein of Milton's Satan in that he is both a blend of wanton violence and cultured intelligence. As discussed previously, Satan may be viewed in *Paradise Lost* as a hero-villain, or antihero. Judge Holden occupies a similar role in *Blood Meridian*, but to a far greater extreme. I would not call Milton's Satan nor Ahab evil. Judge Holden, however, has none of the moral reservations of Satan or Ahab—he has no internal struggle with his desire for destruction. He simply acts. He is a sadist, a wanton killer, and a child murderer and rapist.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, scholar Brent Edwin Cusher asserts that "in the figure of Judge Holden, Cormac McCarthy has crafted

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<sup>105</sup> Bruce Plourd, "Frontier as Symptom: Captain Kirk, Ahab, and the American Condition," *Cercles* 19, (2009): 122, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://illiad.uoregon.edu/illiad/oru/illiad.dii?Action=10&Form=75&Value=606254>.

<sup>106</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 170; 200-201; 286.



perhaps the most haunting character in all of American literature (...) Holden is a richly composed portrait of human evil responsible for a litany of wicked deeds throughout the novel.”<sup>107</sup>

And yet, the Judge has admirable qualities. He is a polymath: he studies religion, history, philosophy, archaeology, and sociology;<sup>108</sup> he can dance, he can fiddle, “he can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer. He’s been all over the world. Him and the governor they sat up till breakfast and it was Paris this and London that in five languages...”<sup>109</sup> Note here how similar this sounds to when Captain Peleg tells Ishmael of Ahab’s adventures among cannibals and colleges. Additionally, as 2<sup>nd</sup> in command of the scalphunters, Holden is also a firm agent of Manifest Destiny. Liana Vrajitoru Andreasen adds that “the character of the judge demonstrates that Western expansion, understood in its extreme individualistic and mythical sense, can become destructive.”<sup>110</sup> As previously done, I first will establish Holden as being in the tradition of Milton’s Satan, as well as Captain Ahab, and then examine him as an agent of Manifest Destiny.

### *A Satan More Devilish than Lucifer*

Throughout the text, McCarthy puts many references that seem to imply the Judge *is literally* the devil. While I disagree with this interpretation, I think these

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<sup>107</sup> Brent Edwin Cusher, “Cormac McCarthy’s Definition of Evil: Blood Meridian and the Case of Judge Holden,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 43 (2014): 223, accessed May 2, 2017, doi: 10.1080/10457097.2014.900318.

<sup>108</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 89; 152.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

<sup>110</sup> Liana Vrajitoru Andreasen, “Blood Meridian and the Spacial Metaphysics of the West,” *Southwest American Literature* 36 (2011): page numbers unavailable, accessed May 2, 2017, <http://go.galegroup.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ps/i.do?&id=GALE|A270372888&v=2.1&u=s8492775&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&authCount=1>.

references nonetheless more firmly establish him as an heir to Milton's Satan, and are worth considering. Citing the work of John Sepich, scholar Michael Walonen writes that:

On first introducing Judge Holden, the narrator of this episode cryptically remarks, "Give the devil his due" (131). Indeed, as Sepich notes, in this section of the text the judge is described as a "sootysouled rascal" whose handiwork is liberally seasoned with references to "the devil," and "brimstone" (121). Further, throughout the novel Holden and the rest of the gang are associated with fire and whiskey (liquid fire), thus accentuating the hellish aspect of their situation.<sup>111</sup>

Here, we have several small examples where McCarthy puts subtle indicators that Judge Holden is to be associated with the devil. I believe the inclusion of these small references serve to further align Holden with Milton's Satan, and with a literal, Christian interpretation of the devil as well. One episodic example of this occurs near the beginning of the novel when we are first introduced to the Judge. Here, the kid is watching a tent preacher outside a small town when the Judge enters. He addresses the crowd directly from the preacher's pulpit, and accuses the preacher of being an imposter and a child molester. The preacher replies by saying "[t]his is him (...) This is him. The devil. Here he stands."<sup>112</sup> Nonetheless, the crowd goes into an uproar and tries to lynch the preacher. Later on, in a bar, the kid observes the Judge drinking when he is approached by the posse rounded up to find the preacher. When asked how he came by the information about the man, Holden replies that he "never laid eyes on the man before today. Never heard of him."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Walonen, "Old Nick Crossed the Mississippi," 13.

<sup>112</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 7.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

Here, Holden not only accuses an innocent man of horrible crimes, but they are crimes he himself is wont to commit. Holden's deception of the crowd and the preacher's accusation that Holden is the Devil mark him as a satanic figure: that is, in swaying the crowd from the preacher's words through guile, he (albeit in a minor way) echoes Milton's Satan swaying the angelic hordes of Heaven. Next, I want to examine an episode from the novel that firmly establishes Holden as an heir to Milton's Satan, in the sense that it is a direct reference to a specific scene in *Paradise Lost*. Actually, it is more a combination of two. First consider the episode in which Tobin relates to the Kid how the Glanton Gang first came upon the judge.

The expriest Tobin (as McCarthy calls him) explains to the Kid that the then members of the Glanton Gang were out of gunpowder and were being pursued across the desert by the natives they had been hunting. The gang finally comes upon the judge sitting solitary on a desert rock. Holden leads them up out of the desert to a volcanic rim, where they fashion gunpowder from the minerals there and kill their pursuers. In a series of lectures on *Blood Meridian*, Yale Professor Amy Hungerford points out that "this [scene] is taken directly from *Paradise Lost* where Satan instructs his fiends on how to make gunpowder."<sup>114</sup> Returning to *Paradise Lost* briefly, let us examine this scene from Book 6. After the first battle in Heaven, which Satan and his armies lost, the fallen angels are debating how they might overcome the loyalist forces of Heaven. One proposes an invention of a new weapon, the idea of which Satan enjoys. Though this section has already been discussed, it is worth examining again in this new context:

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<sup>114</sup> Amy Hungerford, "Lecture 17 – Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian," *Open Yale Courses* video, 50:12, <http://oyc.yale.edu/english/engl-291/lecture-17#ch2>.

Not uninvented that which thou aright /Believ' st so main to our success I bring. /Which of us who beholds the bright surface of this etherous mold whereon we stand, /This continent of spacious Heav'n adorned /With plant, fruit, flow'r ambrosial, gems and gold, /Whose eye so superficially surveys /These things as not to mind from whence they grow /Deep under ground, materials dark and crude /Of spirituous and fiery spume, till touched /With Heaven's ray and tempered they shoot forth /So beauteous, op'ning to the ambient light? /These in their dark nativity the deep /Shall yield us pregnant with infernal flame.<sup>115</sup>

Here, Satan tells his rebel angels that the substances to fashion the weapons they need lie right beneath their feet “deep underground” in “dark nativity” which will “yield [them] pregnant with infernal flame.” Professor Hungerford notes that “this is what the Judge says for his part in like circumstances.”<sup>116</sup> Let us now return to *Blood Meridian*, where Tobin continues his narration:

In all this time the judge had spoke hardly a word. So at dawn we were on the edge of a vast malpais and his honor takes up a position on some lava rocks there and he commences to give us a address. It was like a sermon but it was no such sermon as any man of us had ever heard before. Beyond the malpais was a volcanic peak(...)and he pointed to that stark and solitary mountain and delivered himself of an oration to what end I know not, then or now, and he concluded with the tellin us that our mother the earth as he said was round like an egg and contained all good things within her. Then he turned and led the horse he had been ridin across that terrin of black and glassy slag, treacherous to man and beast alike, and us behind him like the disciples of a new faith.<sup>117</sup>

Here, we can see a strong parallel between Satan and the judge. Hungerford notes that Satan and the judge share “the same structural position,”<sup>118</sup> in that Holden elevates himself upon lava rocks, whereas Satan stands above his fellow rebel angels on the outskirts of the battlefield. Additionally, both stand in the position of a leader trying to rally their troops and show them a new way to victory. But what is most striking is the

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<sup>115</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 6.470-83.

<sup>116</sup> Hungerford, “Lecture 17 – Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*.”

<sup>117</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 136.

<sup>118</sup> Hungerford, “Lecture 17 – Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*.”

similarity of language between the two. Satan's speech to the rebel angels that they can utilize "deep underground, materials dark and crude" which "in their dark nativity the deep /Shall yield us pregnant with infernal flame" is remarkably similar to the judge's assertion that "our mother the earth" is "round like an egg and contain[s] all good things within her." As the scalphunters approach the volcano, Hungerford also draws attention to Tobin's assertion that inside the earth's core is "where for aught any man knows lies the locality of hell."<sup>119</sup> Tobin's speculation that the scalphunters may be nearing Hell further serves to illuminate the parallel McCarthy creates between the judge and Milton's Satan.

I would argue additionally that this scene is also a reference to an earlier part of *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, McCarthy's homage here is really a synthesis of the two. Let us turn our attention to Book 1, in which Satan leads his fallen angels out of the gulf of fire and unto the shoreline to establish Pandemonium. Milton writes that:

There stood a hill not far whose grisly top /Belched fire and rolling  
smoke. The rest entire /Shone with a glossy scurf, undoubted sign /That  
in his womb was hid metallic ore, /The work of sulphur. Thither winged  
with speed /A num'rous brigade hastened (...) Soon had his crew  
/Opened into the hill a spacious wound /And digged out ribs of gold.<sup>120</sup>

Here, I want to examine the imagery presented and how it resonates through to McCarthy's work. Milton's words that "there stood a hill not far whose grisly top /Belched fire and rolling smoke" seem to be present in *Blood Meridian* as well. Recall how McCarthy describes "the edge of a vast malpais (...) Beyond the malpais was a volcanic peak" which is surrounded by a "terrin of black and glassy slag." Here, we can see a clear connection between Milton's description of the hilltop that will become

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<sup>119</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 136.

<sup>120</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.670-75, 688-690.

Pandemonium and McCarthy's of the volcanic peak the scalphunters will use to make gunpowder. Note as well the similarity of terrain: Milton describes "glossy scurf" around the hilltop, whereas McCarthy mentions "black and glassy slag." Moving a little farther along in the episode, I want to draw attention to McCarthy's description of the volcanic peak: "A weal of brimstone all about the rim of the caldron, bright yellow and shining here and there with the little flakes of silica but the most pure flowers of sulphur."<sup>121</sup> Indeed, this echoes Milton's description of the hilltop, saying that "in his womb was hit metallic ore, /The work of sulphur." Ultimately, in this section McCarthy establishes a clear homage to two parts of *Paradise Lost*, effectively aligning the judge with Milton's Satan.

Leaving this episode behind, I want to examine yet another way the judge is an heir to Milton's Satan, and this is through their similar philosophies. Holden has many peculiar habits, from dancing and fiddling to amateur archaeological speculations. One such habit is cataloguing the various plants, animals, locations, and artifacts that he encounters as the Glanton Gang pillages its way across the US/Mexico border. After he has catalogued these things, he destroys them, saying he wishes to "expunge them from the memory of man."<sup>122</sup> When questioned about this practice by Toadvine, another of the scalphunters, the judge replies that:

Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. He looked about at the dark forest in which they were bivouacked. He nodded toward the specimens he'd collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath you rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when

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<sup>121</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 137.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he properly be suzerain of the earth.<sup>123</sup>

The judge's assertion that "only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he properly be suzerain of the earth" seems to echo Satan's pronouncement to Sin and Death that they should "There (Earth) dwell and reign in bliss! Thence on the earth /Dominion exercise and in the air, /Chiefly on Man, sole lord of all declared: /Him first make your thrall and lastly kill. My substitutes I send ye and create /Plenipotent on Earth, of matchless might /Issuing from me."<sup>124</sup>

There is a bit of an inversion of roles here, as the judge wishes to enslave nature to man and Satan wants man enslaved to himself and his fiends, but the key idea of total dominion being necessary for success is present in both. Holden's full embodiment of the forces of chaos and war also echoes Satan's pledge to Beelzebub in Book 1 that "to do ill" would be the demons' "sole delight."<sup>125</sup> Recall Walonen's statement that it is "in his consummate embrace of the forces of destruction, upheaval, and non-productive expenditure that marks the malign and imposing Judge Holden as (...) satanic."<sup>126</sup> Thus, McCarthy further positions Holden as an heir to Milton's Satan.

Using this same section, I want to switch focus now to Captain Ahab, who I would argue is even more a direct influence on the judge's philosophy. Tesar astutely notes that "McCarthy injects Ahab's oratorical style into the judge's many speeches about topics as wide-ranging as warfare, geology, history, and fate."<sup>127</sup> And scholar

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>124</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 10.309-405.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 1.160.

<sup>126</sup> Michael Walonen, "Old Nick Crossed the Mississippi," 14.

<sup>127</sup> Ryan Tesar, "The Influence of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* on Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" (Master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2014).

Erik Hage concurs that the judge's "high oratory and inscrutability calls to mind Ahab."<sup>128</sup> Additionally, Scholar Brent Edwin Cusher points out that Holden "appears to have an unquenchable thirst for learning (...) he appears to view the quest for knowledge as among the central tasks—if not *the* central task—of his life."<sup>129</sup> Indeed, Holden's assertion that whatever exists without his knowledge exists "without [his] consent" echoes very strongly Ahab's desire to "strike through the mask," to know more about nature than man naturally ought to. Much as Ahab describes the "inscrutability" of *Moby-Dick* as that which he "chiefly hates," so does the judge hate the inscrutability of nature, which he views as preventing man from being "suzerain" of the Earth. Going further, academic Ryan Tesar highlights the idea that Holden's desire to erase what he finds after cataloguing it is a means of "reshap[ing] the past to which he resents being inextricably bound,"<sup>130</sup> and thereby the future as well.

If all that exists of a thing is its picture in the judge's ledger, then the judge controls the history of that thing and the future of it and those things connected to it. In addition to this, consider Ahab's words near the end of the novel, when he tells Starbuck, "Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant, I act under orders."<sup>131</sup> Ahab's attempt here to separate himself from the past, to set himself as an agent of fate independent of time or place recalls the Kid's fever dream of the judge, where the narrator says of him that "[w]hatever his antecedents he

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<sup>128</sup> Erik Hage, *Cormac McCarthy: A Literary Companion* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2010) 44.

<sup>129</sup> Cusher, "Cormac McCarthy's Definition of Evil," 224.

<sup>130</sup> Tesar, "The Influence of *Moby-Dick* on *Blood Meridian*."

<sup>131</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 459.



was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there a system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history (...) will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing.”<sup>132</sup> Here, we can see that both Ahab and Holden are shown as apart from—or attempting to be apart from—history and causality. Thus, each positions himself to lie independent of and greater than the events around them, as something fate has decreed. Finally, I now want to switch focus and examine how Holden functions specifically as an agent of Manifest Destiny.

#### *Holden, Judge of the West*

The very position of Holden and the scalphunters in Cormac McCarthy’s novel already clearly marks them as westward expansionists: they are an extra-judicial ragtag band of criminals who roam the US/Mexico border killing and scalping natives and eventually Mexicans alike, whose scalps they sell to local governments along the border. Indeed, scholar Josef Benson writes that “*Blood Meridian* can be regarded as a revision of what Sara Spurgeon calls ‘one of our most pervasive national fantasies—the winning of the West and the building of the American character through frontier experiences.’”<sup>133</sup> The judge is, naturally, at the forefront of this idea. One way we can clearly see that Holden is marked as an expansionist aside from his profession is by the

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<sup>132</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 322.

<sup>133</sup> Josef Benson, “An Ironic Contention: The Kid’s Failure to Rebel against the Judge’s Hypermasculinity in *Blood Meridian*,” *Southwestern American Literature* 36 (2011): page numbers unavailable, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://go.galegroup.com/libproxy.uoregon.edu/ps/i.do?&id=GALE|A270372892&v=2.1&u=s8492775&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w>.

inscription we are told is on his rifle: *Et in Arcadia ego*.<sup>134</sup> This translates to “even in paradise I am with you.” This phrase can be taken as a *memento mori*, meaning that no matter where one goes in life, no matter how safe and happy they may feel, death is inescapable. This seems telling on its own as to the nature of the judge, but Josef Benson goes further. He argues that Arcadia may reference the American idea of the US as a new Eden, and that “[e]t in Arcadia Ego references how the great American democratic experiment has always relied and will always rely on bloodshed. The judge’s inscription mocks the idea of America as an Arcadia and further exposes him as a living deconstruction of the master narrative of Manifest Destiny.”<sup>135</sup>

Consider as well the judge’s philosophy that was discussed earlier. Holden’s idea that whatever exists in nature exists “without [his] consent” and his goal to “expunge from the memory of man” things which he deems unfit to continue existing or be remembered as existing is strongly connected to Manifest Destiny. If Holden in fact views himself as a force of nature, as a judge of what is worthy to exist and what isn’t, then he is in fact shaping the past to suit a present and future he envisions. Much as America viewed (and frankly continues to view) itself as destined to be the dominant power of the globe, to have others’ history and understanding destroyed and rebuilt in our own fashion, so does the judge act as a living embodiment of this ideal in *Blood Meridian*. Let us consider as well the judge’s words on war:

This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select.

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<sup>134</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 131.

<sup>135</sup> Benson, “An Ironic Contention.”

War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.<sup>136</sup>

Here, Holden asserts that war is the “truest form of divination” in that it sets two sides against one another and forces one to be eliminated. Holden sees war as god because he sees it as the ultimate judgement, the ultimate say in what is what and what is not. This is absolutely an ideal encapsulated within Manifest Destiny, in that westward expansionists essentially thought the same way: the pioneers moving westward used war and violence as a way of “testing [their] will against the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is forced to select.” It seems to me that the “larger will” Holden references is the will of Fate, or destiny. Thus, those who went westward saw their conquering and destruction as fate, as their destiny made manifest. When Doc Irving asserts that a victor by force of arms is not morally vindicated, Holden replies that:

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a new and broader view.<sup>137</sup>

Here, Holden again presents his philosophy regarding war as being strongly in line with the ideals of Manifest Destiny. Holden’s idea that historical law subverts moral law can be explained in the sense that the victor writes history, or history remembers the victor. Had the Nazis won WWII, the extermination of the Jews and other “undesirable” ethnic groups would have been either hidden or spun to appear favorable. What would have been written by the victor, the “historical law,” would completely eliminate any moral

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<sup>136</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 261.

<sup>137</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 261.

scruples existing, the “moral law,” because the people in possession of such scruples would simply be dead. This may seem to counter Holden’s assertion that “a man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views,” but it actually supports it. Holden argues that his views are not made right or wrong by death, they are made irrelevant. This is Holden’s meaning of “a new and broader view”: he who loses and dies is lost to history, he who wins and speaks is favored by it. It is this same mentality that pushed America westward, the same mentality of Manifest Destiny.

Next, I would like to switch gears from the Judge and examine some other facets of the novel that nonetheless contribute to its critique of Manifest Destiny. One scene I would like to examine is actually near the beginning of the novel, where the Kid meets up with a ragtag band of US soldiers who are disappointed the Mexican-American War is over and wish to keep fighting. Their leader, Captain White, explains to the Kid that

What we are dealing with (...) is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there’s no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That’s right. Others come in to govern for them.<sup>138</sup>

Here, Captain White demonstrates the incredibly racist attitude that accompanied the agents of Manifest Destiny. This clearly marks White as an expansionist, and I do not doubt that his name has significance as well. As scholar Robert L. Jarrett points out, “the ideology of Manifest Destiny held that one race, the Anglo-Saxon, combined with the political form of republican government, comprised an elect nation that held the true title to the American landscape.”<sup>139</sup> Here Captain White clearly puts a strong and racist

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>139</sup> Robert L. Jarrett, *Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Twayne, 1997) 70.

voice to this idea. Later, when White and his band of filibusters are massacred by Comanches, McCarthy writes that the natives were “riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them” and “gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera.”<sup>140</sup> It is significant that McCarthy refers to the men as “Saxons” and draws special attention to their “white torsos.” I assert this attention to detail is McCarthy acknowledging the men as agents of Manifest Destiny, and then demonstrating what often happens to such people.

Finally, let us consider how McCarthy demonstrates a parallel between the description of the *Pequod* and that of the scalphunters. Recall Melville’s description of the *Pequod* :

She was apparelled like any barbaric Ethiopian emperor, his neck heavy with pendants of polished ivory. She was a thing of trophies. A cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies. All round, her unpanelled, open bulwarks were garnished like one continuous jaw, with the long sharp teeth of the sperm whale, inserted there for pins, to fasten her old hempen thews and tendons to (...) scorning a turnstile wheel at her reverend helm, she sported there a tiller; and that tiller was in one mass, curiously carved from the long narrow lower jaw of her hereditary foe.<sup>141</sup>

Keeping in mind the cannibalistic nature of the *Pequod*, which wears pieces of its foes, let us examine McCarthy’s description of the scalphunters:

They saw one day a pack of visciouslooking humans mounted on unshod Indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowieknives the size of claymores and short twobarreled rifles with bores you could stick your thumbs in and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or

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<sup>140</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 56.

<sup>141</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 59.

necklaces of dried and blackened human ears and the horses rawlooking and wild in the eye and their teeth bared like feral dogs and riding also in the company of a number of halfnaked savages reeling in the saddle, dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh.<sup>142</sup>

There are many similarities here between the description of the *Pequod* and that of the scalphunters. Much like the ship, the scalphunters are also things “of trophies.” While the *Pequod* carries “the chased bones of her enemies” and is a “cannibal of a craft,” so do the scalphunters carry “the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven out of human hair” and “scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears” and appears as if they are from “some heathen land where they and others fed on human flesh.” Here, both the *Pequod* and scalphunters are called cannibalistic. I argue this hearkens back to Richard Slotkin’s idea of regeneration through violence, in that both the ship and the scalphunters are agents of manifest destiny, bedecked in pieces of what they have slain.

Thus, we have examined Milton’s Satan, Captain Ahab, and Judge Holden both as satanic leaders and as agents of Manifest Destiny. Lastly, let us examine what the result of all this study is, what it may say about America and where we are going as a nation.

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<sup>142</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 82.

## Conclusions

“The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted.” –D.H. Lawrence

“But the West has been envisioned as not just a place rugged to the point of maleficence, but also in terms of a broader set of ideological constructs informing a sense of Western American place and the identity of its inhabitants. It is in this regard that the preponderance of the devil in the literature of the West can perhaps best be understood.” –Michael Walonen

“Who will survive in America?” –Kanye West

The United States of America is an empire. If you take a look at the history of the United States, you will find that not only have we been involved in a plethora of armed conflicts since our inception, but we have not gone a single decade without fighting someone.<sup>143</sup> And if you look down at the congressional report I cited, you will see it only covers foreign operations between 1798-2009, which effectively misses about 30 years of military operations and ignores domestic uses of the armed forces, which I assure the reader were very active between 1776-1798 (and onward) killing natives to make way for land development. Frederick Turner was more correct than he could possibly ever imagine when he said the Americans would eventually demand “a wider field for exercise,” yet I doubt he realized this would one day mean the entire globe. If we consider this information, it tells us that the United States is a nation of war and violence.

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<sup>143</sup> Richard F. Grimmett, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2009* (CRS Report No. RL32170) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010) 1-30, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/crs/rl32170.pdf>.

Milton's Satan, too, is a proponent of war and violence. He fights with God and his angels, and then he fights with Man as well. As previously discussed, Satan is a "classical battle hero," powerful, prideful, selfish, skilled in battle and speech alike, and unwilling to admit defeat. In fact, I would argue that all these qualities—which I have established in this essay as Miltonically Satanic—are the truest qualities of the American. But Satan is a thief. And America too, is a thief. Satan tries to take God's place in Heaven, and for that he is cast into perdition. In recompense, he corrupts mankind, and steals Earth, what should have been humanity's perfect seat. And yet Satan seduces us as well: he paints a picture with language and imagery that makes him out perhaps to be the hero. America has been doing the same thing since our inception. Our nation presents itself as a great hero, a messiah for the world bringing democracy and prosperity, when often the reality is far darker.

I argue that this is the primary reason Melville and McCarthy found the devil so interesting. Melville saw the rapid territorial expansion of his country and was deeply concerned by it. But at the same time, was he not in some way enraptured by it, and celebrating it when he wrote *Moby-Dick*? We want Ahab to kill the white whale, we want the *Pequod*'s quest to succeed and even though everyone else in the book dies, we cannot help but feel in connection with Ahab, we cannot help but feel some pleasure as he finally kills the white whale. We are fascinated by this nightmarish, "cannibal of a craft" the *Pequod*, and her captain, this "ungodly, god-like man" with a "globular brain and ponderous heart."<sup>144</sup> Indeed, this fascination with the paradoxical nature of Satan, Ahab, Holden—this Satanic blend of qualities, this *American* blend of qualities—speaks

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<sup>144</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 63.



to something in our national character. It is no insignificant thing that many scholars have called *Moby-Dick* America's national text.

But is it not odd that Satan ends as a writhing serpent in Hell, Ahab is dragged to the ocean's floor, while the judge dances, seemingly victorious, the last surviving member of the Glanton Gang, proclaiming he will never die? Let us take a look at the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*:

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he endkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again.<sup>145</sup>

There are multiple interpretations one could take with this epilogue, but there are two I want to focus on. If we take the interpretation of scholar John Sepich, this man is making fenceposts, which thus symbolizes the closing of the West.<sup>146</sup> Those following him are literally searching for the bones of dead buffalo which they may be able to sell

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<sup>145</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 351.

<sup>146</sup> Mark Busby, "Rolling the Stone, Sisyphus, and the Epilogue of *Blood Meridian*," *Southwest American Literature* 36 (2011): page numbers unavailable, accessed May 4, 2016, <http://go.galegroup.com/libproxy.uoregon.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE|A270372893&v=2.1&u=s8492775&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w>.

in a market, as the phosphorous from bones became used as an agricultural fertilizer.<sup>147</sup> If we take this literal interpretation, then Holden's proclamation that he will "never die" seems in a sense to be true. The closure of the West perhaps is a closure for the judge and his nihilism and Manifest Destiny as well, but this is unlikely. The holemaker and his band "all move on again" and this motion implies perpetuation.

The next interpretation comes from Harold Bloom and other scholars,<sup>148</sup> and suggests that the man is some kind of modern Promethean figure, as suggested by the fact that he strikes fire from the rock "which God has put there." This seems to be a kind of challenge to the judge's nihilism, in that the judge is a full embracement of the violent and conquering nature of mankind, this lone figure seems to represent a Prometheus bringing new fire, new life, a suggestion that perhaps change is possible, perhaps the judge and his ways will die. Consider as well that this happens "in the dawn," as opposed to twilight, or *the Evening Redness in the West*, the novel's subtitle, which Bloom suggests is a reference to the judge. If we take this viewpoint, then there is hope even in the bleakest novel of the possibility of man's depravity. I think this interpretation is better, and it is the one that I take as well.

Ultimately, we can see that McCarthy's interpretation of the final implications of Manifest Destiny is a little more ambiguous than Milton or Melville's. While the latter two authors agree that such pursuits are entirely ruinous from point A to B, McCarthy considers the idea as more of a cycle, a thing people have always been doing and perhaps will always be doing, and one that is deeply entrenched in American

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<sup>147</sup> Busby, "Rolling the Stone," 87.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

consciousness. This is what McCarthy means when he says the movements of the people appear “less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it.”<sup>149</sup> Indeed, Americans view our place in the world as something which has been rightfully won and orchestrated, the “verification of a principle” of Manifest Destiny, that this land was laid out for our taking, that since we have it we must have rightfully won it, as if “each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it,” when the reality is something else. The reality is “the pursuit of some continuance,” the continuous movement westward killing everything in our way because it was what we had been doing and because it benefitted us and because we saw no reason to stop. I do believe America can change, but our understanding of our past must change first, as must our understanding of how we presently operate. To conclude, I would like to quote Richard Slotkin, who ends his book *Regeneration through Violence* with these same magnificent words:

Under the aspect of mythology and historical distance, the acts and motives of the woodchopper, the whale and bear hunter, the Indian fighter, and the deerslayer have an air of simplicity and purity that makes them seem finely heroic expressions of an admirable quality of the human spirit. They seem to stand on a commanding ridge, while we are still tangled in the complexities of the world and the wilderness. But their apparent independence of time and consequence is an illusion; a closely woven chain of time and consequence binds their world to ours. Set the statuesque figures and their piled trophies in motion through space and time, and a more familiar landscape emerges -- the whale, buffalo, and bear hunted to the verge of extinction for pleasure in killing and "scalped" for fame and the profit in hides by men like Buffalo Bill; the buffalo meat left to rot, till acres of prairie were covered with heaps of whitening bones, and the bones then ground for fertilizer; the Indian debased, impoverished, and killed in return for his gifts; the land and its

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<sup>149</sup> McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 351.

people, its "dark" people especially, economically exploited and wasted; the warfare between man and nature, between race and race, exalted as a kind of heroic ideal; the piles of wrecked and rusted cars, heaped like Tartar pyramids of death-cracked, weather-browned, rain-rotted skulls, to signify our passage through the land.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, 565.

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