

Article

Black or White: The Art of Rhetoric in *Sunset Limited*[†]

Douglas C. MacLeod, Jr.

Composition and Communication, SUNY Cobleskill, Cobleskill, NY 12043, USA; macleodc@cobleskill.edu

[†] Trigger Warning: This article speaks about dying and death by suicide, so reader discretion is advised.

Abstract: The film *Sunset Limited* is an HBO adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's play of the same name, and it is an in-depth character study of two individuals: Black (played by Samuel L. Jackson) and White (played by Tommy Lee Jones). In the beginning of the film, Black has already saved White from committing suicide and they are sitting together at a small, round kitchen table; viewers learn that Black was going to work when he saw White on the train platform about ready to jump in front of the *Sunset Limited*. Black is a religious Christian and White is an outright atheist; one believes in Jesus Christ and one believes in nothing; one has faith and one has no faith in anything. These ideological standpoints (the lack of an ideology is still an ideology) are the foundation of this text. The focus of *Sunset Limited* is the push and pull between religious belief (Black) and philosophical thought (White), which ultimately will determine whether White stays and decides to live, or goes and decides to take his life. In essence, *Sunset Limited* is an exercise in rhetoric, in the art of persuasion, and how this artform can be used in both religious and secular conversation. This study of *Sunset Limited* will devote time to Cormac McCarthy's connections to religion and philosophy using research about his work; then, there will be an in-depth textual analysis of the film, which will speak to not only who these characters are but also what they want to relay to one another about what they know (rather than what they believe) about the world. Black and White are polar opposites of each other (black and white); what this essay intends to prove is that there are similarities to their thought processes, even if they may not recognize it.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy; film adaptation; rhetoric; communication



Citation: MacLeod, Douglas C., Jr.

2023. Black or White: The Art of Rhetoric in *Sunset Limited*. *Religions* 14: 1298. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101298>

Academic Editor: Carol E. Henderson

Received: 18 July 2023

Revised: 25 September 2023

Accepted: 27 September 2023

Published: 16 October 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Once while being interviewed, the late Cormac McCarthy, notorious for not generally giving interviews, spoke briefly about being an author: "Writing is very subconscious and the last thing I want to do is think about it" (Carpenter 2022). In the same interview, soon after, he stated that to analyze a novel rhetorically is "a good way to ruin the reading experience" (Carpenter 2022). In essence, to him, what is important is the narrative, the characters, the dialogue, and the storytelling, and what is of no importance or consequence to him is how one academically studies these elements or his canon of work. The problem, however, is even his commercial successes and lesser-known writings, let alone his more literary tomes, are looked at as masterpieces deemed worthy of scholarly discourse. The prolific scholar Harold Bloom equates McCarthy to Shakespeare, Melville, and Faulkner, and says that his passion for the novel *Blood Meridian* (1985) "is so fierce [he has] reread it perpetually and cannot persuade [himself] that [he has] come to the end of it" (Bloom 2019). Much of this admiration from Bloom, and from other researchers in literary studies, stems from McCarthy's brutal and beautiful depiction of violent imagery, his keen understanding of American Western history, and his unique and eloquent writing style. But, what is less talked about and researched is, again, what McCarthy claims ruins the reading experience of his novels: his use of rhetoric, both in a secular and spiritual way, which gives readers a better sense of who the characters are and how they use logic, emotion, and ethics to justify their actions and behaviors.

One of these works where rhetoric becomes the central focus of the play/film is director Tommy Lee Jones's 2011 HBO adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's play *Sunset Limited*. The play/movie, which was adapted to the screen by McCarthy, is an in-depth character study of two random men who meet in the most unlikely of ways: Black (played by Samuel L. Jackson) saves White (played by Tommy Lee Jones) as he is about to kill himself by jumping in front of the Sunset Limited, hence the title. The story itself is set in Black's dilapidated flat in New York, where the two characters sit together at a small, round kitchen table and walk around to and fro in the hopes of convincing the other whether or not life is worth living. Throughout, while they candidly converse for an hour and a half about their respective backgrounds, we learn that Black is a religious Christian and White is an outright atheist: one believes in Jesus Christ and has faith, and one believes in nothing and has no faith in anything. McCarthy most likely would disagree with this analytical and erudite perspective; however, for the sake of dialogue, *Sunset Limited* is the push and pull between religious belief (Black) and philosophical thought (White), which ultimately determines whether White decides to stay in the apartment with Black or leave to die by suicide.

The rhetorical nature of McCarthy's work is Black's attempt to convince White that believing in Jesus Christ, or having any form of faith, can create a sense of wellness in all areas of one's life. Religion changed Black, who was vicious convict earlier in his violent life; thus, religion, according to Black, can change anyone for the better. White, on the other hand, in an attempt to let him leave the apartment, uses antiquarian rhetorical persuasion to convince Black that he will never follow Christian doctrine or any doctrine, so there is no reason to have a conversation. But, it is also because of this dialogue that *Sunset Limited*, as a movie, becomes an exercise in rhetoric, showing audiences that this artform can be used in both religious and secular discussions. The study of *Sunset Limited* is complex in that the film delves into the concept of rhetoric, which is traditionally more embedded in philosophical thought, and then speaks to how both characters use this artform as a means to an end, and whether it means salvation or suicide. This study of *Sunset Limited* will also devote time to McCarthy's connections to religion and philosophy, briefly using his novel *Blood Meridian* as source material, since there is not much in the way of interviews devoted to his thoughts about the subject matter. Then, finally, a textual analysis of the film will speak to not only who these characters are but also what they want to relay to one another about what they know (rather than what they believe) about the world. Although one can argue Black and White are polar opposites of each other (black and white), there are similarities to their thought processes, even if they may not recognize it.

2. Rhetoric and Suicide: Brief Definitions and Discussion

To adequately discuss and define what rhetoric is, as it pertains to *Sunset Limited*, one must first examine Aristotle's influence over the concept and term. Aristotle, in his aptly titled *Rhetoric*, written around 350 B.C., claims that rhetoric is a counterpart to dialectic, which has a simpler meaning than how it is presently defined. As Robert Burch (2004, p. 18) states, Aristotelian "dialectic has a logical rather than an ontological meaning" and it is used both as a "mental exercise and as a training in debate". Burch (2004, p. 18) continues by claiming dialectic, according to Aristotle, has little scientific value but can be used for "a critical examination of common opinion, and allows for the critique of false opinions in terms of contradictory consequences". Important to Aristotle's definition, and Burch's understanding of Aristotle's work, is the use of logic to convince the conversant to develop a more multifaceted understanding of the opinion they may have. One's opinion generally stems from one's emotional state of mind and is rife with subjectivity; in other words, the subject of the had discussion is no longer what is being debated. Instead, the subject of the conversation becomes the opinion, thought, belief, feeling, etc. For example, one can say, "In my opinion, God does not exist" or "I think God does not exist". These opinionated comments can be easily refuted because the subject of these sentences cannot be researched nor do they take into account objectivity, which adds faith and the logic behind faith,

into the equation. By saying, “God does not exist”, a logical, dialectical argument can ensue because the conversation is no longer being fueled just by subjective emotions and thoughts. That does not mean emotion cannot still play a role in dialectic; logic, however, is the primary goal of dialectical reason.

As mentioned above, rhetoric is a counterpart of dialectic, but rhetoric and dialectic are two different concepts. According to Aristotle (2009), and on a very basic level, dialectic should be seen as the lead up to rhetoric, which consists of demonstrated “modes of persuasion” that are proven using enthymeme, which is a form of syllogism that consists of propositions rather than full-on truths. The three commonly known modes of persuasion are based on “the personal character of the speaker. . . on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind. . . on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself” (Aristotle 2009). As it pertains to methodology, Aristotle claims there are three means to effective persuasion: “(1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) to understand the emotions—that is, to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited” (Aristotle 2009). In other words: logos, ethos, and pathos. Noticeably, much of rhetoric is oratory in nature, which is divided into three groups: political, forensic, and ceremonial oratory of display. Oratory, and most especially Aristotle’s third form, is going to play a significant role in the analysis of *Sunset Limited*, in that the film focuses on the conversation between Black and White, and that conversation is not overtly political nor is it forensic. Does ceremony play into Black and White’s discussion? Is suicide and religious doctrine ceremonial in nature?

Another question that could be asked as it pertains to Black and White’s intense banter: Are they conversing with each other out of a need for happiness? Happiness is defined “as prosperity combined with virtue; or as independence of life, or as the secure enjoyment of the maximum of pleasure; or as a good condition of property and body, together with the power of guarding one’s property and body and making use of them” (Aristotle 2009). Are they both trying to convince each other of their respective positions because they are trying to figure out what is good or bad about both of those positions? What is good? What is bad? Could committing suicide be good when it is often perceived as bad? Can faith be bad when it is generally treated as good? Are both good and bad, or can they be recognized as both from an objective perspective? Many of these questions will hopefully be answered with conversational and character analysis, as well as with more discussion about rhetoric, religion, and logistical reasons for suicide, which is generally “condemned in most major religious sects” (Gearing and Lizardi 2009, p. 338) and is considered an outright sin according to Christianity, which is openly Black’s faith, a faith he built on while in prison.

An influential theorist who recognized these connections and contradictions, which are pondered both by Black and White through the movie, was Emile Durkheim. In his seminal work *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Durkheim ([1951] 2005, p. xi) starts his work by defining suicide as “any death which is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim himself [sic]”, as well as recognizing that their multiple factors that can come about when discussing self-harm. For example, there are two forms of what Durkheim calls “extra-social causes” that can lead to suicide: individual constitution and inclination that happens from country to country or environmental factors like climate or temperature (p. 3). Thus, is suicide a disease (a form of insanity) or is it just a “manifestation of insanity” (p. 5)? How one figures this out, according to Durkheim, is by classifying them according to the characteristics of each death to see what the answer is. The four types of suicide are maniacal (due to delirium); melancholy (due to depression); obsessive (no true motive except having a fixed idea of death); and impulsive as automatic (the same as obsessive but it happens quicker). Thus, when suicide is based on a form of insanity, the motive is imaginary (as opposed to tangibly environmental), a common misconception during the early days of therapy, social work, psychology, and the like. In other words, are depression, obsession, and mania imaginary or just not tangible?

It is here where Durkheim starts to briefly delve into religious belief and starts to move away from what is deemed as insanity: “Discarding the individual as such, his motives and ideas, we shall seek directly the states of the various social environments (religious confessions, family, political society, occupational groups, etc.), in terms of which the variations of suicide occur” (p. 104). He calls this egoistic suicide and although it does happen within religious communities, the action is not talked about regularly because of the stigma attached to it; those that are in a sect have “to exercise severe control over themselves and subject themselves to an especially rigorous discipline” and they “have to practice greater morality” (p. 110). Much of Durkheim’s commentary speaks to Judaism but his commentary soon after delves deeply into Catholicism and Protestantism. His description of how suicide is vilified in these two particular religions is lengthy, astute, and straight-forward:

Yet they both prohibit suicide with equal emphasis; not only do they penalize it morally with great severity, but both teach that a new life begins beyond the tomb where men are punished for their evil actions, and Protestantism just as well as Catholicism numbers suicide among them. Finally, in both cults these prohibitions are of divine origin; they are represented not as the logical conclusion of correct reason, but God Himself is their authority. Therefore, if Protestantism is less unfavorable to the development of suicide, it is not because of a different attitude from that of Catholicism. Thus, if both religions hate the same precepts with respect to this particular matter, their dissimilar influence on suicide must proceed from one of the more general characteristics differentiating them. (p. 112)

The only difference between the two is: free will. Protestants have more of a connection to this concept of free will than Catholics do, so the dynamic changes as it pertains to the severity of the action. That does not mean, however, that the consequences are still not punitive in both (and in other religious beliefs as well); it means that Protestants have more of a “proclivity” (p. 112) to suicide because of their ability to have more free inquiry and to attain more knowledge outside of the Catholic doctrine, which is much more highly organized (at least at the time of Durkheim’s writing). Their free will and the more disorganized nature of this form of Christianity gives them the option to “overthrow...traditional beliefs” (p. 112), which includes not killing or attempting to kill oneself. Thus, Durkheim hypothesizes: (1) gaining secular knowledge from a weakened religion can lead to a disconnection from the “religious society” (p. 124) one comes out of, and (2) the “more numerous and strong [sic] these collective states of mind are, the stronger the integration of the religious community, and also the greater the preservative value” (p. 125). This means that the more cohesive the sect, the less likely it is that suicide will take place.

It is this knowledge that Durkheim speaks of that connects with the definitions of rhetoric mentioned earlier. He writes:

To be sure, once knowledge exists, it may battle in Its own name and in its own cause, and set up as an antagonist to traditional sentiments. But its attacks would be Ineffective if these sentiments still possessed vitality; or rather, would not even take place. Faith is not uprooted by dialectic proof; it must already be deeply shaken by—other causes to be unable to withstand the shock of argument. (p. 124)

Aristotle claims dialectic and the art of rhetoric are meant to ensure happiness, goodness, and utility. A good thing is “that which is chosen for its own sake; or as that for the sake of which we choose something else; or as that which is sought after by all things, or by all things that have sensation or reason, or which will be sought after by any things that acquire reason; or as that which must be prescribed for a given individual by reason generally, or is prescribed for him by his individual reason, this being his individual good; or as that whose presence brings anything into a satisfactory and self-sufficing condition; or as self-sufficiency; or as what produces, maintains, or entails characteristics of this kind,

while preventing and destroying their opposites" (Aristotle 2009). He continues by saying that "learning entails knowledge subsequently", and it is this that allows for "freedom from the evil things simultaneously" (Aristotle 2009). Ultimately, having the knowledge and doctrine are of benefit until there are cracks in the foundation of the doctrine, then the knowledge can show the evil rather than the good. This particular point will be of great importance to the analysis of *Sunset Limited* in that White seems to have the knowledge Aristotle speaks of and allows evil to take over his life and thoughts, thus allowing him to lose his happiness, which leads to his need and drive for suicide. Black, on the other hand, as readers will later learn, has a great deal of knowledge based on his experiences in prison but decides, based on his own free will, that the Christian doctrine he takes on and espouses to White is steady and unbreakable.

3. Cormac McCarthy and Religion/Rhetoric: A Study of *Blood Meridian*

The discussion above about rhetoric, happiness, and religious doctrine, etc., pertains a great deal not only to *Sunset Limited* but to the entirety of Cormac McCarthy's canon of work, much of which consists of fictional Westerns devoted to historical issues surrounding the Southern border. As Jung-Suk Hwang states in his work "The Wild West, 9/11, and Mexicans in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*",

His border novels are all set in the Texas-Mexico border region, which is often defined by ideals of the Wild West that coexist with contesting local realities. It is constantly remapped and reproduced in movies, television, and literature as a land of and for cowboys, where the spirit of the West and the image of the old America remain. As a border and a contact zone for two different nations and cultures, the Southwest has long been idealized as a locale marked by hybridity and multiculturalism. However, it is also one of the frontiers in which America expanded its political, economic, and military dominance over a neighboring nation, Mexico. (Hwang 2018, p. 349)

Included are *No Country for Old Men*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain*, and arguably his most famous work, *Blood Meridian*. All of these works delve into issues surrounding the fight between knowledge and faith, the need for free will and choice, ethics and morality, and the need to recognize that reality is hard enough for one to devote time to abstractions. Although an in-depth study of each of his works could and has been completed by other writers, this essay will exclusively focus on one of McCarthy's novels as an example of how these tropes manifest themselves: *Blood Meridian*.

Blood Meridian, which is quite possibly his most well-known and most studied novel, is a prime example of how religious doctrine can play an important role in his narratives, while also being a tool for rhetorical purposes. Christopher Douglas's essay, "'If God Meant to Interfere': Evolution and Theodicy in *Blood Meridian*", discusses how the book is very much a product of the times in that the story may take place in the mid-1890s but it is also a reflection of what was happening in the 1980s vis à vis the popularity of televised evangelical Christianity and the regularity of scandals that were taking place with the likes of Oral Roberts, Jimmy and Tammy Faye Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart. Recognizing that the scandals took place after *Blood Meridian*'s initial release in 1985, Douglas does state that "McCarthy emerged from an intensely religious culture, and his novels, critics agree, are among the most religiously resonant of the serious literature being produced today" (Douglas 2013, p. 85). Speaking about Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, Christopher places emphasis on the now defunct *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court decision and Equal Rights Amendment as galvanizing post-separatist fundamentalists, conservative evangelicals, and some Catholics to get into "a broad alignment" with each other and to become a part of the cultural politics of the time (2013, p. 85).

Manuel Broncano (2013, p. 35) agrees with Douglas's assessment of McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* in his book *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands*, where he spends a chapter devoted to an in-depth analysis of the book's biblical tropes: "This novel takes humankind back to the Middle Ages and even earlier, to biblical times of the Old

Testament, when God and men were still trying to figure out their roles in the world". Like in Genesis, the religious wording starts from the first line, "See the child".

"See the child" echoes 2 Kings 4:32 ("eccepuer"), which is a passage that tells the story of the miraculous resurrection of a child performed by Elisha, who had been elected by Elijah as a prophet as well as the successor before Elijah was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. (Broncano 2013, p. 37)

Broncano is more overt later in his book when he states, "*Blood Meridian* stands as the book of Genesis, and by extension, the Old Testament", where the South becomes "an earthly paradise gone awry by the sin of slavery and the plantation system that parallels God's curse on humankind, but this time the curse is imposed on blacks by the greed of whites" (Broncano 2013, p. 39). Speaking about this from a socio-political perspective, President Ronald Reagan's trickle-down economics plan was an unmitigated disaster for poverty rates around the country, most especially for marginalized communities in rural populations. In his article "The Ethnic Dimension of Persistent Poverty in Rural and Small-Town Areas", Calvin L. Beale (1996, p. 27) speaks about how, between 1960 and 1990, in "demographic and cultural terms, the great majority of the persistent poverty counties fall within four types. They are counties in which the high overall poverty rate results primarily from low income among either Blacks, Hispanics, American Indians and Alaskan Natives, or the White population of the Southern Highlands. In two-thirds of all counties with persistent high poverty, the high incidence reflects conditions in a minority population". In 255 of the more than 500 counties persistently mired in poverty, 67.5 percent of the 1.5 persons living in these counties were Black farming ancestors of old southern slaves (Beale 1996, p. 27). In other words, *Blood Meridian* is written as a veiled commentary about southern Black poverty, thus not only revising colonialist narratives but also deconstructing them and foregrounding "the instability of narrative representation itself" (Baker 2016, p. 4). *Blood Meridian*, thus, is a nihilist work of fiction that subscribes to Friedrich Nietzsche's perception that "God is Dead", as well as that philosophy and faith are in a constant struggle with one another to gain control, religion being the more dangerously enveloping of the two, squelching one's need for free will. As Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "Christianity gave Eros poison to drink; he did not die of it, certainly, but degenerated to Vice". It is at this point where White and Black from *Sunset Limited* can be focused on, White being a complete nihilist who has lost his faith based on the knowledge he has been given and has accrued, while the other, Black, is a man of faith who was able to ingest Christian principles while incarcerated. It is here where their struggles begin.

4. Textual Analysis of *Sunset Limited*: Knowledge vs. Faith

Sunset Limited starts with the two men sitting at a small, round table; Black is staring inquisitively at White. Black asks, "What am I supposed to do with you, Professor?" It is established early on that White is an academic and Black, wearing a cheap janitor's uniform, is a blue-collar worker living in low-income housing. Then, Black lets White know that White was not part of his plan for the day, but he is now sitting in front of him, so he asks what he should do. White's response: "Doesn't mean anything. Everything that happened doesn't mean something else". This line speaks to McCarthy's thoughts about writing but more importantly, as it pertains to the concept of rhetoric, it presents viewers with a clear understanding as to how White views the world. Things just are, there is no meaning to anything, his nihilism has got him to this point in his life. He has no beliefs because he has the knowledge that there is no reason for belief. And, it is not really up to White to convince Black of this; it just is. It is at this point, motivation starts to be discussed: White believes that those that try to be heroes and save someone else, someone they do not know, are also trying to compensate for not saving someone important in their own lives. All of that does not matter, however, at least according to White. Black wants to know more: "What I don't understand is how you come to get yourself in such a fix". He asks White about why today was the day he decided to end his life, without speaking the word suicide. Is it a special day? White claims it is not with a simple, "No". One gathers no days

are special for White, that he lives day by day without meaning, without purpose because he does not need a purpose. He does relay to Black that it is his birthday, but that does not constitute the day being special and that is not the reason why he was about to jump in front of a train.

It is at this point where we first experience a commentary about a religious holiday: Christmas. White states he sees birthdays as dangerous “like Christmas-ornaments hanging on the trees, wreathes from the doors, and bodies from the steam pipes all over America”. The holiday does not retain its meaning for White: a time of joy when Jesus Christ is born, the fundamental moment in the Christian faith. Christian doctrine looks at this as a time when the Son of God comes to life; White sees this as a time of death, which, according to Black, does not bode well for Christmas. White says, “Christmas is not what it used to be”. Does this mean for him or just as a generalization? Oftentimes, the holiday is looked at as being commercialized, so the common thing to say is that it is not what it used to be but for White it may a time when his faith was solid, like the doctrine is solid. Maybe, at one time, his happiness was intact, but now Christmas holds a darker meaning for him.

When Black agrees with him, White wants to run out: “I’ve got to go”. White does not want to be in agreement with Black, because with agreement comes happiness, but he may also be inadvertently facing the issue that envelops him, that has broken him, and he simply does not want to get to that point. White has become comfortable in the idea the world is broken; his life has followed suit and he does not want that to change for it is then that change may happen. He wants his freedom to be and to do as he pleases, because to be free means one is fulfilling their need for being. Like Sartre himself, his freedom is “identical with [his] existence” and it is “the foundation of ends which [he] will attempt to attain either by will or by passionate efforts” (Sartre [1956] 2011, p. 444). He puts on his coat and is about to leave when Black tells him to wait so he can get his coat. He plans to go where White is going. Black feels like he has no choice in the matter. White says Black does have a choice. The concept of free will now starts to play a more important role in *Sunset Limited*. Black has free will to do as he chooses even though he tells White he has no choice. He feels responsible now for White’s life, which leads White to ask Black: “Who appointed you my guardian angel?” Although he may claim to be faithless, White speaks to the possibilities that guardian angels exist. White’s past slowly creeps out with each word used. As it pertains to Black, he does not make it clear who did so but alludes to White putting him in that position. He just says, “You know who appointed me your guardian angel”. Black says White jumped into his arms, so is it possible White believes in free will too? Did he save himself?

The answer to these questions, for now, would be impossible, but it frustrates White to the point of him sitting back down and asking Black: “Do you think Jesus is really in this room?” Black says no he does not think he is in the room: He knows Jesus is in the room. A noticeable Bible is centered on the table, which was not noticeable before. The conversation is the focal point of the first few minutes of the film but now the objects in the room are becoming more visible. A single round light hovers over the ripped-up tome, another fixture in Christian doctrine. White looks strangely at Black and Black says it is the way White worded the question: “It’d be like me asking you if you think you got your coat on”. White then says, “It is not the same thing. It’s a matter of agreement”. The idea here is that one (Black) is philosophically and religiously delving into his argument while the other (White) is looking at the practical nature of the conversation: I just want you to agree with me. And, it is here where White goes into a little diatribe involving an imaginary character named Cecil, a character Black believes is White, who is not in agreement with the both of them and needs to be put away if he says something ridiculous like that they are naked or are green and scaly. The idea that Jesus is there is thus equated, by White, to something not really happening.

White asks Black if he has seen Jesus and Black says no, but he has heard him and he does talk to Jesus every day. Black has not heard Jesus’s voice, but he has heard him and Jesus is in his head. White has a hard time comprehending this, has a hard time

following Christianity and Black's understanding of the doctrine. He tells Black he does not understand what Black is saying, and Black says he does not understand it either. All he knows is that nothing in his head is an original thought and all his thoughts have a "lingering scent of divinity" to it. Divinity is the study of religion, it is theology, it is the complete devotion to God. God and Jesus Christ are all-consuming, according to Black, at least for him. That includes gaining life in death and reading the Bible, a book White has never read. He read parts of it, but he never really read it. He has read thousands of books, but not the Bible. He is not sure why but he does believe that both Leo Tolstoy's realistic, historical novel *War and Peace*, about the Napoleonic Wars, and the Bible are both made up. Surprised, Black says, "Ain't neither of them true?" Not historically, White says. History books, according to White, are true; if they have events that really happened, then the book is true and good. What makes for a good book, Black asks. White is unsure, but Black points out that his Bible used to say, on the bottom of the cover, the Bible is the greatest book ever written. White has read good books but he never read the greatest book ever written, at least according to someone. Black wins the argument by claiming that they are all books and some books are good, some books are great, but only one can be the greatest ever written.

The conversation ends there with White saying, "I got to go". Black wants him to stay; and keeps calling him Professor. The beauty of this moment in the film is Black is trying to save White by professing to him. He is making sure the professor knows that he is a formidable opponent, someone who listens and is able to make a persuasive argument. And, White is trying to change the subject to ensure he is not persuaded, he is not changed, he is not happy. "I got to go" means there is a need to go; White does not say he wants to go, which changes the context of what is said. He looks around but knows he cannot leave. Black will not let him. So, he tries a different approach by asking Black if he will get fired for not calling into work if he does not turn up. Black assures White he will not get fired, which means another dead end, but the professor wants to stick to conversing with Black about where he was when White decided to take his giant leap. Black relays he was on the platform; even though White did not see him, Black was there to save him. Is Black an angel? White does not believe that, even though he suggests it in his wording and his tone: Black just came out of nowhere. Is this true?

White claims not to believe in angels, so Black asks him, "Well, what is it you believe in?" White says, "A lot of things". Black: "What things?" "White: Cultural things". His examples are music, books, art, etc. Those are things that have value to him, or used to have value to him, according to him. They are the "foundations of civilization". Not God, not religion, not faith, not the Bible. The foundations are what is tangible, what could be seen, heard, felt, etc. The use of the senses is strong when talking about cultural things. Why does he decide not to value these artifacts anymore? Because no one else values them anymore; people stopped valuing what are the fragile, destructible foundations of civilized communities. What he once thought was indestructible is no longer indestructible; he gained the knowledge, which led him to believe this theory was correct, and used it to justify his nihilism and his suicide attempt. This commentary leads Black to ask, "It wasn't nothing personal?" White responds: "Oh, it's personal. That's what an education does. It makes the world personal". Having an education makes those living in the world cynical and subjective; human beings learn, through people like the professor, that emotional states of mind overrule history and faith and, as he claims, logic. White recognizes that his decision to jump in front of the Sunset Limited was not logical, it just was, and it is because of his witnessing of "the death of everything" that he makes his choice. "The death of everything", including God and religion, has now become a part of his existence and his freedom to be and do as he choose, including to commit suicide. If everything dies, then that means nothing lives, and if nothing lives that makes the world lonely for the last person, and White, in his estimation, based on what is read into by the audience, becomes that last person. Having knowledge of this can lead to a break in one's faith, hope, and belief systems. The death of everything also means the death of doctrine, of religion, of

God. All of these are considered foundations by the pious, by Black, while culture, as important as it is, is not.

This sets up a debate between the secular (White) versus the spiritual (Black), where rhetoric becomes more prominently displayed by Cormac McCarthy as the actors speak his words. With faith, nothing more is needed because faith comes from the heart; with culture, one learns that more is needed to ensure the happiness of the masses, which is a virtual impossibility and an unattainable goal, and can lead to a sense of dread and despair. If nothing changes for everyone, that would include the one who believes this is happening, who sees what others do not see, or do not care to see, based on the blindness caused by their faith. It is White's turn to try and convince Black of this, that there is only the *Sunset Limited*, White's belief in the *Sunset Limited*, and nothing else. This leads to the crux of what *Sunset Limited* is as an artistic piece: an attempt of one person to persuade another that either everything exists including faith because of doctrine, or nothing exists at all, other than the train that almost ran over White.

White is about to leave again, thinking he has won the argument, but he notices the door is locked as to not let him out. Black asks White if he has any friends; White says not really. Black picks up on this and says who is the "not really". It is a colleague of his whom he has lunch with. Black starts to call this person White's best friend and White denies this incessantly, until he no longer corrects him. The conversation becomes inane and White inches over to Black and says, "Look, suppose I were to give you my word that I would just go home and I wouldn't try to kill myself en route". Black skeptically looks at him, moves from his place at the table, calmly sits on his recliner, and says, "Suppose I was to give you my word that I wouldn't listen to none of your bullshit". The art of rhetoric here has no effect on Black. He sees through White's lie and calls him on it; White is "a death row prisoner", who was a prisoner prior to being locked in Black's apartment.

White also becomes Black's patient. White lays down on the couch while Black psycho-analyzes him. Black brings up White's mother and father. The conversation becomes serious again. White's father was a lawyer who died of cancer. Black has to pry it out of White that White's mother wanted him to go see his father before he passed. White did not want to; White's father did not want him there. White made the conscious choice not to see his dying father and Black has no clue why, and yet claims White is clear as glass, and he has "good light. . .true light" within him. White cannot see it; all he has is darkness. The binary oppositions here are powerful and blatant: one who can see light and one who cannot, one who can see good and one that sees only evil. At this point, Black blesses him and asks the Lord to bless and keep him. He knows the light is there and he prays White will eventually see it, but that remains to be seen.

The next conversation is led by White, who asks Black about his incarceration. Black lets White know he was in prison for murder, but wants to speak about something "more cheerful". White wants to hear "penitentiary" stories, but Black does not want to narrate. White asks Black if he was ever married and Black says to White it may be better to tell him some "jailhouse" stories instead, meaning it is more cheerful to talk about that than his romantic relations. It is here we learn about their backstories: Black had two boys, but they both died; in fact, everyone he knows is dead. He was always a problem, he liked being a problem, and he spent seven years in prison but hurt a lot of people in his time. He is condemned to it but he is "on the other side now". Black once had a great deal of knowledge that got him in a great deal of trouble; but now he is happy in his faith, in his regiment, even in his ratty apartment. White wonders why he lives there. Black alludes to the fact that he has all he needs: a bedroom, a couch, people to talk to (even if they are crackheads and junkies), no worldly possessions (which are not needed if you have relationships). These points do not seem to matter to White: "It's a horrible place full of horrible people. You must know that these people are not worth saving even if they could be saved, which they can't. You must know that". Black states he likes the challenge, an indication as to why he is keeping White in his apartment. He wants to save those wrapped or enveloped by evil, so much so that, right before he got out of prison, he started a ministry.

Many of the prisoners did not want to hear the word of God, but believed in God, more so than those on the outside: "You ought to think about that, Professor". Black knows White is having "a bad life", but that does not mean good days are never going to happen or happen again. Black is trying to convince him of this and White sees that, even though Black does not want him to know he is doing it. He says as much, which is an overt recognition that the art of rhetoric is happening. The best form of rhetoric is the one which is not noticeable, but Black does not care at this point. He just wants to keep White there and alive. So, he tells White a "Jailhouse story".

The story is one of the more difficult moments in *Sunset Limited* in that viewers learn how vicious Black can be. He speaks about how he beat a man with a table leg adorned with a large nail. The man had stabbed Black with a hardcore, "Italian" knife because Black said something to him about getting beans on his uniform while they were in the chow line. He theatrically speaks about how he just kept hitting this man over and over and over again to the point of almost killing him. Black is capable of pure evil; he almost beat this man to death while also losing half of his blood from the stab wounds he received from him and one of this convict's friends (who also felt Black's wrath with a blow to the head). Everyone lived through the experience but the man was not right after Black's rampage: "He walked around with his head kinda to the side, lost one eye, arm's hanging down, didn't talk right. They shipped him off to another facility". As for Black, while in his sick bed with leg and wrist irons on, 240 stiches holding his gut together, he heard a voice that said to him, "If it were not for the grace of God, you would not be here". To White this is a "strange story", because it is about how Black had to almost bludgeon a man to death to see God rather than it being about empathy for the man he almost killed.

"You hadn't thought of it that way?" asks White. Black says he had, but viewers can see how he is a bit shaken by White's take on the incident. This is one of the few times White has the upper hand in this rhetorical conversation. Black is trying to just tell a story, but White is trying to penetrate through the religiousness of the story to expose the darkness, the evil, and the selfishness of Black's motivation for telling the story. He found a fissure in the doctrine and decided to strike, unnerving Black, who has to find a way back to the order of things, so he tells him that he is going to continue to tell White the story, looking at it from White's perspective. Black says he is not sure why God decided to talk to him. He just did. White counters with, "But you listened". Black did not have to listen, but he decided to, he chose to even though he claims he had no choice. This leads to White's next question: "Why is it you people can't just accept it that some people don't even want to believe in God?" The phrasing is interesting here in that he does not say, "Why is it you people can't just accept it that some people don't even believe in God?" The concept of wanting to believe in God is different than believing in God, which means that White may believe in God but just might not want to believe in God for the purpose of what he is thinking of doing and almost did. Black says he could accept people do not want to believe in God, but he is not about to let someone kill themselves because the Bible and God tells him to save them.

"Don't you want to be happy?" asks Black. An interesting question in that it brings viewers back to the concept of rhetoric. Black is trying to create a dialogue to see if he can find joy in White. White, however, believes happiness is "contrary to the human condition". To White, there is no such thing as happiness because we were born into it: "Suffering and human destiny are the same thing". But, Black counters by saying that without suffering and pain, we would not have happiness. To have happiness we have to have suffering, to have suffering we have to have happiness. There needs to be one for the other to exist, a strong argument to make, and it leads White to want to have something to drink. Black has nothing in the apartment but more stories about how drunks, in the search for their next drink, are looking for the one thing that everyone wants: to be loved by God. White says, "I don't want to be loved by God". Yet another indication White believes in God even though he does not explicitly state it. What he wants is the *Sunset Limited* and that "the idea of God is a load of crap". Black makes a joke about being blasphemous, laughs, and

White says, “You don’t find that an evil thing to say?” White’s intention and choice is to be evil but not to be evil because he is evil; he wants to see Black’s reaction to evil, which is: “No, Professor, I don’t. But you does”. White tries to state it as fact, but Black calls him out by saying it is not a fact, but maybe it is the only fact about White, which means it could be why White is in the predicament he is in. God sometimes speaks out loud like in Black’s case, but God can always speak to a person’s heart, and if God can speak to Black and to his heart, “he can speak to anybody”.

This moment is a turning point in *Sunset Limited*. Black’s use of logos, ethos, and pathos seem to penetrate into White’s sensibility about the world. Black waits to see what happens next by drumming his fingers on the table and provides us with White’s inner monologue: “Wonder what this crazy n—er is fixing to do now. He’s liable to put the mojo on me. He’ll be speaking in tongues here directly. I need to get my ass out of here. He’s liable to steak my pocketbook. I need to get my ass on down to that depot ‘fore something bad happens to me”. BAM! He wakes up White from wherever he is by hitting the table, and asks the Professor what he is to do with him. White wants to give Black \$3000 to settle this, but Black says White does not have to settle with him. God brought White to Black to save him but there is more to it: “Belief. . . ain’t like unbelief”. The believer does not have an issue, the unbeliever does because they “set out to unravel the world. For everything he can point to that ain’t true, he leaves to things laying there”. So, belief and unbelief are the same, belief is just belief, and unbelief is just an attempt to deconstruct belief, which does exist. White asks Black if he literally believes everything in the Bible. Black says no, an example being the notion of original sin. Evil is not given to you; evil is something one brings upon themselves “mostly from wanting things you ain’t supposed to have”. In the case of White, it is death on his own terms, which is evil according to doctrine.

White asks Black if he is a heretic, or someone who contradicts religious orthodoxy. Black says he can be in that he is a questioner as opposed to a doubter, the difference being a questioner asks questions to get to the truth while the doubter “wants to be told there ain’t no such thing”. He also believes that people do not have to read the Bible to get saved because whatever truths are written in the book are also written on the heart and were there a long time ago. This mentality is the exact opposite of what White believes, that happiness is not part of the human condition. Humans can even be saved without even knowing the Bible exists. The human condition is connected to God, no matter what, and it is a guide for those who need help. Black is reminiscent of Albert Camus’s priest near the end of *The Stranger*. He goes to Meursault (the narrator) to speak with him about why he should embrace God, even though Meursault has no interest and does not believe in God. Meursault believes the tangible jail cell around him exists, and he ultimately cannot take the priest’s attempts to convert him any longer:

Then, I don’t know how it was, but something seemed to break inside me, and I started yelling at the top of my voice. I hurled insults at him, I told him not to waste his rotten prayers on me; it was better to burn than to disappear. I’d taken him by the neckband of his cassock, and, in a sort of ecstasy of joy and rage, I poured out on him all the thoughts that had been simmering in my brain. (Camus [1942] 1989, p. 74)

Meursault is like White in that he is a nihilist and he sees himself as someone who does not care for religion, and he is determined to let the priest know his sermons and blessings will never work for him, because he will never have faith. As it pertains to *Sunset Limited*, White sees Black’s perception about God as savior differently, and it is here where viewers will start to see the fundamental differences between the two men: White sees the Bible as pointing out “the dialectic of the homily always presupposes a ground of evil”. What this means is there are always going to be multiple paths to evil while there is only one path to good. White cannot see that one path because he sees all of the evil paths. There is always going to be that imbalance for him and it is becoming more obvious that White is not going to be able to see this from Black’s perspective. As Black says, all he knows is the

Bible; White claims to know more, which is what is outside of the doctrine and what leads him to the Sunset Limited.

The two of them become distracted by a fight that happens across from Black's apartment. White wonders why he lives there and calls the area a "moral leper colony", that he should move to a place where he can do some good. "As opposed to where good is needed?" says Black. He found the one path, and he wants to lead others down that path, because he has seen all the paths White alluded to earlier. White says, "Even God gives up at some point. There's no ministry in hell that I ever heard of". Black sees this as correct: ministry is for the living and that is why you have to take care of others. Black is his brothers' keeper, along with Jesus. The question posed by White is: Why? Why would Jesus want to work with those that do not want to work with Him? There would be no point. Black seriously calls him a theologian and White thinks he is being facetious; White thinks Black says things sometimes just for the effect. This happens several times throughout the movie, where White thinks Black is not being sincere, even though viewers know he is being quite serious. That cynical nature is part of why White has become suicidal. He does not believe those around him are saying truthful things. They just placate him or amuse him or condescend him. White no longer believes in truth, where Black sees that truth exists and that truth is provided to human beings through doctrine, through the Word. And, that truth leads to everlasting life, which White does not believe in because he both does not believe good can exist or that the unworthy are worthy of any redemption, love, or care. Nothing is wrong with him as it pertains to his perceptions, he has just been "driven to finally face the truth". On his path, White has been to therapy but has no friendships, he does not connect with his fellow person, he "loathes" his colleagues who loathe him, he does not take medications that work. In fact, White wonders why he needs "constituents", a word used by Black. Black believes these new friends could help White see something new, different, real. White could then find the path to good, if he believes something other than not believing. The issue White is having, according to Black, is that White believes not having beliefs means there is an absence of belief. That is not the case. The absence of belief is a belief, so belief in something else can be accomplished if one tries to do so. That could be Jesus but maybe it is not. What is more fundamental is to know, according to Black, that it is not about Black, Christian, White, Jewish, etc. At the core of that is one thing: humanity is humanity.

According to White, the one thing that makes us human is "the primacy of the intellect". It is not about feeling, emotion, or empathy. Logos rules over logos, ethos, and pathos combined. The other thing that makes us human is our love of food. Black gives White some food and White loves it. He keeps on saying it is very good; he is surprised he can feel something, like something, something good. He is breaking bread with Black, who says grace before they start to eat. Having a meal, a good meal, with someone else is a great connector, and they find common ground in their enjoyment of the meal. Happiness happens, even though White does not want it to, so he chooses to go back to evil and asks Black what the worst thing he ever did was. Black does not want to tell him but he did tell a man of God, who did not say a word, did not judge him for it. White wonders why Black does not ask him the same question. Black presumes it is because it was White about to kill himself, but that presumption is false, or at least the viewer can presume that. The viewer never learns what that evil is or if it even exists. This is a test for us, what Alfred Hitchcock called the MacGuffin, the thing that drives the story and plot but it does not matter what it is. All we know is that we, along with Black and White, are here.

White asks Black, after they eat, if White is a test for him. Black does not see it that way. He sees everything in black and white, according to him. There is no other way; if one were to think of things with more complexity, the people of the world would be like White. The doctrine and the rhetoric protect Black from the knowledge he accrued prior to his release from prison. Being good protects him from becoming evil again. Speaking and listening to Jesus and God helps sustain him, keeps him on the straight and narrow. White believes he is not virtuous enough for Jesus to talk to him, and Black tells him it is not

about virtuousness. All one has to do is listen, a part of conversation most humans have a hard time with but still a part of conversation. It is here where White asks him outright if Black believes that “culture tends to contribute to human misery, that the more one knows the unhappier one is likely to be”. Black says, as White is saying that, that Black does not really believe that. But, White points to the Bible and says that the same thought process is in the first part of the Bible: The Garden of Eden, the tree of knowledge, “knowledge is destructive to the spirit, destructive to goodness”. It could be because all knowledge is “vanity or the unhealthy illusion that they can outwit the devil”. White sees this as an impossibility: “The darker picture is always the correct one”. Yes, human beings think it will change, but it will not and he knows this for fact.

Black can relate to this, but he can also relate to the idea that what White is saying may not be correct. He can see both sides of the story, so he knows that he does not know. Since White has the knowledge, he is in despair and he essentially knows all. He thinks he is right about his perceptions of the world and he cannot truly see that the people around him, the commuters on the platform waiting for the *Sunset Limited*, may be in the same headspace White is in. That is not to say White’s problems are inconsequential; it just means White can only see himself and his evil and he cannot start over. Black is trying to keep White alive at this point, so he tells him that “maybe faith is just a case of not having nothing else left”. This leads White to say, “Well, I do have something else”. To White, there are always going to be other paths other than the one Black is walking down, and it is at this point the conversation ends, even though they talk for another twenty minutes or so. Black tries repeatedly to find the words to White’s heart, but White tells him, “Well, I can’t help you”. Black wants him to stay, but he cannot. The *Sunset Limited* is White’s future. He wants death, blackness; he wants nothingness: “I don’t regard my state of mind as some pessimistic view of the world. I regard it as the world itself”. That is White’s doctrine. He claims to have taken a long time to get to that point, but he is there and that is where he wants to be, and there is nothing Black can change or do, nor does White want that to happen. Death, to White, is the doctrine, is the fellowship; so is all that is evil in the world. The last ten or so minutes of *Sunset Limited* is White explaining this to Black, who has now become completely aware of why White decided to commit suicide. He cannot argue anymore, he cannot try to persuade. There is no use. White is going to do what he seeks out to do. He will die by his own hand and that is what will bring happiness to White. In the end, White gets his happiness when he leaves and is able to keep his nihilistic and atheistic views intact.

5. Conclusions

Black, in the end, however, has nothing left. He no longer has the words. He yells to God, “I don’t understand why you sent me down there. I don’t understand. If you wanted me to help him, then how come you didn’t give me the words? You give them to him. What about me?” Black is speaking about the art of persuasion; Black was persuaded, finally, to give White what he wanted, what he needed, what already was. White won the argument because he had the words, he was the more effective communicator, the Professor wins over the Reverend, to the point of doubt. Black wants to keep God’s word, but in the end asks, “Is that okay? I-is that okay?” The final result: Doctrine and religious belief are not just about God. What Black does not see, at least by the end of the film, is that darkness and evil can be just as much a religion as Christianity and can be just as persuasive. Sometimes, the only road is death and, for some, that road is the road to good and, most importantly, to freedom.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Aristotle. 2009. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Translated by W. Rhys Roberts. The Internet Classics Archive. First Written 350 B.C. Available online: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.html> (accessed on 2 July 2023).
- Baker, W. Oliver. 2016. "Words Are Things": The Settler Colonial Politics of Post-Humanist Materialism in Cormac McCarthy's Blook Meridian. *Meditations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 30: 1–24. Available online: <https://mediationsjournal.org/articles/words-are-things> (accessed on 2 July 2023).
- Beale, Carrie L. 1996. *The Ethnic Dimension of Persistent Poverty in Rural and Small-Town Areas*; Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture. Available online: https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/40678/32990_aer731b_002.pdf?v=0 (accessed on 2 July 2023).
- Bloom, Harold. 2019. Harold Bloom on Cormac McCarthy, True Heir to Melville and Faulkner. *Literary Hub*, October 16. Available online: <https://lithub.com/harold-bloom-on-cormac-mccarthy-true-heir-to-melville-and-faulkner/> (accessed on 1 July 2023).
- Broncano, Manuel. 2013. *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Burch, Robert. 2004. Dialectic. *English Studies in Canada*. vol. 30. Available online: link.gale.com/apps/doc/A169457904/GLS?u=central&sid=bookmark-GLS&xid=9fde7785 (accessed on 2 July 2023).
- Camus, Albert. 1989. *The Stranger*. New York: Vintage. First published 1942.
- Carpenter, Murray. 2022. Rare Thoughts on Writing from Cormac McCarthy in This Unlikely Interview. *Literary Hub*, March 15. Available online: <https://lithub.com/rare-thoughts-on-writing-from-cormac-mccarthy-in-this-unlikely-interview/> (accessed on 1 July 2023).
- Douglas, Christopher. 2013. 'If God Meant to Interfere': Evolution and Theodicy in Blood Meridian. *Religion & Literature* 45: 83–107. Available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24397781> (accessed on 1 July 2023).
- Durkheim, Émile. 2005. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Edited by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson. Translated by George Simpson. London and New York: Routledge. First published 1951.
- Gearing, Robin E., and Dana Lizardi. 2009. Religion and Suicide. *Journal of Religion & Health* 48: 332–41. [CrossRef]
- Hwang, Jung-Suk. 2018. The Wild West, 9/11, and Mexicans in Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men. *Texas Studies in Literature & Language* 60: 346–71. [CrossRef]
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2011. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated and Introduced by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Open Road Integrated Media. First published 1956. Available online: https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/6564640/mod_resource/content/2/Being%20and%20Nothingness.pdf (accessed on 1 July 2023).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.