

169 QUOTATIONS



Cormac McCarthy

(1933-)

Cormac McCarthy wrote *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Road* (2006), two of the most distinguished American novels since Hemingway and Faulkner. He is a conservative. He mentions God more often than any major American writer since Hawthorne and Melville, giving his work a metaphysical dimension that enlarges its significance beyond the atheistic secularism of the Postmodernist liberals. Yet his disbelief in immortality, his hatred even of the idea, is pessimistic. The only transcendence possible for McCarthy is humanism. This morality strengthens and deepens his work. He affirms primal family values as essential for the survival of civilization against the naïve barbarism of liberals. We must struggle to keep going “on the road” of humanity—a form of Existentialism. McCarthy is not silly like Pynchon or funny like DeLillo can be, he is serious, realistic, deep, and powerful. He knows he has a soul. He combines the fatalism of Greek tragedy with American traditions of Calvinism, Gothicism—Brown, Poe, Bierce--and Naturalism. He is the darkest major writer since Eugene O’Neill, Nathaniel West and Flannery O’Connor and the most forceful in his attack on Postmodernism since T.S. Eliot, echoing “The Waste Land” (1922) especially in *The Road*. McCarthy often writes like the less prolific son of Faulkner with his colloquial language, emotional rhetoric, deep historical perspective, and dazzling Expressionistic prose style.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, the West, America, history, morality, pessimism, consolations, stoicism, God, human nature, savagery, humanity, civilization, determinism, Existentialism, women, sex, beauty, ladies picnic at the Civil War, unmarried, teaching creative writing, liberals, utopianism, abortion, fools, war, reality, Postmodernism, drugs, cowardice, bad government, futile politics, apocalyptic vision, barbarism, truth, literature, Political Correctness, writing, style, old age, prayer, death:

YOUTH

I felt early on I wasn’t going to be a respectable citizen.

By the time I was sixteen I had read many books and I had become a freethinker.

My daddy always told me to just do the best you knew how and tell the truth.

It was good that God kept the truths of life from the young as they were starting out or else they'd have no heart to start at all.

I never had any doubts about my abilities. I knew I could write. I just had to figure out how to eat while doing this.

THE WEST

I've always been interested in the Southwest. There isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West.

Son, not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven.

You go back home and everything you wished was different is still the same and everything you wished was the same is different.

AMERICA

This country will kill you in a heartbeat and still people love it.

HISTORY

I tried to put things in perspective but sometimes you're just too close to it.

Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not.

MORALITY

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak.

At some point we cannot escape naming responsibility. It's in our nature.

PESSIMISM

If trouble comes when you least expect it then maybe the thing to do is to always expect it.

All the time you spend tryin to get back what's been took from you there's more goin out the door. After a while you just try and get a tourniquet on it.

CONSOLATIONS

Who knows what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from.

There are no absolutes in human misery and things can always get worse.

All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes.

STOICISM

You give up the world line by line. Stoically. And then one day you realize that your courage is farcical. It doesn't mean anything. You've become an accomplice in your own annihilation and there is nothing you can do about it. Everything you do closes a door somewhere ahead of you. And finally there is only one door left.

GOD

God needs no witness.

God will not permit that we shall know what is to come.

The voice of the Almighty speaks most profoundly in such things as live in silence themselves.

Nor does God whisper through the trees. His voice is not to be mistaken. When men hear it they fall to their knees and their souls are riven and they cry out to Him and there is no fear but only wildness of heart that springs from such longing.

I always thought when I got older that God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didn't. I don't blame him. If I was him I'd have the same opinion about me that he does.

Those he has spoke to are the ones that must of needed it the worst.

He knew only that his child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.

Men do not turn from God so easily... Deep in each man is the knowledge that something knows of his existence. Something knows, and cannot be fled nor hid from.

The world was new each day for God made it daily. Yet it contained within it all the evils as before, no more, no less.

The argument of the village atheist whose single passion is to revile endlessly that which he denies the existence of in the first place.

The wrath of God lies sleeping. It was hid a million years before men were and only men have the power to wake it.

When we went back to the fire he knelt and smoothed her hair as she slept and he said if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different.

The breath of God was his yet, though it pass from man to man through all of time.

HUMAN NATURE

Flesh is so frail it is hardly more than a dream.

Scared money can't win and a worried man can't love.

People don't pay attention. And then one day there's an accounting.

You forget what you want to remember and remember what you want to forget.

A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart, but he don't want to. Rightly so. Best not to look in there.

I don't think goodness is something that you learn. If you're left adrift in the world to learn goodness from it, you would be in trouble.

When God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make a machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it.

What deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of hydrophobia could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky wormbent tabernacle.

The closest bonds we will ever know are bonds of grief. The deepest community one of sorrow.

SAVAGERY

What joins men together...is not the sharing of bread but the sharing of enemies.

I've seen the meanness of humans till I don't know why God ain't put out the sun and gone away.

Seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows.

They were skewered through the cords of their heels with sharpened shuttles of green wood and they hung gray and naked above the dead ashes of the coals where they'd been roasted until their heads had charred and the brains bubbled in the skulls and steam sang from their noseholes.

HUMANITY

I wanted very much to be a person of value and I had to ask myself how this could be possible if there were not something like a soul or like a spirit.

Every man is tabernacled in every other, and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world.

Every man's death is standing in for every other. And since death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love the man who stands for us.

He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart.

CIVILIZATION

We're carrying the fire.

Keep a little fire burning; however small, however hidden.

DETERMINISM

It is suppose to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I don't believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God—who knows all that can be known—seems powerless to change.

For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on.

The shape of your path was visible from the beginning.

EXISTENTIALISM

Every road ends in death.

Every step you take is forever.

Each man is the bard of his own existence.

The truth about the world...is that anything is possible.

There is no such joy in the tavern as upon the road thereto.

Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing.

Existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass.

The world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts. For awhile it seemed a place which contained men; it was in reality a place contained within them.

That man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.

WOMEN

Nothin wounded goes uphill.

The societies to which I have been exposed seemed to me largely machines for the suppression of women.

There is no forgiveness. For women. A man may lose his honor and regain it again. But a woman cannot.

She said that to be a woman was to live a life of difficulty and heartbreak and those who said otherwise simply had no wish to face the facts.

Females of domestic reputation lounged upon the balconies they passed with faces gotten up in indigo and almagre gaudy as the rumps of apes and they peered from behind their fans with a kind of lurid coyness like transvestites in a madhouse.

She said that if women were drawn to rash men it was only that in their secret hearts they knew that a man who would not kill for them was of no use at all.

SEX

The following night she came to his bed and she came every night for nine nights running, pushing the door shut and latching it and turning in the slatted light at God knew what hour and stepping out of her clothes and sliding cool and naked against him in the narrow bunk all softness and perfume and the lushness of her black hair falling over him and no caution to her at all. Saying I don't care I don't care. Drawing blood with her teeth where he held the heel of his hand against her mouth that she not cry out.

BEAUTY

A goodlookin horse is like a goodlookin woman.... They're always more trouble than what they're worth. What a man needs is just one that will get the job done.

LADIES PICNIC AT THE CIVIL WAR

He told how...the dames of the city rode up into the hills in buggies and picnicked and watched the battle and how at night as they sat by the fires they could hear the moans of the dying out on the plain and see by its lantern the deadcart moving among them like a hearse from limbo.

UNMARRIED

Life is brief and to have to spend every day of it doing what somebody else wants you to do is not the way to live.

It would take a hell of a wife to beat no wife at all.

TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

Teaching writing is a hustle.

You are either born a writer or you are not.

He may be dead; or he may be teaching English.

Poets shouldn't vote. [echo of Plato]

LIBERALS

Beware gentle knight. There is no greater monster than reason.

I can normally tell how intelligent a man is by how stupid he thinks I am.

Best way to live in California is to be from somewhere else.

A bad map is worse than no map at all for it engendered in the traveler a false confidence and might easily cause him to set aside these instincts which would otherwise guide him if he would but place himself in their care. He said that to follow a false map was to invite disaster.

A man of broad principles. Of liberal sentiments. Even a generous man. Yet one might say that his way through the world was so broad it scarcely made a path at all.

A fevered dream, a trance be populate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tents how whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning.

Word gets around when the circus comes to town.

UTOPIANISM

I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.

ABORTION

Here a year or two back me and Loretta went to a conference.... I got set next to this woman...she kept talkin about the right wing this and the right wing that. I aint even sure what she meant by it... She kept on, kept on. Finally told me, said: I don't like the way this country is headed. I want my granddaughter to be able to have an abortion. And I said well ma'am I don't think you got any worries about the way the country is headed. The way I see it going I don't have much doubt but what she'll be able to have an abortion. I'm going to say that not only will she be able to have an abortion, she'll be able to have you put to sleep. Which pretty much ended the conversation.

They came to a bush that was hung with dead babies.

I don't know what sort of world she will live in and I have no fixed opinions concerning how she should live it. I only know that if she does not come to value what is true above what is useful, it will make little difference whether she lives at all. And by true I do not mean what is righteous but merely what is so.

FOOLS

Fools beget their own kind and here was the proof of it and that as only foolish women would have aught to do with them their progeny were twice doomed.

They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen.

When the shooting starts would you rather be armed or legal?

WAR

People will tell you it was Vietnam brought this country to its knees. But I never believed that. It was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just the icing on the cake.... You can't go to war like that. You can't go to war without God. I don't know what is going to happen when the next one comes. I surely don't.

As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance...and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers.

It makes no difference what men think of war.... War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him.

You can be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more than they're worth. Ask them Gold Star mothers what they paid and what they got for it. You always pay too much.

REALITY

In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and reality, even where we will not.

POSTMODERNISM

Hell ain't half full.

Hard people make hard times.

On this road there are no godspoke men.

If you break little promises, you'll break big ones.

His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement.

I guess if everybody went crazy together nobody would notice.

What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul?

His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day.

Credless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland.

All progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage.

It starts when you begin to overlook good manners. Any time you quit hearing Sir and Ma'am the end is pretty much in sight.

If it is life that you feel you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent.

DRUGS

I read in the papers here a while back some teachers came across a survey that was sent out back in the thirties to a number of schools around the country.... And the biggest problems they could name was things like talkin in class and runnin in the hallways. Chewin gum.... So they...printed up a bunch of them and sent em back out to the same schools. Forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide.

I think if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics.

And so these parties divided upon that midnight plain, each passing back the way the other had come, pursuing as all travelers must inversions without end upon other men's journeys.

COWARDICE

It was always himself that the coward abandoned first. After this all other betrayals came easily.

The wicked know that if the ill they do be of sufficient horror men will not speak against it. That men have just enough stomach for small evils and only these will they oppose.

BAD GOVERNMENT

It takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people can't be governed at all.

Do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them.

FUTILE POLITICS

And so these parties divided upon that midnight plain, each passing back the way the other had come, pursuing as all travelers must inversions without end upon other men's journeys.

APOCALYPTIC VISION

He knew that all things fought.

How do you like city life? said Toadvine.

I don't like it worth a damn so far.

All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes.

Uneasy sleeper you will live to see the city of your birth pulled down to the last stone.

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions.

It's snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He cause it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom.

Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row.

The sun was down and to the west lay reefs of bloodred clouds up out of which rose little desert nighthawks like fugitives from some great fire at the earth's end.

The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk.

The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void.

BARBARISM

The world soon to be populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell.

They came shuffling through the ash casting their hooded heads from side to side. Some of them wearing canister masks. One in a biohazard suit. Stained and filthy. Slouching along with clubs in their hands, lengths of pipe. Coughing.

Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant.

If people saw the world for what it truly is...I don't believe they could offer the first reason why they should not elect to die as soon as possible.

I don't know what of our culture is going to survive, or if we survive.

He found some tools and...sat working on the wheel.

TRUTH

I think that when the lies are all told and forgot the truth will be there yet.

LITERATURE

I don't care whether it's art, literature, poetry or drama, whatever. The sheer volume of it will wash it out. I mean, if you had thousands of Greek plays to read, would they be that good? I don't think so.

The indulgent 800-page books that were written a hundred years ago are just not going to be written anymore and people need to get used to that. If you think you're going to write something like *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Moby-Dick*, go ahead. Nobody will read it. I don't care how good it is, or how smart the readers are. Their intentions, their brains are different.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Where all is known, no narrative is possible.

WRITING

I don't know why I started writing.

Words pale and lose their savor while pain is always new.

If there is an occupational hazard to writing, it's drinking.

I'm not interested in writing short stories. Anything that doesn't take years of your life and drive you to suicide hardly seems worth doing.

I like what I do. Some writers have said in print that they hated writing and it was just a chore and a burden. I certainly don't feel that way about it. Sometimes it's difficult. You know, you always have this image of the perfect thing which you can never achieve, but which you never stop trying to achieve...that's your signpost and your guide. You'll never get there, but without it you won't get anywhere.

My perfect day is sitting in a room with some blank paper. That's heaven. That's gold and anything else is just a waste of time.

STYLE

A thin shell of a moon lay capsized over the jagged peaks.

By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp.

The adamantine ranges rising out of nothing like the backs of seabests in a devonian dawn.

A man near him sat with an arrow hanging out of his neck. He was bent slightly as if in prayer.

In the long red sunset the sheets of water on the plain below them lay like tidepools of primal blood.

He rocked in the swells, floating like the first germ of life adrift on the earth's cooling seas, formless maculae of plasma trapped in a vapor drop and all creation yet to come.

They were watching, out there past men's knowing, where stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea.

All about her the dead lay with their peeled skulls like polyps bluey wet or luminescent melons cooling on some mesa of the moon.

The carrion birds sat about the topmost corners of the houses with their wings outstretched in attitudes of exhortation like dark little bishops.

We encountered the two lads that had deserted us. Hangin upside down in a tree. They'd been skinned and I can tell ye it does very little for a man's appearance.

[Attack by Apaches]: A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear or cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armour of a spanish conquistador, the breastplate and cauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporuous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools.

OLD AGE

There is no later. This is later.

Pain for the old was no longer a surprise.

To have a child when you're older, it wrenches you up out of your nap and makes you look at things, you know, afresh. It forces the world on you. And I think it's a good thing.

PRAYER

Sometimes it's good to pray. I don't think you have to have a clear idea of who or what God is to pray. You could even be quite dubious about the whole business.

DEATH

How surely are the dead beyond death. Death is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of a bitter memory. But the dead do not remember and nothingness is not a curse. Far from it.

If I thought that in death I would meet the people I've known in life I don't know what I'd do.... If I had to meet my mother again and start all of that over, only this time without the prospect of death to look forward to? Well. That would be the final nightmare. Kafka on wheels.

As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart.

They say that death comes like a thief in the night. Where is he? I'll hug his neck.

Life is a memory, and then it is nothing.

The frailty of everything revealed at last.

The point is there ain't no point.

Last words are only words.

Ever is no time at all.

Carry the fire.

