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The Echoes of Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Fredrich Nietzsche in Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*

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**The Echoes of Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Fredrich Nietzsche in Cormac McCarthy's
*The Sunset Limited***

by

Hee-seong Lim

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Justin Remes, Major Professor
Matthew Wynn Sivils
Stacey Weber-Feve

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein has approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2018

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Myung soo Lee, who has been a great supporter of mine. My mother, who is now 56, has dedicated herself to my nurture and education for more than half of her life, working without holidays, ever since she had to shoulder her responsibility to rear her two sons by herself. The time has now worn her out, and I can see the traces of her lonely and fierce battle on her grey hairs and wizened hands, which are too rough and coarse. Compared to her devotion to myself, the dedication of my thesis seems so humble, but I would like to acknowledge her invisible contribution to this research.

With all my love and respect for my mother,

Lim, Hee-seong

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NOMENCLATURE

<i>TSL</i>	<i>The Sunset Limited</i>
Job	The Book of Job
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
<i>GS</i>	<i>The Gay Science</i>

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Author

Lim, Hee-seong

ABSTRACT

As many of Cormac McCarthy scholars have agreed, McCarthy's film adaptations as well as published novels conspicuously have engaged in religious themes. The purpose of this thesis is to explore religious aspects of the film adaptation of McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited* (2011) from Buddhist, Christian, and atheist perspectives. This thesis' Buddhist reading of *The Sunset Limited* is the first attempt among religious interpretations of McCarthy's text, and this is expected to open a new horizon in the religious analysis of McCarthy's film. *The Sunset Limited* shows a tension between Black and White, and the tension represents collisions of will to live and self-destruction.

First, focusing on the Buddhist notion of pain (*dukkha*), this research contends that White's (understanding of) pain aligns with the Buddhist doctrine, but his solution to pain is antithetical to Buddhist philosophy. In addition, this study explores how Black's theory of redemption and his own salvation conflicts with the Buddhist notion of redemption. The film also exhibits a collision between the Christian faith and atheist total nihilism. Secondly, this thesis compares White's atheism to the Book of Job and how his mistrust of God prevents White from receiving salvation on contrary to Job. Furthermore, the second chapter claims how Black, who tries to dissuade White from another suicide attempt, miscarries his comforter role of White. Lastly, this thesis examines how White's nihilism and atheism are different from that of Nietzsche based on his book, *The Gay Science* (1882), which famously declares "God is dead." Addressing Buddhist, Christian, and atheist perspectives on *The Sunset Limited* will bring more vital and various discourses about McCarthy's film with regard to the religious reading of this film adaptation.

CHAPTER 1. THE GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Oprah Winfrey: You haven't worked out the God thing or not yet?

Cormac McCarthy: Well, it depends on what day you asked me (chuckle).

You know, but, um, sometimes, sometimes, it's good to pray. I don't think you have to have a clear idea of who or what God is in order to pray. You can even be quite doubtful about the whole business."¹

Cormac McCarthy, a reclusive writer in contemporary America with a mystical and fascinating writing style, first appeared in a televised interview in 2007. On the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey posed questions about McCarthy's novel, *The Road* (2006), which is a post-apocalyptic story about a nameless father and a son. McCarthy revealed that this story came up in his mind when he was traveling with his son, John Francis McCarthy. What is interesting in the aforementioned interview is McCarthy's remark on religion and God. As suggested in the epigraph, McCarthy demonstrates an ambiguous attitude towards religion. Despite his ambivalence towards religion and the existence of God, his novels have engaged in prevalent religious themes.²

McCarthy published *The Sunset Limited* in the same year when he published *The Road*. It is a story about Black, who is an ex-convict, and White, who is a pessimistic professor. The story starts with Black's mysterious rescue of White from his suicide attempt. Black brings White to his apartment in New York, and Black tries to dissuade White from his second suicide attempt by using Christianity. That is to say, this story is about the tension

¹ For the full interview with Cormac McCarthy, visit "Cormac McCarthy Interview on the Oprah Winfrey Show" on *YouTube*, especially youtu.be/y3kpzuk1Y8I. The transcription is my own.

² Manuel Broncano also points out that religion is one of the predominant themes in McCarthy's texts: "the most controversial issue in Cormac McCarthy studies [is] the religious scope of his fiction" (1). For a more detailed explanation about Broncano's interpretation, see Broncano, especially p.1.

between two men: Black who tries to convert White to Christianity versus White who strives to walk into the darkness, which implies his death. This novel is heavy with dialogs between Black and White, but the novel has a subtitle, “a novel in a dramatic form.” The category of this text is unclear due to its subtitle and the form of its text. Even many scholars use different terms to classify McCarthy’s *The Sunset Limited*; some call it a novel, and others call it a play or a drama. In this research, I will simply call it a (literary) text since there is no clear agreement about the category of this text among McCarthy scholars.

Tommy Lee Jones who was the director, executive producer, and lead male actor (White) of the film, adapted McCarthy’s novel into a film. Samuel L. Jackson starred in the film as Black. McCarthy himself participated in the film production as a screenwriter. What is intriguing is that McCarthy already had Samuel L. Jackson in his mind when he was writing the literary text. According to *Cormac McCarthy and Performance: Page, Stage, Screen* (2017), Stacey Peebles indicates that one of McCarthy’s notes from his early draft of *The Sunset Limited* shows that McCarthy chose Jackson as Black:

On one of the folders that held an early draft of the play, McCarthy scrawled the names ‘Samuel L Jackson’ and ‘John Malkovitch [sic]’ — notable not only because McCarthy was thinking of Jackson well before he starred in the HBO adaptation but also because he was, in fact, thinking of actors rather than considering his characters to be purely literary creation. (Peebles 85)

Peebles’ note proves that McCarthy thought of actors in advance, and McCarthy’s note reveals that he has a great interest in visualizing his text, *The Sunset Limited*. In addition to his note, McCarthy proves his interest in the adaptation by participating in the film

production as a screenwriter. Therefore, it is important to explore the film adaptation as well as his literary text so as to holistically understand McCarthy's work.

Numerous scholars have explored McCarthy's literary texts and film adaptations from various perspectives, but I can narrow down the scope of literary analyses of McCarthy's texts into two categories: philosophical and religious readings.³ First, the philosophical interpretation started with Vereen M. Bell. Bell has published *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988) and interpreted McCarthy's novel based on nihilistic philosophy. In addition to his book, Bell also published his article, "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy," and he explores McCarthy's nihilism in four texts: *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979). A recently published book, *Philosophical Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Beyond Reckoning* (2017), has analyzed McCarthy's work from various philosophies. Secondly, Dianne Luce interprets McCarthy's Appalachian novels from the gnostic perspectives.⁴ Edwin Arnold, who edited *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (1999) together with Luce, also constructs a religious analysis of McCarthy's novels from the perspective of orthodox Christianity. In addition to Luce and Arnold, many other scholars such as Manuel Broncano, Matthew L. Potts, Susan J. Tyburski, Robert Metcalf, and John Vanderheide have provided various and insightful religious analyses on McCarthy's novels.

Although many scholars have actively interpreted McCarthy's fiction, the scholars of McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited* have not been actively interpreted by many scholars

³ Matthew L. Potts also broadly classifies McCarthy studies into two categories: philosophical and religious readings, which I agree with. For a more detailed classification about McCarthy's studies, see Potts, especially pp.1-18.

⁴ What scholars argue about the scope of McCarthy's Appalachian novels slightly differs from scholars, but the majority of scholars have agreed that McCarthy's Appalachian novels include *Child of God* (1973) and *Outer Dark* (1968).

compared to *The Road*. In her article, “Beyond the Border: Cormac McCarthy in the New Millennium,” Luce points out that *The Sunset Limited* gathers less attention compared to *The Road*: “*The Sunset Limited* was published by Vintage International in January 2007 (sic), three months after *The Road*, to almost no critical notice in the popular press” (Luce 9). In other words, only a small number of readers have appreciated *The Sunset Limited*.

According to Lydia Cooper’s article, “‘A Howling Void’: Beckett’s Influence in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Sunset Limited*,” she argues, “*The Sunset Limited* is a complicated play to interpret, especially in terms of how the play fits within McCarthy’s corpus. [...] the play seems to lean precariously in the direction of a nihilism not seen in McCarthy’s work since *Blood Meridian*” (1). Cooper elucidates one of the reasons why critics have difficulties examining McCarthy’s play. In addition to the explicit nihilism in the work, McCarthy’s ambiguous ending of the text impedes the analysis of this text. The ending of *The Sunset Limited* does not offer a clear resolution of the tension between Black and White. White walks into the darkness, and Black’s unanswered questions remain at the end of the play. Due to the lingering ambiguity at the end of the text, it is purely the reader’s and the audience’s duty to figure out the meaning of the text.

Despite the nihilism in the text and McCarthy’s ambiguous attitude towards religion, it is valuable to analyze *The Sunset Limited* and to reflect upon the meaning of the text. The complexity and the ambiguity open a window for various kinds of interpretations of *The Sunset Limited*. As Steven Frye argues in his book, *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (2013), the true value of McCarthy’s fiction lies in the openness and freedom of the meaning of the text:

While philosophy in McCarthy's vision is broader and perhaps more fluid than it is conceptualized in an academic context, *he has demonstrated a deep interest in Western and non-Western philosophical and theological traditions, and as a starting point, it is reasonable to consider some of the various philosophical systems that inform his work.* (Frye 4-5, emphasis added).

In this sense, my attempt to explore *The Sunset Limited* based on Buddhist, Christian, and Nietzschean perspectives will add more diversity to the academic discourses about McCarthy's novel and film.

The first chapter is a Buddhist interpretation of a non-Buddhist film based on Buddhist notions of pain (*dukkha*) and its way of liberation (the Four Noble Truths). In this chapter, I contend that White's pain, which derives from the destruction of his belief in human culture, echoes Buddhist pain or *dukkha*. White concludes that the only solution to his pain is suicide. However, White's solution is antithetical to the Four Noble Truths because Buddhist philosophy explains that the world is worth living in even though there is a plethora of pain. In addition, Buddhist thought argues that pain is necessary for one's life because it makes a human mature. In this sense, I argue that White's notion of pain aligns with the *dukkha*, but his solution to pain is antithetical to the Buddhist philosophy. Black, who tries to prevent White from another suicide attempt, uses his redemptive narrative which derives from his past violent act. Black's redemptive narrative cannot avoid failure from the Buddhist standpoint because salvation cannot originate from any form of violence. In this respect, I assert that Black's endeavors to protect White from the suicide attempt are futile. Although it is not clear whether McCarthy has been influenced by the Buddhist doctrine, this

Buddhist reading of *The Sunset Limited* offers a deeply insightful understanding of human pain, and it offers the audience an opportunity to ruminate upon overcoming agony in audience's lives.

In the second chapter, I will examine *The Sunset Limited* compared to the Book of Job. More specifically, I will explore how McCarthy's religious ambivalence towards God is represented by White. The main point of this chapter is that White, who does not have faith in God, is another version of Job, and thus fails to receive redemption. On the other hand, Job attains salvation due to his unwavering faith in God although Job suffers from agony, which is imposed by God and Satan. Black, who tries to be White's comforter, fails in his role due to his lack of empathy and forceful attitude towards White. However, McCarthy does not give a value judgment to either character. I will conclude that McCarthy's ambiguous stance towards religion in this text poses questions to the audience and asks them to think of the meaning of pain and redemption on their own.

In the last chapter, I will explore White and Nietzsche's atheism and nihilism. White demonstrates the strong form of atheism because he rejects God as well as all the supernatural and transcendental phenomena. Nietzsche also displays the strong atheism because he denies God as well as Christian morality. In this sense, I contend that Nietzschean atheism is philosophical as well. In addition to their atheism, it is important to explore their nihilism since nihilism is the root of White's and Nietzsche's atheism. I assert that White's nihilism is extreme, which only advocates the extinction of life in the face of the hollowness of human culture. On the other hand, Nietzschean nihilism implies the affirmation of life, and his philosophy is well indicated in his book, *The Gay Science* (1882). I will discuss the similarities and differences between White and Nietzsche's philosophies and reflect on the

message of the collision of two thoughts. At the end of this research, I will discuss why McCarthy does not suggest any clear messages in this text and argue that *The Sunset Limited* is McCarthy's enigmatic but condensed text that demonstrates his inner dialogue between religion and philosophy.

**CHAPTER 2. *DUKKHA* AND FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S
*THE SUNSET LIMITED: THE BUDDHIST READING OF NON-BUDDHIST FILM***

“Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope. Now open the door. Please,” says White, who is a pessimistic professor (*TSL* 141)⁵. White’s desperate eyes are brimmed with the yearning for the hope of darkness. Black, who strives to prevent White from tramping into the curtains of the abyss, is intuitively insinuated that there is nothing that he can do for White. This is a scene from Cormac McCarthy’s film adaptation *The Sunset Limited* (2011), directed by Tommy Lee Jones. McCarthy, who wrote the novel, also participated in the film production as a screenwriter. *The Sunset Limited* is a two-hander film, and Tommy Lee Jones and Samuel Jackson play roles of White and Black respectively. McCarthy unfolds the story of White who is a pessimistic professor and attempts to commit suicide. Black, who is an ex-con, mysteriously saves White who jumps into the subway train the *Sunset Limited*. After saving White, Black tries to prevent White from another suicide attempt by asking White to stay at his apartment a little longer. However, White is too determined to kill himself.

The theme of White’s pain and suicide can be read through a Buddhist lens, especially the Buddhist notion of suffering, *dukkha*.⁶ White’s pain originates from his sense

⁵ Throughout this thesis, I will use the abbreviated title of McCarthy’s film instead of using his last name to indicate the source of the text in order to avoid confusion. *TSL* is an abbreviation for *The Sunset Limited*.

⁶ *Dukkha* is a Pali word which is usually translated as “suffering” or “pain” in English, but Peter Harvey (53) and John Peacock (209-210) point out that the translation is incorrect. Although two scholars point out that translating *dukkha* into pain or suffering is not quite right, translating one language into another often entails the treacherous violation of the original meaning. In other words, it is common not to find a perfect one-to-one correspondence between two languages. One-to-one correspondence means an identical similarity between two languages with respect to phonology and semantics, but it happens coincidentally. Therefore, it is somewhat unreasonable to expect to discover a perfect translation of *dukkha* in English. Despite the fact that there is no perfect one-to-one correspondence between English and Pali, I will stick to using “pain” or “suffering” in referring to *dukkha* throughout this research in order to sustain the consistency and avoid confusion.

of transitoriness that all the forms of culture and human lives do not last forever. In addition, White thinks that the only way to escape from this pain is death. Although White's interpretation that a human life is full of suffering is identical with the Buddhist idea of pain, *dukkha*, his solution to his pain does not align with the Buddhist doctrine. According to Buddha's teaching, one person should overcome *dukkha* through the fourth discipline of the Four Noble Truths known as the Eightfold Paths. In the Eightfold Paths, death or suicide is not an ultimate solution for pain which a human experiences. Rather, the Eightfold Paths show practical cultivation methods to overcome the pain and offer wisdom to see reality in an enlightened way. In this respect, White's understanding of the Buddhist notion of pain (*dukkha*) aligns with the Buddhist teaching, but White's method of dealing with his pain, suicide, is antithetical to Buddhist doctrine since Buddhism regards self-destruction as a sin.

In effect, using a Buddhist lens in analyzing a non-Buddhist film is not a groundbreaking approach in film studies because the similar approach has already been attempted by many other scholars. For example, *Buddhism and American Cinema* (2014) explores non-Buddhist films, especially Hollywood films from the Buddhist thought. This book is a good indicator that analyzing non-Buddhist films from a Buddhist lens is enlightening since the approach brings a new understanding of mainstream cinema. In addition, such a new attempt vitalizes the diversity of academic discourses about film criticism. Considering that Buddhist philosophy is not a rare subject in mainstream cinema, it is high time to interpret *The Sunset Limited* from the Buddhist viewpoint. By utilizing Buddhist philosophy in analyzing a non-Buddhist text, *The Sunset Limited*, this research will bring a new understanding of *The Sunset Limited*, especially about how McCarthy depicts pain and what message McCarthy wants to deliver through the sharp description of pain.

The main argument of this chapter is that White correctly defines the meaning of pain (*dukkha*) from a Buddhist perspective, but he concludes that the solution to his pain is a suicide. Examining how Buddhism is paradoxically described by White remains critical because a paradoxical depiction of Buddhism in a mainstream cinema expands and reproduces the wrong understanding that Buddhist philosophy is nihilistic and even self-destructive. However, the truth is that Buddhist philosophy paves a road for people to live better lives because Buddhist teaching specifies various types of pain (*dukkha*) and offers practical methods to overcome pain. First, this study will survey some of the central Buddhist notions such as *dukkha*, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Paths. After examining these central tenets, this chapter will analyze how Buddhist concepts are paradoxically delineated through Black and White in McCarthy's film.

An Overview of Buddhism: *Dukkha* and Four Noble Truths

According to one of the early Buddhist Bibles, Gotama (Buddha's real name) first taught five *bhiksus*⁷ after he enlightened himself through a long meditation. At first, the five *bhiksus* scorned Gotama since they thought that Gotama failed to reach the enlightening phase through meditation. However, Gotama gave them his first sermon, and the five *bhiksus* became Gotama's first disciples. Gotama suggested the Middle Path as a practical method as well as a philosophy in order to overcome pain, *dukkha*.⁸ More specifically, he developed the notion of the Middle Path and suggested the Four Noble Truths as philosophy and practice for the pain that people experience. Harvey explains the Four Noble Truths in detail:

They are: (i) *dukkha*, 'the painful,' encompassing the various forms of 'pain', gross or subtle, physical or mental, that we are all subject to, along

⁷ *Bhiksu* is a Pali word signifying a male monk.

⁸ For a more detailed explanation about Middle Path, see Harvey 23-25.

with painful things that engender these; (ii) the origination (*samudaya*, i.e. cause) of *dukkha*, namely craving (*taṇhā*, Skt *trṣṇā*); (iii) the cessation (*nirodha*) of *dukkha*, by the cessation of craving (this cessation being equivalent to *Nirvāṇa*); and (iv) the path (*magga*, Skt *mārga*) that leads to this cessation. (Harvey 52)

The first set of Four Noble Truths includes eight different kinds of pain: the pain of birth, aging, sickness, death, separation from the beloved, coexistence with whom a person hates, and the five bundles of aggregates (*upādānakkhandā*, Skt *upādāna-skaṇhda*).⁹ The first four types of pain are biological pain, the pain of separation and coexistence are mental pain. Lastly, the five bundles of aggregates are “the five factors which go to make up a ‘person’” (Harvey 55). In other words, the five bundles of aggregates are the factors which comprise the Self and affect one’s perception of the world. Buddha argues that the origin of one’s pain comes from the illusion of the empirical Self and illusory perception of the world. By realizing the illusionary aspects of the Self and of one’s perception, Buddha asserts that one person can be free from *dukkha*.

The second set of Four Noble Truths clarifies the origin of *dukkha*: craving or desire (*taṇhā*). To literally translate the Pali word, *taṇhā*, it means thirst (Harvey 63). However, it does not simply mean thirst; rather, it is “desire [that] can be wholesome and for good things” (Harvey 63). Harvey further expounds the nature of *taṇhā*:

Also, the *more things* a person craves for, the more opportunities for frustration, *dukkha*. Craving also brings pain as it leads to quarrels, strife, and conflict between individuals and groups, and motivates people to

⁹ Throughout this chapter, I will indicate Pali and Sanskrit words in the parenthesis. Skt is an abbreviation for Sanskrit.

perform various actions with karmic results shaping further rebirths, with their attendant *dukkha*. (Harvey 63, emphasis in original)

This explanation gives a clue to why Buddhism uses “thirst” in order to signify one’s desire. The desire is just like sea water. Once one starts to drink it, it is impossible to stop drinking it. As a consequence, continuously drinking sea water is fatal. This rule accurately applies to *taṇhā*. It is an accurate and metaphoric expression that sharply points out the nature of human desire. In this respect, *taṇhā* is at the center of *dukkha*: the more a person craves for something, the greater the person will feel pain.

The third set of Four Noble Truths shows how to stop *dukkha* and what results from the cessation of *dukkha*. The ultimate goal of all Buddhist practice and meditation is to attain the *Nirvāṇa*. The literal meaning of *Nirvāṇa* is “extinction or quenching of fire” (Harvey 73). The fire here indicates the *taṇhā* (craving), which is one of the main causes of *dukkha*. Therefore, the true meaning of *Nirvāṇa* is not just an Enlightenment or Awakening, but a calm and non-painful state of being by letting go of a craving (Harvey 73).¹⁰ Buddha asserts that the essence of *Nirvāṇa* is empty of itself because *Nirvāṇa* lets go of all the attachment of worldly cravings and phenomena (Harvey 81). Buddha’s argument that *Nirvāṇa* is empty of itself shaped the Mahayana Buddhist School, which developed the notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and taught emptiness as the core doctrine of Buddhism. Again, the empty nature of *Nirvāṇa* does not presuppose any nihilistic or annihilating aspect. Rather, it is a teaching and a philosophy for fully understanding reality without any biases or undesirable cravings.

¹⁰ Harvey explains the relationship between *taṇhā* and *Nirvāṇa* as follows: “As an initial spur to striving for *Nirvāṇa*, craving for it may play a role, but this helps in overcoming of other cravings, is generally replaced by a wholesome aspiration, and is completely eradicated in the full experience of *Nirvāṇa*: *Nirvāṇa* is only attained when there is non-attachment and letting go” (Harvey 73).

The last set of Four Noble Truths preaches how to overcome *dukkha* through the practical meditation and self-development in a daily life. More specifically, Buddha suggests the Eightfold Paths. The definition of the Eightfold Paths is to liberate people from *dukkha* by avoiding the pursuits of extreme pleasure and asceticism (Harvey 82). The Eightfold Paths are often grouped into three categories: (i) wisdom (*paññā*), (ii) moral virtue (*sīla*), and (iii) meditation (*lokīya*) according to Harvey's explanation. The following is the list of the Eightfold Paths: (i) Right View (*sammā-ditṭhi*), (ii) Right Thought (*sammā-saṅkappa*), (iii) Right Speech (*sammā-vācā*), (iv) Right Action (*sammā-kammanta*), (v) Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), (vi) Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), (vii) Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), and (viii) Right Concentration / Mental Meditation (*sammā-samādhi*).¹¹

The abovementioned Eightfold Paths show practical guidelines of mental cultivation in a daily life so as to alleviate the degree of *dukkha*, and ultimately achieve awakening, *Nirvāṇa*. The notions of *dukkha* and the Four Noble Truths provide a better understanding of various causes of pain in a human life. Furthermore, the Four Noble Truths show how to avoid or, at least, reduce the level of pain through the Eightfold Paths. *Dukkha* and the Four Noble Truths are useful concepts in Buddhism, especially in analyzing White's pain in *The Sunset Limited* because White choose to commit suicide to stop his pain. Based on these two concepts, I will interpret how pain is (mis)represented through Black and White in the analysis of McCarthy's text.

White's *Dukkha* and Wrong Solution

The film starts in Black's apartment. The conversations between the two seem to have started a while ago, so the audience jumps into the middle of their conversations not

¹¹ Harvey explains the meanings of each entry in the Eightfold Paths. For detailed explanations about them, see Harvey pp. 82-84.

exactly knowing the topic or context of their talks. Among their ordinary talk, White reveals that today is his birthday. Naturally, the audience discovers the fact that White tries to kill himself on his birthday. At this point, the audience raises a question: Why does White try to commit suicide? It can be inferred from White's remarks that White may suffer from a high degree of pain, and therefore he attempts to kill himself. Soon, White discloses the reason why he tries to commit suicide.

The cause of White's suffering is due to the destruction of his belief in human culture, and he tries to commit suicide due to this reason. The collapse of White's belief in human culture becomes painful to him:

WHITE. Lots of things. Cultural things, for instance. Books and music and art. Things Like that. [...] Those are the kinds of things that have value to me. They're the foundations of civilization. Or they used to have value. I suppose they don't have so much any more. [...] There's nothing to follow. It's all right. The things that I loved were very frail. Very fragile. I didnt know that. I thought they were indestructible. They werent. (TSL 25)¹²

White used to have a strong attachment to cultural values such as "books and music and art," and this is well-represented through the word, "love." In addition, the audience discovers the fact that White is a man of rationality since he strongly believed in the human civilization. White finds the ephemerality of human civilization and feels a sense of loss. His sense of loss which is created by and within himself is developed to *dukkha* and the cause of his suicidal impulse.

¹² As the lines in the film are identical to those in the novel, I will use the lines from McCarthy's novel throughout this chapter.

White's pain is *dukkha* from the Buddhist sense because it is inflicted by White's too strong attachment to human culture, which is inevitably transitory. As I mentioned earlier, *dukkha* in the first set of Four Noble Truths best describes the nature of White's pain and why it is identical with *dukkha*:

The second set of features [of *dukkha*] refer[s] to physical or mental pain that arises from the vicissitudes of life. [...] *The changing, unstable nature of life is such that we are led to experience dissatisfaction, loss and disappointment: the frustration.* (Harvey 53-4, emphasis added)

Harvey's emphasized statement of *dukkha* perfectly echoes White's frustration: "The things that I loved were very frail. Very fragile. I didn't know that. I thought they were indestructible. They weren't" (*TSL* 25). Again, White's pain which is caused by the fall of his belief in cultural things aligns with the Buddhist suffering, *dukkha*.

What is antithetical to the Buddhist doctrine is that White chooses suicide although he understands the fact that pain in a human life is natural and inevitable: "We are born in such a fix as this. Suffering and human destiny are the same things. Each is a description of the other" (*TSL* 55). The problem with this statement is that White's view is too limited to understand the meaning of life. He concludes that life is full of pain only. Contrary to White's conclusion that his life is equal to pain, and therefore it is meaningless to live on, Buddhist doctrine considers the human realm as the ideal place: "The human realm is a middle realm: there is enough suffering to motivate humans to seek to transcend it by spiritual development, and enough freedom to be able to act on this aspiration. It is thus the most favourable realm for spiritual development" (Harvey 39). What Buddhist doctrine explains in this excerpt is that there are a lot of possibilities for humans to overcome agony in

their lives and achieve spiritual development. As an intellectual, White may feel the transitoriness of life when he witnesses that some parts of culture disappear, but White's suicide attempt is not fully justified as the best solution to shun himself from witnessing the transitoriness of human culture. What is more, not all the people decide to commit suicide due to the sense of loss and evanescence. From the Buddhist standpoint, White's decision to commit suicide is a sin which abandons his opportunities to develop himself spiritually and enjoy the unalienable right to freedom in the human world.

On the other hand, White's pain can be understood from one central notion in the second set of Four Noble Truths: *taṇhā*, the causation of *dukkha*. Among the three types of *taṇhās*, a craving for non-existence (*vibhava-taṇhā*), is one's drive to remove all the unpleasant things in the world, and it is usually expressed in an extreme form such as suicide:

In a strong form, it may lead to the impulse for suicide, in the hope of annihilation. [...] In order to overcome *dukkha*, the Buddhist path aims not only to limit the expression of craving, but ultimately to use calm and wisdom to completely uproot it from the psyche. (Harvey 63)

This third type of *taṇhā* accurately reflects White's situation. Due to strong attachment to cultural phenomena, White loathes ephemerality, and his loathing becomes *dukkha* to him. As White desires to remove his unpleasant feeling, he chooses to destroy himself. In other words, his craving for non-existence (*vibhava-taṇhā*) constantly leads him to self-destruction, which is not desirable at all from Buddhist doctrine. As Harvey explains, the desirable solution to this is "not only to limit the expression of craving, but ultimately to use calm and wisdom to completely uproot it from the psyche." (63) In other words, Buddhist teaching points out that one should remove the cause of *dukkha*, which is rooted in one's mind,

through medication. However, it does not seem that White is likely to change his attitude since his resolution is too solid to change.

White's paradoxical attitude towards *dukkha* constantly haunts the novel. Although White's notion of pain echoes the Buddhist teaching, and his intellectuality has potential to enlighten him, he does not use his enlightening ability. Rather, he enshrouds himself with pessimism and sarcasm against the world and craves for suicide more avidly.

WHITE. I'm sorry. You're a kind man, but I have to go. I've heard you out and you've heard me and there is no more to say. Your God must have once stood in a dawn of infinite possibility and this is what he's made of it. And now it is drawing to a close. You say that I want God's love. I dont. Perhaps I want forgiveness, but there is no one to ask it of. And there is no going back. No setting things right. Perhaps once. Not now. *Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope. Now open the door.* Please. (TSL 141, emphases added)

White demonstrates stubborn attitudes towards Black's sermon by stating, "I've heard you out and you've heard me and there is no more to say." His desire for suicide is too resolute to listen to Black's sermon, which preaches that his life is still meaningful, and White does not have to choose suicide as an ultimate solution to his *dukkha*. At first glance, White's remark that "nothingness is the only hope" is similar to the Buddhist notion of emptiness, *śūnyatā*, but the problem is that *śūnyatā* does not propose death nor suicide as ultimate solutions to pain in a human life. Rather, the Buddhist philosophy of *śūnyatā* is a philosophy of existence, and it helps to understand the meaning of life better.

According to Masao Abe's research, the Buddhist notion of emptiness, *śūnyatā*, does not connote any negative implications such as absence, lack, or even death. Rather, it is a philosophy of liberation, which leads people one step closer to the truth of reality. Abe provides a detailed explanation of the origin and the meaning of *śūnyatā*:

It is Nāgārjuna who establishes the idea of *Śūnyatā* or Emptiness [...]. It must be emphasized that Nāgārjuna's idea of Emptiness is not nihilistic. Emptiness which is completely without form is freed from both being and non-being because 'non-being' is still a form as distinguished from 'being.' [...] he also rejects as illusory the exactly opposite 'nihilistic' view that emptiness and non-being are true reality. (Abe 185)

Nāgārjuna is an Indian Buddhist monk who established the Mahayana Buddhist School, which significantly developed the religious and philosophical notion of emptiness.¹³ What is noteworthy in Abe's explanation is that the philosophy of emptiness is not nihilistic because *śūnyatā* is a notion relative to fullness: "Emptiness which is completely without form is freed from both being and non-being because 'non-being' is still a form as distinguished from 'being.'" Abe takes being and non-being as examples to explain the relativity of all phenomena in the world, but the Buddhist notion of relativity can be expanded to many other concepts: fullness/emptiness, love/hatred, high/low, life/death, and so forth. The aforementioned pairs and worldly phenomena cannot exist themselves. The *raison d'être* of all the things in the world is defined in the relative interconnectedness. In this sense, *śūnyatā* does not preach nihilistic aspects of the worldly phenomena, but it demonstrates the relativity

¹³ I refer to the fifth chapter of Harvey's book to provide a short summary of Nāgārjuna. For more explanations about Nāgārjuna, emptiness (*Śūnyatā*), and Mahayana Buddhist School, please see *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, History and Practices*, especially pp. 114-150.

of all phenomena. To expand this notion, *śūnyatā* is, then, a philosophical notion that helps people to understand a fact that their existences are also relative and interdependent. This is the reason why the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness is a philosophy of existence. From Buddhist philosophy, White distorts the true meaning of *śūnyatā* and uses it as a justifying tool for this craving for suicide. Therefore, White's nothingness is antithetical to the true meaning of nothingness in Buddhism, and his desire for nothingness is misrepresented as a suicide attempt.

The final scene ends with White's exit to the door and Black's weep and monologue. As McCarthy makes the ending as an open ending, there is no clue to what happens to White. This open ending causes a controversy over White's death because it cast a doubt upon whether White indeed attempts to kill himself again or not. Therefore, it is important to make a clear point about White's current state (dead/alive) and his last choice. In the exchange of correspondence with Marty Priola, Peter Josyph assumes that White is already dead:

“[White's] choice also creates a seeming paradox: it is precisely because White knows that Black can have no effect on saving his life—*because his life is already over*—that he can linger and accept Black's ministry as one of the last things that he hears from a human being. (Josyph 70, emphasis added)

Josyph presupposes that White is already dead, and therefore it does not matter whether White walks into the darkness at the end of the film. If Josyph's assumption is correct, then the audience may raise some questions: If White is already dead, and the dialog between Black and White is meaningless, what is the message of this film? That is to say, White's state is important in this film because it affects the main message of this text. It is possible

that Josyph's interpretation is accurate, but it is more probable that White is on the verge of death according to the context.

In his one of the last remarks, White implies that he will attempt to kill himself again, and most audiences think that White's exit to the door means his another suicide attempt: "You asked what I was a professor of. I am a professor of darkness. The night in day's clothing. And now I wish you all the very best but I must go" (*TSL* 140). His last words show that White is going to kill himself again. He defines himself as "a professor of darkness" and maintains his solution to his pain, which is antithetical to the Buddhist doctrine, the Four Noble Truths. The most notable expression that White uses is, "The night in day's clothing." This phrase accurately echoes my main assertion: White correctly understands the nature of *dukkha*, but he antithetically utilizes the solution for his pain from a Buddhist perspective. "Day's clothing" implies White's correct understanding of *dukkha*. White has a high intellectual ability and insight to penetrate the essence of *dukkha*. In addition, it connotes that White has the possibility to choose the right path to remove his pain from his life. However, "the dark night" repels White's all the possibilities of self-redemption. That is to say, White sticks to the pessimistic option, suicide. As White himself declares that he is "a professor of darkness" and "the night in day's clothing," my argument that White's comprehend *dukkha* correctly, but chooses a wrong answer for it is affirmed here again. White shows the fatal consequences of misuse of Buddhist doctrine, and he is an archetype of the undesirable man who pursues the wrong path in Buddhist viewpoint.

The Meaning of Black's Redemption

At the beginning of the film, Black mysteriously saves White at the subway station by taking White with his two arms. Black, who is an ex-con, thinks that his mission is to

prohibit White from another suicide attempt. What is notable is that Black's strategies to stop White from the second suicide attempt are problematic from Buddhist doctrines. The first problem with Black's strategies is that he uses an unreliable redemptive narrative to prevent White from a suicide. Black confesses that he receives salvation from God even though the salvation is based on violence that he wielded. Black's redemptive narrative is based on his violence against others, and violence is unacceptable in Buddhist doctrine under any circumstances. Stephen Batchelor explains why violence is unacceptable under Buddhist doctrine in detail:

The resolve to awaken requires the integrity not to hurt anyone in the process. Dharma practice cannot be abstracted from the way we interact with the world. Our deeds, words, and intentions create an ethical ambiance that either supports or weakens resolve. If we behave in a way that harms either others or ourselves, the capacity to focus on the task will be weakened. [...] The practice will have less effect, as though the vitality of resolve is being drained. (Batchelor 45, emphases added)

Therefore, Black's redemptive narrative, which is based on his violence against others, loses its validity, and ironically Black's story reinforces White's decision to suicide.

In order to hold White, Black tells his jailhouse story about the crimes he made in the past and how he obtained redemption through his misconducts. Black went to the prison because he committed a murder. In the jail, Black fought with his fellow prisoner, and as a result, he left his fellow prisoner disabled:

BLACK. All right. I'm in the chowline and I'm gettin my chow and this nigger in the line behind me gets into it with the server. [...] And then this

dude says somethin to me and I turned and look back at him and when I done that he stuck a knife in me. [...] I beat on it till you couldnt hardly tell it was a head [...]. (TSL 45)

Black's story shows that his violence is excessive. In the penitentiary, Black inflicted *dukkha* to another prisoner although Black wielded violence against his fellow prisoner as a self-defense. However, the problem is that he did not stop wielding violence against the prisoner who could not attack Black anymore. Consequently, Black ruined the prisoner's life, and Black's fellow prisoner had to live the rest of his life with a disability. Black's past crime records undermine the credibility of his persuasion that White should not cause the extreme form of *dukkha* (suicide) to White himself because Black is the one who caused the extreme form of *dukkha* (a murder) to the others. As Batchelor points out, violence is unacceptable in Buddhism:

The resolve to awaken requires the integrity not to hurt anyone in the process. [...] If we behave in a way that harms either others or ourselves, the capacity to focus on the task will be weakened. [...] The practice will have less effect, as though the vitality of resolve is being drained. (Batchelor 45)

Although what Batchelor explains here is that non-violence is essential to achieve the awakening (*Nirvāṇa*) in Buddhist philosophy, the principle of non-violence in Buddhism is located at the core of Buddhism. That is to say, any form of violence is not acceptable in Buddhism. In this sense, Black's violent story, which aims to prohibit White from suicide, loses its own reliability to dissuade White from another suicide attempt, and therefore Black cannot cease White's suicide impulse.

Another problem of Black is that he does not show any great moral compunction about the incident. When White sarcastically points out the fact that Black does not atone for his misdeeds, Black does not accept White's point that Black does not feel sorry for his fellow prisoner who becomes disabled due to Black's excessive violence. In other words, White accurately points out that Black's redemption is based on the violence, and his apathetic attitude in the lack of atonement is problematic. Furthermore, Black does not earn redemption through his self-conscience nor atonement. Rather, his redemption is mysteriously granted by a transcendental being, God:

BLACK. [...] And I'm layin [at the infirmary] and I hear this voice. Just as clear. Couldnt of been no clearer. And this voice says: If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here. [...]

WHITE. You dont think this is a strange kind of story?

BLACK. I do think this is a strange kind of story.

WHITE. What I mean is that you dont feel sorry for this man?

BLACK. You gettin ahead of the story.

WHITE. The story of how a fellow prisoner became a crippled one-eyed halfwit so that you could find God.

BLACK. Whoa.

WHITE. Well isnt it?

BLACK. I dont know. (*TSL* 49-50)

The aforementioned excerpt is Black's story about how he gets redemption after the violent fight with his fellow prisoner. Black confesses that he hears a "voice" in the infirmary and believes that it is proof of his redemption. However, the problem is that Black does not

specify what he has heard and how this voice possesses a redemptive power over his past misdeeds. That is to say, Black's redemptive narrative lacks reliability by not fully stating how and why the voice is proof of his salvation. As Black's story contains low validity, White questions the believability of the story: "You don't think this is a strange kind of story" (*TSL* 49). White's question implies that he does not believe Black's story, and Black's story does not affect White's willingness to walk out of Black's apartment at all. Moreover, White keeps pointing out the fundamental problem of Black's story, which is that Black's salvation does not originate from atonement nor moral compunction, but Black's redemption is mysteriously granted to Black: "The story of how a fellow prisoner became a crippled one-eyed halfwit so that you could find God" (*TSL* 50). To White, this redemption does not make any sense to him, nor does it in Buddhism.

Black's redemption is problematic from Buddhist philosophy since it is mysteriously gifted to Black without proper process. In other words, Black's salvation is given by a transcendental being, God. Batchelor explains why this type of redemption is problematic from the perspective of Buddhism:

It is tempting to appeal to a purpose-giving God outside of time and space, a transcendent Absolute in which ultimate meaning is secured. [...] Dharma practice starts not with belief in a transcendent reality but through embracing the anguish experienced in an uncertain world. (Batchelor 40)

When Batchelor explains how to resolve *dukkha* from the Buddhist doctrine, he illustrates that one should not depend on the transcendental Being. Rather, Batchelor notes that one should find the answer how to solve *dukkha* in a real life through the Buddhist practice,

Dharma: “Dharma practice starts not with belief in a transcendent reality but through embracing the anguish experienced in an uncertain world” (Batchelor 40).

Buddhist doctrine specifically suggests the Eightfold Paths, which I mentioned in the earlier section. The Eightfold Paths are practical ways of self-cultivation in a real life in order to alleviate or eradicate *dukkha* and achieve *Nirvāṇa*, which is an ultimate awakening state. Black’s past crimes and non-apatetic attitude towards his misconducts violate five paths among the Eightfold Paths: (iv) Right Action (*sammā-kammanta*), (v) Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), (vi) Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), (vii) Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), and (viii) Right Concentration / Mental Meditation (*sammā-samādhi*). Black’s violation of Right Action, Livelihood, and Effort is evident in that he wields violence against the others. The violation of Right Mindfulness and Concentration is rooted in the absence of Black’s atonement for his guilt. Buddhism requires atonement or self-reflection before achieving *Nirvāṇa*. However, Black does not repent of what he has done, but only notes that he obtains the redemption from God: “And this voice says: If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here” (*TSL* 49). As Black’s salvation does not result from his atonement nor self-conscience, which is an essential step to alleviate *dukkha* and to achieve *Nirvāṇa*, Black’s unreliable story does not and cannot prevent White from suicide impulse. Paradoxically, Black’s story intensifies White’s suicide attempt:

WHITE. Then why cant you leave us alone?

BLACK. To do your own thing.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Hangin from them steampipes and all.

WHITE. If that’s what we want to do, yes. (*TSL* 53)

This excerpt is a dialog between Black and White after Black's jailhouse story. Although White hears all the Black's stories and sermons, White does not change his attitude towards suicide but clings to his will to suicide. In other words, this passage clearly shows that Black's redemptive narrative does not have a strong influence over White, and therefore Black's story is unreliable because his salvation does not stem from atonement nor self-reflection over his past sins. Although Susan J. Tyburski does not utilize a Buddhist lens in analyzing this text, her indication that Black's faith is defective supports my claim that Black's faith and redemption is problematic: "In fact, Black's faith is born of desperation and violence—a brutal prison battle described, in typical McCarthy fashion, in compellingly graphic detail" (Tyburski 122).

Due to Black's defective faith and redemption, his stories do not have a successful impact on stopping White from suicide. In order to keep White in his apartment, Black says that he can see the "light" around White, and this is the reason why White does not have to commit suicide:

BLACK. The point dont change. The point is always the same point. It's what I said before and what I keep lookin for ways to say it again. The light is all around you, cept you don't see nothing but shadow. And the shadow is you. You are the one makin it. (*TSL* 118)

This excerpt is Black's one of the last plea to White, which urges him not to make another suicide attempt. Black explains why White must not commit suicide, and the reason is that Black can see the "light" around White. The light that Black is referring to here is a metaphor which indicates White's moral goodness and potential to sustain a better life if White decides to change his nihilistic worldview and resolution to suicide. From the Buddhist perspective,

however, Black's argument that he can see the "light" around White is highly likely to be a lie because a person without true awakening cannot see the true essence of a thing or a person. Peacock's explanation about the meaning of awakening in Buddhism suggests why Black cannot see the "light" around White: "The content of this awakening was to 'awake' to the true nature about the way things were rather than dwelling in some fictional fantasy about the way you would like them to be" (Peacock 212). As Black does not achieve true awakening nor redemption, he does not have an ability to see the thing itself. Hence, what Black is saying is that he is projecting his desire (*taṇhā*) to White that he will not attempt another suicide. Again, Black's remark on light is another example that Black's effort is not credible enough to save White from self-destruction because Black could not achieve the true awakening, *Nirvāṇa*.

To sum up, Black's efforts to prevent White from suicide cannot avoid a failure because Black epitomizes a person who inflicts pain (*dukkha*) upon others, so his story loses the credibility and influence over White. In addition, Black's redemptive narrative does not contain enough reliability to dissuade White from suicide since Black's redemption does not result from Black's self-awakening nor atonement for his sins. Black's redemption is mysterious, it is bestowed from the transcendental being. From the Buddhist perspective, this is not a true redemption nor awakening, so it is impossible for Black to carry out a role as a lifeguard of White.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that White sharply grasps the meaning of pain (*dukkha*) from the Buddhist standpoint. However, White chooses suicide as a solution to his pain, which is antithetical to the Buddhist perspective. In addition, Black, who tries to prohibit White from

another suicide attempt, is destined to fail because he was not awakened. To contextualize the Buddhist lens in analyzing this film, I explore the Buddhist theories about pain (*dukkha*) and the Four Noble Truths, which expound on nature, causation, and solutions to overcome pain. In *The Sunset Limited*, two characters demonstrate two fatal consequences of misunderstanding and misusing Buddhist theories. One is that White, who misunderstands the notion of emptiness, leans toward suicide even though he obtains a second chance to shift his nihilistic worldview. The other is that the misunderstood and misused depiction of Buddhist philosophy may perpetuate the wrong and negative portrayal of Buddhist thought.

The first problem is that White misinterprets the meaning of emptiness as self-destruction and sticks to his wrong solution to *dukkha*. The second problem of miscomprehension of Buddhism is that it degrades Buddhism to a justifying tool for violence. Richard Anderson and David Harper point out that American pop culture, especially Hollywood cinema, misuses Buddhism so as to legitimize violence as a resolution to *dukkha*:

For better or worse, American popular culture has appropriated an enlightenment ideology that is primarily identified as “Buddhist” and reworked in a way consistent with an American mythos that often attempts to alleviate suffering and provide liberation through violence. It is this resulting mash-up of philosophies and ideologies that we termed “American Militant Buddhism” (AMB) in 2003 and that we often find as we tune in to American popular culture today. (Anderson and Harper 133-134)

In interpreting Hollywood films such as *Fight Club* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999), and *The Last Samurai* (2003), Anderson and Harper point out how Hollywood films have exploited

Buddhism as an excuse which rationalizes “redemption through violence.” They coin a term, “American Militant Buddhism” (AMB) to indicate the misrepresented Buddhism in the mainstream cinema. Just as three Hollywood films, two characters in *The Sunset Limited* implicitly misemploy Buddhist philosophy to justify their actions and resolution. White misinterprets emptiness as his justification for suicide, and Black’s redemption results from violence without his atonement, which is against Buddhist doctrines, non-violence and the Eightfold Paths.

The critical reader may ask a final question: Why do all the concerns about the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Buddhist theories in a film matter? The reason why this research focuses on the misrepresented aspects of Buddhism based on Black and White is that a misinterpretation of Buddhist philosophy in a mainstream film can expand and reproduce a wrong understanding of Buddhism to the audience. Besides, the ripple effect of a film is tremendous because a film is one of the most influential media in this image-based contemporary era. Peacock well points out that Buddhist concept was wrongly understood in the Western world when it was first introduced to West:

From the moment of the first contact, the West’s perception of Buddhism has been severely flawed by a misapprehension of the role that suffering plays within this ancient tradition. [...] The failure to understand this has led to the identification of Buddhist doctrine and practice being viewed as species of nihilism—a religious tradition fostering a pessimistic and even hostile attitude towards life. As a consequence, the goal of Buddhist striving,

the realisation of *anattā-nibbāna*, is understood as an extinction of essential being in the ontological sense. (Peacock 209)¹⁴

As miscomprehension of Buddhist teaching is deep in the West, it is possible that the true meaning of Buddhism represented in this film can be distorted and spread through film media. The purpose of this study is to note the danger of misreading the Buddhism as well as to fill the gap in McCarthy studies that Frye mentions in his book.

Buddhism is, then, a philosophy which liberates people from pain by deconstructing people's biased worldviews and suggesting practical self-development methods. Personally, I hope this research to be similar to the Buddhist philosophy by suggesting the alternative view in Buddhist reading of *The Sunset Limited*.

¹⁴ In this excerpt, *anattā-nibbāna* means the Awakening through non-Self. *Nibbāna* is a Sanskrit word for *Nirvāṇa*, meaning Awakening or Enlightenment.

**CHAPTER 3. PAIN AND REDEMPTION: *THE SUNSET LIMITED* AND THE BOOK
OF JOB**

In the previous chapter, I discussed two characters' pain from the Buddhist perspective, but many critics point out that one of the major themes in Cormac McCarthy's works is religion, especially Christianity. In her research, Mary Brewer expounds on this aspect of McCarthy: "Cormac McCarthy makes copious references to God and Christianity throughout his novels and plays, and a key concern of McCarthy scholarship involves an exploration of the role and the meaning of the sacred in the fictional worlds he creates" (39). The tint of Christianity also colors Tommy Lee Jones' film adaptation of *The Sunset Limited*.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Tommy Lee Jones, who directed and starred in the film, worked with Samuel L. Jackson, who played Black in the film. Furthermore, he worked with Cormac McCarthy, who actively engaged himself in the film production as a screenwriter. A prevailing assumption is that McCarthy does not like to appear on TV and engage himself in a visual media; McCarthy himself disclosed a fact that he does not like to talk about his literary work in public merely because he thinks that it would not be helpful to produce a better literary work.¹⁵ However, Stacey Peebles notes that McCarthy welcomes people to adapt his literary works to creative projects such as screenplays or stage production.¹⁶ Interpreting a film adaptation as well as his novel will

¹⁵ McCarthy answers Oprah Winfrey's question about this rare appearance on mass media. For the full interview with McCarthy, please visit youtu.be/y3kpzuk1Y8I.

¹⁶ Stacey Peebles explains, "a more complete consideration of McCarthy reveals that he has routinely welcomed others into his creative projects and, just as routinely, has demonstrated a keen interest in writing directly for film and theater as well as a desire to see how filmmakers would bring his writing to the screen" (2). For a more detailed explanation, see Peebles, especially pp. 1-3.

bring more visualized and/or dramatized understanding of McCarthy's intended messages in *The Sunset Limited* because McCarthy participated in the film production as a screenwriter.

In this respect, *The Sunset Limited* demonstrates an allegorical tug-of-war between White's desire for self-destruction and Black's efforts to save White based on Christian principles.¹⁷ White, who is a sarcastic college professor, yearns to walk out of Black's apartment to attempt suicide again, and Black, who is an ex-convict, seeks to stop White from such an extreme choice. The main reason why Black tries to prevent White from suicide is that Black believes that it is his duty to protect White from suicide. In other words, Black thinks that it is his calling to be "a guardian angel" of White (*TSL* 00:05:00-05). However, White does not believe in God nor is persuaded by Black's sermon. He only clings to "the hope of nothingness" (*TSL* 01:24:27). These two characters clearly show that *The Sunset Limited* is a clash between Christianity and atheism.

By focusing on the subtitle of this work, Ciarán Dowd argues that *The Sunset Limited* is a dramatization of McCarthy's inner debate and she suggests a list of thematic collisions in McCarthy's inner conflicts:

Instead of seeing the phrase "A Novel in Dramatic Form" as a mere statement of genre, we can also read this as the more specific "A *Cormac McCarthy* Novel in Dramatic Form." [...] Through this debate between White and Black, McCarthy is continuing a debate he has always been having with himself: a debate between ontological naturalism and mysticism, between causal determinism and free will, between a belief in the

¹⁷ My argument here aligns with Mary Brewer's argument: "The action of the play involves a battle of words between the men: Black draws on Christian theology to argue that life and human connections are sacred, while White counters with unadulterated cynicism about the value of religion, human life and community." For a more detailed analysis, see Brewer, especially pp. 40-41.

utter indifference of a coldly mechanical universe and a belief in a universe supported by a meaningful and spiritually significant architecture. (116-117, emphasis in original)

Dowd posits a list of McCarthy's themes in his novels, and my argument aligns with one of her assertions: *The Sunset Limited* is a debate "between a belief in the utter indifference of a coldly mechanical universe and a belief in a universe supported by a meaningful and spiritually significant architecture." What Dowd argues here is that *The Sunset Limited* is McCarthy's inner conflict between distrust of God and faith in God, which is represented by the incompatible characterizations of White and Black. As I mentioned in the introduction, McCarthy confessed on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* that his belief in God depends on the day:

Well, it depends on what day you asked me (chuckle). You know, but, um, sometimes, sometimes, it's good to pray. I don't think you have to have a clear idea of who or what God is in order to pray. You can even be quite doubtful about the whole business. (*Oprah Winfrey Show*)¹⁸

Both Dowd's argument and McCarthy's confession affirm my assertion that *The Sunset Limited* is an allegorical tug-of-war between Black and White.

Inspired by McCarthy's own comments about God and Dowd's argument about McCarthy's inner debates, I will examine how McCarthy's mistrust of God and faith in God are represented by comparing the Book of Job to *The Sunset Limited*. In *The Sunset Limited*, White, who stands for McCarthy's atheist aspect, reveals that he has read the Book of Job, which is crucial to understanding McCarthy's dramatized portrayal of distrust of God.

Focusing on the fact that the Book of Job is the only biblical text that White has read, John

¹⁸ For the full interview with Cormac McCarthy, please visit "Cormac McCarthy Interview on the Oprah Winfrey Show" on *YouTube*, especially youtu.be/y3kpkzuk1Y8I. The transcription is my own.

Vanderheide argues that White is an embodiment of the monster Leviathan, which symbolizes self-destruction.¹⁹ Although Vanderheide's interpretation is insightful, this study will concentrate more on the comparative analysis between Job and White because they share a commonality that both complain to God and even demonstrate blasphemous attitudes towards the Almighty. The notable difference between Job and White, however, is that Job receives salvation at the end of the narrative whereas White walks into the darkness, which signifies that White abandons an opportunity to be saved. Black tries to save White from self-destruction just as Job's three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) visit Job to assuage his agony and anchor Job's wavering faith in God. Black's attempt to comfort White becomes futile because White does not change his mind about committing another suicide. The comparative analysis between *The Sunset Limited* and the Book of Job will reveal the intimate relationship between the two books, and it offers a ground for the future studies, especially about the intertextual relationship between McCarthy's novel and the Bible.

I contend that White, who does not believe in God, is another version of Job, and therefore fails to receive redemption from God while Job finally achieves salvation through his unwavering faith. In addition, Black also fails to complete his mission as White's guardian angel whereas Job's three friends help Job to sustain his fidelity to God even though they are punished by God at the end of the story. I assert that McCarthy reveals his inner debate between mistrust and faith in divinity by rewriting the Book of Job. First, I will delve into the comparative analysis of White and Job with respect to their pain, protests against God, and salvation. Second, I will investigate how the Book of Job is adapted into the cinema by focusing on McCarthy's film adaptation. This is closely related to Stacey Peeble's

¹⁹ For a more detailed interpretation, see Vanderheide p. 113.

analysis of McCarthy's career and interests in adaptation. Thirdly, I will explore Black and Job's three friends as caregivers and guides to salvation. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by arguing that McCarthy does not advocate for either stance but rather he just wants the audience to witness the collision between atheism and Christianity and to contemplate the meaning of pain and redemption on their own.

White: Another Job Who Rejects Redemption

The film starts with mixed sounds of sirens, an infant's cry, people's shouts, and a train. The train passes an empty platform of a New York subway station. Those sounds at the beginning of this film are cinematic representations of White's suffering: "[T]he things I believed no longer exist. It's foolish to pretend that they do. Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys of *Dachau*, and I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now" (*TSL* 00:15:15-34, emphasis added). White's suffering comes from the destruction of his beliefs, which are specified as "books, art, and cultural things" by White's own remarks in the later part of the film. The mixed and confusing sounds of men's and women's shouts, the infant's cry, and the shrieking sounds of a subway train echo both White's pain and hideous history of Dachau. White's pain makes White believe that the world is chaotic and disastrous, which is represented by the word "Dachau." Dachau, which has a notorious history during World War II, was Nazi's first concentration camp. What is noteworthy is that Dachau was a final gate for Jewish people before they headed to the extermination camp (*Britannica*).²⁰ The fact that Dachau was a final step for Jewish victims before the extermination camp echoes White's current situation as a final step to the darkness. White, who walks into the darkness at the end of the film, stays at Black's apartment, and this place is just another Dachau for White. In

²⁰ For a more detailed explanation about the concentration camp at Dachau, visit academic.eb.com.proxy.lib.iastate.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Dachau/28484.

other words, the world where White belongs is a place of pain just like Dachau. White's pain is represented by the confusing sounds at the beginning of the film, which signifies both the world full of agony and White's suffering.

As both Job and White are in agony, they start to complain about their current situation. White's pain, which derives from the collapse of his beliefs in human culture. Also, his pain parallels Job's pain which originates from his loss of secular property and physical pain, which are inflicted unjustly by God and Satan's wager. Sounds of people's shouts and sirens echo Job's pain, which displays the chaotic aspect of his loss of abundance. Chapters one and two in the Book of Job tell the reader that God and Satan wager Job's faith because Job is a "perfect and upright man" (*King James Bible*, Job 1:1). Consequently, God accepts Satan's challenge, and they deprive Job of everything that Job possesses; according to Job's servants, Job loses 500 yoke[s] of oxen, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camel, and his seven sons and three daughters (Job 1:13-1:19). Job's loss of secular properties and his children echoes chaotic and mixed sounds at the beginning of the film.

White's complains about his pain focusing on birthdays because he thinks that being born into the human world is a starting point where a human suffers from various types of pain. In this vein, White starts to explain that his birthday, which is today in the film, is the best day for his suicide because he thinks that birthdays are precarious like Christmas:

BLACK. When did you decide that today was the day? Was there something special about it?

WHITE. No. Well, today is my birthday, but I certainly don't regard that as special.

BLACK. Well, Happy Birthday, professor.

WHITE. Thank you.

BLACK. So you seen (sic) your birthday was coming and that seemed like a good day?

WHITE. Who knows? Maybe birthdays are dangerous, like Christmas.

Ornaments hanging from the trees, reeds from the doors, and bodies from the steampipes all over America. (*TSL 00:03:19-41*)

White argues that one's birthday is as dangerous as Christmas, and it is a departure from the Christian perspective because White directly regards the birth of Jesus Christ not as a day of joy and blessing but as a day of danger. White's words correspond to chapter three in the Book of Job, which describes "Job's protest against the futility of human life" (Marks 894). In chapter three, Job breaks his silence and starts to complain about his birth: "After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day. And Job spake, and said, Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived" (Job 3:1-3). Just as White despises his birthday, Job curses his day of birth and wishes that he had not been born in this world to experience all the pain unfairly endowed by God. Both White and Job complain about their birthdays which are the beginning point of their pain, and it is a confrontation with God.

Both White's pain and Job's suffering based on their attachment to secular values and items do not only indicate their commonality, but also they directly lead to the problem of their redemption. At the end of the film, White finally tries to get out of the door, which signifies that he will walk into the darkness (*TSL 01:23:23-01:25:17*). This shows that White insistently refuses to receive salvation from God from the Christian theology because he cannot abandon his attachment to secular value, human culture. As he believes that futility is

prevalent in the human world, he thinks that his *raison d'être* expired because cultural values are what buttress White's life as a college professor. In other words, the reason why White sticks to suicide is due to his attachment to human culture, and therefore he loses an opportunity to be salvaged.

Unlike White, Job's redemption begins from his secular items. According to Geoffrey J. Aimers, Job's abundance, which consists of secular properties, is proof of his faithfulness to God, but Job faces a situation that he must preserve his fidelity to God after God and Satan take away his proof of piety.²¹ As Job's reverence to God is despoiled from him unjustly, Job protests to God: "He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head" (Job 19:9). In this remark, the word "crown" indicates Job's worldly wealth, which he has lost from God and Satan's wager because "crown" is a symbol of carnal affluence. However, Job realizes that loss of his glory and property is not significant, but his faithfulness to God only matters at the end of the story (Job 41:1-17). In other words, Job admits that he cannot understand God's unfathomable wisdom and why God deprives Job of property, and therefore Job reveres God again with his heart. With Job's reaffirmed reverence to God, which starts after his loss of secular abundance, Job receives redemption at the end of the narrative.

Despite the fact that both White and Job's pain originates from the loss of secular values and items, the determining factor over who is going to receive redemption entirely depends on one's faith. According to their introductory book to Christian theology, Richard J. Plantinga et al. argue, "What brings salvation is the faithfulness of Jesus, as God the Son, to

²¹ "Job's honour derives from his material wealth and social status and the perception that this is a reflection of the grace of God. In this alternative narrative the significance of his ordeal in the Prologue is that Job has been reduced to a state of poverty and now finds his honour is in jeopardy." For a more detailed explanation about Job's faith and materiality, see Aimers, especially p. 100.

the covenantal plan of God the Father” (Plantinga et al. 325). These scholars’ explanation provides an insightful understanding of why White and Job reach different destinations at the end of their narratives. When Black and White discuss their belief systems, White clarifies that he does not believe in God but the power of intellectualism and longs for another suicide:

WHITE. [God] is not my point of view. I believe in the primacy of the intellect.

[...]

BLACK. Well, what about the primacy of the Sunset Limited?

WHITE. Yes, that too. (*TSL 00:56:47-00:57:01*).

In this dialog, White’s belief system is firmly rooted in human reason, which once made him trust the value of human culture such as “book, art, and music,” and this is clearly demonstrated through White’s remark, “the primacy of the intellect.” However, as his belief in culture has been destructed, White clings to the “hope of nothingness,” which is represented as a subway train, the Sunset Limited (*TSL 01:24:27-28*). No matter how much Black tries to convert White from his atheism and nihilism, White does not change his stance. From the Christian theological perspective, it is clear that White may not receive redemption because salvation starts from the faith in God.

In addition to the absence of White’s faith in God, White does not only reject God but also makes blasphemous comments towards God. White drifts farther away from the possibility of receiving salvation because the first step to redemption is to construct an intimate engagement and faith in God:

The traditional tendency in soteriology has been to regard salvation in rather individualistic and otherworldly terms. According to this view, salvation is predominantly a matter of a personal relationship with God that ensures one's happy existence after death. (Plantinga et al. 315)

According to their explanation, a person should accept God first to receive redemption:

“salvation is predominantly a matter of a personal relationship with God.” However, White does not try to connect himself with God, and his such tendency is illustrated by his word:

WHITE. I don't think you understand that people such as myself look upon this yearning for God as something lacking in these people.

BLACK. Sure, I do. I couldn't agree more!

WHITE. You agree with that?

BLACK. Yes! What's lacking is God.

WHITE. I am sorry, but to me, *the whole idea of God is just a load of crap.*

BLACK. Oh, Lord, have mercy! Jesus, help us. The professor's done gone (sic) and blasphemed all over us! We ain't never gonna be saved now. (TSL 00:39:26-00:39:52, emphasis added)

His remark does not only demonstrate a fact that he has no faith in God but also it shows that he does not intend to build up an intimate relationship with God, which is a prerequisite step to salvation from the general tenet of Christianity. What is more, White clearly demonstrates his atheism by saying “*the whole idea of God is just a load of crap.*” It is a point where the last possibility of White's redemption is shattered by his clear demonstration of atheism. White's absence of faith in God, a non-relationship with God, and desecration to God prevent White from receiving salvation from a Christian theology.

Contrary to White, Job keeps a thread of faith in God even though he occasionally challenges God, and this is a reason why Job receives redemption whereas it is unlikely that White will be saved from the Christian soteriological viewpoint. In the last chapter of the Book of Job, Job confesses that he receives God's omnipotence and wisdom, which is unfathomable by human rationality: "I know that thou [God] canst do every thing (sic), and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? [T]herefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not" (Job 42:2-3). This passage is Job's answer to God's long and enigmatic questions. Job's realization, "thou [God] canst do every thing (sic)," indicates God's omnipotence. Again, Job constantly notes that he cannot understand God with human rationality: "therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not." Thus, he admits that his intellectualism is petty and affirms that he will trust God wholeheartedly.

This is a noteworthy difference from White. White constructs a hierarchy that his intellectualism supersedes God, and he does not abandon his trust in rationality, which results in his failure of redemption. On the other hand, Job gives up understanding God with his reason, recovers his faith in God, and consequently obtains redemption at the end of the narrative; Job gains more property than he used to have (Job 42:12-17). Andrew E. Steinmann also contends that the lesson of the Book of Job is to show that the wisdom of God cannot be comprehended by human intellectualism, and thus a human should sustain one's devotion to God:

Thus, the central concern of Job is how a righteous person's faith and integrity come through a crisis. [...] Job shows us th[a]t theodicy is an

irrelevant exercise for human beings. They cannot explain God's actions because they do not have access to God's wisdom in the heavenly court. (Steinmann 99).

What Steinmann explains here is that the true lesson of the Book of Job teaches that faith in God is the foremost virtue for a Christian to receive salvation from God, and a human cannot understand God's wisdom through reason. It is for this reason that Job receives redemption whereas White cannot do so since White does not abandon his obsession with intellectualism.

While White and Job continuously complain about their pain, God remains silent both in the film and the Bible. In other words, what is notable is God's absence and observer position both in the Bible and the film. In the Bible, God permits Satan to test Job's faith, saying, "Behold, [Job] is in [Satan's] hands; but save his life" (Job 2:6). That is to say, God remains silent when Job suffers from Satan's torment. When Job entreats God to recognize his innocence, God appears at the end of the Book of Job (Job 38:1-42:6). However, God does not explain the true reason of Job's suffering, but He starts to pour rhetorical questions about his creation of the world, wisdom, and will. In the Book of Job, Job's salvation originates from Job's realization that he cannot understand God with his reason and his anchoring of his wavering faith in God. In other words, redemption in the Book of Job does not only lie in God's hands, but also in Job's heart. In the Book of Job, Job's wavering faith and his agony are clearly resolved with a clear ending that Job is saved by God.

Similarly, God does not give an answer nor a solution to Black's endeavors to save White; rather, the ending of the film only shows White's exit to the door and Black's hollow question: "Is that okay?" (*TSL* 01:26:41). That is to say, God keeps his quietness throughout the film unlike the Book of Job. At the beginning of the film, the camera shows sequences of

long-take shots of various objects: an empty sofa and a crucifix under a paper towel. God's attitude is portrayed as an empty and shabby sofa, which is shown at the beginning of the film. The sofa does not merely create a Beckettian minimalistic and hollow atmosphere of the film but also signifies the empty throne of God, which suggests the absence of God's answer. A positioning of the crucifix in the long-take shot is another proof of God's observer-like attitude. The crucifix is not at the center of the screen, but it is located beneath a disposable commodity, a paper towel. The layout of a paper towel and a crucifix in this long-take shot not only implies God's observer role, but also the limited engagement of God in this rewritten Book of Job: *The Sunset Limited*. God's observer-like attitude hovers within the film just as God in the book of Job only answers Job's prayer at the end of the book.²²

But at the end of the film still one question remains: why does McCarthy end the film an open ending absent of God's voice and engagement? As McCarthy has revealed on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, his tendency is to sometimes, but not always, write his fictions with faith in God, which leaves also ambiguity at the end of the film. White walks out of the door at the end of the film, and it seems that he chooses to commit another suicide attempt from a Christian perspective. However, this is ambiguous since neither the film nor the novel explicitly shows White dying. In addition to the unknown consequence of White, both the film and the novel end with Black's questions to God. Black tells God that he does not understand why He sends Black to save White. The lingering ambiguity at the end of the film is McCarthy's true message; that is to say, McCarthy does not suggest any value judgment to either pole: Christianity versus atheism. He just wants the audience to witness the battle between faith and atheism and think of the value of lining in the dismal reality. His attitude

²² In *The Sunset Limited*, crucifix as an observer appears around 00:01:31, 00:21:30, and 00:25:00. In addition, God only appears at chapters 1,2, 38-42 in the Book of Job.

also corresponds to God's attitude in the Book of Job. God does not give a specific account of why Job suffers from his agony; rather, it is Job who realizes the path to redemption. Just as Job finds his own road to salvation, McCarthy's implicit message is that we should find our own *raison d'être* and salvation in this reality.

Black: Failed Comforter and Guide to Salvation

As I mentioned in the introduction, Dowd states that *The Sunset Limited* is an arena of McCarthy's inner debates, which have been illustrated throughout his overall literary works, and Jones' film adaptation *The Sunset Limited* dramatizes collisions of Christianity and nihilism as well: Black as a comforter based on a Christian perspective versus White as a self-destructive pessimist. Their lingering tension is portrayed through the camera work and silence. White's pain is directly delivered through a close-up shot of White's face, who avoids Black's eye contact and anxiously taps the table with his hand (*TSL* 00:01:32-53). The camera slowly pans around two characters, and such movement of the camera kinetically shows the lingering tension between Black and White.

In addition to the conflict between the two characters, silence suggests that Black is performing his mission as White's caregiver. Silence is a form of non-linguistic communication, and Black demonstrates that he is a patient comforter who waits for White to speak first under this circumstance. Black's patient waiting is portrayed through the tick-tock sound of a clock. The absence of conversation between Black and White mirrors when Job's three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—visit Job to offer him solace, saying nothing: “So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great” (Job 2:13). In their article, Åsa Roxberg et al. interpret the caregiver role of Job's three friends based on the theology of

caring. They offer an insightful interpretation of the caregiver's silence: "[Silent] attitude of respect and reverence toward suffering is relevant for health care today. The suffering person needs to be genuinely met in his/her suffering situation. This seems to be an enduring presence that speaks of fidelity toward the suffering other" (Roxberg et al. 118). In this sense, Black's role as White's caregiver parallels the role of Job's three friends in the Book of Job.

Despite the fact that Job's three friends pay a visit to Job to offer him comfort, what is notable in the Book of Job is that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar do not successfully and satisfactorily act as caregivers to Job. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar denounce Job and his complaints about his torment because they think that Job's agony is a justifiable consequence of Job's sin. However, the truth is that Job's misery stems from his fate as a guinea pig of the faithfulness test between God and Satan. As a matter of fact, Job does not exactly know his sin, and thus he entreats God to let him know what his sin is: "Teach me, and I will hold my tongue: and cause me to understand wherein I have erred. How forcible are right words! But what doth your arguing reprove" (Job 6:24-25). In this respect, Job's three friends ought to trust Job's innocence because Job proclaims his innocence. Nonetheless, Job and his three friends continue their hot debates from chapters 3 to 31. According to Roxberg et al., the controversy between Job and his friends demonstrates that these friends fail to play comforter roles (118).²³

Similarly, Black is a failed comforter in *The Sunset Limited*. Specifically, Black's failed role as a comforter results from his forcible and uncompromising attitude towards White whereas the failed comforter roles of Job's three friend derives from distrust of Job's

²³ "The attempted consolation, provided by Job's friends, is a consolation that is distanced from the sufferer, namely Job. It is a false consolation that originates in itself and a consolation that reduces the suffering by neglecting or ignoring its cause and thereby the sufferer himself" (Roxberg et al. 118).

innocence. Although White argues that he does not believe in God, Black continuously tries to impale Christianity on White throughout the film. Furthermore, Black forcibly questions White about God in an effort to convert White from atheism to Christianity. Black preaches about happy existence after death if White should accept God:

BLACK. Suppose I was to tell you that if you could bring yourself to unlatch your hands from around your brother's throat, you could have life everlasting.

WHITE. There's no such thing. Everybody dies.

BLACK. That ain't what [God] said. He said that you could have life everlasting, have it now today. Hold it in your hands, see it. It give (sic) off a light. [...] Ain't that so? Ain't it?

WHITE. I don't think in those terms.

BLACK. *Just answer the question, Professor.*

WHITE. I don't believe in that sort of thing.

BLACK. I know you don't. *Just answer the question.*

WHITE. There may be some truth in what you say.

BLACK. That's all I'm going to get?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. All right, all right. I'll take it. Some is a lot. We down to breadcrumbs here. (*TSL 00:48:56-37, emphases added*)

In this dialog, Black argues that God guarantees happy existence after death: "you could have life everlasting." This is the meaning of salvation that Plantinga et al. explain: "salvation is predominantly a matter of a personal relationship with God that ensures one's happy

existence after death” (315). Black is persuading White to believe in God in order to be saved. As White sustains his stubbornness not to believe in God and avoids Black’s questions, Black repeats, “Just answer the question” twice. Black’s repetition clearly shows that Black forces White to answer in a certain direction that White realizes God’s will and starts believing in Him. More specifically, Black’s repetition is a forced catechism that aims to draw an answer from White to convert him to believe in God. Black’s oppressive attitude is illustrated through the camera as well. Black stares at White while he speaks to White, but White does not make any eye contact with Black as if White is under huge pressure or pain. Here, Black seems more like an interrogator rather than White’s caregiver. Black is putting pressure on White, and Black fails to construct a caregiver-sufferer relationship.

Black’s forcible attitude as a comforter lacks empathy, and therefore he is doomed to fail his mission. According to Ronald E. Hopson and Gene Rice’s research, they point out the importance of empathy as a caregiver:

In the midst of great suffering, emotional integrity in the caregiver and the willingness to accept the authentic experience of the sufferer are crucial to providing an authentic avenue for encounter with the Divine. When empathy fails, and theological orthodoxy prevails over emotional integrity, the experience of God is defiled and the very words intended to convey Divine presence, are experienced as false and vacuous. (Hopson and Rice 91)

Hopson’s and Rice’s explanation echoes the scene I have discussed. Black’s forceful attitude does not contain any empathy, but it aims to hear the right answer from White that White starts to trust God. Therefore, Black does not construct the empathy with White’s suffering; he just pushes White to the corner of Christianity, which White does not believe at all.

Naturally, White's pain is neglected, and White feels that Black's words about God and faith are "false and vacuous." Black's failed role as a comforter originates from his lack of empathy with White, and it results in Black and White's irreconcilable gap.

The roundtable, which is located between Black and White, also symbolically reveals the irreconcilable gap between the two characters. Peebles also points out that the table is at the center of Black and White's conversation, and therefore it contains importance as an apparatus:

The center of the two men's engagement, however, and the center of the apartment generally, is the table that they joust around, eat off of, and occasionally strike to make a point. The table is, notably, round—a difference from most, if not all, of the previous stage adaptations—a feature that allows Black and White to move, by degrees, closer to one another or farther apart. (Peebles 157)

Peebles points out that the roundness of the table causes the dynamics between Black and White. These dynamics do not only signify their movements in the film but also their conversation and their distant relationship. Their conversations about Christianity and atheism parallel those that have occurred for thousands of years in human history. In other words, the topic of their debates is just as irreconcilable as their relationship. Their unsettling gap is represented through the orbiting-like movements of Black and White as well. Their orbiting is accelerated by Black's lack of empathy with White's suffering, and it is further deteriorated by Black's forced catechism, which is imposed upon White.

Although it is clear that the roundtable symbolizes the irreconcilable gap between Black and White, Peebles suggests that the table signifies Black's and White's close relationship as well:

That round table allows Black and White to drift into each others' (sic) rhetorical spaces as well. Black is a person who reaches out to others, and White is in retreat or outright recoil, from everyone. [...] Yet, their conversation reveals that the two aren't so philosophically distant as they might suppose. (Peebles 157)

I agree with Peebles' argument that the roundtable enables two characters to share and exhibit their rhetorical spaces. However, Peebles does not clearly illustrate why their discussion is not philosophically distant as it seems. I assert that their philosophical positions can never meet or be settled because the ending of the film manifests that they never agree with each other's assertions. White walks into the darkness, and Black does not understand why he fails to save White.

In addition to the ending, another noteworthy aspect of this scene is items on the roundtable: the Bible and a newspaper. The layout of these apparatuses is a miniature of a power struggle between Black and White. The Bible and the newspaper, which represent Black and White respectively, imply that two characters' belief system can never be merged due to their distinctively different nature. That is to say, the Bible symbolizes Black's faith in God as it is a typical emblem of Christianity. On the other hand, the newspaper is a secular item that delivers information based on the reasonable account, and therefore, it is a symbol of rationality or intellectualism. Just as these two objects stand at the antipodal spots on the same table, Black and White are in the same apartment, colliding with each other based on

their conflicting belief systems. Therefore, the roundtable is a mini-map of Black and White's rhetorical and power relational collision, and it is represented by two items, the Bible, and the newspaper.

Black's lack of understanding White's pain, failure to construct a caregiver-sufferer relationship, and absence of empathy with White result in White's exit to the door at the end of the film. In other words, Black's failure as White's caregiver is well represented at the end of the film. After White's exeunt, Black questions 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?" (*TSL* 01:26:02-01:26:51). In his monolog, Black asks questions why God sends Black to prevent White from another suicide. Black's remark exhibits that Black still does not fully understand his role as a caregiver of White. That is to say, Black's role as White's comforter should understand White's pain and construct empathy with White's suffering, but Black does not realize this. Consequently, Black's mission is doomed to fail and his endeavors to refrain White from walking into the darkness become futile. In their exchanges of correspondences, Peter Josyph and Marty Priola also points out that Black's lack of empathy with White is the core reason why Black fails to save White: "As you know, it has been my [Josyph's] complains that [...] [Black] might have done better for White's body and his soul *if [Black] had simply made [White] feel more at home, without array of conversion strategies*" (Josyph 82, emphasis added). Josyph argues that Black could have saved White if Black tries to make White comfortable rather than impale White on Christianity. Josyph's note that Black should have made White feel at home starts from an understanding of White and showing empathy with White and his current suffering as I argue. However, Black does not recognize the importance of understanding White and

empathizing with him, so he fails to complete his mission. I agree with Josyph's interpretation that Black does not exhibit his empathy, which results in White's exit to the darkness at the end of the film. Black's inability to understand the importance of empathy with his fellow human being and failure as an effective caregiver is represented as his hollow question, "then how come you didn't give me the words?" As a matter of fact, White's redemption depends on not only White's realization of the preciousness of life but also Black's ability to empathize with his fellow human being.

The message that McCarthy wants to deliver through Black's failure as White's caregiver may be importance of the ability to empathize with the others, especially with someone who is in agony. Although Black's question, "is that okay," leaves ambiguity at the end of the film, the ambiguity of Black's last question invites the audience to think of the meaning of Black's failure as White's caregiver. In other words, Black's last question echoes McCarthy's implicit question to the audience, and the question can be assumed as follows: "Is it okay [to comfort the sufferer without empathy]?" Until the end of the film, McCarthy does not give an answer but makes the audience think of the importance of empathy on their own.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have compared White and Job with regard to their pains, complains to God, and different results of their redemption. White's pain originates from the destruction of human civilization, and this is the reason why he abandons his opportunity to be saved by God. On the other hand, Job, who becomes a guinea pig of faithfulness test between God and Satan, suffers from agony, but he receives salvation at the end of the narrative. The biggest differences between White and Job is that White does not have faith and Job sustain his faith

in God. Consequently, White walks into the darkness, which implies that he refuses to attain redemption; contrary to White, Job receives redemption from the Christian theology. Black fails to be a successful comforter of White due to his non-understanding of White's pain, apathetic attitude towards White. As a result, his last monolog leaves hollowness at the end of the film.

McCarthy's implicit message within *The Sunset Limited* is still ambiguous, but McCarthy's ambiguity is the message for the audience. McCarthy does not make any value judgment between Christianity and atheism, so the audience should think of the message in *The Sunset Limited* on their own. In terms of White, McCarthy suggests that redemption or the complete emancipation from pain in the human world is impossible, but McCarthy is not totally nihilistic. Just as Job discovers his path to redemption on his own, McCarthy wants us to witness the tragic version of Job (White) and think of the dismal result of indulgence of total nihilism. In the case of Black, McCarthy describes that the empathy with the others is the key factor to help someone in agony. Through Black's lack of empathy and failure as a comforter, McCarthy may want to stress importance of the contemporary audience's ability to understand and empathize with others.

The Sunset Limited, in this sense, is not simply the drama of McCarthy's inner debate between Christianity and atheism. Rather, it is a drama that reflects ourselves who fiercely and painfully live in the world just like White, and it is within a twenty-first century version of the Book of Job that we should understand our contemporary people with empathy.

**CHAPTER 4. “I CLING TO THE HOPE OF NOTHINGNESS:” ATHEISM AND
NIHILISM IN *THE SUNSET LIMITED***

“There is only the hope of nothingness. And I cling to that hope. Now open the door” (*TSL* 01:24:27-32). White says to Black’s face. He gathers his two hands together, and the desperation in his voice shows how eagerly White wants to walk into the darkness, which waits for him outside of the door. This is the last scene of *The Sunset Limited*, where White’s yearning for nothingness is clearly portrayed. In the previous chapter, I discussed how White can be viewed as a nihilistic atheist from the Christian perspective. This observation opens up another predominant theme in McCarthy’s works, which is nihilism. Vereen M. Bell, who explores nihilism in McCarthy’s *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979), argues that McCarthy’s nihilism has “no first principles, no foundational truths” (32). In other words, Bell asserts that the mechanism of McCarthy’s nihilism does not exhibit a clear cause and effect relationship of why tragic events occur. In addition to Bell, William Quirk, Robert Wyllie, and Stacey Peebles explore tragic and nihilistic elements in *The Sunset Limited*.

In his article, “‘Minimalist Tragedy’: Nietzschean Thought in McCarthy’s ‘The Sunset Limited,’” Quirk offers a thorough interpretation of *The Sunset Limited* based on Nietzsche’s book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Although Quirk focuses on the novel rather than the film adaptation of *The Sunset Limited*, his research offers an insightful interpretation of how this text is a tragedy. Based on Nietzsche’s book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Quirk argues that *The Sunset Limited* is in the tradition of ancient Greek tragic literature. Based on the Nietzschean notion of a tragedy, Quirk asserts that Black and White represent Dionysian and

Apollonian figures respectively.²⁴ He claims that White's nihilism signifies "Apollonian figure in extremis" (Quirk 41). Black stands for a Dionysian figure due to "kindred spirits," which means that Black constantly strives to construct a friendship with White (Quirk 42). Quirk concludes his research by arguing that the end of the play affirms Nietzsche's eternal recurrence through the repetitive trope of Black and White's dialogs.²⁵

Quirk's Nietzschean interpretation of *The Sunset Limited* based on *The Birth of Tragedy* is insightful in understanding how the Nietzschean notion of tragedy is reflected in McCarthy's novel. However, this study will argue that nihilism and atheism are dominant factors in this film, and they are represented by White. First, White's nihilism is reminiscent of Nietzsche's famous declaration, "God is dead" in *The Gay Science* (1882) because White walks into the darkness, which implies that White chooses an extreme form of nihilism. Secondly, White's words and action are closely linked to the Nietzsche's madman's declaration, "God is dead" as he constantly reveals that he does not believe in God or want to receive salvation. It is for these reasons why I will explore White's nihilism and atheism based on Nietzsche's book *The Gay Science* and explain how White and Nietzsche's nihilism and atheism differ with respect to the affirmation of life.

I contend that the form of White's nihilism is extreme, and his philosophy is different from the Nietzschean one, which appears in his book, *The Gay Science*. White's nihilism does not presuppose any affirmation of life, but rather causes White to yearn for

²⁴ Quirk offers a succinct summary of notions of Apollonian and Dionysian in Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Tragedy*: "According to young German philologist, Greek tragedy develops out of the tension between two artistic drives, the Apollonian and Dionysian, whose primary artistic manifestations are, respectively, sculpture with its orientation around beautiful appearances, and music with its call to song, dance and the fullest enjoyment of the senses" (40). For a more detailed recapitulation of Apollonian and Dionysian figures, see Quirk p. 40-41.

²⁵ For a more detailed explanation about the relationship between the repetitive trope and the eternal recurrence, see Quirk's "'Minimalist Tragedy': Nietzschean Thought in McCarthy's 'The Sunset Limited,'" especially pp. 49-53.

eternal extinction, which is represented as “darkness” in the film. On the other hand, Nietzschean philosophy does not aim for eternal vanishing, but it implies an affirmation of life, and Nietzsche’s affirmation of life is well expressed through his words, *amor fati* (love of fate). At first glance, Nietzsche’s atheism, which is embodied in the madman, seems to reject the existence of God just as White does. However, what Nietzsche tries to reject in the madman’s parable is Christian morality, which had been a prevalent paradigm in nineteenth-century Europe. Therefore, Nietzsche’s atheism is more philosophical and metaphysical because what Nietzsche rejects is not the existence of God but Christian morality as a paradigm. On the other hand, White’s atheism refutes all the supernatural and transcendental beings and phenomena, which is a totally negative atheism. In this sense, aligning White’s nihilism and atheism with that of Nietzsche is erroneous, and such oversimplification between the two pose a danger that may produce the misunderstanding of Nietzschean philosophy reflected in *The Sunset Limited*. The attempt of this chapter to clarify the differences between White and Nietzsche’s philosophy will help the audience correctly understand two different philosophies.

First, I will focus on the similarities and differences between White and Nietzschean nihilism and atheism. White’s atheism is an extremely strong atheism, which rejects the existence of God. On contrary, Nietzsche’s atheism is philosophical atheism because Nietzsche does not clearly argue whether God exists or not in his book. What Nietzsche rejects is Christian morality, which is represented as the death of God in the madman’s parable. White and Nietzsche demonstrate nihilism, but their nihilistic philosophies are different with regard to the affirmation of life. White does not accept that there is still an optimistic point in this world, and consequently, he argues that he does not have a reason to

continue to live. Secondly, I will explore how their two philosophies diverge and reach a different conclusion: White's desire for the extinction of life versus Nietzsche's affirmation of life. Lastly, I will conclude why McCarthy portrays extreme forms of atheism and nihilism through White in *The Sunset Limited*.

White and Nietzsche's Atheism

Before jumping into the analyses of White and Nietzsche's atheism, it is necessary to define the meaning of atheism first. According to Michael Palmer, "the word 'atheism' is derived from the Greek: *a* meaning 'not' is conjoined with *theos* meaning 'god.' So, we may define atheism as follows: it is the belief *that there is no God*" (1, emphases in original). Although he admits that atheism contains a variety of subcategories, Palmer broadly divides atheism into two subcategories: negative (or weak) and positive (or strong) atheism. A negative atheist means a person who does not have any interest in the existence of a god or lacks knowledge or education in religious and transcendental beings (Palmer 1). On the other hand, a positive atheist signifies a person who knows religion and presents a claim why there is no god (Palmer 1). Based on these two categories, I will explore White's atheism first.

As I have explored in chapter three, White explicitly rejects the existence and teaching of God even though he has knowledge of religion, especially Christianity. In this sense, I argue that White is a positive atheist. Due to the fact that I have explored White's atheistic aspects in the previous chapters, I will recapitulate White's atheism succinctly. Firstly, White reveals his atheism through words such as "I am sorry, but to me, the whole idea of God is just a load of crap" (*TSL* 00:39:40-41).²⁶ Secondly, White is a positive atheist since he has read one of the books from the Old Testament, the Book of Job, but he does not

²⁶ For a more detailed explanation of White's atheism, see the analysis of White in this thesis, especially chapter three, White section.

accept the existence of God. This fact echoes Palmer's explanation that a positive atheist is a person who possesses religious knowledge but does not accept the existence of a transcendental being, God. Lastly, the empty sofa at the beginning of the film also shows White's atheist perspective. In chapter three, I have argued, "the sofa does not merely create a Beckettian minimalistic and hollow atmosphere of the film but also signifies the empty throne of God, which suggests the absence of God's answer." The meaning of the empty throne of God, sofa, also symbolizes White's atheist aspect. The hollow throne of God echoes White's atheism. On account of these three reasons, White's atheism is positive or strong atheism, which totally rejects the existence of God. White's strong atheism echoes Nietzsche's atheism, which is represented by the madman's declaration in *The Gay Science*.

Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* is a collection of his philosophy in aphoristic form. The aphorisms condense and well demonstrate Nietzsche's philosophy. In section 125 (*The Madman*) in book three, the madman's declaration is a famously preferred slogan for atheists. This parable starts with the madman's entrance to the marketplace looking for God. As he is surrounded by atheists, the madman proclaims the death of God:

The Madman. —Haven't you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, 'I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!' Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. [...] The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Where is God?' he cried; 'I'll tell you! *We have killed him*—you

and I! We are all his murderers.’ (GS 119-120; sec. 125, emphasis in original)²⁷

The excerpt shows that the madman declares the death of God, and it is Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the failure of Christian morality in nineteenth-century Europe. Intriguing is the dramatic form of the madman’s declaration of God’s death. The madman is looking for God in a marketplace, especially surrounded by atheists (“many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then”). What Nietzsche tries to convey through the madman is that atheism is prevalent due to the rise of scientific knowledge, and therefore the fall of Christianity was a clear phenomenon at the time. It is represented when the madman is surrounded by atheists and mocked by them. The marketplace, which is an arena of transacting commodity as well as people’s thoughts, is full of atheists, and this fact shows that atheism was prevalent at the time. In addition, the madman’s efforts to look for God is mocked by them, and this shows the fall of Christianity. In his article “Nietzsche’s Madman Parable: A Cynical Reading,” Charles Bambach claims that the spatial setting also symbolizes the death of God: “[...] Nietzsche’s parallel funeral oration for God in *The Gay Science* lays bare the bankruptcy of all conventional values (*nomoi*) as counterfeit currency (*nomisma*). For him, the dead God, like a counterfeit coin, simply no longer has any power to sustain its value” (454). Bambach sharply points out that the death of God indicates a collapse of Christianity as well as old cultural values. Keith Ansell Pearson also asserts that the madman’s word is “not a metaphysical speculation about an ultimate reality, but a diagnosis of the state of European culture and its direction” (31). Pearson argues that the madman’s declaration signifies not only the failure of Christianity but also Nietzsche’s

²⁷ It is a custom to use the section number only in indicating the sources of Nietzsche’s works. However, I will use the page number and section number together in order to clarify sources of quotations in this research.

diagnosis of nineteenth-century Europe. Two scholars point out that the madman's shout connotes the fall of Christianity as well as Nietzsche's diagnosis of nineteenth-century Europe, but the madman's proclamations clearly demonstrate Nietzsche's atheism because it is powerfully revealed through the madman's words. Nietzsche clearly demonstrates his strong atheism in this parable through the madman, and McCarthy also exhibits his atheist aspect through White, who proclaims that he does not believe in God.

At first glance, Nietzsche's atheism seems straightforwardly positive atheism since the madman, who is a re-embodiment of Nietzsche's atheist thought, declares the death of God. However, the problem of Nietzsche's atheism is more ambiguous than it looks on a superficial level. Robin Alice Roth argues, "But the problem of atheism within Nietzsche's thought is not so straightforward and easily resolved" (57). The reason why Roth argues ambivalence of Nietzsche's atheism is that Nietzsche regards atheism as something negative and attacks Schopenhauer's atheism as well (56-57). Roth explains that Nietzsche criticizes Schopenhauer's atheism because Schopenhauer's atheism is too strong, and consequently it advocates negativity too much (57). Therefore, it is difficult to put Nietzsche's atheism into Palmer's binary category (negative or positive atheism), and Palmer also reveals that Nietzsche is "[a] both believer and non-believer [of religion or transcendental being]" (Palmer xi). Even some scholars argue that Nietzsche is not an atheist, and consequently, it is a wonder how to define Nietzsche's atheism at this point.

Although some scholars have discovered that Nietzsche's atheism exhibits ambiguity, I assert that Nietzsche's atheism is positive or strong because many parts of Nietzsche's book *The Gay Science*, especially the madman's parable, demonstrate his criticisms against Christian morality and God just as White denies God. However, it is also

important to examine Nietzsche's nihilism, which is reflected in his atheism based on what Roth argues in his article. Roth argues, "the proclamation of God's death is at once the exclamation that history has been essentially nihilistic. Indeed, the issue of nihilism and problem of the death of God are directly related" (55). Although atheism and nihilism are not identical thoughts, it is true that they share a commonality as well. In addition, as Nietzsche discusses nihilism through his positive atheism, it is necessary to explore Nietzsche's nihilism. In the next section, I will explore the meaning of Nietzsche's nihilism and how his nihilism is similar to and different from White's nihilism in *The Sunset Limited*.

White, A Madman Who Yearns for Nothingness

The meaning and usage of a term, nihilism, are diverse and vast, and it is important to survey the definition of nihilism. Denotative definitions of nihilism list five explanations according to *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, but its primary meaning is "total rejection of prevailing religious beliefs, moral principles, laws, etc., often from a sense of despair and the belief that life is devoid of meaning. [It] also more generally [means] negativity, destructiveness, hostility to accepted beliefs or established institutions" (*OED*).²⁸ As the *OED* says, nihilism does not presuppose the negation of religion or god. In other words, nihilism can refute any institutionalized thoughts or systems. However, with respect to Nietzsche, nihilism coalesces with the rejection of God due to the reason that I have explored in the previous section.

Returning to the madman's parable in *The Gay Science*, this parable declares not only the failure of Christian morality but also diagnoses the cultural and social status of nineteenth-century Europe: "Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? —God,

²⁸ For detailed definitions of nihilism, see "Nihilism, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/127097.

too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers!” (*GS* 120; sec. 125). This excerpt displays two aspects of Nietzsche’s thoughts. First, it shows Nietzsche’s atheist perspective as I have explored in the previous section. Secondly, the death of God indicates the death of ultimate truth in reality, which many philosophers in the nineteenth-century had believed. Roth elucidates the meaning of the ultimate truth based on Platonic philosophy:

The demise of God is summed up through the entire history of the devaluation of the highest value, i.e., the collapse of the Platonic ‘true world.’ In turn, the decline of Platonism encompasses the stages of nihilism through which the ‘true world’ becomes a fable. (55)

The “Platonic ‘true world’” that Roth explains here is the Platonic notion of Form. According to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (2015), Platonic Form signifies, “Plato believed there must be an essence—or Form—common to everything falling under one concept, which makes anything what it is” (369). For example, the Form of Love is perfect love or the essence of love. In this chapter, the meaning of the ultimate truth is identical to “Platonic ‘true world,’” or Platonic Form. However, Nietzsche argues that there is no such thing as ultimate truth, and Pearson expounds on Nietzsche’s theory: “[The death of God] means that the God of theologians, philosophers and some scientists, that is the God that serves as a guarantor that the universe is not devoid of structure, order and purpose, is also dead” (Pearson 35). The death of God in the madman’s words manifest the collapse of Christianity and the destruction of the belief in the ultimate truth in nineteenth-century Europe. What is interesting is that the madman’s declaration echoes with White’s nihilistic thinking when White reveals his nihilism with respect to human culture.

White's pain derives from the destruction of his belief in human culture, and this is the reason why he tries to attempt another suicide. When Black asks what kinds of belief White has, he answers as follows:

WHITE. Um, cultural things, for instance, books, music, art, things like that.

BLACK. Alright.

WHITE. Those are the things that have value to me. They're foundations of human civilization. Well, they used to have value to me. They don't have much value anymore, I guess.

BLACK. What happened to them?

WHITE. People stopped valuing them. I stopped valuing them to a certain extent. I'm not sure I can tell you why. That world is largely gone now. Soon it will be wholly gone. (*TSL 00:13:04-36*)

In this dialog, White's remarks demonstrate that White has lost his belief in human culture, and his notes of "books, music, [and] art" clearly shows that White used to have a firm trust in human culture. However, at some point, White realizes that the world does not value them anymore, and he is influenced by people's indifference to culture: "People stopped valuing them." This is the point where White loses his interests in human culture and his nihilism starts. White's destruction of his belief corresponds to the madman's shout in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. Human culture, in which he has held a strong faith, plays a role as a god to White, but he has witnessed that people withdraw their trust in his god. In other words, White diagnoses that the contemporary American society, to which he belongs, has stopped valuing culture itself, and therefore cultural paralysis is prevalent. The contemporary people's

rampant indifference to culture also numbs White's faith and interest in human culture, and this is the root of White's nihilism towards the world.

When White reveals that he has lost his belief in human culture, the camera shows not only White but also White's background. What is notable is that an empty sofa reappears on the screen. As I have explored the meanings of the empty sofa before, the empty sofa signifies the absence of God (or God's voice) and White's non-belief in God. In addition to these meanings, the empty sofa exhibits White's destructed belief in human civilization. The denotive definition of nihilism is "total rejection of prevailing religious beliefs, moral principles, laws, etc., often from a sense of despair and the belief that life is devoid of meaning," and this definition reiterates White's nihilism towards human culture (*OED*). White's nihilism is not only disclosed by his remarks, but it is also revealed through the empty sofa, which is devoid of White's desiccated belief in human culture.

White demonstrates his nihilism by saying that he does not want to live on and witness the death of cultural and social phenomena. His desire for death originates from the death of culture:

WHITE. I don't have an answer to any of that either. Maybe [suicide] is not logical. I don't know. I don't care. I've been asked, didn't I think it odd that I should be around to witness the death of everything? I don't think it's odd. But that doesn't mean it isn't so. Somebody has to be here.

BLACK. But you don't intend to hang around for it?

WHITE. No, I don't.

BLACK. (Sigh) Let me see if I got this straight. You're saying that all this culture stuff is the only thing between you and the Sunset Limited.

WHITE. It's a lot.

BLACK. But it busted out on you.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. You're a culture junkie. (*TSL 00:14:19-00:14:55*)

Under the circumstance that he is suffering from the collapse of the human culture, White recognizes that suicide is not a logical choice, and it is represented in his words, "Maybe it's not logical." In addition, White admits that someone must continue to live despite inevitable despair and suffering: "Somebody has to be here." What is contradictory in White's words and behaviors is that he knows that it is possible for him to live on, but he chooses suicide. Paradoxical though it is at first glance, White's words are understandable from the nihilistic perspective. As White's reason to live on has been evaporated, all White has is despair and absence of meaning. In other words, what is left to White is nihilism itself. Therefore, White chooses suicide as the only solution to his pain and nihilism.

White's nihilistic thought is refuted by Nietzsche's philosophy that one person should live on despite pain from the world because pain makes the person "not better but deeper" (*GS 6-7; sec. 3*). In section three of Book one, Nietzsche illustrates why people should live on:

I doubt that such pain makes us 'better' — but I know that it makes us deeper. [...] The trust in life is gone: life itself has become a *problem*. Yet one should not jump to the conclusion that this necessarily makes one sullen. Even love of life is possible — only one loves differently. (*GS 7; sec 3, emphasis in original*)

Nietzsche's recognition that life is problematic juxtaposes with White's attitude towards human culture. Nietzsche also thinks that there is no significant value in life, and it is revealed through his words, "The trust in life is gone: life itself has become a *problem*." What is different from White's philosophy is that Nietzsche argues that "love of life is [still] possible." Although the word "love" provokes an association of strong optimism towards a life, Nietzsche does not intend to use this word literally. What Nietzsche wants to express here is that a person, who experiences pain in his/her life, should not necessarily be a nihilist but can take a different attitude towards his/her life. In this sense, Nietzsche's philosophy connotes the affirmation of life, although his thoughts admit that life is dire, and this is a bifurcation between White and Nietzsche's thoughts.

In addition to the section mentioned above, Nietzsche expresses the affirmation of life through another of his famous declarations *amor fati* (love of one's fate) in section 276 in book four, and this is a clear divergence from White's darkest nihilism:

For the new year.— [...]. Today everyone allows himself to express his dearest wish and thoughts: so I, too, want to say what I wish from myself today and what thought first crosses my heart—what thought shall be the reason, warrant, and sweetness of the rest of my life! I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati* [love of one's fate]: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let looking away be my only negation! And, all in all, and on

the whole: someday I want only be a Yes-sayer! (*GS* 157; sec. 276, emphasizes in original)

According to Tom Stern, *amor fati* in this excerpt means that it requires us to “love the terrible things [that] befall us” (145, emphasis in original). Nietzsche’s remarks that he “does not want to wage war against ugliness” signify that he wants not to turn his back to the world but to accept the ugly things in this world. However, Nietzsche specifies how to love hideous things by noting that “I will be one of those who make things beautiful.” In other words, Nietzsche transforms terrible things in the world into something beautiful so that he can love his fate although it is unlovable. In addition, Nietzsche’s only “negation” of anything unlovable is just “looking away.” Neglect of ugliness does not necessarily mean an extreme form of negation of life in Nietzsche’s philosophy. In this sense, Nietzsche’s rejection of ugliness of the world does not align with that of White.

White wants to destroy himself because he loathes the contemporary’s devaluation of human culture, but it is not what Nietzsche argues through *amor fati*. *Amor fati* in Nietzsche’s philosophy is an antidote for nihilism, and Béatrice Han-Pile also suggests the same argument:

[*Amor fati*] may or may not come to us; we may not be able to sustain it forever. But if and while we have it, it saves us from bitterness and resentment as well as from Schopenhauerian resignation [extreme nihilism or atheism]. Its redemptive powers may not be infinite, but they are the best we can hope for. (Han-Pile 246)

What Han-Pile asserts here is that Nietzsche’s *amor fati* plays a role as a buttress in one’s life so that the person can endure and overcome hardships in his/her life. Han-Pile admits that the

influence of *amor fati* is not “infinite,” and thus it may have some limitation to console people for their agony. Despite the limitation of *amor fati*, Han-Pile contends that Nietzsche’s *amor fati* is the hope that a person in pain can hope for. Nietzsche’s optimism in the dismal world is also represented by the last line: “And, all in all, and on the whole: someday I want only be a Yes-sayer!” Nietzsche’s “Yes-sayer” stands for a person who internalizes the notion of *amor fati* and does not lose one’s hope in the face of a hopeless world. Nietzsche’s proclamation of *amor fati* and being a “Yes-sayer” are the biggest differences from White’s philosophy, which presupposes that there is no hope in this world. Towards the end of the film, White walks into a totally opposite direction from Nietzsche’s nihilistic but somewhat hopeful philosophy.

Before White achieves his yearning to walk out of Black’s apartment, which implies White’s second suicide attempt, White pours out his extreme nihilism, which is significantly different from that of Nietzsche:

WHITE. I don’t regard my state of mind as some pessimistic view of the world. I regard it as the world itself. [a loud banging from the neighbor] Evolution cannot avoid bringing intelligent life ultimately to an awareness of one thing, and one thing above all, and that one thing is futility. (TSL 01:18:47-01:19:07)

In his long talk, White reveals two things. First, White shows that White’s pessimism or nihilism is equal to the world. Secondly, White argues that science contributes to bringing the futility of the world to people’s minds. White’s nihilism is equal to the world. This means that White regards this world identical to misery or pain. On the other hand, Nietzsche’s philosophy does not suppose that his philosophy is equal to the world. Rather, Nietzsche, as I

have explored earlier, argues that the world contains pessimistic factors, but such factors can be endured and overcome by *amor fati*. In this respect, White's nihilism is more extreme than Nietzsche's nihilism. White's word "evolution" is reminiscent of Darwin's Evolution Theory, by which Nietzsche was heavily influenced. In a sense, "evolution" in White's remarks synecdochally signifies science. White concludes that science has brought the futility of the world to intellectuals including himself. In other words, White thinks that science catalyzes his nihilism because it has introduced futility to this world. In the case of Nietzsche, science is a useful tool to deconstruct the Christian morality that Nietzsche criticizes. Nietzsche's and White's different evaluations of science are another bifurcation point in their nihilism. For Nietzsche, science is a springboard to establish his nihilistic but somewhat optimistic philosophy. On the other hand, science for White is a reinforcing agent of his extreme nihilism.

White knows Nietzsche's philosophy, especially his madman's parable, but White draws a line that he does not accept Nietzsche's philosophy or want to accept the optimistic messages within Nietzschean thought. This is another divergence point of White through which he differentiates his nihilism from Nietzsche's:

WHITE. [...] I don't believe in God. Can you understand that? [...] *The argument of the village atheist whose single passion is to revile endlessly that which he denies the existence of in the first place.* [...] Show me a religion that prepares one for nothingness, for death. That's a church I might enter. [...] The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy. Every road ends in death, every friendship, every love. Torment, loss, betrayal, pain, suffering,

age, indignity, hideous lingering illness—and all of it with a single conclusion. (*TSL* 01:19:35-01:21:26, emphasis added)

White's mention "I don't believe in God" shows White's atheist aspect, and it reminds of Nietzsche's madman, especially the madman's famous declaration, "God is dead." In addition to this, White more directly alludes to Nietzsche's madman's parable: "*The argument of the village atheist whose single passion is to revile endlessly that which he denies the existence of in the first place.*" This line is a summary of an allusion to Nietzsche's madman's parable. As I have explored earlier, Nietzsche's madman jumps into the marketplace full of atheists, and White's words, "the argument of the village atheist" indicate this. What is more, the madman denies the existence of God and White's remarks, "*he denies the existence of in the first place,*" point out that the madman's rejection of God. Nietzsche's madman's parable is to criticize Christian morality and Platonic Form (the ultimate truth). However, White distorts Nietzsche's philosophy and he only yearns for nothingness, death. The excerpt above is another piece of evidence showing why White's nihilism differs from that of Nietzsche.

The camera, which usually moves slowly before this scene, is dynamically maneuvered when White pours out his dark nihilism. The camera pans and accompanies White as he walks to the door, which is the only blockade between White and nothingness. The more nihilistic White becomes, the closer the camera zooms up to White's face so that the intensity of White's nihilism is delivered to the audience more directly. When White leans on the door, the camera uses a close-up shot, and it highlights White's eagerness for death and foreshadows that White will walk out of the door at the end of the film. Not only

do White's words exhibit his extreme nihilism, but also the camera movements and a close-up shot of White intensify and communicate White's nihilism better to the audience.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have examined White and Nietzsche's atheism and nihilism, which are reflected in *The Sunset Limited*. I argue that Nietzsche's atheism is a positive (or strong) atheism due to the fact that Nietzsche criticizes Christian morality, although some scholars point out that his atheism is somewhat ambiguous. White's atheism is also a positive atheism, but his atheism is much more extreme compared to that of Nietzsche's. White is a representation of McCarthy's atheist aspect as well. Nietzsche's nihilism is clearly demonstrated throughout his book *The Gay Science*, but Nietzsche leaves room for optimism even though the reality is dismal. Nietzsche exhibits his optimism through the phrase, *amor fati* (love of one's fate), and this is an antidote for extreme nihilism as Han-Pile argues in her research.

The film ends with White's exit to the door and Black's unanswered question to God. Consequently, it seems that McCarthy advocates suicide or extreme nihilism for people at first glance. However, McCarthy also leaves ambiguity about this matter in the interview with David Carr in *New York Times*. In this interview, Carr asks McCarthy whether McCarthy believes that having too much knowledge may lead to suicide, but McCarthy equivocates Carr's question: "I don't think it's true that an education necessarily is going to drive you to suicide, but it's probably true that more educated people commit suicide than people who are not educated" (Carr). What McCarthy says here is just a common-sensical comment on the relationship between the level of education and suicide. Therefore, it is unclear whether McCarthy advocates suicide, especially to the intellectual. Furthermore, the

film ends with a scene of a rising sun, and it adds more ambiguity to McCarthy's implicit message of this film. It seems that McCarthy implies that there is still hope although White walks into the darkness and Black fails his role as a comforter of White by showing the rising sun, which implicates optimism in general. It does not seem that McCarthy wants to reveal his value judgment about atheism or nihilism. McCarthy produces an ambiguous ending of the film so that we can think of the meaning of our existence in the face of nihilism, which is prevalent in the contemporary society.

CHAPTER 5. THE GENERAL CONCLUSION

In this research, I have explored the notion of pain and redemption from Buddhist philosophy and Christian doctrine. Based on Buddhist teaching, White's pain aligns with *dukkha*, but his solution to pain conflicts with the Four Noble Truths, which are liberation methods, because the Four Noble Truths do not preach that death or suicide is the appropriate way to relieve one's pain. Black, who tries to prevent White from a suicide attempt, fails his role because his redemption originates from violence, which Buddhist philosophy valorizes as a valid path for redemption. From the Christian viewpoint, White cannot end his pain and receive salvation because he is a strong (or positive) atheist. Black fails his comforter role to White due to his forceful attitude towards White and lack of empathy with White's pain. Another notable theme in *The Sunset Limited* is atheism and nihilism. White's atheism is strong or positive according to Palmer's classification because he has exhibited his mistrust of God explicitly. Nietzsche also demonstrates his atheist aspect through the madman's parable in his book, *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche attacks Christian morality and the Platonic notion of ultimate truth (or Form). Nihilism in their atheism shows some similarities and differences. White's nihilism does not assume any optimism and his extreme nihilism is fulfilled at the end of the film by walking into the darkness that he longs for. On the other hand, Nietzsche's nihilistic philosophy presupposes optimism, and Nietzsche reveals it through the phrase *amor fati*.

As I have noted throughout the previous chapters, McCarthy does not clearly give the audience the answer to the recurring question about this film: What does McCarthy want to tell us through this claustrophobic and dire film? I would argue that what McCarthy truly wants us to do is to witness Black and White's struggles, pain, agony, and (self) destruction

and contemplate the meaning of redemption in the contemporary society. Peter Josyph and Marty Priola have exchanged emails discussing the meaning of McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*. Josyph confesses one of his experiences that he could not save his Japanese friend from suicide. He connects his past experiences with *The Sunset Limited* and asks the true message of McCarthy's text to Priola. Priola assumes McCarthy's message as follows:

But I think McCarthy might say, and I might agree, that it's not about saving, it is about seeing, witnessing [the tragedy]. [...] We don't have control over when people we love are taken from us, or how. [...] The priest couldn't save the man nor any other, but I don't believe lives are futile, and I don't believe stories are either. Maybe, in the long light of things, the story is enough. (Josyph 68)

Priola's assumption about McCarthy's message helps us to reflect on the hidden messages of McCarthy in *The Sunset Limited*. As Priola explains, Black cannot save White in the end, and he becomes a witness just like us. However, Black reveals that he will wait for White the next morning at the platform where he has saved White, and the movie ends with the rising sun. This text can be read as a victory of White's extreme nihilism or a sheer of optimistic light in the tragic reality. Either analysis or any other interpretations are possible, so there is no perfect answer to this question. One thing is sure by the way: Through the multivalence of the text, McCarthy asks, "How should we deal with pain and what is the meaning of redemption in this reality?" All we can do is to witness another version of Black and White in our daily lives and to constantly and diligently recall McCarthy's questions.

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