

## **A Reaction to *The Sunset Limited***

By Chris Mack

(*The Sunset Limited*, a novel in dramatic form, by Cormac McCarthy)

I loathe strawman arguments. The ones I've composed (usually in my head, but sometime on paper) I dislike the most. They are usually self-serving, occasionally fatuous, and rarely edifying. As the name implies, instead debating a real opponent, the strawman opponent is intentionally easy to knock down, making the author or reader feel good about themselves and their moral or intellectual superiority. In general, they are at best a waste of time.

So when I started reading Cormac McCarthy's strawman arguments in *The Sunset Limited*, I was naturally put off. But it is Cormac McCarthy after all, and I've never known his brilliance to be limited or his writing to be disappointing. I kept reading. If a strawman is a fictional debate opponent, isn't all of fiction populated by straw men and women, the products of the imagination of the author? Ah, but there is the difference. The fictional "straw people" are characters and not just arguments, and it is the characters, who and what they are, that matter. They may have arguments to make, but by bringing their characters to life the good novelist gives us far more than an intellectual argument, they give us a relationship, a connection, a reason to care. The novelist exposes us to more than rational examination – they give us a slice of life, and possibly a bit of truth to ponder.

The characters in *The Sunset Limited* are Black and White, an obvious double entendre. White, the professor, is less a character than a stereotype of the soulless intellectual, a sad, suicidal middle-aged white man lacking even a drop of hope for the world. His was the voice of unbelief, one whose worldview was easy to dismiss as worse than jaded, as dangerous. Black was at least fleshed out more as a character, though he, too, was not much more than a well-drawn stereotype: a black ex-con who found Jesus in the jailhouse, now intent on saving souls.

But it wasn't till the end that I realized that McCarthy had done something quite unique. He had given us not one, but two strawman arguments, battling against each other. For White, there is nothing in this world that makes life worth living, and the ignorant survive by either not paying attention, or by believing in make believe. For Black, once you accept that God loves you, then it's OK. I dislike both positions, and found them both easy to knock down. Yet the dialog was interesting, and often compelling. I wanted to see what would be said next. I even thought closely about the cases being made on both sides. McCarthy's masterful writing and unique construction of the back and forth was worth much more than the less-than-stimulating "dialectic of the homily" found in the arguments themselves.

And then I realized one more thing. McCarthy had slipped in the answer, the true point to be made. Or maybe I had. In either case, it was there. The other people on the platform. Community. The professor resolutely rejected community, longed for death as a way to cement this lack of community. Black, in his empty apartment with the many locks on the door, had none as well, his family all dead, junkies as strawmen companions, and just God to talk to. The other people on the platform. For me, I don't need God's love, but I do need love, to give and to receive. This is what the professor needed as well.

It is the same answer I found in McCarthy's play *The Stonemason*, in just one line, said in a dream, and the pivot for that play. After spending most of his adult life learning the art and philosophy of stone masonry, intent on preserving the lessons of the past, Ben finds himself facing God at the preverbal pearly gates. God gazes into Ben's soul and asks a single question: "Where are the others?" Indeed. Where are the others.