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## **The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form**

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## THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

'The Theatre of the Absurd' is a term coined by the critic Martin Esslin for the work of a number of playwrights, mostly written in the 1950s and 1960s. The term is derived from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus. In his 'Myth of Sisyphus', written in 1942, he first defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. The 'absurd' plays by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and others all share the view that man is inhabiting a universe with which he is out of key. Its meaning is indecipherable and his place within it is without purpose. He is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened.

The origins of the Theatre of the Absurd are rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, it was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the Second World War, which showed the total impermanence of any values, shook the validity of any conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness. The trauma of living from 1945 under threat of nuclear annihilation also seems to have been an important factor in the rise of the new theatre.

At the same time, the Theatre of the Absurd also seems to have been a reaction to the disappearance of the religious dimension from contemporary life. The Absurd Theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age, by making man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, by instilling in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish. The Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition.

As a result, absurd plays assumed a highly unusual, innovative form, directly aiming to startle the viewer, shaking him out of this comfortable, conventional life of everyday concerns. In the meaningless and Godless post-Second-World-War world, it was no longer possible to keep using such traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity. The Theatre of the Absurd openly rebelled against conventional theatre. Indeed, it was anti-theatre. It was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. The dialogue seemed total gobbledygook. Not unexpectedly, the Theatre of the Absurd first met with incomprehension and rejection.

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama was its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language had become a vehicle of conventionalised,

stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which is distorted, parodies and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically. Conventionalised speech acts as a barrier between ourselves and what the world is really about: in order to come into direct contact with natural reality, it is necessary to discredit and discard the false crutches of conventionalised language. Objects are much more important than language in absurd theatre: what happens transcends what is being said about it. It is the hidden, implied meaning of words that assume primary importance in absurd theatre, over and above what is being actually said. The Theatre of the Absurd strove to communicate an undissolved totality of perception - hence it had to go beyond language.

Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abandon the straitjacket of logic. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language the absurd theatre is trying to shatter the enclosing walls of the human condition itself. Our individual identity is defined by language, having a name is the source of our separateness - the loss of logical language brings us towards a unity with living things. In being illogical, the absurd theatre is anti-rationalist: it negates rationalism because it feels that rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite. It offers intoxicating freedom, brings one into contact with the essence of life and is a source of marvellous comedy.

There is no dramatic conflict in the absurd plays. Dramatic conflicts, clashes of personalities and powers belong to a world where a rigid, accepted hierarchy of values forms a permanent establishment. Such conflicts, however, lose their meaning in a situation where the establishment and outward reality have become meaningless. However frantically characters perform, this only underlines the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. Absurd dramas are lyrical statements, very much like music: they communicate an atmosphere, an experience of archetypal human situations. The Absurd Theatre is a theatre of situation, as against the more conventional theatre of sequential events. It presents a pattern of poetic images. In doing this, it uses visual elements, movement, light. Unlike conventional theatre,

where language rules supreme, in the Absurd Theatre language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery.

The Theatre of the Absurd is totally lyrical theatre which uses abstract scenic effects, many of which have been taken over and modified from the popular theatre arts: mime, ballet, acrobatics, conjuring, music-hall clowning. Much of its inspiration comes from silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in early sound film (Laurel and Hardy, W C Fields, the Marx Brothers). It emphasises the importance of objects and visual experience: the role of language is relatively secondary. It owes a debt to European pre-war surrealism: its literary influences include the work of Franz Kafka. The Theatre of the Absurd is aiming to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams.

### **Some of the predecessors of absurd drama:**

- **In the realm of verbal nonsense:** François Rabelais, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Many serious poets occasionally wrote nonsense poetry (Johnson, Charles Lamb, Keats, Hugo, Byron, Thomas Hood). One of the greatest masters of nonsense poetry was the German poet Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914). Ionesco found the work of S J Perelman (i.e. the dialogues of the Marx Brothers' films) a great inspiration for his work.
- **The world of allegory, myth and dream:** The tradition of the world as a stage and life as a dream goes back to Elizabethan times. Baroque allegorical drama shows the world in terms of mythological archetypes: John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Calderon, Jakob Biederman. With the decline of allegory, the element of fantasy prevails (Swift, Hugh Walpole).
- In some 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century works of literature we find sudden transformation of characters and nightmarish shifts of time and place (E T A Hoffman, Nerval, Aurevilly). Dreams are featured in many theatrical pieces, but it had to wait for Strindberg to produce the masterly transcriptions of dreams and obsessions that have become a direct source of the Absurd Theatre. Strindberg, Dostoyevsky, Joyce and Kafka created archetypes: by delving into their own subconscious, they discovered the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. In the view of Mircea Eliade, myth has never completely disappeared on the level of individual experience. The Absurd Theatre sought to express the individual's longing for a single myth of general validity. The above-mentioned authors anticipated this.

Alfred Jarry is an important predecessor of the Absurd Theatre. His *UBU ROI* (1896) is a mythical figure, set amidst a world of grotesque archetypal images. Ubu Roi is a caricature, a terrifying image of the animal nature of man and his cruelty. (Ubu Roi makes himself King of Poland and kills and tortures all and sundry. The work is a puppet play and its décor of childish naivety underlines the horror.) Jarry expressed man's psychological states by objectifying them on the stage. Similarly, Franz Kafka's short stories and novels are meticulously exact descriptions of archetypal nightmares and obsessions in a world of convention and routine.

- **20<sup>th</sup> Century European avant-garde:** For the French avant-garde, myth and dream was of utmost importance: the surrealists based much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious. The aim of the avant-garde was to do away with art as a mere imitation of appearances. Apollinaire demanded that art should be more real than reality and deal with essences rather than appearances. One of the more extreme manifestations of the avant-garde was the Dadaist movement, which took the desire to do away with obsolete artistic conventions to the extreme. Some Dadaist plays were written, but these were mostly nonsense poems in dialogue form, the aim of which was primarily to 'shock the bourgeois audience'. After the First World War, German Expressionism attempted to project inner realities and to objectify thought and feeling. Some of Brecht's plays are close to Absurd Drama, both in their clowning and their music-hall humour and the preoccupation with the problem of identity of the self and its fluidity. French surrealism acknowledged the subconscious mind as a great, positive healing force. However, its contribution to the sphere of drama was meagre: indeed it can be said that the Absurd Theatre of the 1950s and 1960s was a belated practical realisation of the principles formulated by the Surrealists as early as the 1930s. In this connection, of particular importance were the theoretical writings of Antonin Artaud. Artaud fully rejected realism in the theatre, cherishing a vision of a stage of magical beauty and mythical power. He called for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes, thus creating a new mythology. In his view, theatre should pursue the aspects of the internal world. Man should be considered metaphorically in a wordless language of shapes, light, movement and gesture. Theatre should aim at expressing what language is incapable of putting into words. Artaud forms a bridge between the inter-war avant-garde and the post-Second-World-War Theatre of the Absurd.

## Absurd Drama - Martin Esslin

'The Theatre of the Absurd' has become a catch-phrase, much used and much abused. What does it stand for? And how can such a label be justified? Perhaps it will be best to attempt to answer the second question first. There is no organised movement, no school of artists, who claim the label for themselves. A good many playwrights who have been classed under this label, when asked if they *belong* to the Theatre of the Absurd, will indignantly reply that they belong to no such movement - and quite rightly so. For each of the playwrights concerned seeks to express no more and no less his own personal vision of the world.

Yet critical concepts of this kind are useful when new modes of expression, new conventions of art arise. When the plays of Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, and Adamov first appeared on the stage they puzzled and outraged most critics as well audiences. And no wonder. **These plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries; they must therefore appear as a provocation to people who have come into the theatre expecting to find what they would recognize as a well-made play. A well-made play is expected to present characters that are well-observed and convincingly motivated: these plays often contain hardly any recognizable human beings and present completely unmotivated actions. A well-made play is expected to entertain by the ding-dong of witty and logically built-up dialogue: in some of these plays dialogue seems to have degenerated into meaningless babble. A well-made play is expected to have a beginning, a middle, and a neatly tied-up ending: these plays often start at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily.** By all the traditional standards of critical appreciation of the drama, these plays are not only abominably bad, they do not even deserve the name drama.

**And yet, strangely enough, these plays have *worked*, they have had an effect, they have exercised a fascination of their own in the theatre.** At first it was said that this fascination was merely a *succès de scandale*, that people flocked to see Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco's *Bald Primadonna* merely because it had become fashionable to express outrage and astonishment about them at parties. But

this explanation clearly could not apply to more than one or two plays of this kind. And the success of a whole row of similarly unconventional works became more and more manifest. If the critical touchstones of conventional drama did not apply to these plays, this must surely have been due to a difference in objective, the use of different artistic means, to the fact, in short, that these plays were both creating and applying a different *convention* of drama. It is just as senseless to condemn an abstract painting because it lacks perspective or a recognizable subject-matter as it is to reject *Waiting for Godot* because it has no plot to speak of. In painting a composition of squares and lines an artist like Mondrian does not *want* to depict any object in nature, he does not *want* to create perspective. Similarly, in writing *Waiting for Godot* Beckett did not intend to tell a story, he did not want the audience to go home satisfied that they knew the solution to the problem posed in the play. Hence there is no point in reproaching him with not doing what he never sought to do; the only reasonable course is to try and find out what it was that he did intend.

Yet, if tackled directly most of the playwrights in question would refuse to discuss any theories or objectives behind their work. They would, with perfect justification, point out that they are concerned with one thing only: to express their vision of the world as best they can, simply because, as artists, they feel an irrepressible urge to do so. This is where the critic can step in. By describing the works that do not fit into the established convention, by bringing out the similarities of approach in a number of more or less obviously related new works, by analysing the nature of their method and their artistic effect, he can try to define the framework of the new convention, and by doing so, can provide the standards by which it will become possible to have works in that convention meaningfully compared and evaluated. The onus of proof that there is such a convention involved clearly lies on the critic, but if he can establish that there are basic similarities in approach, he can argue that these similarities must arise from common factors in the experience of the writers concerned. And these common factors must in turn spring from the spiritual climate of our age (which no sensitive artist can escape) and also perhaps from a common background of artistic influences, a similarity of roots, a shared tradition.



A term like the Theatre of the Absurd must therefore be understood as a kind of intellectual shorthand for a complex pattern of similarities in approach, method, and convention, of shared philosophical and artistic premises, whether conscious or subconscious, and of influences from a common store of tradition. A label of this kind therefore is an aid to understanding, valid only in so far as it helps to gain insight into a work of art. It is not a binding classification; it is certainly not all-embracing or exclusive. A play may contain *some* elements that can best be understood in the light of such a label, while other elements in the same play derive from and can best be understood in the light of a different convention. Arthur Adamov, for example, has written a number of plays that are prime examples of the Theatre of the Absurd. He now quite openly and consciously rejects this style and writes in a different, realistic convention. Nevertheless even his latest plays, which are both realistic and socially committed, contain some aspects which can still be elucidated in terms of the Theatre of the Absurd (such as the use of symbolic interludes, *guignols*, in his play *Spring '71*). Moreover, once a term like Theatre of the Absurd is defined and understood, it acquires a certain value in throwing light on works of previous epochs. The Polish critic Jan Kott, for example, has written a brilliant study of *King Lear* in the light of Beckett's *Endgame*. And that this was no vain academic exercise but a genuine aid to understanding is shown by the fact that Peter Brook's great production of *King Lear* took many of its ideas from Kott's essay.

**What then *is* the convention of drama that has now acquired the label of the Theatre of the Absurd?**

Let us take one of the plays in this volume as a starting point: Ionesco's *Amédée*. A middle-aged husband and wife are shown in a situation which is clearly not taken from real life. They have not left their flat for years. The wife earns her living by operating some sort of telephone switchboard; the husband is writing a play, but has never got beyond the first few lines. In the bedroom is a corpse. It has been there for many years. It may be the corpse of the wife's lover whom the husband killed when he found them together, but this is by no means certain; it may also have been a burglar, or a stray visitor. But the oddest thing about it is that it keeps growing larger and larger; it is suffering from 'geometric progression, the incurable disease of the dead'. And in the course of the play it grows so large that eventually an enormous foot bursts from the bedroom into the living-room,

threatening to drive Amédée and his wife out of their home. All this is wildly fantastic, yet it is not altogether unfamiliar, for it is not unlike situations most of us have experienced at one time or another in dreams and nightmares.

Ionesco has in fact put a dream situation onto the stage, and in a dream quite clearly the rules of realistic theatre no longer apply. Dreams do not develop logically; they develop by association. Dreams do not communicate ideas; they communicate images. And indeed the growing corpse in *Amédée* can best be understood as a poetic image. It is in the nature both of dreams and poetic imagery that they are ambiguous and carry a multitude of meanings at one and the same time, so that it is futile to ask what the image of the growing corpse stands for. On the other hand one can say that the corpse *might* evoke the growing power of past mistakes or past guilt, perhaps the waning of love or the death of affection - some evil in any case that festers and grows worse with time. The image can stand for any and all of these ideas, and its ability to embrace them all gives it the poetic power it undoubtedly possesses.

Not all the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd can be described simply as dreams (although Adamov's *Professor Taranne* in this volume actually came to Adamov as a dream, Albee's *Zoo Story* is clearly far more firmly anchored in reality) but in all of them the poetic image is the focus of interest. In other words: while most plays in the traditional convention are primarily concerned to tell a story or elucidate an intellectual problem, and can thus be seen as a narrative or discursive form of communication, the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are primarily intended to convey a poetic image or a complex pattern of poetic images; they are above all a poetical form. Narrative or discursive thought proceeds in a dialectical manner and must lead to a result or final message; it is therefore dynamic and moves along a definite line of development. Poetry is above all concerned to convey its central idea, or atmosphere, or mode of being; it is essentially static.

This does not mean, however, that these plays lack movement: the movement in *Amédée*, for instance, is relentless, lying as it does in the pressure of

the ever-growing corpse. But the situation of the play remains static; the movement we see is the unfolding of the poetic image. The more ambiguous and complex that image, the more intricate and intriguing will be the process of revealing it. That is why a play like *Waiting for Godot* can generate considerable suspense and dramatic tension in spite of being a play in which literally *nothing* happens, a play designed to show that nothing *can* ever happen in human life. It is only when the last lines have been spoken and the curtain has fallen that we are in a position to grasp the total pattern of the complex poetic image we have been confronted with. If, in the traditional play, the action goes from point A to point B, and we constantly ask, 'what's going to happen next?', here we have an action that consists in the gradual unfolding of a complex pattern, and instead we ask, 'what is it that we are seeking? What will the completed image be when we have grasped the nature of the pattern?' Thus in Arrabal's *The Two Executioners* in this volume we realise at the end of the play that the theme is the exploration of a complex image of the mother-son relationship; in Albee's *Zoo Story* it is only in the last lines of the play that the idea of the entire dialogue between Jerry and Peter falls into place, as an image of the difficulty of communication between human beings in our world.

Why should the emphasis in drama have shifted away from traditional forms towards images which, complex and suggestive as they may be, must necessarily lack the final clarity of definition, the neat resolutions we have been used to expect? Clearly because the playwrights concerned no longer believe in the possibility of such neatness of resolution. They are indeed chiefly concerned with expressing a sense of wonder, of incomprehension, and at times of despair, at the lack of cohesion and meaning that they find in the world. If they could believe in clearly defined motivations, acceptable solutions, settlements of conflict in tidily tied up endings, these dramatists would certainly not eschew them. But, quite obviously, they have no faith in the existence of so rational and well ordered a universe. The 'well-made play' can thus be seen as conditioned by clear and comforting beliefs, a stable scale of values, an ethical system in full working condition. The system of values, the world-view behind the well-made play may be a religious one or a political one; it may be an implicit belief in the goodness and perfectibility of men (as in Shaw or Ibsen) or it may be a mere unthinking acceptance of the moral and political status quo (as in most drawing-room comedy). But whatever it is, the basis of the well-made play is the implicit assumption that the world does make sense, that reality is solid and secure, all

outlines clear, all ends apparent. The plays that we have classed under the label of the Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, express a sense of shock at the absence, the loss of any such clear and well-defined systems of beliefs or values.

There can little doubt that such a sense of disillusionment, such a collapse of all previously held firm beliefs is a characteristic feature of our own times. The social and spiritual reasons for such a sense of loss of meaning are manifold and complex: the waning of religious faith that had started with the Enlightenment and led Nietzsche to speak of the 'death of God' by the eighteen-eighties; the breakdown of the liberal faith in inevitable social progress in the wake of the First World War; the disillusionment with the hopes of radical social revolution as predicted by Marx after Stalin had turned the Soviet Union into a totalitarian tyranny; the relapse into barbarism, mass murder, and genocide in the course of Hitler's brief rule over Europe during the Second World War; and, in the aftermath of that war, the spread of spiritual emptiness in the outwardly prosperous and affluent societies of Western Europe and the United States. There can be no doubt: for many intelligent and sensitive human beings the world of the mid twentieth century *has* lost its meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. Previously held certainties have dissolved, the firmest foundations for hope and optimism have collapsed. Suddenly man sees himself faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical - in a word, absurd. All assurances of hope, all explanations of ultimate meaning have suddenly been unmasked as nonsensical illusions, empty chatter, whistling in the dark. If we try to imagine such a situation in ordinary life, this might amount to our suddenly ceasing to understand the conversation in a room full of people; what made sense at one moment has, at the next, become an obscure babble of voices in a foreign language. At once the comforting, familiar scene would turn into one of nightmare and horror. With the loss of the means of communication we should be compelled to view that world with the eyes of total outsiders as a succession of frightening images.

Such a sense of loss of meaning must inevitably lead to a questioning of the recognised instrument for the *communication* of meaning: language. Consequently the Theatre of the Absurd is to a very considerable extent concerned with a critique of language, an attack above all on fossilized forms of language which have

become devoid of meaning. The conversation at the party which at one moment *seemed* to be an exchange of information about the weather, or new books, or the respective health of the participants, is suddenly revealed as an exchange of mere meaningless banalities. The people talking about the weather had no intention whatever of really exchanging meaningful information on the subject; they were merely using language to fill the emptiness between them, to conceal the fact that they had no desire to tell each other anything at all. In other words, from being a noble instrument of genuine communication language has become a kind of ballast filling empty spaces. And equally, in a universe that seems to be drained of meaning, the pompous and laborious attempts at explanation that we call philosophy or politics must appear as empty chatter. In *Waiting for Godot* for example Beckett parodies and mocks the language of philosophy and science in Lucky's famous speech. Harold Pinter, whose uncanny accuracy in the reproduction of real conversation among English people has earned him the reputation of having a tape-recorder built into his memory, reveals that the bulk of everyday conversation is largely devoid of logic and sense, is in fact nonsensical. It is at this point that the Theatre of the Absurd can actually coincide with the highest degree of realism. For if the real conversation of human beings is in fact absurd and nonsensical, then it is the well-made play with its polished logical dialogue that is unrealistic, while the absurdist play may well be a tape-recorded reproduction of reality. Or, in a world that has become absurd, the Theatre of the Absurd is the most realistic comment on, the most accurate reproduction of, reality.

In its critique of language the Theatre of the Absurd closely reflects the preoccupation of contemporary philosophy with language, its effort to disentangle language, as a genuine instrument for logic and the discovery of reality, from the welter of emotive, illogical usages, the grammatical conventions that have, in the past, often been confused with genuine logical relationships. And equally, in its emphasis on the basic absurdity of the human condition, on the bankruptcy of all closed systems of thought with claims to provide a total explanation of reality, the Theatre of the Absurd has much in common with the existential philosophy of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. (It was in fact Camus who coined the concept of the Absurd in the sense in which it is used here.) This is not to say that the dramatists of the Absurd are trying to translate contemporary philosophy into drama. It is merely that philosophers and dramatists respond to the same cultural and spiritual situation and reflect the same preoccupations.

Yet, however contemporary the Theatre of the Absurd may appear it is by no means the revolutionary novelty as which some of its champions, as well as some of its bitterest critics, tend to represent it. In fact the Theatre of the Absurd can best be understood as a new combination of a number of ancient, even archaic, traditions of literature and drama. It is surprising and shocking merely because of the unusual nature of the combination and the increased emphasis on aspects of drama that, while present in all plays, rarely emerge into the foreground.

The ancient traditions combined in a new form in the Theatre of the Absurd are: the tradition of miming and clowning that goes back to the *mimus* of Greece and Rome, the *commedia dell' arte* of Renaissance Italy, and such popular forms of theatre as the pantomime or the music-hall in Britain; the equally ancient tradition of nonsense poetry; the tradition of dream and nightmare literature that also goes back to Greek and Roman times; allegorical and symbolic drama, such as we find it in medieval morality plays, or in the Spanish *auto sacramental*; the ancient tradition of fools and mad scenes in drama, of which Shakespeare provides a multitude of examples; and the even more ancient tradition of ritual drama that goes back to the very origins of the theatre where religion and drama were still one. It is no coincidence that one of the masters of the Theatre of the Absurd, Jean Genet, regards his plays as attempts at recapturing the ritual element in the Mass itself, which, after all, can be seen as a poetic image of an archetypal event brought to life through a sequence of symbolical actions.

It is against this background that we must see the history of the movement which culminates in Beckett, Ionesco, or Genet. Its immediate forebears are dramatists like Strindberg, who progressed from photographic naturalism to more and more openly expressionist representations of dreams, nightmares, or obsessions in plays like the *Ghost Sonata*, *Dream Play*, or *To Damascus*, and novelists like James Joyce and Kafka. A form of drama concerned with dream-like imagery and the failure of language was bound to find inspiration also in the silent cinema, with its dream-like quality and cruel, sometimes nightmare humour. Charlie Chaplin's little man and Buster Keaton's stonefaced stoic are among the

openly acknowledged influences of writers like Beckett and Ionesco. These comedians, after all, derive from the most ancient traditions of clowning, as do, in the talking cinema, the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, or Laurel and Hardy, all clearly part of the tradition which leads to the Theatre of the Absurd.

Another direct and acknowledged influence is that of the Dadaists, the surrealists, and the Parisian avant-garde that derives from writers like Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, first performed in 1896, might in fact be called the first modern example of the Theatre of the Absurd. It is a savage farce in which monstrous puppets castigate the greed and emptiness of bourgeois society through a series of grotesque stage images. Apollinaire's play *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* ('The Breasts of Tiresias') was the first play to be labelled by its author as 'a surrealist drama'. Here too the action proceeds through a series of savagely grotesque images; the hero, or rather the heroine, Thérèse-Tiresias changes sex by letting her breasts float towards the heavens in the shape of two toy balloons. Jarry and Apollinaire were the direct precursors of the Dadaists in Switzerland, France and Germany. Brecht's earliest plays bear the marks of the Dadaist influence and can be regarded as early examples of the Theatre of the Absurd: *In the Jungle of the Cities* for instance presents the audience with a totally unmotivated struggle, a series of poetic images of man fighting a senseless battle with himself. In France the two leading exponents of surrealism in drama were Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and Roger Vitrac (1899-1952). Vitrac's play *Victor ou Les Enfants au Pouvoir* (1924) anticipates Ionesco and Arrabal by showing the world from the point of view of a nine-year-old child of giant size and monstrous intelligence. Artaud, who wrote very little in dramatic form himself, is of immense importance as a theoretician of the new anti-literary theatre: he coined the slogan of the 'Theatre of Cruelty' for his conception of a theatre designed to shock its audience into a full awareness of the horror of the human condition. Jean-Louis Barrault and Roger Blin, two of the leading directors of the contemporary avant-garde theatre, were pupils of Artaud; Arthur Adamov was among his closest friends.

In its present form the Theatre of the Absurd is a post-war phenomenon. Genet's *The Maids* had its first performance at the Athénée in Paris in 1947;

Ionesco's *Bald Primadonna* and Adamov's earliest plays were first produced in 1950; Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1952. It will be noticed that all these first performances took place in Paris. And Paris certainly is the fountainhead of the Theatre of the Absurd. Yet it is equally strange and significant that the playwrights themselves are largely exiles from other countries domiciled in Paris: Beckett (born 1906) an Anglo-Irishman who writes in French; Ionesco (born 1912) half-French and half-Rumanian; Adamov (born 1908) a Russo-Armenian. Only Genet is a Frenchman born and bred, but then he is an exile in a different sense: an exile from society itself, a child abandoned by his mother, brought up by foster-parents and drifting from detention centres for juvenile delinquents into an underworld of thieves and male prostitutes, prison and penitentiary. It is in the experience of the outcast or exile that our image of the world seen from the outside assumes a new and added significance: for the exile, from his country or from society, moves in a world drained of meaning, sees people in pursuit of objectives he cannot comprehend, hears them speak a language that he cannot follow. The exile's basic experience is the archetype and the anticipation of twentieth-century man's shock at his realization that the world is ceasing to make sense.

Of the dramatists of the Absurd Samuel Beckett is undoubtedly the profoundest, the greatest poet. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are certainly masterpieces; *Happy Days* and *Play*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and the two *Acts without Words* (where language has drained away altogether) are brilliant and profound poetic images; and the radio plays *All that Fall*, *Embers*, *Words and Music*, and *Cascando* have an equal enigmatic power.

Jean Genet (born 1910) lacks Beckett's discipline, intellect and erudition, but he too is a poet, endowed with the wellnigh magic power of creating beauty from evil, corruption and excrement. If the evanescence of man in time and the mystery of human personality and identity are Beckett's main themes, Genet's chief concern is with the falseness of human pretensions in society, the contrast between appearance and reality, which itself must remain for ever elusive. In *The Maids* we see the servants bound in a mixture of hatred and erotic dependence to their mistress, re-enacting this love-hate in an endless series of ritual games; in *The Balcony* society itself is symbolized in the image of a brothel providing its



customers with the illusions of power; and in *The Blacks* we are back with the underdog acting out his hatred for his oppressor (which is also a form of love) in an endless ritual of mock-murder.

Jean Tardieu (born 1903) and Boris Vian (1920-59) are among the best of the French dramatists of the Absurd. Tardieu is an experimenter who has systematically explored the possibilities of a theatre that can divorce itself from discursive speech to the point where language becomes mere musical sound. Vian, a devoted follower of Jarry, wrote a play, *The Empire Builders*, which shows man fleeing from death and loneliness in the image of a family moving into ever smaller flats on higher and higher floors of a mysterious building.

In Italy Dino Buzzati and Ezio d'Errico, in Germany Günter Grass (known as a novelist for his monumental *Tin Drum*) and Wolfgang Hildesheimer are the main exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd. In Britain, N. F. Simpson, [James Saunders](#), David Campton, and Harold Pinter might be classed under this heading. N. F. Simpson has clear links with English nonsense literature, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. James Saunders, particularly in [Next Time I'll Sing to You](#), expresses in dramatic form the thought of the existential philosophers. Pinter, who acknowledges Kafka and Beckett among his literary heroes, combines realism with an intuition of the absurdity of human existence. In his later work he has shed some of the allegorical symbolism of his beginnings, but even in seemingly realistic plays like *The Collection* there is an absence of motivation and solution, a multiple ambiguity and a sense of non-communication which transforms the seemingly realistic account of humdrum adultery into a poetic image of the human condition.

Behind the Iron Curtain, where socialist realism is the official creed in the theatre, there would appear to be no room for an avant-garde trend of this type. Yet there is one country where the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd has produced some astonishingly successful plays: Poland, an area of relative artistic freedom since the defeat of the Stalinists by Gomulka in the autumn of 1956. A strong surrealist influence was present in Poland even before the war (Gombrowicz and

Witkiewicz are two dramatists who might be regarded as among the most important immediate precursors of the Theatre of the Absurd) so that the soil was fertile for a development which was further fostered by the ability of drama of this kind to express political comment in a suitably oblique form. A number of young dramatists, notably Slawomir Mrozek and Tadeusz Rozewicz, have produced outstandingly original work in the convention of the Absurd.

Three of the playwrights represented in this volume are Parisian exiles. Eugène Ionesco is undoubtedly the most fertile and original of the dramatists of the Absurd, and also, in spite of a streak of clowning and fun for its own sake in his work, one of the most profound. He is moreover the most vocal of the dramatists of the Absurd, the only one who is prepared to discuss the theoretical foundations of his work and to reply to the attacks on it from committed left-wing realists. The critique of language and the haunting presense of death are Ionesco's chief themes in plays like *The Bald Primadonna*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs*, *The Killer*, *Rhinoceros*, and *Exit The King*. *Amédée or How to Get Rid of It* (1953) is Ionesco's first full-length play and contains one of his most telling images. It is also characteristic in its alternation between states of depression and euphoria, leaden oppression and floating on air, an image which reappears through his work and which culminates, in this particular play, in Amédée's floating away at the end.

Arthur Adamov today belongs to the camp against which Ionesco directs his harshest polemics, the socialist realists whose organ is the periodical *Théâtre populaire*, but he started out as a follower of Artaud, a self-confessed neurotic, an alien in a senseless world. Adamov's development from one extreme to the other is a fascinating artistic and psychological case history, in which *Professor Taranne* occupies a key position. Adamov's progress can be seen as a process of psychological therapy through writing. Unable to face the reality of the outside world, he started out by projecting his oppressions and anxieties on to the stage. Nothing would have induced him, he has since confessed, to mention any element of the real world, such as a place-name in one of his plays; he would have regarded that as a piece of unspeakable vulgarity. And yet, when he committed to paper the dream which is now the play *Professor Taranne*, he realized that a real place-name, that of Belgium, had occurred in the dream. Truthfulness in transcribing the

dream thus forced him to compromise on one of his fundamental artistic principles. And from then onwards reality kept breaking through into his writing in ever more insistent form, until today he is a thorough-going realist of the Brechtian school. That is to say, by writing his obsessions out of his system, Adamov acquired the ability to face and to control the objective world from which he had withdrawn into neurosis. It might be argued that the projection of neurotic obsessions is both more interesting and more illuminating in providing insights into the dark side of the human mind than the accurate transcription of historical events, and that therefore Adamov's absurdist plays are more fascinating, more successful than his later efforts. But this is a matter of taste as well as of ideological bias. The fact remains that *Professor Taranne* and the somewhat more realistic *Ping Pong* are undoubtedly among Adamov's best plays.

Fernando Arrabal (born 1932) is a Spaniard who has been living in France since 1954 and now writes in French. He is an admirer of Beckett, but sees his roots in the surrealist tradition of Spain, a country that has always been rich in fantasy and the grotesque (El Greco, Goya) and that in more recent times has produced such outstanding representatives of the modern movement as the painter Picasso (who has himself written two plays in an absurdist vein) and the writers Lorca and Valle Inclàn. Arrabal's own contribution to the absurdist spectrum is a highly original one: his main preoccupation is with the absurdity of ethical and moral rules. He looks at the world with the incomprehension of a child that simply cannot understand the logic of conventional morality. Thus, in *The Automobile Graveyard* there is a prostitute who follows her profession simply because religion demands that one be kind to one's neighbours; how then could she refuse them the ultimate kindness of giving herself to them? And similarly in *The Two Executioners* the rebel son who objects to the tortures that his mother inflicts on his father is faced with the dilemma of several contradictory moral laws: obedience to one's father, the human goodness that prompts one to save the suffering victim from his torturers, and the need to honour and obey one's mother. These moral laws are here in obvious conflict, as it is the mother who has the father tortured. Clearly the situation in which several moral laws are in contradiction exposes the absurdity of the system of values that accommodates them all. Arrabal refuses to judge; he merely notes the position and shows that he finds it beyond his comprehension.

Edward Albee (born 1928) is one of the few American exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd. An adopted child, he shares with Genet the orphan's sense of loneliness in an alien world; and the image of the dream child which exists only in the adoptive parents' imagination recurs in a number of his plays, notably *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. The latter, which has earned him an enormous success on Broadway, is undoubtedly one of the finest American plays since the heyday of Eugene O'Neill. It is a savage dance of death reminiscent of Strindberg, outwardly realistic in form, but in fact, as in the case of Pinter's best work, existing on at least two levels apart from the realistic one: as an allegory of American society, a poetic image of its emptiness and sterility, and as a complex ritual on the pattern of Genet. *The Zoo Story* (1958), one of Albee's earliest dramatic ventures, has a similar complexity: it is a clinically accurate study of Schizophrenia, an image of man's loneliness and inability to make contact, and also, on the ritual and symbolic level, an act of ritual self-immolation that has curious parallels with Christ's atonement. (Note the names Jerry - Jesus? - and Peter).

The plays in this volume, like the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd in general, present a disillusioned, harsh, and stark picture of the world. Though often couched in the form of extravagant fantasies, they are nevertheless essentially realistic, in the sense that they never shirk the realities of the human mind with its despair, fear and loneliness in an alien and hostile universe. There is more human reality in the grotesquely extravagant images of *Amédée* than in many far longer plays in a convention that is a mere photographic copy of the surface of life. The realism of these plays is a psychological, and inner realism; they explore the human sub-conscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence. Nor is it quite correct that these plays, deeply pessimistic as they are, are nothing but an expression of utter despair. **It is true that basically the Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear**

it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely *because* there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world.

The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.

## Characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd

- \_ Situations and characters' emotional states may be represented through poetic metaphor (dreamlike, fantastical or nightmarish images).
- \_ The notion of realism is rejected: situations and characters are not “realistic” and characters are often placed in obviously unreal situations.
- \_ Set and costumes may not reflect an outward reality.
- \_ Dialogue is often nonsensical, clichéd or gibberish.
- \_ Communication is fractured.
- \_ There is usually an emphasis on “theatricality” as opposed to realism.
- \_ Absurdist playwrights often use dark comedy for satiric effect.
- \_ Characters exist in a bubble without the possibility of communication.
- \_ Characters may be one-dimensional, with no clear motivation or purpose.
- \_ Characters may be symbolic of universal situations.
- \_ Behaviour and situations may not follow the rules of logic.
- \_ Structure may be circular, without a precise resolution.
- \_ Action may be minimal.
- \_ Setting of the play may be in one locale.
- \_ Often characters perceive a threat from the “outside”, leading to a sense of powerlessness.

## The Absurd Hero

Sisyphus is the absurd hero. This man, sentenced to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain and then watching its descent, is the epitome of the absurd hero according to Camus. In retelling the Myth of Sisyphus, Camus is able to create an extremely powerful image with imaginative force which sums up in an emotional sense the body of the intellectual discussion which precedes it in the book. We are told that Sisyphus is the absurd hero "as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing." (p.89). Sisyphus is conscious of his plight, and therein lies the tragedy. For if, during the moments of descent, he nourished the hope that he would yet succeed, then his labour would lose its torment. But Sisyphus is clearly conscious of the extent of his own misery. It is this lucid recognition of his destiny that transforms his torment into his victory. It has to be a victory for as Camus says:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (p.91).

Sisyphus' life and torment are transformed into a victory by concentrating on his freedom, his refusal to hope, and his knowledge of the absurdity of his situation. In the same way, Dr. Rieux is an absurd hero in *The Plague*, for he too is under sentence of death, is trapped by a seemingly unending torment and, like Sisyphus, he continues to perform his duty no matter how useless or how insignificant his action. In both cases it matters little for what reason they continue to struggle so long as they testify to man's allegiance to man and not to abstractions or 'absolutes'.

The ideas behind the development of the absurd hero are present in the first three essays of the book. In these essays Camus faces the problem of suicide. In his typically shocking, unnerving manner he opens with the bold assertion that:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. (p. 3).

He goes on to discover if suicide is a legitimate answer to the human predicament. Or to put it another way: Is life worth living now that god is dead? The discussion begins and continues not as a metaphysical cobweb but as a well reasoned statement based on a way of knowing which Camus holds is the only epistemology we have at our command. We know only two things:

This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. (p. 14)

With these as the basic certainties of the human condition, Camus argues that there is no meaning to life. He disapproves of the many philosophers who "have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living." (p.7) Life has no absolute meaning. In spite of the human's irrational "nostalgia" for unity, for absolutes, for a definite order and meaning to the "not me" of the universe, no such meaning exists in the silent, indifferent universe. Between this yearning for meaning and eternal verities and the actual condition of the universe there is a gap that can never be filled. The confrontation of the irrational, longing human heart and the indifferent universe brings about the notion of the absurd. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. (p.21)

and further:

The absurd is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together...it is the only bond uniting them. (p. 21)

People must realize that the feeling of the absurd exists and can happen to them at any time. The absurd person must demand to live solely with what is known and to bring in nothing that is not certain. This means that all I know is that I exist, that the world exists ,and that I am mortal.

Doesn't this make a futile pessimistic chaos of life? Wouldn't suicide be a legitimate way out of a meaningless life? "No." "No." answers Camus. Although the absurd cancels all chances of eternal freedom it magnifies freedom of action. Suicide is "acceptance at its extreme", it is a way of confessing that life is too much for one. This is the only life we have; and even though we are aware, in fact, because we are aware of the absurd, we can find value in this life. The value is in our freedom, our passion, and our revolt. The first change we must make to live in the absurd situation is to realize that thinking, or reason, is not tied to any eternal mind which can unify and "make appearances familiar under the guise of a great principle," but it is:

...learning all over again to see, to be attentive, to focus consciousness; it is turning every idea and every image, in the manner of Proust, into a privileged moment. (p. 20)



My experiences, my passions, my ideas, my images and memories are all that I know of this world - and they are enough. The absurd person can finally say "all is well". I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone. (p. 41)

Camus then follows his notions to their logical conclusions and insists that people must substitute quantity of experience for quality of experience. The purest of joys is "feeling, and feeling on this earth." This statement cannot be used to claim a hedonism as Camus's basic philosophy, but must be thought of in connection with the notion of the absurd that has been developed in the early part of the essay. Man is mortal. The world is not. A person's dignity arises from a consciousness of death, an awareness that eternal values and ideas do not exist, and a refusal to give in to the notion of hope or appeal for something that we are uncertain of.

In the following essays, Camus presents examples of the absurd person. We are given Don Juan, the actor, and the conqueror as examples of people who multiply their lives in an attempt to live fully within the span of their mortality. But more important is the creator who is discussed in the essay "Absurd Creation". "The absurd joy par excellence is creation." For in creating a work of art the creator is living doubly in as much as his creation is a separate life. "The artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work." Works of art become, then, the one means for a person to support and sustain a lucid consciousness in the face of the absurdity of the universe.

The present and the succession of presents before an ever conscious mind, this is the ideal of the absurd man. (p. 81)

Art is for Camus an essential human activity and one of the most fundamental. It expresses human aspirations toward freedom and beauty, aspirations which make life valuable for each transient human being. Art defies that part of existence in which each individual is no more than a social unit or an insignificant cog in the evolution of history.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* then we find the philosophical basis for the stranger, the doctor, and the judge-penitent. This is the starting point of Camus's thought. Camus is concerned here as in his other works with persons and their world, the relationships between them, and the relationships between persons and their history. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he opposes himself to the rationalism of classical philosophy which seeks universal and enduring truths or a hierarchy of values which is crowned by God; he believes that truth is found by a subjective intensity of passion; he maintains that the individual is always free and involved in choice; he recognizes that persons exist in the world and are naturally related with it; he is deeply concerned with the significance of death, its inevitability and its finality. The absurd is a revolt against tomorrow and as

such comes to terms with the present moment. Suicide consents to the absurd as final and limitless while revolt is an ongoing struggle with the absurd and brings with it man's redemption.

One can see now why Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is conscious of his plight: it was his scorn of the gods, hatred of death, and passion for life that won him the penalty of rolling a rock to the top of the mountain forever, and he does not appeal to hope or to any uncertain gods. His is the ultimate absurd, for there is not death at the end of his struggle. All is not chaos; the experience of the absurd is the proof of man's uniqueness and the foundation of his dignity and freedom.

All that remains is a fate whose outcome alone is fatal. Outside of that single fatality of death, everything, joy or happiness, is liberty. A world remains of which man is the sole master. What bound him was the illusion of another world. The outcome of his thought, ceasing to be renunciatory, flowers in images. It frolics - in myths, to be sure, but myths with no other depth than that of human suffering and like it inexhaustible. Not the divine fable that amuses and blinds, but the terrestrial face, gesture, and drama in which are summed up a difficult wisdom and an ephemeral passion. (p. 87)  
One could do worse than to consider the myths-retold in the works of Camus.

# Cormac McCarthy

## The Sunset Limited

### Introduction:

The drama of the post-war period, from the 1950's onward reflects the dominant spirit of the age focusing on the prevailing social, political and religious situations with deteriorating values and attitudes, the post-war drama explores the darker regions of human psyche, the nothingness of human existence and the pessimistic approach towards life. The daring drama of this period focuses on how to face the realities of life, how to take suffering as it comes and how to accept man's unheroic status in the absurd universe where he is forced to live.

The play, *The Sunset Limited* is based on confrontation of two contrasting ideologies faced by modern man, i-e, atheism and firm belief in God. The debate between Black and White in *The Sunset Limited* is the debate between believer and non-believer, between optimism and pessimism and between hope and despair. In a philosophical argumentation, both not only express their outlooks on life and religion but also attempt hard to convince the other.

Cormac McCarthy's play, *The Sunset Limited*, subtitled as *A Novel in Dramatic Form*, has been set in New York city. It opens in Black's apartment of a tenement building, situated in Black ghetto. It is a one-act drama which consists of one-scene conversation between two strangers named Black and White. White is an intellectual professor who has been badly affected by depression and as a result he has given up on life. In contrast to him, Black, a nigger from Louisiana, is a reformed prisoner who is convinced that he is being guided by God. The meeting and lengthy dialogue between them is the result of suicidal attempt of depressed White in front of *The Sunset Limited*, a subway train where he is saved by Black who brings him to his apartment. White is an atheist and is forced to suffer a crisis of faith after he has been saved by believer of God. White yearns to die and Black yearns to save the soul of White, taking it as a serious and important purpose of life. Therefore, White all along tries to leave the apartment for the train station to end the meaningless drama of his life; whereas Black all along tries to prevent White from doing so. The plot unfolds and develops with White's rude and flat rejection of Black's point of view, the invitation of the Black to eat something and the prison stories of the Black. It seems that the friendship may put an end to the suicidal depression. The climax is reached when in a monologue, White admits that he has lost all faith in God and

brotherhood and persistently demands to be released. Understanding his failure to stop White from killing himself, Black finally unlocks the door. Though the play ends with White's intellectual triumph and Black's rhetorical defeat, Black is also victorious in remaining unchanged and committed to his strong belief in God and mankind.

The title of the play *The Sunset Limited* is, in fact, the name of an Armtrak train which rides toward West. This train actually goes from Louisiana to California. Riding westward can make this train named *The Sunset Limited*, to be symbolic of the via for taking the final journey which is 'death'. It means travelling west of the real sunset limited can be a symbol of White's decision to embrace death by throwing himself before this train. White decides so because in his opinion if ultimately death has to come, whether sooner or later, then it should be rather met with quickly instead of lingering in the world where life has become meaningless. The selection of names Black and White by Cormac stand for opposing forces, i-e, religion and no-religion.

This thought-provoking exchange of dialogue is the comparative study of the depth of complexities prevailing in modern man's ideological differences concerning despair, existence and meaning of life, brotherhood and power of faith. The story told by Cormac McCarthy in *The Sunset Limited*, has been in many respects influenced by Samuel Beckett's masterpiece, 'Waiting for Godot', especially for having two major characters to deal with the conflict, using the technique of conversation throughout the play, focusing upon the theme of 'hopeless hope' and sharing suicidal tendency in characters. But Cormac McCarthy's individuality is obvious in his development of the plot in the play. It is clearly described with White's decisiveness not to wait for God as he does not believe in him rather he selects the path of suicide to leave the world while frequently mentioning of having to go (almost twenty times in the play). Same is the case with Black who is all for optimism and tries his utmost to prevent White's suicide fail, weeps in the end because of the rhetorical victory of White over him, but it is he who proclaims, at the same time, his strong and firm faith in God and His word whether He speaks to him again or not.

# The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form

First published in 2006

This is a room in a tenement building in a black ghetto in New York City. There is a kitchen with a stove and a large refrigerator. A door to the outer hallway and another presumably to a bedroom. The hallway door is fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars. There is a cheap Formica table in the room and two chrome and plastic chairs. There is a drawer in the table. On the table is a Bible and a newspaper. A pair of glasses. A pad and pencil. A large black man is sitting in one chair (stage right) and in the other a middle aged white man dressed in running pants and athletic shoes. He wears a T shirt and the jacket, which matches the pants, hangs on the chair behind him.

BLACK. So what am I supposed to do with you, Professor?

WHITE. Why are you supposed to do anything?

BLACK. I done told you. This ain't none of my doin. I left out of here this mornin to go to work you wasn't no part of my plans at all. But here you is.

WHITE. It doesn't mean anything. Everything that happens doesn't mean something else.

BLACK. Mm hm. It don't.

WHITE. No. It doesn't.

BLACK. What's it mean then?

WHITE. It doesn't mean anything. You run into people and maybe some of them are in trouble or whatever but it doesn't mean that you're responsible for them.

BLACK. Mm hm.

WHITE. Anyway, people who are always looking out for perfect strangers are very often people who won't look out for the ones they're supposed to look out for. In my opinion. If you're just doing what you're supposed to then you don't get to be a hero.

BLACK. And that would be me.

WHITE. I don't know. Would it?

BLACK. Well, I can see how they might be some truth in that. But in this particular case I might say I sure didn't know what sort of person I was supposed to be on the lookout for or what I was supposed to do when I found him. In this particular case they wasn't but one thing to go by.

WHITE. And that was?

BLACK. That was that there he is standin there. And I can look at him and I can say: Well, he don't look like my brother. But there he is. Maybe I better look again.

WHITE. And that's what you did.

BLACK. Well, you was kindly hard to ignore. I got to say that your approach was pretty direct.

WHITE. I didn't approach you. I didn't even see you.

BLACK. Mm hm.

WHITE. I should go. I'm beginning to get on your nerves.

BLACK. No you ain't. Don't pay no attention to me. You seem like a sweet man, Professor. I reckon what I don't understand is how come you to get yourself in such a fix.

WHITE. Yeah.

BLACK. Are you okay? Did you sleep last night?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. When did you decide that today was the day? Was they somethin 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 your birthday was comm up and that seemed like the right day.

WHITE. Who knows? Maybe birthdays are dangerous. Like Christmas. Ornaments hanging from the trees, wreaths from the doors, and bodies from the steam pipes all over America.

BLACK. Mm. Don't say much for Christmas, does it?

WHITE. Christmas is not what it used to be.

BLACK. I believe that to be a true statement. I surely do.

WHITE. I've got to go. (He gets up and takes his jacket off the back of the chair and lifts it over his shoulders and then puts his arms in the sleeves rather than putting his arms in first one at a time.)

BLACK. You always put your coat on like that?

WHITE. What's wrong with the way I put my coat on?

BLACK. I didn't say they was nothin wrong with it. I just wondered if that was your regular method.

WHITE. I don't have a regular method. I just put it on.

BLACK. Mm hm.

WHITE. It's what, effeminate?

BLACK. Mm.

WHITE. What?

BLACK. Nothin. I'm just settin here studyin the ways of professors.

WHITE. Yeah. Well, I've got to go. (The black gets up.)

BLACK. Well. Let me get my coat.

WHITE. Your coat?

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. Where are you going?

BLACK. Goin with you.

WHITE. What do you mean? Going with me where?

BLACK. Goin with you wherever you goin.

WHITE. No you're not.

BLACK. Yeah I am.

WHITE. I'm going home.

BLACK. All right.

WHITE. All right? You're not going home with me.

BLACK. Sure I am. Let me get my coat.

WHITE. You can go home with me.

BLACK. Why not?

WHITE. You can't.

BLACK. What. You can go home with me but I can't go home with you?

WHITE. No. I mean no, that's not it. I just need to go home.

BLACK. You live in a apartment?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. What. They don't let black folks in there?

WHITE. No. I mean of course they do. Look. No more jokes. I've got to go. I'm very tired.

BLACK. Well I just hope we don't run into no hassle about you gettin me in there.

WHITE. You're serious.

BLACK. Oh I think you know I'm serious.

WHITE. You can't be serious.

BLACK. I'm as serious as a heart attack.

WHITE. Why are you doing this?

BLACK. Me? I ain't got no choice in the matter.

WHITE. Of course you have a choice.

BLACK. No I ain't.

WHITE. Who appointed you my guardian angel?

BLACK. Let me get my coat.

WHITE. Answer the question.

BLACK. You know who appointed me. I didn't ask for you to leap into my arms down in the subway this mornin.

WHITE. I didn't leap into your arms.

BLACK. You didn't?

WHITE. No. I didn't.

BLACK. Well how did you get there then? (The professor stands with his head lowered. He looks at the chair and then turns and goes and sits down in it.) What. Now we ain't gain?

WHITE. Do you really think that Jesus is in this room?

BLACK. No. I don't think he's in this room.

WHITE. You don't?

BLACK. I know he's in this room. (The professor folds his hands at the table and lowers his head. The black pulls out the other chair and sits again.) It's the way you put it, Professor. Be like me askin you do you think you got your coat on. You see what I'm sayin?

WHITE. It's not the same thing. It's a matter of agreement. If you and I say that I have my coat on and Cecil says that I'm naked and I have green skin and a tail then we might want to think about where we should put Cecil so that he won't hurt himself

BLACK. Who's Cecil?

WHITE. He's not anybody. He's just a hypothetical ... There's not any Cecil. He's just a person I made up to illustrate a point.

BLACK. Made up.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Mm.

WHITE. We're not going to get into this again are we? It's not the same thing. The fact that I made Cecil up.

BLACK. But you did make him up.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. And his view of things don't count.

WHITE. No. That's why I made him up. I could have changed it around. I could have made you the one that didn't think I was wearing a coat.

BLACK. And was green and all that shit you said.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. But you didn't.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. You loaded it off on Cecil.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. But Cecil can't defend hisself cause the fact that he ain't in agreement with everybody else makes his word no good. I mean aside from the fact that you made him up and he's green and everthing.

WHITE. He's not the one who's green. I am. Where is this going?

BLACK. I'm just tryin to find out about Cecil.

WHITE. I don't think so. Can you see Jesus?

BLACK. No. I can't see him.

WHITE. But you talk to him.

BLACK. I don't miss a day.

WHITE. And he talks to you.

BLACK. He has talked to me. Yes.

WHITE. Do you hear him? Like out loud?



BLACK. Not out loud. I don't hear a voice. I don't hear my own, for that matter. But I have heard him.

WHITE. Well why couldn't Jesus just be in your head?

BLACK. He is in my head.

WHITE. Well I don't understand what it is that you're trying to tell me.

BLACK. I know you don't, honey. Look. The first thing you got to understand is that I ain't got a original thought in my head. If it ain't got the lingerin scent of divinity to it then I ain't interested.

WHITE. The lingering scent of divinity.

BLACK. Yeah. You like that?

WHITE. It's not bad.

BLACK. I heard it on the radio. Black preacher. But the point is I done tried it the other way. And I don't mean chipped, neither. Runnin blindfold through the woods with the bit tween your teeth. Oh man. Didn't I try it though. If you can find a soul that give it a better shot than me I'd like to meet him. I surely would. And what do you reckon it got me?

WHITE. I don't know. What did it get you?

BLACK. Death in life. That's what it got me.

WHITE. Death in life.

BLACK. Yeah. Walkin around death. Too dead to even know enough to lay down.

WHITE. I see.

BLACK. I don't think so. But let me ask you this question.

WHITE. All right.

BLACK. Have you ever read this book?

WHITE. I've read parts of it. I've read in it

BLACK. Have you ever read it?

WHITE. I read the Book of Job.

BLACK. Have. You. Ever. Read. It.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. But you is read a lot of books.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. How many would you say you read?

WHITE. I've no idea.

BLACK. Ball park.

WHITE. I don't know. Two a week maybe. A hundred a year. For close to forty years. (The black takes up his pencil and licks it and falls to squinting at his pad, adding numbers laboriously, his tongue in the corner of his mouth, one hand on his head.) Forty times a hundred is four thousand.

BLACK. (Almost laughing.) I'm just messin with you, Professor. Give me a number. Any number you like. And I'll give you forty times it back.

WHITE. Twenty six.

BLACK. A thousand and forty.

WHITE. A hundred and eighteen.

BLACK. Four thousand seven hundred and twenty.

WHITE. Four thousand seven hundred and twenty.

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. The answer is the question.

BLACK. Say what?

WHITE. That's your new number.

BLACK. Four thousand seven hundred and twenty?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. That's a big number, Professor.

HITE. Yes it is.

BLACK. Do you know the answer?

WHITE. No. I don't.

BLACK. It's a hundred and eighty eight thousand and eight hundred. (They sit.)

WHITE. Let me have that. (The black slides the pad and pencil across the table. The professor does the figures and looks at them and looks at the black. He slides the pencil and paper back across the table and sits back.) How do you do that?

BLACK. Numbers is the black man's friend. Butter and eggs. Crap table. You quick with numbers you can put the mojo on you brother. Confiscate the contents of his pocketbook. You get a lot of time to practice that shit in the jailhouse.

WHITE. I see.

BLACK. But let's get back to all them books you done read. You think maybe you read four thousand books.

WHITE. Probably. Maybe more than that.

BLACK. But you ain't read this one.

WHITE. No. Not the whole book. No.

BLACK. Why is that?

WHITE. I don't know.

BLACK. What would you say is the best book that ever was wrote?

WHITE. I have no idea.

BLACK. Take a shot.

WHITE. There are a lot of good books.

BLACK. Well pick one.

WHITE. Maybe War and Peace.

BLACK. All right. You think that's a better book than this one?

WHITE. I don't know. They're different kinds of books.

BLACK. This War and Peace book. That's a book that somebody made up, right?

WHITE. Well, yes.

BLACK. So is that how it's different from this book?

WHITE. Not really. In my view they're both made up.

BLACK. Mm. Ain't neither one of em true.

WHITE. Not in the historical sense. No.

BLACK. So what would be a true book?

WHITE. I suppose maybe a history book. Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire might be one. At least the events would be actual events. They would be things that had happened.

BLACK. Mm hm. You think that book is as good a book as this book here?

WHITE. The Bible.

BLACK. The Bible.

WHITE. I don't know. Gibbon is a cornerstone. It's a major book.

BLACK. And a true book. Don't forget that.

WHITE. And a true book. Yes.

BLACK. But is it as good a book.

WHITE. I don't know. I don't know as you can make a comparison. You're talking about apples and pears.

BLACK. No we ain't talkin bout no apples and pears, Professor. We talkin bout books. Is that Decline and Fall book as good a book as this book here. Answer the question.

WHITE. I might have to say no.

BLACK. It's more true but it ain't as good.

WHITE. If you like.

BLACK. It ain't what I like. It's what you said.

WHITE. All right. (The black lays the Bible back down on the table.)

BLACK. It used to say here on the cover fore it got wore off: The greatest book ever written. You think that might be true?

WHITE. It might.

BLACK. You read good books.

WHITE. I try to. Yes.

BLACK. But not the best book. Why is that?

WHITE. I need to go.

BLACK. You don't need to go, Professor. Stay here and visit with me.

WHITE. You're afraid I'll go back to the train station.

BLACK. You might. Just stay with me.

WHITE. What if I promised I wouldn't?

BLACK. You might anyways.

WHITE. Don't you have to go to work?

BLACK. I was on my way to work.

WHITE. A funny thing happened to you on your way to work.

BLACK. Yes it did.

WHITE. Will they fire you?

BLACK. Naw. They ain't goin fire me.

WHITE. You could call in.

BLACK. Ain't got a phone. Anyways, they know if I ain't there I ain't comin. I ain't a late sort of person.

WHITE. Why don't you have a phone?

BLACK. I don't need one. The junkies'd steal it anyways.

WHITE. You could get a cheap one.

BLACK. You can't get too cheap for a junky. But let's get back to you.

WHITE. Let's stick with you for a minute.

BLACK. All right.

WHITE. Can I ask you something?

BLACK. Sure you can.

WHITE. Where were you standing? I never saw you.

BLACK. You mean when you took your amazin leap?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. I was on the platform.

WHITE. On the platform.

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. Well I didn't see you.

BLACK. I was just standin there on the platform. Mindin my own business. And here you come. Hauling ass.

WHITE. I'd looked all around to make sure there was no one there. Particularly no children. There was nobody around.

BLACK. Nope. Just me.

WHITE. Well I don't know where you could have been.

BLACK. Mm. Professor you fixin to get spooky on me now. Maybe I was behind a post or somethin.

WHITE. There wasn't any post.

BLACK. So what are we sayin here? You lookin at some big black angel got sent down here to grab your honky ass out of the air at the last possible minute and save you from destruction?

WHITE. No. I don't think that.

BLACK. Such a thing ain't possible.

WHITE. No. It isn't.

BLACK. Well you the one suggested it.

WHITE. I did m suggest any such thing. You're the one put in the stuff about angels. I never said anything about angels. I don't believe in angels.

BLACK. What is it you believe in?

WHITE. A lot of things.

BLACK. All right.

WHITE. All right what?

BLACK. All right what things.

WHITE. I believe in things.

BLACK. You said that.

WHITE. Probably I don't believe in a lot of things that I used to believe in but that doesn't mean I don't believe in anything.

BLACK. Well give me a for instance.

WHITE. Mostly the value of things.

BLACK. Value of things.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Okay. What things.

WHITE. Lots of things. Cultural things, for instance. Books and music and art. Things like that.

BLACK. All right.

WHITE. 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.

BLACK. What happened to em?

WHITE. People stopped valuing them. I stopped valuing them. To a certain extent. I'm not sure I could tell you why. That world is largely gone. Soon it will be wholly gone.

BLACK. I ain't sure I'm followin you, Professor.

WHITE. There's nothing to follow. It's all right. The things that I loved were very frail. Very fragile. I didn't know that. I thought they were indestructible. They weren't.

BLACK. And that's what sent you off the edge of the platform. It wasn't nothin personal.

WHITE. It is personal. That's what an education does. It makes the world personal.

BLACK. Hm.

WHITE. Hm what.

BLACK. Well. I was just thinkin that them is some pretty powerful words. I don't know that I got a answer about any of that and it might be that they ain't no answer. But still I got to ask what is the use of notions such as them if it won't keep you glued down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through at eighty mile a hour.

WHITE. Good question.

BLACK. I thought so.

WHITE. I don't have an answer to any of that either. Maybe it's not logical. I don't know. I don't care. I've been asked didn't I think it odd that I should be present to witness the death of everything and I do think it's odd but that doesn't mean it's not so. Someone has to be here.

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

WHITE. No. I don't.

BLACK. So let me see if I got this straight. You sayin that all this culture stuff is all they ever was tween you and the Sunset Limited.

WHITE. It's a lot.

BLACK. But it busted out on you.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. You a culture junky.

WHITE. If you like. Or I was. Maybe you're right. Maybe I have no beliefs. I believe in the Sunset Limited.

BLACK. Damn, Professor.

WHITE. Damn indeed.

BLACK. No beliefs.

WHITE. The things I believed in don't exist any more. It's foolish to pretend that they do. Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now.

BLACK. You a challenge, Professor. Did you know that?

WHITE. Well, there's no reason for you to become involved in my problems. I should go.

BLACK. You got any friends?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. You ain't got even one friend?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. You got to be kiddin me, Professor. Not one?

WHITE. Not really. No.

BLACK. Well tell me about that one.

WHITE. What one?

BLACK. The not really one.

WHITE. I have a friend at the university. Not a close friend. We have lunch from time to time.

BLACK. But that's about as good as it gets.

WHITE. What do you mean?

BLACK. That's about all you got in the way of friends.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Mm. Well. If that's the best friend you got then I reckon that's your best friend. Ain't it?

WHITE. I don't know.

BLACK. What did you do to him.

WHITE. What did I do to him?

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. I didn't do anything to him.

BLACK. Mm hm.

WHITE. I didn't do anything to him. What makes you think I did something to him?

BLACK. I don't know. Did you?

WHITE. No. What is it you think I did to him?

BLACK. I don't know. I'm waitin on you to tell me.

WHITE. Well there's nothing to tell.

BLACK. But you didn't leave him no note or nothin. When you decided to take the train.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. Your best friend?

WHITE. He's not my best friend.

BLACK. I thought we just got done deciding that he was.

WHITE. You just got done deciding.

BLACK. You ever tell him you was thinkin about this?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. Damn, Professor.

WHITE. Why should I?

BLACK. I don't know. Maybe cause he's your best friend?

WHITE. I told you. We're not all that close.

BLACK. Not all that close.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. He's your best friend only you ain't all that close.

WHITE. If you like.

BLACK. Not to where you'd want to bother him about a little thing like dyin.

WHITE. (Looking around the room.) Look. Suppose I were to give you my word that I would just go home and that I wouldn't try to kill myself en route.

BLACK. Suppose I was to give you my word that I wouldn't listen to none of your bullshit.

WHITE. So what am I, a prisoner here?

BLACK. You know better n that. Anyway, you was a prisoner fore you got here. Death Row prisoner. What did your daddy do?

WHITE. What?

BLACK. I said what did your daddy do. What kind of work.

WHITE. He was a lawyer.

BLACK. Lawyer.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. What kind of law did he do?

WHITE. He was a government lawyer. He didn't do criminal law or things like that.

BLACK. Mmhm. What would be a thing like criminal law?

WHITE. I don't know. Divorce law, maybe.

BLACK. Yeah. Maybe you got a point. What did he die of?

WHITE. Who said he was dead?

BLACK. Is he dead?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. What did he die of?

WHITE. Cancer.

BLACK. Cancer. So he was sick for a while.

WHITE. Yes. He was.

BLACK. Did you go see him?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. How come?

WHITE. I didn't want to.

BLACK. Well how come you didn't want to?

WHITE. I don't know. I just didn't. Maybe I didn't want to remember him that way.

BLACK. Bullshit. Did he ask you to come?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. But your mama did.

WHITE. She may have. I don't remember.

BLACK. Come on, Professor. She asked you to come.

WHITE. Okay. Yes.

BLACK. And what did you tell her?

WHITE. I told her I would.

BLACK. But you didn't.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. How come?

WHITE. He died.

BLACK. Yeah; but that ain't it. You had time to go see him and you didn't do it.

WHITE. I suppose.

BLACK. You waited till he was dead.

WHITE. Okay. So I didn't go and see my father.

BLACK. Your daddy is layin on his deathbed dyin of cancer. Your mama settin there with him. Holdin his hand. He in all kinds of pain. And they ask you to come see him one last time fore he dies and you tell em no. You ain't comin. Please tell me I got some part of this wrong.

WHITE. If that's the way you want to put it.

BLACK. Well how would you put it?

WHITE. I don't know.

BLACK. That's the way it is. Ain't it?

WHITE. I suppose.

BLACK. No you don't suppose. Is it or ain't it?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Well. Let me see if I can find my train schedule. (He opens the table drawer and rummages through it.) See when that next uptown express is due.

WHITE. I'm not sure I see the humor.



BLACK. I'm glad to hear you say that, Professor. Cause I ain't sure either. I just get more amazed by the minute, that's all. How come you can't see yourself, honey? You plain as glass. I can see the wheels turnin in there. The gears. And I can see the light too. Good light. True light. Can't you see it?

WHITE. No. I can't.

BLACK. Well bless you, brother. Bless you and keep you. Cause it's there. (They sit.)

WHITE. When were you in the penitentiary?

BLACK. Long time ago.

WHITE. What were you in for?

BLACK. Murder.

WHITE. Really?

BLACK. Now who would claim to be a murderer that wasn't one?

WHITE. You called it the jailhouse.

BLACK. Yeah?

WHITE. Do most blacks call the penitentiary the jailhouse?

BLACK. Naw. Just us old country niggers. We kind of make it a point to call things for what they is. I'd hate to guess how many names they is for the jailhouse. I'd hate to have to count em.

WHITE. Do you have a lot of jailhouse stories?

BLACK. Jailhouse stories.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. I don't know. I used to tell jailhouse stories some but they kindly lost their charm. Maybe we ought to talk about some thin more cheerful.

WHITE. Have you ever been married?

BLACK. Married.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. (Softly.) Oh man.

WHITE. What.

BLACK. Maybe we ought to take another look at them jailhouse stories. (He shakes his head, laughing soundlessly. He pinches the bridge of his nose, his eyes shut.) Oh my.

WHITE. Do you have any children?

BLACK. Naw, Professor, I ain't got nobody. Everybody in my family is dead. I had two boys. They been dead for years. Just about everybody I ever knowed is dead, far as that goes. You might want to think about that. I might be a hazard to your health.

WHITE. You were always in a lot of trouble?

BLACK. Yeah. I was. I liked it. Maybe I still do. I done seven years hard time and I was lucky not to of done a lot more. I hurt a lot of people. I'd smack em around a little and then they wouldn't get up again.

WHITE. But you don't get in trouble now.

BLACK. No.

WHITE. But you still like it?

BLACK. Well, maybe I'm just condemned to it. Bit in the ass by my own karma. But I'm on the other side now. You want to help people that's in trouble you pretty much got to go where the trouble is at. You ain't got a lot of choice.

WHITE. And you want to help people in trouble.

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. Why is that? (The black tilts his head and studies him.)

BLACK. You ain't ready for that.

WHITE. How about just the short answer.

BLACK. That is the short answer.

WHITE. How long have you been here?

BLACK. You mean in this buildin'?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Six years. Seven, almost.

WHITE. I don't understand why you live here.

BLACK. As compared to where?

WHITE. Anywhere.

BLACK. Well I'd say this pretty much is anywhere. I could live in another buildin I reckon. This is all right. I got a bedroom where I can get away. Got a sofa yonder where people can crash. Junkies and crackheads, mostly. Of course they goin to carry off your portables so I don't own nothin. And that's good. You hang out with the right crowd and you'll finally get cured of just about ever cravin. They took the refrigerator one time but somebody caught em on the stairs with it and made em bring it back up. Now I got that big sucker yonder. Traded up. Only thing I miss is the music. I aim to get me a steel door for the bedroom. Then I can have me some music again. You got to get the door and the frame together. I'm workin on that. I don't care nothin about television but I miss that music.

WHITE. You don't think this is a terrible place?

BLACK. Terrible?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. What's terrible about it?

WHITE. It's horrible. It's a horrible life.

BLACK. Horrible life?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Damn, Professor. This ain't a horrible life. What you talking about?

WHITE. This place. It's a horrible place. Full of horrid people.

BLACK. Oh my.

WHITE. You must know these people are not worth saving. Even if they could be saved. Which they can't. You must know that.

BLACK. Well, I always liked a challenge. I started a ministry in prison fore I got out. Now that was a challenge. Lot of the brothers'd show up that they didn't really care nothin bout it. They couldn't of cared less bout the word of God. They just wanted it on their resume.

WHITE. Resume?

BLACK. Resume. You had brothers in there that had done some real bad shit and they wasn't sorry about a damn thing cept gettin caught. Of course the funny thing was a lot of em did believe in God. Maybe even more than these folks here on the outside. I know I did. You might want to think about that, Professor.

WHITE. I think I'd better go.

BLACK. You don't need to go, Professor. What am I goin to do, you leave me settin here by myself?

WHITE. You don't need me. You just don't want to feel responsible if anything happens to me.

BLACK. What's the difference?

WHITE. I don't know. I just need to go.

BLACK. Just stay a while. This place is got to be more cheerful than you own.

WHITE. I don't think you have any idea how strange it is for me to be here.

BLACK. I think I got some idea.

WHITE. I have to go.

BLACK. Let me ask you somethin.

WHITE. All right.

BLACK. You ever had one of them days when things was just sort of weird all the way around? When things just kindly fell into place?

WHITE. I'm not sure what you mean.

BLACK. Just one of them days. Just kind of magic. One of them days when everthing turns out right.

WHITE. I don't know. Maybe. Why?

BLACK. I just wondered if maybe it ain't been kindly a long dry spell for you. Until you finally took up with the notion that that's the way the world is.

WHITE. The way the world is.

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. And how is that?

BLACK. I don't know. Long and dry. The point is that even if it might seem that way to you you still got to understand that the sun don't shine up the same dog's ass ever day. You understand what I'm sayin?

WHITE. If what you're saying is that I'm simply having a bad day that's ridiculous.

BLACK. I don't think you havin a bad day, Professor. I think you havin a bad life.

WHITE. You think I should change my life.

BLACK. What, are you shittin me?

WHITE. I have to go.

BLACK. You could hang with me here a little while longer.

WHITE. What about my jailhouse story?

BLACK. You don't need to hear no jailhouse story.

WHITE. Why not?

BLACK. Well, you kind of suspicious bout everthing. You think I'm fixin to put you in the trick bag.

WHITE. And you're not.

BLACK. Oh no. I am. I just don't want you to know about it.

WHITE. Well, in any case I need to go.

BLACK. You know you ain't ready to hit the street.

WHITE. I have to.

BLACK. I know you ain't got nothin you got to do.

WHITE. And how do you know that?

BLACK. Cause you ain't even supposed to be here.

WHITE. I see your point.

BLACK. What if I was to tell you a jailhouse story? You stay then?

WHITE. All right. I'll stay for a while.

BLACK. My man. All right. Here's my jailhouse story.

WHITE. Is it a true story?

BLACK. Oh yeah. It's a true story. I don't know no other kind.

WHITE. All right.

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. Says the beans is cold and he throws the ladle down in the beans. And when he done that they was beans splashed on me. Well, I wasn't goin to get into it over some beans but it did piss me off some. I'd just put on a clean suit - you know, khakis, shirt and trousers - and you only got two a week. And I did say some thin to him like Hey man, watch it, or somethin like that. But I went on, and I'm thinkin, just let it go. Let it go. And then this dude says somethin to me and I turned and looked back at him and when I done that he stuck a knife in me. I never even seen it. And the blood is just flyin. And this ain't no jailhouse shiv neither. It's one of them Italian switchblades. One of them black and silver jobs. And I didn't do a thing in the world but duck and step under the rail and I reached and got hold of the leg of this table and it come off in my hand just as easy. And it's got this big long screw stickin out of the end of it and I went to wailin on this nigger's head and I didn't quit. I beat on it till you couldn't hardly tell it was a head. And that screw'd stick in his head and I'd have to stand on him to pull it out again.

WHITE. What did he say?

BLACK. What did he say?

WHITE. I mean in the line. What did he say.

BLACK. I ain't goin to repeat it.

WHITE. That doesn't seem fair.

BLACK. Don't seem fair.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. Hm. Well, here I'm tellin you a bona fide blood and guts tale from the Big House. The genuine article. And I can't get you to fill in the blanks about what this nigger said?

WHITE. Do you have to use that word?

BLACK. Use that word.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. We ain't makin much progress here, is we?

WHITE. It just seems unnecessary.

BLACK. You don't want to hear nigger but you about to bail out on me on account of I won't tell you some terrible shit the nigger said. You sure about this?

WHITE. I just don't see why you have to say that word.

BLACK. Well it's my story ain't it? Anyway I don't remember there bein no Afro-Americans or persons of color there. To the best of my recollection it was just a bunch of niggers.

WHITE. Go ahead.

BLACK. Well at some point I had pulled the knife out and I reckon I'd done dropped it in the floor. I'm wailin on this nigger's head and all the time I'm doin that his buddy has got hold of me from behind. But I'm holdin on to the rail with one hand and I ain't goin nowhere. Course what I don't know is that this other dude has picked up the knife and he's tryin to gut me with it. I finally felt the blood and I turned around and busted him in the head and he went skitterin off across the floor, and by now they done pushed the button and the alarm is goin everybody's down on the floor and we're in lockdown and the guard up on the tier is got a shotgun pointed at me and he hollers at me to put down my weapon and get on the floor. And he's about to shoot me when the lieutenant comes in and hollers at him to hold his fire and he tells me to throw that club down and I looked around and I'm the only one standin. I seen the nigger's feet stickin out from under the servin counter where he'd crawled so I throwed the thing down and I don't remember much after that. They told me I'd lost about half my blood. I remember slippin around in it but I thought it was this other dude's.

WHITE. (Dryly.) That's quite a story.

BLACK. Yeah. That's really just the introduction to the actual story.

WHITE. Did the man die?

BLACK. No he didn't. Everybody lived. They thought he was dead but he wasn't. He never was right after that so I never had no more trouble out of him. He was missin a eye and he walked around with his head sort of sideways and one arm hangin down. Couldn't talk right. They finally shipped him off to another facility.

WHITE. But that's not the whole story.

BLACK. No. It ain't.

WHITE. So what happened.

BLACK. I woke up in the infirmary. They had done operated on me. My spleen was cut open. Liver. I don't know what all. I come pretty close to dyin. And I had two hundred and eighty stitches holdin me together and I was hurtin. I didn't know you could hurt that bad. And still they got me in leg irons and got me handcuffed to the bed. If you can believe that. And I'm layin there and I hear this voice. Just as clear. Couldn't of been no clearer. And this voice says: If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here. Man. I tried to raise up and look around but of course I couldn't move. Wasn't no need to anyways. They wasn't nobody there. I mean, they was somebody there all right but they wasn't no use in me lookin around to see if I could see him.

WHITE. You don't think this is a strange kind of story?

BLACK. I do think it's a strange kind of story.

WHITE. What I mean is that you didn't 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 isn't it?

BLACK. I don't know.

WHITE. You hadn't thought of it that way.

BLACK. Oh I'd thought of it that way.

WHITE. And?

BLACK. And what?

WHITE. Isn't that the real story?

BLACK. Well. I don't want to get on the wrong side of you. You seem to have a powerful wish for that to be the real story. So I will say that that is certainly one way to look at it. I got to concede that. I got to keep you interested.

WHITE. String me along.

BLACK. That okay with you?

WHITE. And then put me in the what was it? The trick bag?

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. Right.

BLACK. You got to remember this is a jailhouse story.

WHITE. All right.

BLACK. Which you specifically asked for.

WHITE. All right.

BLACK. The point is, Professor, that I ain't got the first notion in the world about what makes God tick. I don't know why he spoke to me. I wouldn't of.

WHITE. But you listened.

BLACK. Well what choice would you have?

WHITE. I don't know. Not listen?

BLACK. How you goin to do that?

WHITE. Just don't listen.

BLACK. Do you think he goes around talkin to people that he knows ain't goin to listen in the first place? You think he's got that kind of free time?

WHITE. I see your point.

BLACK. If he didn't know I was ready to listen he wouldn't of said a word.

WHITE. He's an opportunist.

BLACK. Meanin I guess that he seen somebody in a place low enough to where he ought to be ready to take a pretty big step.

WHITE. Something like that.

BLACK. And you think that maybe I think that you might be in somethin like that kind of a place you own self

WHITE. Could be.

BLACK. Well I can dig that. I can dig it. Of course they is one small problem.

WHITE. And that is.

BLACK. I ain't God.

WHITE. I'm glad to hear you say that.

BLACK. It come as a relief to me too.

WHITE. Did you used to think you were God?

BLACK. No. I didn't. I didn't know what I was. But I thought I was in charge. I never knowed what that burden weighed till I put it down. That might of been the sweetest thing of all. To just hand over the keys.

WHITE. Let me ask you something.

BLACK. Ask it.

WHITE. Why can't you people just accept it that some people don't even want to believe in God.

BLACK. I accept that.

WHITE. You do?

BLACK. Sure I do. Meanin that I believe it to be a fact. I'm lookin at it ever day. I better accept it.

WHITE. Then why can't you leave us alone?

BLACK. To do your own thing.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Hangin from them steam pipes and all.

WHITE. If that's what we want to do, yes.

BLACK. Cause he said not to. It's in here. (Holding up the book. The professor shakes his head.) I guess you don't want to be happy.

WHITE. Happy?

BLACK. Yeah. What's wrong with happy?

WHITE. God help us.

BLACK. What. We done opened a can of worms here? What you got against bein happy?

WHITE. It's contrary to the human condition.

BLACK. Well. It's contrary to your condition. I got to agree with that.

WHITE. Happy. This is ridiculous.

BLACK. Like they ain't no such a thing.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. Not for nobody.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. Mm. How'd we get in such a fix as this?

WHITE. We were born in such a fix as this. Suffering and human destiny are the same thing. Each is a description of the other.

BLACK. We ain't talkin about sufferin. We talkin about bein happy.

WHITE. Well you can't be happy if you're in pain.

BLACK. Why not?

WHITE. You're not making any sense. (The black falls back clutching his chest.)

BLACK. Oh them is some hard words from the professor. The preacher has fell back. He's clutchin his heart. Eyes is rolled back in his head. Wait a minute. Wait a minute folks. His eyes is blinking. I think he's comin back. I think he's comin back. (The black sits up and leans forward.) The point, Professor, is that if you didn't have no pain in your life then how would you even know you was happy? As compared to what?

WHITE. You don't have anything to drink around here do you?

BLACK. No, Professor, I ain't. You a drinkin man?

WHITE. Are we about to get a temperance lecture?

BLACK. Not from me.

WHITE. It's been a difficult day. I take it you don't drink.

BLACK. I don't. I have done my share of it in my time.

WHITE. Are you in AA?

BLACK. No. No AA. I just quit. I've had a lots of friends was drinkers. Most of em, for that matter. Most of em dead, too.

WHITE. From drinking.

BLACK. Well. From drinkin or from reasons that don't get too far from drinkin. Not too long ago I had a friend to get run down by a taxicab. Now where do you reckon he was goin? Drunk.

WHITE. I don't know. Where was he going?

BLACK. Goin after more whiskey. Had plenty at the house. But a drunk is always afraid of runnin out.

WHITE. Was he killed?



BLACK. I hope so. We buried him.

WHITE. I suppose there's a moral to this story.

BLACK. Well, it's just a story about what you want and what you get. Pain and happiness. I'll tell you another one.

WHITE. All right.

BLACK. One Sunday they's a bunch of us settin around at my house drinkin. Sunday mornin. Favorite time for drunks to get together and drink and I'll let you think about why that might be so. Well here come one of my buddies with this girl. Evelyn. And Evelyn was drunk when she got there but we fixed her a drink and directly Redge - my buddy - he goes back in the kitchen to get him a drink only now the bottle's gone. Well, Redge has been around a few drinkin people in his time so he commences to hunt for the bottle. Looks in all the cabinets and behind everthing. He can't find it but of course he knows what's happened to it so he comes back in and he sets down and he looks at Miss Evelyn settin there on the sofa. Drunk as a goat. And he says: Evelyn, where's the whiskey? And Evelyn, she goes: Ah ghaga baba lala ghaga. And he says: Evelyn, where did you put the whiskey? Ah lala blogggleblabla. And Redge is settin there and this is beginnin' to piss him off just a little and he gets in her face and he goes: Ah loddle loddle blabble ghaga blabla and she says I hid it in the toilet.

WHITE. That's pretty funny.

BLACK. I thought you might like that.

WHITE. And is that where the whiskey was?

BLACK. Oh yeah. That's a favorite place for drunks to hide a bottle. But the point of course is that the drunk's concern ain't that he's goin to die from drinkin - which he is. It's that he's goin to run out of whiskey fore he gets a chance to do it. Are you hungry? I can come back to this. I ain't goin to lose my place.

WHITE. I'm all right. Go ahead.

BLACK. If you was to hand a drunk a drink and tell him he really don't want it what do you reckon he'd say?

WHITE. I think I know what he'd say.

BLACK. Sure you do. But you'd still be right.

WHITE. About him not really wanting it.

BLACK. Yes. Because what he really wants he can't get. Or he thinks he can't get it. So what he really don't want he can't get enough of.

WHITE. So what is it that he really wants.

BLACK. You know what he really wants.

WHITE. No I don't.

BLACK. Yeah you do.

WHITE. No I don't.

BLACK. Hm.

WHITE. Hm what.

BLACK. You a hard case, Professor.

WHITE. You're not exactly a day at the beach yourself.

BLACK. You don't know what he wants.

WHITE. No. I do not.

BLACK. He wants what everybody wants.

WHITE. And that is?

BLACK. He wants to be loved by God.

WHITE. I don't want to be loved by God.

BLACK. I love that. See how you cut right to it? He don't either. Accordin to him. He just wants a drink of whiskey. You a smart man, Professor. You tell me which one makes sense and which one don't.

WHITE. I don't want a drink of whiskey, either.

BLACK. I thought you just got done askin for one?

WHITE. I mean as a general proposition.

BLACK. We ain't talkin' about no general propositions. We talkin' about a drink.

WHITE. I don't have a drinking problem.

BLACK. Well you got some kind of a problem.

WHITE. Well whatever kind of a problem I have it's not something that I imagine can be addressed with a drink of liquor.

BLACK. Mm. I love the way you put that. So what can it be addressed with?

WHITE. I think you know what it can be addressed with.

BLACK. The Sunset Limited.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. And that's what you want.

WHITE. That's what I want. Yes.

BLACK. That's a mighty big drink of whiskey, Professor.

WHITE. That I don't really want.

BLACK. That you don't really want. Yes.

WHITE. Well. I think I do want it.

BLACK. Of course you do, honey. If you didn't we wouldn't be settin here.

WHITE. Well. I disagree with you.

BLACK. That's all right. That's the hand I'm playin.

WHITE. I don't think you understand that people such as myself see a yearning for God as something lacking in those people.

BLACK. I do understand that. Couldn't agree more.

WHITE. You agree with that?

BLACK. Sure I do. What's lackin is God.

WHITE. Well, as I say, we'll just have to disagree.

BLACK. You ain't closin down the forum for discussion are you?

WHITE. Not at this juncture.

BLACK. Cause I had a little more to say.

WHITE. How did I know that?

BLACK. I did go to one or two AA meetins. Lot of folks didn't like the God part of it all that much but I hadn't set there too long fore I figured out that the God part was really all the part they was. The problem wasn't that they was too much God in AA it was that they wasn't enough. And I got a pretty thick head about some things but I finally figured out that what was true about AA was probably true about a lot of other things too.

WHITE. Well I'm sorry, but to me the whole idea of God is just a load of crap. (The black puts his hand to his chest and leans back.)

BLACK. Oh Lord have mercy oh save us Jesus. The professor's done blasphemed all over us. We ain't never gone be saved now. (He closes his eyes and shakes his head, laughing silently.)

WHITE. You don't find that an evil thing to say.

BLACK. Oh mercy. No, Professor. I don't. But you does.

WHITE. No I don't. It's simply a fact.

BLACK. No it ain't no simply a fact. It's the biggest fact about you. It's just about the only fact.

WHITE. But you don't seem to think that it's so bad.

BLACK. Well, I know it to be curable. So it ain't that bad. If you talkin about what that man up there thinks about it I figure he's probably seen enough of it that it don't bother him as bad as you might think. I mean, what if somebody told you that you didn't exist. And you settin' there listenin' to him say it. That wouldn't really piss you off, would it?

WHITE. No. You'd just feel sorry for them.

BLACK. I think that's right. You might even try to get some help for em. Now in my case he had to holler at me out loud and me layin on a slab in two pieces that they'd sewed back together where some nigger done tried to core me like a apple but still I got to say that if God is God then he can speak to your heart at any time and Furthermore I got to say that if he spoke to me - which he did - then he can speak to anybody. (The black drums his fingers lightly three times on the table and looks at the professor. Silence.) Well. Wonder what this crazy nigger fixin to do. He liable to put the mojo on me. Be speakin in tongues here directly. I better get my ass out of here. He's liable to try and steal my pocketbook. Need to get my ass down to the train depot fore somethin happen to me. What we goin to do with you, Professor?

WHITE. I need to go.

BLACK. I thought you was goin to stay and visit with me some.

WHITE. Look. I know I owe you a good deal. In the eyes of the world at least. Can't I just give you something and we'll call il square? I could give you some money.

Something like that. (The Black studies him. He doesn't answer.) I could give you a thousand dollars. Well. That's not very much, I guess. I could give you three thousand, say.

BLACK. You don't have no notion the trouble you in, do you?

WHITE. I don't know what you mean.

BLACK. I know you don't.

WHITE. I'd just like to settle this someway.

BLACK. It ain't me you got to settle with.

WHITE. Do you really believe I was sent to you by God?

BLACK. Oh it's worse than that.

WHITE. How do you mean?

BLACK. Belief ain't like unbelief. If you a believer then you got to come finally to the well of belief itself and then you don't have to look no further. There ain't no further. But the unbeliever has got a problem. He has set out to unravel the world, but everthing he can point to that ain't true leaves two new things layin there. If God walked the earth when he got done makin it then when you get up in the mornin' you get to put your feet on a real floor and you don't have to worry about where it come from. But if he didn't then you got to come up with a whole other description of what you even mean by real. And you got to judge everthing by that same light. If light it is. Includin yourself. One question fits all. So what do you think, Professor? Is you real?

WHITE. I'm not buying it.

BLACK. That's all right. It's been on the market a long time and it'll be there a while yet.

WHITE. Do you believe everything that's in there? In the Bible?

BLACK. The literal truth?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Probably not. But then you already know I'm a outlaw.

WHITE. What is it you would disagree with?

BLACK. Maybe the notion of original sin. When Eve eat the apple and it turned everybody bad. I don't see people that way. I think for the most part people are good to start with. I think evil is somethin you bring on your own self. Mostly from wantin' what you ain't supposed to have. But I ain't goin to set here and tell you about me bein a heretic when I'm tryin to get you to quit bein one.

WHITE. Are you a heretic?

BLACK. You tryin to put me in the trick bag, Professor.

WHITE. No I'm not. Are you?

BLACK. No more than what a man should be. Even a man with a powerful belief. I ain't a doubter. But I am a questioner.

WHITE. What's the difference?

BLACK. Well, I think the questioner wants the truth. The doubter wants to be told there ain't no such thing.

WHITE. (Pointing at Bible.) You don't think you have to believe everything in there in order to be saved?

BLACK. No. I don't. I don't think you even have to read it. I ain't for sure you even got to know there is such a book. I think whatever truth is wrote in these pages is wrote in the human heart too and it was wrote there a long time ago and will still be wrote there a long time hence. Even if this book is burned ever copy of it. What Jesus said? I don't think he made up a word of it. I think he just told it. This book is a guide for the ignorant and the sick at heart. A whole man wouldn't need it at all. And of course if you read this book you goin to find that they's a lot more talk in here about the wrong way than they is about the right way. Now why is that?

WHITE. I don't know. Why is it?

BLACK. I'd rather hear from you.

WHITE. I'll have to think about it.

BLACK. Okay. (Silence.)

WHITE. Okay what?

BLACK. Okay go ahead and think about it.

WHITE. It might take me a little longer than you to think about something.

BLACK. That's all right.

WHITE. That's all right.

BLACK. Yes. I mean they's two ways you can take that remark but I'm gain to take it the good way. It's just my nature. That way I get to live in my world instead of yours.

WHITE. What makes you think mine's so bad?

BLACK. Oh I don't know as it's so bad. I know it's brief.

WHITE. All right. Are you ready?

BLACK. I'm ready.

WHITE. I think the answer to your question is that the dialectic of the homily always presupposes a ground of evil.

BLACK. Man.

WHITE. How's that.

BLACK. That's strong as a mare's breath, Professor. Wouldn't I love to lay some of that shit on the brothers? Whoa. Now. Just the two of us here talkin. In private. What did you just say?

WHITE. Your question. The Bible is full of cautionary tales. All of literature, for that matter. Telling us to be careful. Careful of what? Taking a wrong turn. A wrong path. How many wrong paths are there? Their number is legion. How many right paths? Only one. Hence the imbalance you spoke of.

BLACK. Man. I'll tell you what, Professor. You could go on television. Goodlookin man such as yourself. Did you know that?

WHITE. Stop.

BLACK. I'm serious. I wasn't even all that sure you was a professor till you laid that shit on me.

WHITE. I think you're having fun at my expense.

BLACK. Ain't done no such a thing, Professor.

WHITE. Well. I think you are.

BLACK. Honey, I swear I ain't. I couldn't say a thing like you just got done sayin. I admire that.

WHITE. And why do you keep calling me honey?

BLACK. That's just the old south talkin. They ain't nothin wrong with it. I'll try and quit if it bothers you.

WHITE. I'm just not sure what it means.

BLACK. It means you among friends. It means quit worryin bout everthing.

WHITE. That might be easier said than done.

BLACK. Well yes it might. But we just talkin here. Just talkin.

WHITE. What else?

BLACK. What else what?

WHITE. Any other heresies?

BLACK. At this juncture?

WHITE. At this juncture. Yes.

BLACK. Yeah, but I ain't tellin you.

WHITE. Why not?

BLACK. Cause I ain't. Shouldn't of told you what I did.

WHITE. Why not?

BLACK. You settin here at my table dead to God as the fallen angels and you waitin on me to lay another heresy on you to clutch to your bosom and help shore you up in your infidelity and I ain't goin to do it. That's all.

WHITE. Don't then.

BLACK. Don't worry. I ain't.

WHITE. I have to go.

BLACK. Ever time the dozens gets a little heavy you got to go.

WHITE. What's the dozens?

BLACK. It ain't really even the dozens. It's really just a discussion.

WHITE. What's the dozens.

BLACK. It's when two of the brothers stands around insultin one another and the first one gets pissed off loses.

WHITE. What is the point of it?

BLACK. Winnin and losin is the point of it. Same as the point of everthing else.

WHITE. And you win by making the other guy angry.

BLACK. That's correct.

WHITE. I don't get it.

BLACK. You ain't supposed to get it. You white.

WHITE. Then why did you tell me?

BLACK. Cause you asked me.

WHITE. So if I find you a bit irritating and decide to leave then I lose.

BLACK. Well, like I said, this ain't even the dozens. We just talkin.

WHITE. But that's what you think.

BLACK. Oh yeah, that's what I think.

WHITE. Well how long do you think I might have to stay before I could leave without losing?

BLACK. That's kindly hard to say. I guess the best way to put it might be that you'd have to stay till you didn't want to leave.

WHITE. Stay until I didn't want to leave.

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. And then I could leave.

BLACK. Yeah. (The professor runs one hand alongside his head and then holds the back of his neck, his head down and his eyes closed. He looks up.)

WHITE. Why is it called the dozens?

BLACK. Don't know.

WHITE. What sorts of insults?

BLACK. Oh, you might say some thin about the other man's mama. That's a sensitive area, you might say. And he might lose it and come after your ass but when he done that it's like he's sayin that what you just got done tellin about his mama was true. It's like he sayin: You ain't supposed to know that about my mama and you damn sure ain't supposed to of told it and now I'm fixin to whip your ass. You see what I'm sayin?

WHITE. I suppose.

BLACK. Well, probably not.

WHITE. And is this something you do with your friends?

BLACK. Me? No. I don't play the dozens.

WHITE. Tell me something.

BLACK. Sure.

WHITE. Why are you here? What do you get out of this? You seem like a smart man.

BLACK. Me? I'm just a dumb country nigger from Louisiana. I done told you. I ain't never had the first thought in my head. If it ain't in here then I don't know it. (He holds the Bible up off the table and lays it down again.)

WHITE. Half the time I think you're having fun with me. I don't see how you can live here. I don't see how you can feel safe.

BLACK. Well you got a point, Professor. About bein safe anyways.

WHITE. Have you ever stopped any of these people from taking drugs?

BLACK. Not that I know of.

WHITE. Then what is the point? I don't get it. I mean, it's hopeless. This place is just a moral leper colony.

BLACK. Damn, Professor. Moral leper colony? Where my pencil at? (He pretends to rummage through the kitchen table drawer).

WHITE. Well it is.

BLACK. I ain't never goin to want you to leave. Put that in my book.

WHITE. In your book?

BLACK. In the Moral Leper Colony. Damn, I like the sound of that.

WHITE. You're kidding me.

BLACK. You know I ain't writin' no book.

WHITE. Well I still don't get it. Why not go someplace where you might be able to do some good?

BLACK. As opposed to someplace where good was needed.

WHITE. Even God gives up at some point. There's no ministry in hell. That I ever heard of.

BLACK. No there ain't. That's well put. Ministry is for the livin. That's why you responsible for your brother. Once he's quit breathin you can't help him no more. After that he's in the hands of other parties. So you got to look after him now. You might even want to monitor his train schedule.

WHITE. You think you are your brother's keeper.

BLACK. I don't believe think quite says it.

WHITE. And Jesus is a part of this enterprise.

BLACK. Is that okay with you?

WHITE. And he's interested in coming here to this cesspool and salvaging what everybody knows is unsalvageable. Why would he do that? You said he didn't have a lot of free time. Why would he come here? What would be the difference to him between a building that was morally and spiritually vacant and one that was just plain empty?

BLACK. Mm. Professor you a theologian here and I didn't even know it.

WHITE. You're being facetious.

BLACK. I don't know that word. Don't be afraid to talk down to me. You ain't goin to hurt my feelins.

WHITE. It means. I guess it means that you're not being sincere. That you don't mean what you're saying. In a cynical sort of way.

BLACK. Mm. You think I don't mean what I'm sayin.

WHITE. Sometimes. I think you say things for effect.

BLACK. Mm. Well, let me say this for effect.

WHITE. Go ahead.

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 everlastin?

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

BLACK. That ain't what he said. He said you could have life everlastin. Life. Have it today. Hold it in your hand. That you could see it. It gives off a light. It's got a little weight to it. Not much. Warm to the touch. Just a little. And it's forever. And you can have it. Now. Today. But you don't want it. You don't want it cause to get it you got to let



you brother off the hook. You got to actually take him and hold him in your arms and it don't make no difference what color he is or what he smells like or even if he don't want to be held. And the reason you won't do it is because he don't deserve it. And about that there ain't no argument. He don't deserve it. (He leans forward, slow and deliberate.) You won't do it because it ain't just. Ain't that so? (Silence.) Ain't it?

WHITE. I don't believe in those sorts of things.

BLACK. Just answer the question, Professor.

WHITE. I don't think in those terms.

BLACK. I know you don't. Answer the question.

WHITE. I suppose there's some truth in what you say.

BLACK. But that's all I'm goin to get.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Well. That's all right. I'll take it. Some is a lot. We down to breadcrumbs here.

WHITE. I really have to go.

BLACK. Just stay. Just a little. We can talk bout some thin else. You like baseball? Tell you what. Why don't I fix us somethin to eat?

WHITE. I'm not hungry.

BLACK. How about some coffee then?

WHITE. All right. But then I've got to go.

BLACK. (Rising) All right. The man says all right (He runs water in the kettle at the sink and pours the water into the percolator) You see I wouldn't be this rude under normal circumstances. Man come in my house and set at my table and me not offer him nothin? But with you I figure I got to strategize. Got to play my cards right. Keep you from slippin off into the night. (he spoons coffee from a can into the percolator and plugs the percolator in)

WHITE. It's not night.

BLACK. Depends on what kind of night we talkin about. (He comes back to the table and sits). Let me ask you kindly a personal question.

WHITE. This will be good.

BLACK. What do you think is wrong with you that has finally narrowed all your choices down to the Sunset Limited?

WHITE. I don't think there's anything wrong with me . I think I've just been driven finally to face the truth. If I'm different it doesn't mean I'm crazy

BLACK. Different.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Different from who?

WHITE. From anybody.

BLACK. What then about other folks tryin to off themselves?

WHITE. What about them.

BLACK. Well, maybe then is the folks that you is like. Maybe them folks is your natural kin. Only you all just don't get together all that much.

WHITE. I don't think so.

BLACK. Don't think so

WHITE. No. I've been in group therapy with those people. I never found anyone there that I found any kinship with.

BLACK. What about them other professors? They ain't no kinship there?

WHITE. (Disgustedly.) Good God.

BLACK. I'm going to take that for a no.

WHITE. I loathe them and they loathe me.

BLACK. Well now wait a minute. Just cause you don't like them don't mean you ain't like them. What was that word? Loathe?

WHITE. Loathe.

BLACK. That's a pretty powerful word, ain't it?

WHITE. Not powerful enough, I'm afraid.

BLACK. So how come you be loathin these other professors?

WHITE. I know what you're thinking.

BLACK. What am I thinkin?

WHITE. You're thinking that I loathe them because I'm like them and I loathe myself

BLACK. (Sitting back in his chair.) Damn, Professor. If I had your brains ain't no tellin what all I might of done. I'd of been a drug king or somethin. Ride round in a Rolls Royce.

WHITE. You're being facetious again.

BLACK. No I ain't. I wasn't the first time. Let me ask you this.

WHITE. All right.

BLACK. Is you on any kind of medication?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. They ain't got no medication for pilgrims waitin to take the Sunset?

WHITE. For suicidal depression.

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. Yes. They do. I've tried them.

BLACK. And what happened?

WHITE. Nothing happened.

BLACK. You didn't get no relief

WHITE. No. I think the coffee's percolated.

BLACK. I know. Does these drugs work for most folks?

WHITE. Yes, For most.

BLACK. But not for you.

WHITE. Not for me. No.

BLACK. (Rising.) And what do you make of that?

WHITE. I don't know. What am I supposed to make of it?

BLACK. (Crossing to kitchen counter.) I don't know, Professor. I just tryin to find you some constituents out there somewheres.

WHITE. Constituents?

BLACK. (Unplugging percolator and getting down cup') Yeah. You like that?

WHITE. Is that a word they use on the streets?

BLACK. Naw. I learned that word in the jailhouse. You pick up stuff from these jailhouse lawyers and then it gets used around. Be talkin bout your constituents. Some other cat's constituents. Your wife's constituents. You use cream and sugar?

WHITE. No. Just black.

BLACK. Just black.

WHITE. Why do I have to have constituents?

BLACK. I ain't said you got to. I just wondered if maybe you do and we just ain't looked hard enough. (He brings the percolator and the cups to the table and pours.) They could be out there. Maybe they's some other drug proof terminal commuters out there that could be your friends.

WHITE. Terminal commuters?

BLACK. Got a nice sound to it, ain't it?

WHITE. It's all right.

BLACK. (Sitting.) Nobody.

WHITE. Nobody. No.

BLACK. Hm.

WHITE. I'm not a member. I never wanted to be. I never was.

BLACK. Not a member.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. Well. Sometimes people don't know what they want till they get it.

WHITE. Maybe. But I think they know what they don't want.

BLACK. I don't know, Professor. I try and go by what I see. The simplest things has got more to em than you can ever understand. Bunch of people standin around on a train platform of a mornin. Waitin to go to work. Been there a hundred times. A thousand maybe. It's just a train platform. Ain't nothin else much you can say about it. But they might be one commuter waitin there on the edge of that platform that for him it's somethin else. It might even be the edge of the world. The edge of the universe. He's starin at the end of all tomorrows and he's drawin a shade over ever yesterday that ever was. So he's a different kind of commuter. He's worlds away from them everyday travellers. Nothin to do with them at all. Well. Is that right?

WHITE. I don't know.

BLACK. I know you don't. Bless your heart. I know you don't. (They sip their coffee.) You ride that subway ever day, Professor?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. What do you think about them people?  
WHITE. On the subway?  
BLACK. On the subway.  
WHITE. I try not to think about them at all.  
BLACK. You ever speak to any of em?  
WHITE. Speak to them?  
BLACK. Yeah.  
WHITE. About what?  
BLACK. About anything.  
WHITE. No. God no  
BLACK. God no?  
WHITE. Yes. God no.  
BLACK. You ever curse em?  
WHITE. Curse them?  
BLACK. Yeah.  
WHITE. Why would I do that?  
BLACK. I don't know. Do you?  
WHITE. No. Of course not.  
BLACK. I mean where they can't hear it.  
WHITE. What do you mean?  
BLACK. Maybe just under your breath. In your heart. To yourself  
WHITE. Because?  
BLACK. I don't know. Maybe they just in your way. Or you don't like the way they look.  
The way they smell. What they doin.  
WHITE. And I would mutter something ugly under my breath.  
BLACK. Yeah.  
WHITE. I suppose.  
BLACK. And how often do you reckon you might do that?  
WHITE. You really don't get to interrogate me, you know.  
BLACK. I know. How often?  
WHITE. I don't know. With some frequency. Probably.  
BLACK. Give me a number.  
WHITE. A number?  
BLACK. Yeah. Say just on a average day.  
WHITE. I've no idea.  
BLACK. Sure you do.  
WHITE. A number.  
BLACK. I'm a number man.  
WHITE. Two or three times a day, I would guess. Something like that. Maybe.  
BLACK. Could be more.

WHITE. Oh yes.

BLACK. Could be five?

WHITE. Probably.

BLACK. Ten?

WHITE. That might be a bit high.

BLACK. But we can go with five. That's safe.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. That's eighteen twenty five. Can we round that off to two grand?

WHITE. What's that, per year?

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. Two thousand? That's a lot.

BLACK. Yes it is. But is it accurate?

WHITE. I suppose. So?

BLACK. So. I ain't goin to guess your age but let me put you on the low side and say times twenty years of commutin and now we got forty thousand curses heaped on the heads of folks you don't even know.

WHITE. So where is this going?

BLACK. I just wondered if you ever thought about that. If it might have anything to do with the shape you has managed to get yourself in.

WHITE. It's just symptomatic of the larger issue. I don't like people.

BLACK. But you wouldn't hurt them people.

WHITE. No. Of course not.

BLACK. You sure.

WHITE. Of course I'm sure. Why would I hurt them?

BLACK. I don't know. Why would you hurt yourself?

WHITE. It's not the same thing.

BLACK. You sure about that?

WHITE. I'm not them and they're not me. I think I know the difference.

BLACK. Mm.

WHITE. More mm's.

BLACK. You sure you ain't hungry?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. You ain't eat nothin.

WHITE. That's all right.

BLACK. I see you eyein the door. I got to strategize, you know.

WHITE. I'm really not hungry.

BLACK. Active morning like you had you ain't worked up no appetite?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. I see you lookin around. Everthing in here is clean. No, don't say nothin. It's all right. (The black pushes back his chair and rises.) I could eat a bite and I think you could

too. (The black goes to the refrigerator and takes out some pots. He turns on the stove. He washes his hands and dries them with a towel.) You break bread with a man you have moved on to another level of friendship. I heard somewheres that that's true the world over.

WHITE. Probably.

BLACK. I like probably. Probably from you is worth a couple of damn rights anywheres else.

WHITE. Why? Because I don't believe in anything? (The black has put the pots on the stove to warm and he brings napkins and silverware to the table and sets them out. He sits down.)

BLACK. Well. I don't think that's the problem. I think it's what you do believe that is carryin you off, not what you don't. Let me ask you this.

WHITE. Go ahead.

BLACK. You ever think about Jesus?

WHITE. Here we go.

BLACK. Do you?

WHITE. What makes you think I'm not Jewish?

BLACK. What, Jews ain't allowed to think about Jesus?

WHITE. No, but they might think about him differently.

BLACK. Is you Jewish?

WHITE. No. As it happens. I'm not.

BLACK. Whew. You had me worried there for a minute.

WHITE. What, you don't like Jews?

BLACK. (Shaking his head, almost laughing.) Pullin your chain, Professor. Pullin your chain. I don't know why I love to mess with you. But I do. You need to listen. Or you need to believe what you hearin. The whole point of where this is goin - which you wanted to know - is that they ain't no Jews. Ain't no whites. Ain't no niggers. People of color. Ain't none of that. At the deep bottom of the mine where the gold is at there ain't none of that. There's just the pure ore. That forever thing. That you don't think is there. That thing that helps to keep folks nailed down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through. Even when they think they might want to get aboard. That thing that makes it possible to ladle out benedictions upon the heads of strangers instead of curses. It's all the same thing. And it ain't but one thing. Just one.

WHITE. And that would be Jesus.

BLACK. Got to think about how to answer that. Maybe one more heresy wont hurt you. You pretty loaded up on em already. Here's what I would say. I would say that the thing we are talkin' about is Jesus, but it is Jesus understood as that gold at the bottom of the mine. He couldn't come down here and take the form of a man if that form was not done shaped to accommodate him. And if I said that there ain't no way for Jesus to be ever man without ever man bein Jesus then I believe that might be a pretty big heresy. But that's all

right. It ain't as big a heresy as sayin that a man ain't all that much different from a rock. Which is how your view looks to me.

WHITE. It's not my view. I believe in the primacy of the intellect.

BLACK. What is that word.

WHITE. Primacy? It means first. It means what you put first.

BLACK. And that would be intellect.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. What about the primacy of the Sunset Limited?

WHITE. Yes. That too.

BLACK. But not the primacy of all them folks waitin on a later train

WHITE. No. No primacy there.

BLACK. Mm.

WHITE. Mm what.

BLACK. You tough, Professor. You tough. (The black rises and goes to the stove. He reaches down plates and stirs the pots and ladles out the dinner. He takes down a loaf of white bread and puts four slices on a plate and brings the plate of bread to the table and sets it down.) Yeah you tough. (The black brings the two plates to the table and sets them out and takes his seat. He looks at the professor.) You see yourself as a questioner, Professor. But about that I got my doubts. Even so, the quest of your life is your quest. You on a road that you laid. And that fact alone might be all the reason you need for keeping to it. As long as you on that road you can't be lost.

WHITE. I'm not sure I understand what you're saying.

BLACK. Well, Professor. I have got some very serious doubts about you not understanding anything I say. Now I'm going to say Grace. (The black puts his hands on the table at either side of his plate and bows his head.) Lord we thank you for this food and we ask that you keep us ever mindful of the many blessins we have received from your hand. We thank you today for the life of the professor that you have returned to us and we ask that you continue to look after him because we need him. (Pause). I ain't sure why we need him. I just know we do. Amen.(The black looks up . He smiles at the professor). All right. You tell me if you like this.

WHITE. It looks good. (They begin to eat.). This is good. (They eat). This is very good.

BLACK. Supposed to be good. This is soul food, my man.

WHITE. It's got what in it? Molasses?

BLACK. Mm. You a chef, Professor?

WHITE. Not really.

BLACK. But some.

WHITE. Some, yes. Bananas, of course. Mangos?

BLACK. Got a mango or two in there. Rutabagas.

WHITE. Rutabagas?

BLACK. Rutabagas. Them ain't easy to find.

WHITE. It's very good.

BLACK. It gets better after a day or two. I just fixed this last night. You need to warm it up a few times to get the flavours right.

WHITE. Like chile.

BLACK. Like chile. That's right. You know where I learned to fix this?

WHITE. In Louisiana?

BLACK. Right here in the ghettos of New York City. They's a lot of influences in a dish like this. You got many parts of the world in that pot yonder. Different countries.

Different people.

WHITE. Any white people?

BLACK. Not if you can help it.

WHITE. Really?

BLACK. Messin with you, Professor. Messin with you. You know these French chefs in these up town restaurants?

WHITE. Not personally.

BLACK. You know what they like to cook?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. Sweetbreads. Tripe. Brains. All that shit they don't nobody eat. You know why that is?

WHITE. Because it's a challenge? You have to innovate?

BLACK. You pretty smart for a cracker. A challenge. That's right. The stuff they cook is dead cheap. Most folks throws it out. Give it to the cat. But poor folks don't throw nothin out.

WHITE. I guess that's right.

BLACK. It don't take a lot of skill to make a porterhouse steak taste good. But what if you can't buy no porterhouse steak? You still wants to eat somethin that tastes good. What you do then?

WHITE. Innovate.

BLACK. Innovate. That's right, Professor. And when do you innovate?

WHITE. When you don't have something that you want.

BLACK. You fixin to get a A plus. So who would that be? That ain't got what they want?

WHITE. Poor people.

BLACK. I love this man. So how you like this?

WHITE. It's very good.

BLACK. Well let me have your plate.

WHITE. Just a small portion.

BLACK. That's all right, Professor. You need to eat. You done had yourself a pretty busy day. (The black puts more of the dish on the professors plate and comes to the table and sets it in front of him.) You want some more coffee?



WHITE. Yes. That would be great. (The black brings the pot to the table and pours his cup and sets the pot on the table and takes his seat and they continue to eat.) You don't think a glass of wine would have been good with this?

BLACK. Oh no. I think it might of been good.

WHITE. But you wouldn't drink it.

BLACK. Oh I might. One glass.

WHITE. Jesus drank wine. He and his disciples.

BLACK. Yes he did. Accordin to the Bible. Of course it don't say no thin about him hidin it in the toilet.

WHITE. Is that really a favourite hiding place?

BLACK. Oh yes. I've knowed drunks to lift the tops off of toilet tanks in strange places just on the off chance.

WHITE. Is that true?

BLACK. Naw. It could be, though. Wouldn't surprise me none.

WHITE. What is the worst thing you ever did.

BLACK. More jailhouse stories.

WHITE. Why not?

BLACK. Which why not you want to hear?

WHITE. Is bludgeoning the man in the prison cafeteria the worst thing you ever did?

BLACK. No. It ain't.

WHITE. Really? What's the worst?

BLACK. Ain't goin tell you.

WHITE. Why not?

BLACK. Cause you'd jump up and run out the door hollerin.

WHITE. It must be pretty bad.

BLACK. It is pretty bad. That's why I ain't tellin you.

WHITE. Now I'm afraid to ask.

BLACK. No you ain't.

WHITE. Have you ever told anyone?

BLACK. Oh yeah. It wouldn't leave me alone. The soul might be silent but the servant of the soul has always got a voice and it has got one for a reason. The life of the master depends on the servant and this is one master that has got to be sustained. Got to be sustained.

WHITE. Who did you tell it to?

BLACK. I told it to a man of God who was my friend.

WHITE. What did he say?

BLACK. He didn't say a word.

WHITE. But you're not curious about the worst thing I ever did.

BLACK. Yeah I am.

WHITE. But you wont ask me what it is.

BLACK. Don't have to.

WHITE. Why is that?

BLACK. Cause I was there and I seen it.

WHITE. Well, I might have a different view.

BLACK. Yeah. You might. You want some more?

WHITE. No. I'm stuffed.

BLACK. Hungrier than you thought.

WHITE. Yes. I was.

BLACK. Good.

WHITE. Is this some kind of a test of your faith?

BLACK. What, you?

WHITE. Me. Yes.

BLACK. Naw, Professor. It ain't my faith you testin'.

WHITE. You see everything in black and white.

BLACK. It is black and white.

WHITE. I suppose that makes the world easier to understand.

BLACK. You might be surprised about how little time I spend trying to understand the world.

WHITE. You try to understand God.

BLACK. No I don't. I just try and understand what he wants from me.

WHITE. And that is everything you need.

BLACK. If God ain't everthing you need you in a world of trouble. And if what you sayin is that my view of the world is a narrow one I don't disagree with that. Of course I could point out that I ain't down on the platform in my leapin costume.

WHITE. You could.

BLACK. A lot of things is beyond my understandin. I know that. I say it again. If it ain't in this book then they's a good chance that I don't know it. Before I started readin the Bible I was pretty much in that primacy thing myself.

WHITE. Primacy thing.

BLACK. Yeah. Not as bad as you. But pretty bad. I was pretty dumb, but I wasn't dumb enough to believe that what had got me nowheres in forty years was all of a sudden goin to get me somewheres. I was dumb, but I wasn't that dumb. I seen what was there for the askin, and I decided to ask. And that's all I done. And it was hard. I'll tell you right now, Professor, it was hard. I was layin there all cut up and chained to that hospital bed and I was cryin I hurt so bad and I thought they'd kill me if I did live and I tried to say it and tried to say it and after a while I just quit. I put all of that away from me. And I just said it. I said: Please help me. And he did.

(They sit.)

BLACK. Long silence.

WHITE. It's just a silence.

BLACK. Well. That's my story, Professor. It's easy told. I don't make a move without Jesus. When I get up in the mornin I just try to get ahold of his belt. Oh, ever once in a while I'll catch myself slippin into manual override. But I catch myself. I catch myself.

WHITE. Manual override?

BLACK. You like that?

WHITE. It's okay.

BLACK. I thought it was pretty good.

WHITE. So you come to the end of your rope and you admit defeat and you are in despair and in this state you seize upon this whatever it is that has neither substance nor sense and you grab hold of it and hang on for dear life. Is that a fair portrayal?

BLACK. Well, that could be one way to say it.

WHITE. It doesn't make any sense.

BLACK. Well, I thought when we was talkin earlier I heard you to say they wasn't none of it made no sense. Talkin bout the history of the world and all such as that.

WHITE. It doesn't. On a larger scale. But what you're telling me isn't a view of things. It's a view of one thing. And I find it nonsensical.

BLACK. What would you do if Jesus was to speak to you?

WHITE. Why? Do you imagine that he might?

BLACK. No. I don't. But I don't know.

WHITE. I'm not virtuous enough.

BLACK. No, Professor, it ain't nothin like that. You don't have to be virtuous. You just has to be quiet. I can't speak for the Lord but the experience I've had leads me to believe that he'll speak to anybody that'll listen. You damn sure ain't got to be virtuous.

WHITE. Well if I heard God talking to me, then I'd be ready for you to take me up to Bellevue. As you suggested.

BLACK. What if what he said made sense?

WHITE. It wouldn't make any difference. Craziiness is craziiness.

BLACK. Don't make no difference if it makes sense.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. Mm. Well, that's about as bad a case of the primacy as I ever heard.

WHITE. Well. I've always gone my own way. Ich kann nicht anders.

BLACK. What is that you talkin?

WHITE. It's German

BLACK. You talk German?

WHITE. Not really. A little. It's a quotation.

BLACK. Didn't do them Germans much good though, did it?

WHITE. I don't know. The Germans contributed a great deal to civilization. (Pause). Before Hitler.

BLACK. And then they contributed Hitler.

WHITE. If you like.

BLACK. Wasn't none of my doin.

WHITE. I gather it to be your belief that culture tends to contribute to human misery. That the more one knows the more unhappy one is likely to be.

BLACK. As in the case of certain parties known to us.

WHITE. As in the case.

BLACK. I don't believe I said that. In fact, I think maybe you said it.

WHITE. I never said it.

BLACK. Mm. But do you believe it?

WHITE. No.

BLACK. No?

WHITE. I don't know. It could be true.

BLACK. Well why is that? It don't seem right, does it?

WHITE. It's the first thing in that book there. The Garden of Eden. Knowledge as destructive to the spirit. Destructive to goodness.

BLACK. I thought you ain't read this book.

WHITE. Everyone knows that story. It's probably the most famous story in there.

BLACK. So why do you think that is?

WHITE. I suppose from the God point of view all knowledge is vanity. Or maybe it gives people the unhealthy illusion that they can outwit the devil.

BLACK. Damn, Professor. Where was you when I needed you?

WHITE. You'd better be careful. You see where it's gotten me.

BLACK. I do see. It's the subject at hand.

WHITE. The darker picture is always the correct one. When you read the history of the world you are reading a saga of bloodshed and greed and folly the import of which is impossible to ignore. And yet we imagine that the future will somehow be different. I've no idea why we are even still here but in all probability we will not be here much longer.

BLACK. Them is some pretty powerful words, Professor. That's what's in your heart, ain't it?

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Well I can relate to them thoughts.

WHITE. You can?

BLACK. Yes I can.

WHITE. That surprises me. What, you're going to think about them?

BLACK. I done have thought about em. I've thought about em for a long time. Not as good as you said it. But pretty close.

WHITE. Well you surprise me. And you've come to what conclusions?

BLACK. I ain't. I'm still thinkin.

WHITE. Yes. Well, I'm not.

BLACK. Things can change.

WHITE. No they can't.

BLACK. You could be wrong.

WHITE. I don't think so.

BLACK. But that ain't somethin you have a lot of in your life.

WHITE. What isn't?

BLACK. Bein wrong.

WHITE. I admit it when I'm wrong.

BLACK. I don't think so.

WHITE. Well, you're entitled to your opinion. (The black leans back and regards the professor. He reaches and picks up the newspaper from the table and leans back again and adjusts his glasses.)

BLACK. Let's see here. Story on page three. (He folds the paper elaborately.) Yeah. Here it is. Friends report that the man had ignored all advice and had stated that he intended to pursue his own course. (He adjusts his glasses.) A close confidant stated (He looks up.) - and this here is a quotation - said: You couldn't tell the son of a bitch nothin. (He looks up again.) Can you say that in the papers? Son of a bitch? Meanwhile, bloodspattered spectators at the hundred and fifty fifth street station - continued on page four. (He wets his thumb and laboriously turns the page and refolds the paper.) - who were interviewed at the scene all reported that the man's last words as he hurtled toward the oncomin commuter train were: I am right. (He lays down the paper and adjusts his spectacles and peers over the top of them at the professor.)

WHITE. Very funny. (The black takes off his glasses and lowers his head and pinches the bridge of his nose and shakes his head.)

BLACK. Oh Professor. Mm. You an amazin man.

WHITE. I'm glad you find me entertaining.

BLACK. Well, you pretty special.

WHITE. I don't think I'm special.

BLACK. You don't.

WHITE. No. I don't.

BLACK. You don't think you might view them other commuters from a certain height?

WHITE. I view those other commuters as fellow occupants of the same abyssal pit in which I find myself. If they see it as something else I don't know how that makes me special.

BLACK. Mm. I hear what you sayin. But still I keep comin back to them commuters. Them that's waitin on the Sunset? I got to think maybe they could be just a little bit special theyselves. I mean, they got to be in a deeper pit than just us daytravelers. A deeper and a darker. I ain't sayin they down as deep as you, but pretty deep maybe.

WHITE. So?

BLACK. So how come they can't be your brothers in despair and self-destruction? I thought misery loved company?

WHITE. I'm sure I don't know.

BLACK. Well let me take a shot at it.

WHITE. Be my guest.

BLACK. What I think is that you got better reasons than them. I mean, their reasons is just that they don't like it here, but yours says what they is not to like and why not to like it. You got more intelligent reasons. More elegant reasons.

WHITE. Are you making fun of me?

BLACK. No. I ain't.

WHITE. But you think I'm full of shit.

BLACK. I don't think that. Oh I don't doubt but what it's possible to die from bein full of shit. But I don't think that's what we lookin at here.

WHITE. What do you think we're looking at?

BLACK. I don't know. You got me on unfamiliar ground. You got these elegant world class reasons for takin the Limited and these other dudes all they got is maybe they Just don't feel good. In fact, it might could be that you ain't even all that unhappy.

WHITE. You think that my education is driving me to suicide.

BLACK. Well, no. I'm just posin the question. Wait a minute. Fore you answer. (He takes his pad and his pencil and, begins to write laboriously, his tongue in the corner of his mouth, grimacing. This for the professors benefit. He looks ,sideways at him and smiles. He tears off the page and folds it and puts it in his shirt pocket.) All right. Go ahead.

WHITE. I think that s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. (The black takes the folded paper from his pocket and hands it across. The professor opens it and reads it aloud.) I think that's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. Very clever. What's the point.?

BLACK. The point don't 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 nothin but shadow. And the shadow is you. You the one makin it.

WHITE. Well, I don't have your faith. Why don't we just leave it at that.

BLACK. You don't never think about maybe just startin over?

WHITE. I did. At one time. I don't any more.

BLACK. Sometimes faith might just be a case of not havin nothin else left.

WHITE. Well, I do have something else.

BLACK. Maybe you could just keep that in reserve. Maybe just take a shot at startin over. I don't mean start again. Everybody's done that. Over means over. It means you just walk away. I mean, if everthing you are and everthing you have and everthing you have done has brought you at last to the bottom of a whiskey bottle or bought you a one way ticket on the Sunset Limited then you can't give me the first reason on God's earth for salvagin none of It. Cause they ain't no reason. And I'm goin to tell you that if you can bring yourself to shut the door on all of that it will be cold and it will be lonely and they'll be a mean wind blowin. And them is all good signs. You don't say nothin. You just turn up your collar and keep walkin.

WHITE. I can't.

BLACK. Yeah.

WHITE. I can't.

BLACK. You want some more coffee?

WHITE. No. Thank you.

BLACK. Why do you think folks takes their own lives?

WHITE. I don't know. Different reasons.

BLACK. Yeah. But is there somethin them different reasons has got in common?

WHITE. I can't speak for others. My own reasons center around a gradual loss of make-believe. That's all. A gradual enlightenment as to the nature of reality. Of the world.

BLACK. Them worldly reasons.

WHITE. If you like.

BLACK. Them elegant reasons.

WHITE. That was your description.

BLACK. You didn't disagree with it. (The professor shrugs.) It's them reasons that your brother don't know nothin about hangin by his necktie from the steampipe down in the basement. He got his own dumb-ass reasons, but maybe if we could educate him to where some of them more elegant reasons was available to him and his buddies then they'd be a lot of folks out there could off theyselves with more joy in they hearts. What do you think?

WHITE. Now I know you're being facetious.

BLACK. This time I think you're right. I think you have finally drove me to it.

WHITE. Mm hm.

BLACK. Well, the professor's done gone to layin the mm hm's on me. I better watch my step.

WHITE. Yes you had. I might be warming up the trick bag.

BLACK. But still you think that your reasons is about the world and his is mostly just about him.

WHITE. I think that's probably true.

BLACK. I see a different truth. Settin right across the table from me.

WHITE. Which is?

BLACK. That you must love your brother or die.

WHITE. I don't know what that means. That's another world from anything I know.

BLACK. What's the world you know.

WHITE. You don't want to hear.

BLACK. Sure I do.

WHITE. I don't think so.

BLACK. Go ahead.

WHITE. All right. It's that the world is basically a forced labor camp from which the workers - perfectly innocent - are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed. I

don't think that this is just the way I see it. I think it's the way it is. Are there alternate views? Of course. Will any of them stand close scrutiny? No.

BLACK. Man.

WHITE. So. Do you want to take a look at that train schedule again?

BLACK. And they ain't nothin to be done about it.

WHITE. No. The efforts that people undertake to improve the world invariably make it worse. I used to think there were exceptions to that dictum. I don't think that now. (The black sits back, looking down at the table. He shakes his head slightly.) What else do you want to talk about?

BLACK. I don't know. Them sounds to me like the words of a man on his way to the train station.

WHITE. They are those words.

BLACK. What do you think about that man?

WHITE. I'm like you. I don't. I used to. Now I don't. I think about minimalizing pain. That is my life. I don't know why it isn't everyone's.

BLACK. You don't think gettin run over by a train might smart just a little?

WHITE. No. I did the calculations. At seventy miles an hour the train is outrunning the neurons. It should be totally painless.

BLACK. I'm gain to be stuck with your ass for a while, ain't I?

WHITE. I hope not

BLACK. If this ain't the life you had in mind, what was?

WHITE. I don't know. Not this. Is your life the one you'd planned?

BLACK. No, it ain't. I got what I needed instead of what I wanted and that's just about the best kind of luck you can have.

WHITE. Yes. Well.

BLACK. You can't compare your life to mine, can you?

WHITE. In all honesty, no. I can't.

BLACK. Mm.

WHITE. I'm sorry. I should go.

BLACK. You don't have to go.

WHITE. I've offended you.

BLACK. I got a thicker hide than that, Professor. Just stay. You ain't hurt my feelins.

WHITE. I know you think that I should be thankful and I'm sorry not to be.

BLACK. Now Professor, I don't think no such a thing.

WHITE. I should go.

BLACK. I'm diggin a dry hole here, ain't I?

WHITE. I admire your persistence.

BLACK. What can I do to get you to stay a bit?

WHITE. Why? Are you hoping that if I stay long enough God might speak to me?

BLACK. No, I'm hopin' he might speak to me.



WHITE. I know you think I at least owe you a little more of my time. I know I'm ungrateful. But ingratitude is not the sin to a spiritual bankrupt that it is to a man of God.

BLACK. You don't owe me nothin, Professor.

WHITE. Do you really think that?

BLACK. Yes. I really do.

WHITE. Well. You're very kind. I wish there was something I could do to repay you but there isn't. So why don't we just say goodbye and you can get on with your life.

BLACK. I can't.

WHITE. You can't?

BLACK. No.

WHITE. What do you want me to do?

BLACK. I don't know. Suppose you could wake up tomorrow and you wouldn't be wantin' to jump in front of no train. Suppose all you had to do was ask. Would you do it?

WHITE. It would depend on what I had to give up.

BLACK. I started to write that down and put it in my pocket.

WHITE. What is it that you think I'm holding on to? What is it that the terminal commuter cherishes that he would die for?

BLACK. I don't know. I don't know.

WHITE. No.

BLACK. You don't want to talk to me no more, do you?

WHITE. I thought you had a thick skin.

BLACK. It's pretty thick. It ain't hide to the bone.

WHITE. Why do you think it? Why do you think there is something?

BLACK. I don't know. It just seems to me that a man that can't wait for a train to run over him has got to have somethin on his mind. Most folks would settle for maybe just a slap up the side of the head. You say you don't care about nothin but I don't believe that. I don't believe that death is ever about nothin. You asked me what I thought it was you was holdin on to and I got to say I don't know. Or maybe I just don't have the words to say it. And maybe you know but you ain't sayin. Bur I believe that when you took your celebrated leap you was holdin on to it and takin it with you. Holdin on for grim death. I look for the words, Professor. I look for the words because I believe that the words is the way to your heart.

WHITE. You think that anyone in my position is automatically blind to the workings of his own psyche.

BLACK. I think that anybody in your position is automatically blind. But that ain't the whole story. Because we still talkin bout the rest of them third railers and them takin one train and you takin another.

WHITE. I didn't say that.

BLACK. Sure you did. They got a train for all them dumb-ass crackers that just feels bad and then they got this other train for you cause your pain and the world's pain is the same pain and this train requires a observation car and a diner.

WHITE. Well. You can think what you want. You don't need my agreement.

BLACK. I know. But that ain't the way to the trick bag.

WHITE. Well. The trick bag seems to have shaped itself up into some sort of communal misery wherein one finds salvation by consorting among the loathsome.

BLACK. Damn, Professor. You puttin me in the bag. Where you come up with stuff like that?

WHITE. It was phrased especially for you. For your enjoyment. You see what a whore I am?

BLACK. No you ain't. You a smart man. Too smart for me.

WHITE. I feel the bag yawning.

BLACK. I wish I knew how.

WHITE. Do you really think that? That I'm too smart for you?

BLACK. Yes I do. If you can jack you own self around nine ways from Sunday I'd like to know what chance you think I got.

WHITE. I see.

BLACK. What I need to do here is to buy more time. But I don't know what to buy it with.

WHITE. You don't know what to offer a man about to board the Limited.

BLACK. No. I don't. I feel like I'm about traded out.

WHITE. Maybe you are. Have you ever dealt with suicides?

BLACK. No. You the first one. These junkies and crackheads is about as far from suicide as you can get. They wouldn't even know what you was talkin' about. They wake up in pain ever day. Bad pain. But they ain't headed for the depot. Now you can say, well, they got a fix for their pain. Just need to hustle on out there and get it. And that's a good argument. But still we got this question. Just what is this pain that is causin these express riders to belly up at the kiosk with the black crepe. What kind of pain we talkin about? I got to say that if it was grief that brought folks to suicide it'd be a full time job just to get em all in the ground come sundown. So I keep comin back to the same question. If it ain't what you lost that is more than you can bear then maybe it's what you wont lose. What you'd rather die than to give up.

WHITE. But if you die you will give it up.

BLACK. No you wont. You wont be here.

WHITE. Well. I can't help you. Letting it all go is the place I finally got to. It took a lot of work to get there and if there is one thing I would be unwilling to give up it is exactly that.

BLACK. You got any other way of sayin that?

WHITE. The one thing I won't give up is giving up. I expect that to carry me through. I'm depending on it. The things I believed in were very frail. As I said. They won't be around for long and neither will I. But I don't think that's really the reason for my decision. I think it goes deeper. You can acclimate yourself to loss. You have to. I mean, you like music, right?

BLACK. Yes I do.

WHITE. Who's the greatest composer you know of?

BLACK. John Coltrane. Hands down.

WHITE. Do you think his music will last forever?

BLACK. Well. Forever's a long time, Professor. So I got to say no. It won't.

WHITE. But that doesn't make it worthless, does it?

BLACK. No it don't.

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

BLACK. That's a dark world, Professor.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. What's the worst thing ever happen to you?

WHITE. Getting snatched off a subway platform one morning by an emissary of Jesus.

BLACK. I'm serious.

WHITE. So am I.

BLACK. Before this mornin. What was the worst thing.

WHITE. I don't know.

BLACK. Well, let's pretend you don't know then. Still, do you reckon it was about you? Or about somebody close to you?

WHITE. Probably someone close to me.

BLACK. I think that's probably right. Don't that tell you somethin'?

WHITE. Yes. Don't get close to people.

BLACK. You a hard case, man.

WHITE. How else could I win your love?

BLACK. You probably right. Let me try this. I don't believe that the world can be better than what you allow it to be. Dark a world as you live in, they ain't goin to be a whole lot of surprises in the way of good news.

WHITE. I'm sure that's true.

BLACK. Well jubilation. Listen at the professor.

WHITE. But I'm at a loss as to how to bring myself to believe in some most excellent world when I already know that it doesn't exist.

BLACK. Most excellent.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. I sure do like that. Most excellent.

WHITE. Do you actually believe in such a world?

BLACK. Yes I do, Professor. Yes I do. I think it's there for the asking. You got to get in the right line. Buy the right ticket. Take that regular commuter train and stay off the express. Stay on the platform with your fellow commuter. You might even want to nod at him. Maybe even say hello. All of them is travellers too. And they's some of em been places that most people don't want to go to. They didn't neither. They might even tell you how they got there and maybe save you a trip you'll be thankful you didn't take.

WHITE. Yes. Well, that's not going to happen.

BLACK. Why not?

WHITE. Because I don't believe in that world. I just want to take the train. Look, why don't I just go?

BLACK. How about some more coffee?

WHITE. No thank you.

BLACK. What can I do?

WHITE. Maybe you just need to accept that you're in over your head.

BLACK. I do accept it. It don't let me off the hook though.

WHITE. You think I don't understand. But I'm not sure you'd want to listen to the things I do understand.

BLACK. Try me.

WHITE. It would just upset you.

BLACK. I been upset before.

WHITE. It's worse than you think.

BLACK. That's all right.

WHITE. You don't want to hear this.

BLACK. Yes I do. I got no choice. (The professor leans back and studies the black.)

WHITE. Okay. Maybe you're right. Well, here's my news, Reverend. I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death. Real death. If I thought that in death I would meet the people I've known in life I don't know what I'd do. That would be the ultimate horror. The ultimate despair. If I had to meet my mother again and start all of that all over, only this time without the prospect of death to look forward to? Well. That would be the final nightmare. Kafka on wheels.

BLACK. Damn, Professor. You don't want to see you own mama?

WHITE. No. I don't. I told you this would upset you. I want the dead to be dead. Forever. And I want to be one of them. Except that of course you can't be one of them. You can't be one of the dead because what has no existence can have no community. No community. My heart warms just thinking about it. Silence. Blackness. Aloneness. Peace. And all of it only a heartbeat away.

BLACK. Damn, Professor.

WHITE. Let me finish. I don't regard my state of mind as some pessimistic view of the world. I regard it as the world itself Evolution cannot avoid bringing intelligent life ultimately to an awareness of one thing above all else and that one thing is futility.

BLACK. Mm. If I'm understandin you right you sayin that everbody that ain't just eat up with the dumb-ass ought to be suicidal.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. You ain't shittin me?

WHITE. No. I'm not shitting you. If people saw the world for what it truly is. Saw their lives for what they truly are. Without dreams or illusions. I don't believe they could offer the first reason why they should not elect to die as soon as possible.

BLACK. Damn, Professor.

WHITE. (Coldly.) I don't believe in God. Can you understand that? Look around you man. Can't you see? The clamour and din of those in torment has to be the sound most pleasing to his ear. And I loathe these discussions. The argument of the village atheist whose single passion is to revile endlessly that which he denies the existence of in the first place. Your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. And if that pain were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash. And justice? Brotherhood? Eternal life? Good god, man. Show me a religion that prepares one for death. For nothingness. There's a church I might enter. Yours prepares one only for more life. For dreams and illusions and lies. If you could banish the fear of death from men's hearts they wouldn't live a day. Who would want this nightmare if not for fear of the next? The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy. Every road ends in death. Or worse. Every friendship. Every love. Torment, betrayal, loss, suffering, pain, age, indignity, and hideous lingering illness. All with a single conclusion. For you and for everyone and every thing that you have chosen to care for. There's the true brotherhood. The true fellowship. And everyone is a member for life. You tell me that my brother is my salvation? My salvation? Well then damn him. Damn him in every shape and form and guise. Do I see myself in him? Yes. I do. And what I see sickens me. Do you understand me? Can you understand me? (The black sits with his head lowered.) I'm sorry.

BLACK. That's all right.

WHITE. No. I'm sorry. (The black looks up at him.)

BLACK. How long you felt like this?

WHITE. All my life.

BLACK. And that's the truth.

WHITE. It's worse than that.

BLACK. I don't see what could be worse than that.

WHITE. Rage is really only for the good days. The truth is there's little of that left. The truth is that the forms I see have been slowly emptied out. They no longer have any content. They are shapes only. A train, a wall, a world. Or a man. A thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void. No meaning to its life. Its words. Why would I seek the company of such a thing? Why?

BLACK. Damn.

WHITE. You see what it is you've saved.

BLACK. Tried to save. Am tryin. Tryin hard.

WHITE. Yes.

BLACK. Who is my brother.

WHITE. Your brother.

BLACK. Yes.

WHITE. Is that why I'm here? In your apartment?

BLACK. No. But it's why I am.

WHITE. You asked what I was a professor of. I'm a professor of darkness. The night in day's clothing. And now I wish you all the very best but I must go. (He pushes back his chair and rises.)

BLACK. Just stay a few more minutes.

WHITE. No. No more time. Goodbye. (He turns toward the door and the black rises.)

BLACK. Come on, Professor. We can talk about somethin else. I promise.

WHITE. I don't want to talk about something else.

BLACK. Don't go out there. You know what's out there.

WHITE. Oh yes. Indeed I do. I know what is out there and I know who is out there. I rush to nuzzle his bony cheek. No doubt he'll be surprised to find himself so cherished. And as I cling to his neck I will whisper in that dry and ancient ear: Here I am. Here I am. Now open the door.

BLACK. Don't do it, Professor.

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's 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 don't. 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.

BLACK. Don't do it.

WHITE. Open the door. (The black undoes the chains. They rattle to the floor. He opens the door and the professor exits. The black stands in the doorway looking down the hall.)

BLACK. Professor? I know you don't mean them words. Professor? I'm goin to be there in the mornin. I'll be there. You hear? I'll be there in the mornin. (He collapses to his knees in the doorway, all but weeping). I'll be there. (He looks up.) He didn't mean them words. You know he didn't. You know he didn't. I don't understand what you sent me

down there for. I don't understand it. If you wanted me to help him how come you didn't give me the words? You give em to him. What about me? (He kneels weeping rocking back and forth.) That's all right. That's all right. If you never speak again you know I'll keep your word. You know I will. You know I'm good for it. (He lifts his head.) Is that okay? Is that okay?

The End

## ***The Absurd and Cormac McCarthy's "The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form"***

Cormac McCarthy's single act and two character play *The Sunset Limited: A novel in a Dramatic Form* was premiered on May 18 through June 25, 2006, at Steppenwolf's Garage Theatre in Chicago. The play was also published by Vintage international in January 2007 which might explain the apparent subtitle "A Novel in Dramatic Form". The play was adopted in 2010 as a movie with the same title starring Tommy Lee Jones and Samuel Jackson.

Austin Pendleton, who first played the role of the professor, comments on the play as he says "'you'd think it was his 16th play, at least. The dramatic sense in it is at once traditional and righteningly original. . . . [I]t's a mountain I'm very excited to have been asked to try to climb . . . . cormac McCarthy is just a gorgeous writer, that's all" (12). And Jason Zinoman of the New York Times calls the play "a poem in celebration of death" (2010). Moreover, Dianne C. Luce remarks on McCarthy's play as she writes that the play is "dynamic, human, often humorous, but with ultimate dramatic questions at its core" (13).

The play opens with two characters sitting round a table in a subway tenement apartment in the black ghettos of New York. The first character is a large African American ex-convict who turned into a street preacher and the other character is a middle aged White college professor. Even though the stage directions refer to these characters as "The professor" and "the black man", when designating the speakers of the lines they are referred to as "White" and "Black". The audiences learn from the dialogue that earlier on White had tried to commit suicide attempting to jump in front of a subway train. Nevertheless, Black subsequently saves him and takes him back to his apartment as a sort of virtual prisoner in order to find out the reasons behind his attempt and to convince him to drop the idea of suicide and value his own life.

Eventually, both characters are engaged in a deep and intensive philosophical debate about God, human existence and human suffering. During this stark debate, they talk of general issues, drink coffee, eat, and every once and a while White gets up insisting on leaving, however, Black convinces him to stay a little longer then they are once again participate in their conversation. As the dialogue goes on it becomes more intense till the degree that at the end of the play white, not convinced by Black's words, burst out in anger claiming his incredibly deviated and decimating beliefs then leaves the apartment still insists on committing suicide. Eventually, Black collapses on his knees in tears calling



out to God in a state of doubt in his own faith.

Starting with the philosophical impact of the conceptual movement of the absurd on McCarthy's play, this section will be centered on an analytic exploration of the characters confrontation with the absurd and their reaction towards it. The analysis will consider this subject step by step till the whole reflection of the absurd is totally revealed.

### ***The Movement of The Absurd and "The Sunset Limited: A Novel in a Dramatic Form":***

Cormac McCarthy introduces his two characters not only as total strangers but also two extreme opposites of one another. This opposition is not entirely on the level of their race, social position, and intellectual significance, but also on the level of their religious and philosophical perspectives. Dianne C. Luce in her essay "Cormac McCarthy's The Sunset Limited: Dialogue of Life and Death (A Review of the Chicago Production) proclaims: Their differing races come into play in realistic characterizing strategies, but this is not a play primarily about race or social class. The two men are polar opposites philosophically, one embracing life, faith, hope, love of humanity. The other devoted to death, atheism, pessimism, and misanthropy (CMJ 15).

Luce asserts that these two characters adopt extremely opposing world views representing two different philosophical trends. Nevertheless, through the course of their dialogue, it is found that Black and White simultaneously share one prominent similarity, that is, they have both reached a point in their lives where they became conscious of the absurdity of their existence. Even though different life experiences are responsible for this realization, they have both clearly witnessed the feeling of the futility of the surrounding absurd universe. For the purpose of relevance it is appropriate to initially display the circumstances that led to their absurd situations. Cormac McCarthy presents White as what Black describes "a Culture Junky" (TSL 22). When Black enquires about his true beliefs White informs him "Lots of things. Culture things, For instance. Books and music and art. things like that" (TSL 20-21). And he goes on asserting that "Those are the kind of things that have value to me. They're the foundations of civilization" (TSL 21). White, being a college professor, is clearly a man of a high intellect as he admits reading 4000 books in his life period. And when Black asks White about the best books he has ever read White answers

“Maybe War and Peace” (TSL 15) and he goes on naming another book that he believes to be historically true such as “Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire”. The point here is that the books White is most interested in are books that deeply relate to human history and human reality. This reality is dominated by war, human suffering degradation.

Consequently, White reached a certain point where he became conscious of the fact that the cultural structures that he leveled highly lost their meaning and value. And as Black asks him “What happened to em?” White replies “People stopped valuing them. I stopped valuing them. To a certain extent” and that “The things that I loved were very frail. Very fragile. I didn’t know that. I thought they were indestructible” (TSL 21). White wholeheartedly believed in the infinity of the strength, stability, and value of human culture but as a result of his intensive education he realized that he was deceived by the belief of its indestructibility.

Later on in the play White himself confesses that “Evolution cannot avoid bringing intelligent life ultimately to an awareness of one thing above all else that one thing is futility” (TSL 113). White’s knowledge of human history led him to realize that the world of human culture and value is now on its way to destruction, as Dianne J. Luce concedes that “White recognizes that his devotion to culture has contributed to his misery, yet he cannot let go of his intellect or his exceptionalism” (CMJ 18). And moreover, as Black displays his admiration of White’s intellectual state White comments “You’d better be careful. You see where it’s gotten me” (TSL 93). This statement confirms White’s recognition of the consequential reflections of a high intellectuality on the individual’s intelligible reaction towards the surrounding overall reality.

Nonetheless, later on in the play Black promptly asks White about his absolute conceptual vision of human existence as he asks him “What’s the world you know?” (TSL 101), White answers “the world is basically a forced labor camp from which the workers- perfectly innocent- are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed. I don’t think that this is just the way I see it. I think it’s the way it is” (TSL 101). Moreover, within this forced labor camp the human condition is of an aggressively degraded state, as White asserts “When you read the history of the world you are reading a saga bloodshed and greed and folly the import of which is impossible to ignore” (TSL 93). He goes on confirming the inevitability of human decline and destruction, as he asserts that “The efforts that people undertake to improve the world invariably make it worse. I used to think there were exceptions to that dictum. I don’t think that now” (TSL 102). White’s answers sum up the human condition adhering to the ultimate perspectives of

human absurdity.

White visions the worldly everyday life as a labor camp in which the individuals are forced to exercise meaningless and endless labor while waiting for their number to come up in the lottery and are eventually released from their captivity and altered into a state of nothingness through their death. It is explicitly clear how this type of thought would subsequently lead any individual to a deprived state of severe depression. Moreover, McCarthy makes it totally clear that White's theories are not just a result of a passing pessimistic status he might be facing in a confined period of time or developed from a specific depressive situation. White claims that "I don't regard my state of mind as some pessimistic view of the world. I regard it as the world itself" (TSL 113). The feeling of the absurd has come to characterize his emotions and religion as he has based his whole consciousness of the universal existence on it.

Nevertheless, White goes on declaring that the conventional reasons behind his absurdity are related to the intellectual exposition of the true reality of existence as he admits "My own reasons center around a gradual loss of makebelieve.

That's all. A gradual enlightenment as to the nature of reality. Of the world" (TSL 100). Furthermore, He elaborates that "Culture tends to contribute to human misery. That the more one knows the more unhappy one is likely to be" (TSL 92). William Quirk concedes that "White's longing for death results, at least in part, from an excess of knowledge" (34). His knowledge of the futility of existence is what prominently leads him to suicide. Dianne C. Luce goes on confirming that "he partly agrees with Black that his education is pushing him toward suicide" (CMJ 18). Thus, White's absurdity is a consequential outcome of the collaboration of the sense of the meaningless of human existence, and his inability to identify any explanation for this vague reality through his intellectual knowledge.

Nevertheless, other controversially effective events may have also contributed to White's eventual confrontation with the absurd. For example, earlier on in the play McCarthy signifies clear references to the kind of relationship between the professor and his parents. As Black asks White about his father, the audiences learn that he died from cancer and that before he died White's mother asked him to see his father before he died but White never went. Black describes the situation as he concedes "Your daddy is layin on his deathbed dyin of cancer. Your mama settin there with him. Holdin his hand. He in

all kinds of pain. And they ask you to come one last time fore he dies and you tell 'em no. you ain't comin" (TSL 29). Eventually, White agrees confirming his description of the situation. And later on as White admits his repudiation of the idea of an everlasting life after death he says that "The ultimate despair. If I had to meet my mother again and start all of that all over, only this time without the prospect of death to look forward to? Well. That would be the final nightmare. Kafka on wheels" (TSL 112). These remarks adequately function as explicit references to the fact of a disordered relationship between White and his parents and therefore a disordered childhood which he led.

In addition, his social relations with the surrounding individuals appear to be promptly condemned to absolute failure. He admits that he has only one friend who he had lunch with from time to time, however, he still considers him as "not all that close" (TSL 25). He even observes that he is not even close enough to inform him of his plans to commit suicide. Black in an attempt to understand the relation between White and his friend says that he has only one friend who he considers not close to "want to bother him about a little thing like dyin" (TSL 26) and White just coldly changes the subject. Even more, the nature of his relation with his colleague professors is a relation of hate and disrespect as he concedes that "I loathe them and they loathe me" and when Black tells him that "That's a pretty powerful word" he replies "Not powerful enough, I'm afraid" (TSL 69). McCarthy sums up White's social status in Whites phrase "I don't like people" (TSL 77). He even admits that he curses the people on the subway each day.

William Quirk explains that "The play repeatedly emphasizes his [White's] solitude. He has no family and no real friendsI..Even his attempts to find companionship with others like him have failed" (35). And Dianne C. Luce explains that this hatred is not one based on social reasons such as the differentiation in of his social class, but are based on his philosophical perspectives, as she admits that White's reaction towards the surrounding individuals "is not much making a social class statement as a philosophical one" (CMJ 18). According to these references, it is clear that White's attitude towards the community is an attitude of hate and disgust which led him to a state of alienation and definite isolation.

These features could be referred to as progressive elements, as it is clear that by a certain collaboration of his apparent alienation with the passing of time he not only lost his faith in any sort of social relations but it also developed an alleged loss of any faith in human happiness. White relates that happiness is

“contrary to the human condition” and that even the thought of happiness is “ridiculous”. His disbelief in happiness goes to the extent that even denies its existence founding this view on the idea that “suffering and human destiny are the same thing. Each is a description of the other” (TSL 46). As this phrase mirrors his deep depression it also reflects his inner feeling of a severe and endless pain as he remarks that “you can’t be happy if you’re in pain” (46) and that “The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy” (TSL 114). He denies the notion of absolute happiness that could be possessed by any individual.

From this general survey of White’s social history and with the contribution of his high leveled intellect, it is possibly clear to calculate the effective purposes that might have led him to the present absurd state. They have led him to cross beyond the everyday concept of life and human existence taking him to a psychological status where he is confronted by the absurd reality of human existence.

Moving on to the apparent circumstances that led Black to the absurd situation, it is found that the reasons that led him to this awareness are extremely different to those of White. Black had previously indulged a life of crime and addiction before he turned into a street preacher. He informs White that the only thing that type of life contributed was what he describes as a “Death in life” (TSL 11). More than once he confesses his undisputed activities that he would not even mention because of their tremendous inhumanity and brutality. The audiences are even given an example of Black’s brutality as he narrates his controversial jailhouse story. In the prison cafeteria one inmate annoyed Black and had stabbed him with a knife in his stomach, nevertheless, Black describes his reaction, as he remarks:

And I didn’t do a thing in the world but duck and step under the rail and I reached and got hold of the leg of this table and it come off in my hand just as easy. And it’s got this big long screw stickin out of the end of it and I went on wailin on this nigger’s head and I didn’t quit. I beat on till you couldn’t hardly tell it was a head. And the screw’d stick in his head and I’d have to stand on him to pull it out again (TSL 38).

More surprisingly, even though Black comes to tell White of this most brutal incident and had already informed him that he had committed murder, he refuses to inform him of the worst thing he ever did. McCarthy seems to have intentionally left the audiences to figure for themselves what could be remarkably

worse than murder. Black carries on remarking to White that if he told him what he had done he would “jump up and run out the door hollerin” (TSL 86). Observing Black’s background clearly explains his usage of the imagery “Death in life” to ascribe his past life.

Nevertheless, similar to White, Black also experienced some social difficulties regarding his family. He mentions that his two sons died in addition to most of the members of his family. Black says “I ain’t got nobody. Everyone in my family is dead. I had two boys. They been dead for years. Just about everybody I ever knew is dead” (TSL 32). Black, being alone without any sort of family, has obviously suffered from loneliness and isolation leading him into a depressive state. As for his wife, it is found that, to Black, telling the terrifying jailhouse story is more pleasant than talking about his marriage. When White asks him “Have you ever been married?” Black answers “Maybe we ought to take another look at them jailhouse stories. (he shakes his head, laughing soundlessly. He pinches the bridge of his nose. His eyes shut) oh my” (TSL 31). His reaction to the question portrays a miserable picture of his marriage, which in turn also increases his previous depressive experiences.

Apparently Black, aided by these previously mentioned experiences, came to the conclusion of absurdity on his death bed in the prison clinic. At the specific moment of his near death experience, he came to a realization of his pathetic state of suffering and eventually, the absurdity of his reality. Black indicates this realization as he asserts:

I woke up in the infirmary. They had done operated on me. My speen was cut open. Liver. I do’t know what all. I come pretty close to dyin. And I had two hundred and eighty stitches holding me together and I was hurtin. I didn’t know you could hurt that bad. And still they got me in leg irons band got me handcuffed to the bed. If you could believe that (TSL 41).

His overall condition lying there in the infirmary feeling unimaginable pain and, yet, still in bondage theoretically persuaded him to discover the meaningless, pathetic, and absurd life he had indulged. Lying on his death bed, Black concluded his inability to find any meaning of life through his “Death in Life” experience, which only led to more obscurity and nonsense.

Eventually, both of McCarthy’s characters are now confronted with the absurd, and the meaninglessness of their whole existence. At this point the only

possible act is to react to this feeling of the absurd, for; once it is reached by the individual there is no such thing as an escape, it will always be there. There is no possibility of turning back and the individual will have no peace until the issue of the absurd is completely settled. This is exactly the case with McCarthy's characters as they have both reached their own sort of conclusions to the absurd.

Here, Susan J. Tyburski in her essay "The Lingering Scent of Divinity" in *The Sunset Limited and The Road* comments "Both Black and White, in their own ways, struggle with the terrible "darkness" at the core of human existence" (CMJ 123). Consequently, McCarthy explicitly presents two absolute contradictory settlements of the absurd. As White reached the conclusion of suicide in response to his confrontation, Black accommodates a religious life of subjective belief in God.

Being a college professor, White normally follows the scientific method of objectivity and the path of scientific evidence in order to legitimately determine the liability of any theory. In other words, he objectively follows the theory of what is only scientifically proven to exist is what really exists and, therefore, as long as there is no scientific proof of the existence of God, he declares him as nonexistent.

White actually confirms this view as he asserts that he exclusively believes "in the primacy of the intellect" (TSL 80). Consequently, he admits his disbelief in God as he puts it so disturbingly clear as he informs Black "I don't believe in God. Can you understand that?" (TSL 113). And he even relates himself to the kind of people who do not only deny the idea of God, but are also unwillingly prepared to accept any sort of faith as White allegedly announces "Why can't you people just accept it that some people don't even want to believe in God" (TSL 45). Before his confrontation with the absurd, White ultimately disbelieved in the very idea of God and, therefore, consequently took an alternative path in his attempt to resolve the absurd feeling, namely, suicide. White's supreme belief at this point is a belief in the hypothesis of nothingness. He yearns for nothingness and total darkness as it is the solidarity provided by nothingness that is his truthful desire. White has been victimized by an everlasting struggle of adaptation and willingness to comprehend the knowledge he has acquired concerning the reality of his existence. Now he has finally obtained the courage to let go and give up this struggle admitting the apparent futility of his attempts to settle the feeling of the absurd. White affirms that "Letting it all go is the place I finally got to. It took a lot of work to get there

and if there is one thing I would be unwilling to give up it is exactly that” (TSL 108). Moreover, he carries on clarifying his situation more clearly to Black as he concedes that “The one thing I won’t give up is giving up. I expect that to carry me through. I’m depending on it” (TSL 108). Suicide is the only available option as it is the activity that would provide such an ultimate relief.

Moreover, he declares suicide to be the global rational and sensible response to true knowledge. White declares that “If people saw the world for what it truly is. Saw their lives for what they truly are. Without dreams or illusions. I don’t believe they could offer the first reason why they should not elect to die as soon as possible” (TSL 113). He supposes that the immediate global reaction of any individual towards the acknowledgement of the actuality of the whole universal existence, should definitely be suicide. This most appalling declaration confirms his assertion that he is “a professor of darkness” (TSL 116) searching for nothingness and total darkness.

On the other hand, Black took a totally different path in order to settle his vision of the absurd. He followed the subjective method of a religious faith in God. Black once confronted by the absurd has certainly practiced what the absurd philosopher Søren Kierkegaard points out as the “leap of faith”. Within Black’s conversation with White, he announces the fact that even though he was practicing sinful activities that reflect his abandonment of any sort of faith, he still believed in God and was seeking his forgiveness and love. He relates that even his inmates in jail who “had done real bad shit and they wasn’t sorry about a damn thing cept getting caught” (TSL 34) still believed in God, as he asserts “Of course the funny thing was a lot of ‘em did believe in God. Maybe even more than those folks here on the outside. I know I did. You might want to think about that” (TSL 35). Here, McCarthy provides the audiences with a reference to Black’s preparedness to accept the idea of subjective faith.

Eventually, while Black was in the extreme state of the absurd as he was lying near death, he assumes that he heard God speaking to him giving him another chance to live and correct his beliefs. He tells White that “And I’m lying there and I hear this voice. Just as clear. Couldn’t been no clearer. And this voice says: if it was not for the grace of God you would not be here” (TSL 41). He goes on declaring the miraculous element in his experience as he admits that there was nobody there and that the voice is actually the voice of God. He says “Man. I tried to raise up and look around but of course I couldn’t move. Wasn’t no need to anyways. They wasn’t nobody there. I mean. They was somebody there alright but they wasn’t no use in me lookin around to see if I could see him” (TSL 41).



Black found his true purpose for living is faith and he confesses that this gave him the freedom from his obscured state. He claims that “I thought I was in charge. I never knowed what that burden weighed till I put it down. That might have been the sweetest thing of all. To just hand over the keys” (TSL 44). Believing that there is another supreme entity that is held responsible for all existence put his thoughts to an ease and a state of contentment. Surprisingly, Black admits that “Sometimes faith might just be a case of not havin nothing else left” (TSL 118). And on this remark Susan J. Tybursky concedes that “In fact, Black’s faith is born of desperation and violence” (CMJ 122). In a way, it could be remarked that McCarthy presents Black’s experience parallel to that of Abraham, as he too experienced a situation where was obliged to choose between following the words of God and violently kill his son, or to lose faith. This is identically parallel to the situation of Black, as he acts upon faith to settle the witnessed absurdity.

Steven Frye relates:

The street preacher Black in *The Sunset Limited* who claims Christ’s real presence in act of benevolence and self sacrifice. More broadly, it reflects a form of existential Christianity rooted to Soren Kierkegaard. This theology finds God in the embodied reality of the material world (177).

Throughout the play it becomes clear that Black’s vision of faith is not of one that could be described as a strict faith of Christianity. William Quirk asserts that “Black is no typical Christian, as his heretical tendencies reveal” (29). He believes in a more flexible faith as McCarthy displays Black’s heretical beliefs. For instance, Black disagrees with the notion of the “original sin” as he explains that “When Eve eat the apple and turned everybody bad. I don’t see people that way. I think for the most part people are good to start with. I think evil is something you bring on your own self” (TSL 56). And when White asks him if one has to believe everything in the Bible to gain salvation, Black confidently denies that you have to even read the Bible as he asserts:  
No, I don’t think you even have to read it. I ain’t for sure you even got to know there is such a book. I think whatever truth is wrote in these pages is wrote in the human heart too and it was wrote there a long time ago and will still be wrote there a long time hence (TSL 57).

He continues clarifying his vision of the generic purpose of the Bible claiming that

“This book is a guide for the ignorant and the sick at heart. A whole man wouldn’t need it at all” (TSL 57). Black clearly explains that the initial human state is based on the belief in God and at that point he is in no need for the Bible’s guidance to lead his way as he is a whole man. Nevertheless, as the individual imposes evil upon himself, he turns to be in need of the Bible for he has become among the ignorant and sick at heart. This classification of religious thought is exactly the vision of Christianity proposed by Soren Kierkegaard.

The point here is that the attempt of relying one’s faith exclusively and objectively on the Bible is vital. The true believer, to Kierkegaard, is the subjective believer who depends on his instincts to establish truthful faith. This is exactly the case of Black as he explicitly claims that a person doesn’t have to even read the Bible to be faithful.

Later on in the play, Black adds another heresy that gives a more definite shape to his overall concept of Jesus and Christianity. He openly asserts that he visions Jesus as “that gold at the bottom of the mine” and that “He [Jesus] couldn’t come down here and take the form of a man if that form was not done shaped to accommodate him” (TSL 80). Black clarifies his vision further as he goes on saying “And if I said that there ain’t no way for Jesus to be ever man without ever man bein Jesus then I believe that might be a pretty big heresy” (TSL 80). Black holds the absolute belief that any man can take the role of Jesus and could even be parallel to Jesus as a human savior.

From this previous overview, it is explicitly realized that McCarthy intends to embody a kind of debate between two different modes of the philosophical perspectives of the absurd. In other words, it is as if McCarthy aims to visualize the potential outcome of a debate between Søren Kierkegaard and an atheist individual who has arrived to the point of suicide as the answer to his absurdity. Within this debate each party delivers his own views and beliefs in order to convey their different conceptions of the meaning of their existence. This is indeed the case in *The Sunset Limited* as; where Black stands for the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard; White surely represents the suicidal atheist. At this point it would be proper to consider the apparent debate more closely to visualize and understand McCarthy’s actual intentions behind it. The core of this debate is found to be around the subject of the value of connecting with and assisting the surrounding individuals to the path of righteousness to earn God’s love and the hope for an everlasting life.

Black starts the debate by his suggestion that the eminent universal need of all humanity is “to be loved by God” (TSL 50) and earn his forgiveness even if they are not aware of this need. Black carries on his part of the debate with his enquiry “Suppose I was to tell you that if that if you could bring yourself to unlatch your hands from around your brothers throat you could have life everlasting?” (TSL 66). However, the price for this everlasting life is to “let you brother off the hook. You got to actually take him and hold him in your arms and it don’t make no difference what color he is or what he smells like or even if he don’t want to be held” (TSL 66). White on the other hand rejects the very sense of these concepts affirming their futility and emptiness of any sort of logic truth. At the ending of the play, White sums up all his beliefs projecting them so clearly in an outburst of anguish and totally culminates the whole celebrated debate as he sustains:

I don’t believe in God. Can you understand that? Look around you man. can’t you see? The clamour and din of those in torment has to be the most pleasing to his ear....your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. And if that pain were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash (TSL 114).

White puts it that pain is the only true reality of human existence and if God was truly existent it would be based on this creation and responsibility of pain and human suffering.

Furthermore, White imposes that what Black is really offering is a religion that “prepares one only for more life. For dreams and illusions and lies” (TSL 114) and the truth is that “if you could banish the fear of death from man’s heart they wouldn’t live a day” (TSL 114). He admits religion as a way of responding to the mere fear of death and the human ignorance of what follows death. And if he was informed of the truth and the nothingness which follows death he would crave for immediate death. However, he carries on his portray of the reality of existence as he claims:

Every friendship. Every love. Torment, betrayal, loss, suffering, pain, age, indignity, and hideous lingering illness. All with a single conclusion. For you and for everyone and every thing that you have chosen to care for. There’s the true brotherhood. The true fellowship

(TSL 114).

White believes that any friendship or love is undoubtedly subject to the same ending, namely, death and destruction. He believes that all human beings are equally condemned to participate in the same equation of meaningless existence and experience the exact suffering and pain, as White confirms that “And everyone is a member for life. You tell me that my brother is my salvation? My salvation? Well damn him. Damn him in every shape and form and guise. Do I see myself in him? Yes. I do. And what I see sickens me” (TSL 114). White lays it all down in front of Black nearly paralyzing him with the shock of his interior thoughts and beliefs.

Surprisingly, Black’s shock even surfaced his most intimate thoughts in his mind. At this point it is revealed that Black’s true intention behind his attempt of saving White is also to save himself. As White asks Black if he expects that God might speak to him if he is converted, Black replies “No, I’m hopin’ he might speak to me” (TSL 104). This answer reveals the true unstable and inner doubts within Black. Furthermore, his faith is absolutely compromised by White’s replies and is now seeking confirmation from God to ensure his position and his beliefs. Dianne C. Luce explains that Black “lives in hope that God will speak to him again; and for him, this is one of the things at stake as he labors to save White’s life: he hopes that if he is successful he will hear God in his heart” (CMJ 17). At the very end of the play and after White leaves threatening to commit suicide Black fall on his knees in tears calling for God as he says “I don’t understand it. If you wanted me to help him how come you didn’t give the words? You gave em to him. What about me? (TSL 117). Dianne C. Luce asserts that “in the plays final moments, it seems that the eloquence of the intellect has indeed shaken Black” (CMJ 20). Nevertheless, Black goes on affirming his subjective belief in God and his unwillingness to let go of his beliefs, as he asserts that “That’s all right. That’s all right. If you never speak again you know I’ll keep your word. You know I will. You know I’m good for it” (TSL 117). Here, Luce declares that “Black has lost his gambit to help this special case, but he has not decisively lost his faith in God and his own mission” (CMJ 20).

It seems as if McCarthy intended to end the play without any conclusions of the success of any of the debating parties. Each one of the characters is left at the very starting point of which the play started. White leaves still intending to commit suicide and Black is still in his subjective belief of God waiting for any other signs to confirm his beliefs.

It is seemingly appropriate to assume that McCarthy is actually favoring a totally different aspect to human response towards the feeling of the absurd. Parallel to Albert Camus, McCarthy favors the mode of acceptance as the true and proper response to the absurd. White as an enlightened intellect whose knowledge blinded him from visioning the true pleasures of life and that suicide is the only solution to his state of depression. In other words his knowledge failed to provide him with the reasons that could make the apparent suffering of human existence worth it. Black took religion as his way out of the absurd even though it substantially failed to satisfy him, leaving him in doubt and indulging him in a continuous search for the truth. Between Black and White, McCarthy's solution was apparently what could be declared as "grey". McCarthy aims to enlighten his audience to the actual pleasurable activities that both characters had blindly shared. It was there conversation itself, the drink of coffee, and the delicious bowl of soup that they ate together, are what makes life worth living. As William Quirk puts it:

In this oppositional conversation between the atheist and the believer, between the man who wants to die and the man who wants to save him, we see periodic relaxations of the tension: first in the jail house story, then in the humorous anecdote about Evelyn's whiskey bottle, and now, as a kind of culmination, in the pleasure and concord of the shared meal. (40).

McCarthy's hidden intention behind the present debate is to reflect the value and the enjoyment of the simple things in life making it worth holding on to in spite of its unsolved absurdity. To live side by side with the feeling of absurdity is what gains the human qualities of nobility, freedom and passion. These qualities are apparently experienced through Black and White's time together in Black's apartment.

This philosophical survey explicitly reveals the proportional impact of the philosophy of the absurd, primarily proposed by the two leading philosophers of the absurd, Søren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus, on McCarthy. The play clearly bears all the theoretical modes of the movement of the absurd as McCarthy astutely displays his outstanding debate between the polarized characters of his one act play.

# ***The Literary impact of The Absurd on Cormac McCarthy's "The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form"***

## ***1- Metaphors and Allegorical Representations:***

The phrase "Sunset Limited" is originally the name of a southern transcontinental Amtrak train running from Orlando to Los Angeles through New Orleans, El Paso, and other points south such as Louisiana. One of the train's major lines ran through Knoxville at the time McCarthy himself grew up. Dianne C. Luce relates that "The name "Sunset" goes back to the Sunset Route of the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Railway and was used as early as 1874. Thus the Sunset Limited has figured for decades in the popular culture of the region" (CMJ 14). Nevertheless, at the present time the "Sunset Limited" is a subway train running through Brooklyn, New York. It was in front of this particular train that White had attempted to throw himself before being rescued by Black. Susan J. Tybvriski observes that "The Sunset Limited" is a "metaphor for his [White's] suicidal impulse in the face of the meaninglessness of human existence" (CMJ 121). The professor chooses to leap in front of the Sunset Limited sending him to the west of everything where he can endure nothingness and total darkness.

However, the allegorical usage of the title is repeatedly uttered by both characters throughout the play as they relate the phrase with White's attempted suicide and yearning for death. Dianne C. Luce remarks "The title of the play is metaphorical: to ride the Sunset Limited is to take the final journey, to die, to ride the west of everything" (CMJ 14).

Early in the play, as White relates that after his realization of the futility of his existence he reached to the conclusion of suicide and Black responds expressing this allegory as he relates "all this culture stuff is all they ever was tween you and the Sunset Limited" (TSL 22). He imposes the imagery of the Subway train "Sunset Limited" as an allegory of death. Black goes on asking White "What is the use of such notions such as them if it won't keep you glued down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through at eighty mile a hour" (TSL 22). Susan J. Tybvriski writes "Embodied in this dialogue is the question what "notions" can keep suicidal despair at bay? What can keep us reliably grounded in the world of the living?" (CMJ 122). However, White confirms

that “I believe in the Sunset Limited” (TSL 22) and that the only exit is to leap in front of the train. Similar assumptions and references to the “Sunset Limited” are repeated several times throughout the play with the same metaphorical meaning of death.

Moreover, as the “Sunset Limited” presents death it is implicated that the subway itself and the platform represent the world or even the universe, and the travelers represent all mankind. Dianne J. Luce Writes “The subway, of course, is the world” (CMJ 18). Black emphasizes this point as he attempts to sum up White’s overall status as he claims:

The simplest things has got more to em than you can ever understand. Bunch of people standin around on a train platform of a morning. Waitin to go to work...but they might be one commuter waitin there on the edge of that platform that for him is something else. It might be even the edge of the world. The edge of the universe....So he’s a different kind of commuter. He’s world’s away from them everyday travelers (TSL 73).

Black metaphorically explains that the ordinary individual living in society repeatedly experiences his average everyday activities with a feeling of complete contentedness to the life he lives. Nevertheless, there comes a different kind of individual who understands life differently from all those surrounding him. He becomes “worlds away” from everybody else waiting on the edge of the world for the opportunity to end the meaninglessness of his existence. This is the positive description of White’s conceptual status. Intelligibly, Cormac McCarthy proposes these notions in his metaphorical usage of the play’s title *The Sunset Limited*.

Furthermore, another usage of allegory is relevantly exercised within McCarthy’s “The Sunset Limited”, specifically, the metaphorical implications of the characters of the play. Cormac McCarthy managed both of his characters, Black and White, as key instruments to convey a more subtle concept to his audiences. Dianne C. Luce observes the metaphorical presentation of White as she emphasizes that “Although the professor exhibits an exaggerated sense of his own exceptionalism, White is every lost man; but as a spokesman for the spirit, Black’s allegorical significance is richer and more ambiguous” (CMJ 16). White, with his aesthetic beliefs and his depression, clearly resembles every lost individual in society who managed to discover the truth and could no longer mingle along with the meaningless and emptiness of his existence. Nevertheless, as Black introduces a most profound heretical concept, asserting that “there aint no way for Jesus to ever be man without ever man bein

Jesus” (TSL 80), Black comprehends that if Christ could resemble every man then every man resembles Christ. Eventually, this inclination clearly includes himself. William Quirk remarks that “Black is God, but he is so just as everyone else in the world is” (43). McCarthy depicts Black as Jesus with his Christian message and his everlasting life of service to all mankind attempting to save them from destruction. Dianne J. Luce illustrates this notion as she announces:

He [Black] is a human avatar of Jesus, Jesus in his everyman manifestation; he is a seeker— not a “doubter” but a “questioner,” as he tells White (67); he is the “big black angel” (23) who seeks to deliver White from destruction but whose blessing is rejected; he is the gnostic messenger from the alien good God (CMJ 16).

“Black” was at a certain point “White” before he became a representative of Jesus, and precisely from his near-death experience. Then God spoke to him and with God’s speech, Black was converted entirely to a spiritual messenger making him parallel to Jesus. Similar to Christ, Black now leads a life where he ministers those lost and in need for guidance to ensure their salvation and that are, such as White, seeking death as their only available asylum.

## ***2- Polarity and the characters of the play:***

It has been mentioned earlier that McCarthy’s characters White and Black resemble a polarized relation. McCarthy introduces White as a White colored atheist College professor with a high leveled intellectual supremacy. Black, on the other hand, is a dark colored African-American ex-convict who has converted, and is presently a street preacher living in a subway tenement apartment. However, McCarthy’s actual intention behind this polarized relation is entirely stripped from the issues of racism and social class. It seems quite clear that McCarthy deliberately chose Black to represent light and White to represent darkness for the avoidance of any false interpretation of the play as one merely discussing the issue of racism.

Nevertheless, McCarthy emphasizes the adequacy of this paradoxical reality on variously differential levels. They both represent not only different life styles, but also opposite beliefs and theories of their overall existence and imposingly different psychological responses to these beliefs. Black depicts a subjective belief in God who offers hope for an everlasting life as a consequential outcome of the individual’s social unity with the surrounding individuals. In response to this vision, he unites himself with the surrounding community with a beneficial relation of advisory and preaching. On a different level, White visions



an atheistic theology of an isolated, pessimistic, and contemptible human existence that is destined for absolute destruction. Again White reacts to this view with a devoted supplication to death.

However, with this specific contradictory layout, McCarthy's true intention is what Luce relates as "reverse conventional light-versus-dark associations" (CMJ 15). Luce asserts that McCarthy portrays a philosophical debate between darkness and light and leaves the audiences to conclude their own theoretical outcomes. Eventually, references to darkness have been repeatedly visible throughout the play exclusively with relevance to White. Moreover, White openly asserts that "I'm a professor of darkness. The night in day's clothing" (TSL 116). And that "I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death. Real death" (TSL 112). He apprehends his vision of darkness to be the true overall reality of human existence as he relates that "The darker picture is always the correct one" (TSL 93). The result of this prevailing darkness is that "we will not be here much longer" (TSL 94). Black invokes a contradictory view that assumes the revelation of light over darkness. He explains to White that "The light is all around you. 'cept you don't see nothin but shadow. And the shadow is you" (TSL 98). Black believes in the persistency of light but the individual himself is responsible for enshrouding it with the darkness of his own soul.

Furthermore, another reference to the opposition between darkness and light is present as White asserts to Black that "You see everything in black and White" (TSL 88). Black goes on affirming this accusation as he replies "It is black and white" (TSL 88). Here Black explicitly explains that, in the human existence it is either you believe in God and live in an eternal life of light, or you are in eternal darkness. This view, as White points out, "makes the world easier to understand" (TSL 88) in the view of Black. Apparently, McCarthy aims to reflect the idea that the world is actually not primarily black or white. Through this disputation McCarthy aims to announce that there is a certain point between darkness and light, or in other words Black and White, which is the intended objective of human existence. Furthermore, this outcome represents the core concept of the play as Susan declares that "These opposing modes of apprehending reality inform the debate at the core of this play" (CMJ 121).

### ***3- Repetition and Circular Action:***

The mode of repetition and the cyclic conception of time and action which distinguishes the "Theatre of the Absurd" could be also detected in

McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*. William Quirk sustains that "The Sunset Limited reveals that it operates in terms of a cyclical conception of time, not the conventional understanding of linear time, the "clock time" that is an infinite succession of new moments" (41). Early in the play as White elusively asks Black "Do you really think that Jesus is in this room" (TSL 7) which is rather peculiar because Black had not even made any sort of references to the mere suggestion that implies Jesus being in the room. Even though Black had spoken of God before White's question he never referred to Jesus or the idea that he believes him to be in the room. In other words, the mode of the conversation does not fit to be the proper elaboration for such a suggestion. Quirk explains that it could merely be a matter of "anticipating" (41), nonetheless, he goes on asserting that the idea of anticipation is rather "Too specific" (41). In response, Quirk proposes a different theory concerning this matter as he suggests:

we can venture another hypothesis: Black has indeed already claimed that Jesus is in the room with them, but he has not made the claim here and now. Rather, he made the claim in an earlier encounter with White, an earlier encounter that is nothing other than an earlier "performance," an earlier occurrence of this conversation (41).

Quirk theoretically suggests that the play carries out a continual cycling repetition of itself. That is, White already knows that Black believes that Jesus is in the room. That is, the two characters have previously had this conversation at an earlier time and this is a mere repetition of this cycling dialogue.

However, further expressions are found that support this theoretical concept of repetition. One explicit expression is visible within White's response to Black's enquiry about "Cecil", who is just an imaginative figure proposed by White for the reason of clarification. As Black asks "Who's Cecil?"(TSL 8) White surprisingly replies "We're not going to get into this again are we? I The fact that I made Cecil up" (TSL 8). White clearly points out that they had previously talked about "Cecil" and that he is just an imaginative figure. And because there is no other reference to Cecil throughout the play, then they must have had this conversation within an earlier encounter or "performance". Again, White's assumption leads to the idea of an endless cycling mode within the play. Furthermore, at the very end of the play and as White leaves the apartment apparently returning to the subway to commit suicide, Black call's him aloud and says "Professor? I'm goin to be there in the mornin. I'll be there. You hea? I'll be there in the morningI I'll be there" (TSL 117). McCarthy elaborates that the whole play is due for repetition and that the next morning White will

attempt to jump in front of the Sunset Limited and again Black will save him and they will both have a somewhat similar conversation in Black's apartment. In an attempt to understand McCarthy's motivation behind his usage of this cyclic mode, a consideration of Black's notion of an everlasting life must be accounted for. Black presents the idea of "everlasting life" as he emphasizes: He [Jesus] said you could have life everlasting.... And you can have it. Now. Today.... To get it you got to let you brother off the hook. You got to actually take him and hold him in your arms and it don't make no difference what color he is or what he smells like or even if he don't want to be held (TSL 78).

Black explains that by helping another troubled individual, the activity of which he is presently practicing in helping White, one gains an everlasting life. And McCarthy gives a hint that he is assumingly referring to Black's situation, as Black asserts that "it don't make no difference what color he is. I. or even if he don't want to be held" (TSL 78). It is clear that White is different in color than Black and, moreover, he insists that he doesn't want to be saved and he pleads for death. Consequently, by Black's efforts in order to save White, he has already gained a "Life everlastin" and he has it "Now. Today" explaining the continuity of the play.

A different structural mode of repetition is also noticed within McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*. This mode could be described as a verbal repetition of a "catchphrase" that is repeatedly uttered by one or more of the characters throughout the play. Moreover, this "catchphrase" holds specific references relevant to the general meaning of the play. Shortly after Black takes the professor to his apartment and starts their conversation, White tells Black "I should go" (3) and henceforth it recurs several times throughout the play. It is precisely within the moments where the dialogue becomes more intense that White utters this phrase as if he is implicating that he is still not convinced and its time to head for the Sunset Limited, or death.

Furthermore, Black too has his own phrase which he repeats in moments of silence and thought. In the opening line of the play Black looks at the professor and says "So what am I supposed to do with you. Professor?" (TSL 1). This phrase reflects Black's continues devotion to the idea of saving White and convincing him to let go of the idea of suicide by expressing his attempt to figure a way of doing so. Nevertheless, at the end of the play and as Black is running out of ideas, he utters the phrase but in a more desperate manner as he says "What can I do?" (TSL 111). Here, the phrase expresses a sense of need and

desperation. That is, Black not only wants to convince White but he is also in demand to save him for purposes of his own. These two phrases work together as an implication to the overall aim of the play. They both stand for two opposite trends of the individual's reactions towards life. While the phrase "I've got to go" resembles death, the phrase "What we goin to do with you. Professor?" refers to the idea of unity and support of the individuals of a community towards one another.

Nonetheless, derived from the circulation of action and repetition within these plays, another structural element is adequately produced, namely, the plays unsettled ending. As James L. Roberts recognizes one of the distinguishing characteristics of the theatre of the absurd as he asserts that "Nothing is ever settled; there are no positive statements. No conclusions are ever reached, and what few actions there are have no meaning, particularly in relation to the action. This is, one action carries no more significance than does its opposite action" (14), this is relevantly the case in the studied plays. In the Theatre of the Absurd there is no dominant conclusion that could be observed by the audiences and they are left to figure their own conclusions of the proposed endings.

In the final scene of McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited* White insists that Black opens the apartment door and he leaves while Black drops on his knees in desperation and doubt. This ending provides no absolute resolution to the play. Both characters part without any definite impact of the whole debate of which the play is centered on. White leaves the apartment still not convinced with Black's religious perspectives and still insisting on committing suicide. On the other hand, Black falls on his knees shaken by doubt and weariness as he has failed to convert White and has yet not received any help or word from God. Dianne C. Luce depicts the plays end as she writes "The play ends...with the mysterious silence of God" (CMJ 20). God has not spoken to Black leaving him in the tormenting feeling of weariness and doubt. That is, nothing actually changed and there is no alteration that could be positively stated as both characters leave the stage the exact same way they entered, holding on to the same religious and philosophical perspectives.

## Character Analysis:

The *Sunset Limited* by Cormac McCarthy is an intelligent debate of philosophical nature about faith in God and the purpose of life on one hand and atheism and meaninglessness of life on other. The choice of names for characters, Black and White, makes clear the dichotomy to be presented by McCarthy. As the play opens in Black's apartment, the preliminary dialogue discloses that White, a professor, in his extremely depressed condition has tried to kill himself by leaping himself in front of New York's subway train, *The Sunset Limited*. As he tries to make the fatal jump a man named Black, an ex-con but now changed into a deeply religious person, saves him. Sitting at dining table in his apartment, Black interrogates White in order to find the reasons of his suicidal attempt. After getting answers to some of his questions Black is shocked to find that White has no interest in personal beliefs or values. Here McCarthy shows importance of sleep also. White is so depressed that he has not slept last night and as a human being Black can understand the negative influence of sleeplessness on a person who is already disturbed. White does not regard his birthday to be a special day, therefore, he does not mind making it his death day. White considers birthdays dangerous like Christmas. The mention of hanging things symbolize actual 'hanging' of man or Christ. That is why at this point he at once declares that he has to "go". Through questioning White frequently, Black gets familiar with the way of thinking of educated people like the professor. When White insists upon going, Black's decision to go with him (even if white is going home) is, in fact, his effort to resist White's approach again towards death. But White saying that he cannot go home with him makes Black realize and tell plainly that White can come to his home but he cannot go to White's home. It is obvious here that Black possesses the quality to face reality. He simply remarks that White people do not like black folks in their area. This reference has been made by McCarthy towards racism prevailing in the modern developed society of advanced country like America.

White, being a totally disillusioned man, wonders why Black cares so much about a stranger's life. He questions Black who has appointed him to be his guardian angel. In fact, White is intelligent enough to understand that Black believes Jesus has appointed him as White's guardian angel, Jesus has made him leap into Black's arms and Jesus has made the events occur the way they take place that day, that is why he asks Black if really thinks that Jesus is in his room. Black's belief in the presence of Jesus in his room is so strong that he does not "think" but is sure that Jesus is present in his room. At this point White asks if Black can see Jesus and Black's reply is very simple, plain and innocent. He says that he can't see Jesus but he hears him daily; though he is not so particular about hearing voices, not even of his own, yet he has "heard" Jesus. Black explains how after hearing the phrase 'lingering scent of

divinity' uttered by some black preacher on radio, he got interested in religion. Here McCarthy gives importance to words which have the ability to influence people.

Later the importance of words will reach its peak near the end of the play. Cormac McCarthy makes language the major strength of his play *The Sunset Limited* in which there is no action but only the use of accurate, vivid and moving words with deeper meanings. At one place after questioning White and making calculations Black points out that over the course of White's whole life he has read almost four thousand seven hundred and twenty books containing worldly knowledge but he has not read one book \_ the Bible which teaches how to live in the world. Perhaps at some stage White has read some parts of the Bible but he has not read it the whole as he has read other books. To differentiate between two books it is essential to read the both. It seems that Blacks wants to bring White to the point to make him read the complete Bible thoroughly even if to differentiate with other books only. When White declares *War and Peace* to be a good book Black wants to know if difference of authors makes any difference in White's point of view. He also wants White to define "a true book". At this, White replies that a history book like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* might be a true book because, according to him, it is about actual events that have happened. Black wants to know if one of these books is true and White's response is that in historical sense none of these two books is "true", he means not even the Bible. Actually, Black wants him to decidedly declare which of the two books is good and true one. White wants to avoid comparison hence avoids the reading of Bible. Black asks if White agrees to the saying of the Bible that it is the greatest book ever-written, and he agrees to it. Black then asks a shaking question; if White has read good books then why he has not read the best book? At this question White feels the need to go instead of providing the answer.

In *The Sunset Limited*, McCarthy presents White as an atheist. While discussing how Black comes to rescue White at his amazing leap, White clearly remarks that Black believes in angels whereas he does not. Instead of angels he believes in cultural things-books and music. Books and music, according to White, are foundations of civilization, therefore, these have value to him. But even these have lost value now.

Although White does not believe in beliefs yet he believes in the sunset limited. It seems to have become a metaphor of death for him. In response to another valuable and relevant question about having a friend, White gives his opinion about friends who do nothing except eating together. White is not clear about the best form of friendship either because he has no real friend or because he himself is not a good friend to anyone. White tries to get released soon from the life-saving, soul-saving and toward religion-tilted trance of Black. He falsely tells Black that he wants to go home to which black does not believe. At this, White calls himself a prisoner and Black comments that before coming to his home White has already been a "Death

Row prisoner”. White tells about his father who was a lawyer and how he didn’t go to see his dying father in suffering and pain from cancer because he doesn’t want to “remember him that way”. This shows another aspect of White’s character that he is an escapist who tries to escape the bitter and painful realities of life. That is why he wants to put an end to his life. When Black mentions light- “good light. True light” Black does not want see or feel this light being turned into a nihilist and atheist. Black is a loving man and its proof is that he calls White “brother”. Now White questions Black and comes to know that Black has spent time in jail on the charge of murder. In reply to the question about marriage White receives only “Oh man”. When he asks about his children Black tells that his two boys and all the other members of his family have died. He further tells that he has spent seven years of hard time during which he smacked many people. He tells that he lives in this building for the sake of junkies and crackheads despite their stealing habits. Black misses one thing here and that is music. He tells honestly that he does not want to have a television but music. At this White calls his place to be terrible place with horrible people. He thinks junkies not to be “worth saving” people. Black argues that though life is long and dry but times often change. He tries to talk about hope in life but White says that it is bad life and at once says that he has to go. Then he insists upon the need to go in any case. Black allures him to listen to his jailhouse true story in order to stop him from going to death and White agrees to listen but the true story only. Black narrates the story giving detail of event which took place in the jail. One day a nigger misbehaved with the Black and he tells how the fight started, how he got injured, how he injured others, how someone pushed the button of alarm, how the guard came and was about to shoot him but the lieutenant came and saved him. Almost half of his blood was lost. Nobody died. He was about to die and they operated him. When he came into senses he felt hurt with two hundred and eighty stitches. Still he had leg irons and was hand cuffed to the bed. In this condition he heard the clear voice saying, “if it was not for the grace of God you could not be here”. Black says it was then that he got changed. Black says he does not know why God spoke and White comments that He is an opportunist. Both the characters differ in their views about killing oneself, happiness and suffering. Continuing to convince White, Black points out that according to the Bible, God has forbidden from committing suicide. To White, happiness is ridiculous. It is nowhere. In his opinion suffering and human destiny describe each other. But Black rightly points out if there is no pain in one’s life how can one know what happiness is.

In *The Sunset Limited*, White stands for reason and Black stands for evangelical Christianity. White has been following throughout his life the prevailing social order and culture but without paying heed to any religion. He seems unaware of his problem. As far as religion or God is concerned he clearly says that he does not want to be loved by God. Now even culture cannot console his soul. He does not want to see the people again whom he has known in his life. Without any hope of renewal he feels committed to suicide as only via to end his existence. On the contrary, from the

day Black has received his “call” he has embraced Christian simplicity and whatever divine knowledge he has, has been received directly from the Bible. White has been so deeply disillusioned internally that he thinks in search of meaning to the existence of man, he has spent his whole life futilely. As Black has given meaning to his life with purpose of serving his fellow beings, therefore he feels comfortable with his faith. White, a book-loving intellectual is thoroughly tilted toward death through suicide, whereas Black, a people-loving ex-con, finds life meaningful and worth-living (having faith in God) not only for himself but for others as well. If White is an epitome of cynicism then Black is an epitome of optimism. If White is archetype of reason then Black is archetype of faith. If White is an embodiment of despair then Black is an embodiment of hope. Both of them have opposing temperaments. In fact both of them try to convince the other. Black does not want White to leave the apartment due to fear that he will commit suicide. He takes it as a challenge to save White’s soul by preventing his suicidal killing. At the same time White, with the help of his intellect and reason tries to persuade Black that in modern age there is no God. For him The Sunset Limited (train) is a metaphor for the journey of life but he does not want to take it to the end. Quite opposite to him, Black feels happiness in getting what we need instead of what we want.

Because of his experience of pain and suffering in life around him White remarks that to stop worrying is not an easy task. Black has tasted the spiritual joy after helping others. That is why, according to him, life gives light and one can make one’s life everlasting. Black wants White not to leave and for this purpose he is ready to change the topic and can discuss baseball. He decides to bring something to eat. White agrees to have some coffee and mentions again to leave after that. On the question of his relationships with colleagues, White replies that he loathes other professors and they loathe him. Here Cormac McCarthy presents another point of opposition. In the greatest country of the world the poor uneducated people coordinate with each other but educated people lack this coordination. White further philosophizes that he loathes them and because he is like them, therefore, he loathes himself also. It is a painful thing that White has already tried psychological treatment for his “suicidal depression” but even the drugs have done nothing. At this stage of discussion Black makes difference between different travelers by explaining that one (Black) stands on platform hundreds or thousand times to reach the workplace and another (White) stands on the same platform for another purpose. He means that one’s purpose is to participate in life-activation while the purpose of the other is to put an end to life itself. On the issue of cursing unknown people on train, White admits that is linked with the larger issue that he does not like people. Here too, he is opposite to Black who helps people and believes in brotherhood. In response to Black’s next question that though he does not like people yet he never hurts them, White agrees. Then Black comes to his actual point and wants to know how can such a man hurt himself. To White it is not the same thing as they are they and he is he. Black believes that there are no Jews, no Whites, no niggers, no men of



colour but only one thing and that is Humans. Black is a good learner also. Whenever White utters some new words Black asks meaning. Black brings food and then says Grace (prayer). He thanks God for the food and all other blessings. Black is not an ungrateful person. He thanks God for saving professor though he does not know why he is needed. White tells him that his prayer is good then says this is “very good”. In Black’s opinion jumping before the Sunset Limited is the worst thing White has tried. Then they debate on the topic of civilization. Black gets surprised to listen White who explains that history is full of saga of bloodshed, greed and folly. He is sure that humans will not be here much longer. Black wants White to consider other people to be his brothers during his despair and self-destruction period. He appreciates White’s intelligent reasoning. He has the opinion that the light of faith is everywhere around man who just has to see it. At this White declares plainly that he has no faith like Black. This declaration shows their difference on religion. In White’s opinion different people have different reasons to go toward suicide and his own reason in his regard is “gradual loss of make-belief”. Black’s desire to educate the people (towards positive side of life) who try to commit suicide, is called “facitions” by professor. When many things seem opposite and contrasting with White’s idea, Black asks about the world White knows. White’s hopelessness about world is obvious when he describes the world as a “forced labour camp” from which the workers are daily executed. According to him, the efforts that people undertake to improve the world, make it worse. Black takes notice of note of hopelessness and despair in the talk of White and White admits that only death can end pain and to die quickly under a fast-moving train means totally painless death. White refuses to compare his life with Black’s at Black’s suggestion and feels the need to go. Black wants him to postpone his suicide for one night at least and to White it depends on if he does not commit it today. It means he is going to commit it today. Here Black regrets for not having the words that can serve to reach the heart of White. McCarthy has given importance to language here.

According to White, the worst thing of his life was when a Black saved him from dying. If McCarthy shows rhetorical superiority of White in *The Sunset Limited* then he shows the extraordinary ability of Black to make White utter certain facts about him because of his questioning like a psychiatrist. Black adapts preaching style now advising to find an excellent world by being decent and loving to the fellow beings. In this way one can save oneself and feel relieved for not following the path to suicide. But White still insists to go because he does not believe in the world. Here White explains that he desires “darkness”. He prays for “death”. As dead have no existence therefore no community, that is why he has idealized Death, which will provide him with silence, Blackness, Loneliness and Peace. Only heart-beat is between all these peace-providing things. He believes that his state of mind is not pessimistic view of the world, it is rather “the world itself”. According to him evolution brings awareness of futility. White pleads his case in favour of his suicidal act by saying if people see what the world and their lives in it truly are for, they will

select to die as soon as possible. In his final monologue, White proclaims clearly that he does not believe in God. There is no religion which prepares one for death. All talk about justice, brotherhood, eternal life, good God and the church preaching prepares people for more life with dreams, illusions and lies. Only if the fear of death can be banished from the hurt of people they would not live a day. Every road, every friendship, every love, betrayal, loss, suffering, pain, hideous lingering illness ends in death. The true brotherhood is in sharing pain. He condemns the idea of desiring this life which gives only pain and suffering. Black agrees to him with lowered head. White rising to go declares himself to be a professor of darkness in day's clothing. He is not in need of God's love or forgiveness instead has only hope of nothingness. He asks Black to open the door and finally exists. Now Black asks God if He wanted him to help White then why didn't He give him the words with which He has awarded White. While weeping and kneeling back and forth, he reaffirms his obedience to Him and firm belief in Him and that even if he does not speak to Him again, he will keep the word.

In the beginning it is Black who leads the dialogue with hope of life and light but in the end it is White who makes the play take a darker turn with his frightening despair. The initially plausible dialogue turns into apocalyptic near the end. In *The Sunset Limited*, Cormac McCarthy masterfully reveals the importance of rhetoric and oratory by proving words to be the only medium of meaning, words-which on one side have so much darkness with them to drive one towards death and on the other side, make another to hold a complaining exchange of talk with God.