Cormac McCarthy: A Style Analysis

Cormac McCarthy’s writing is simple, but powerful. He uses very little punctuation -- a style choice he says was inspired by James Joyce’s writing, he uses a great deal of scene description, and he often includes violent scenes without suggesting the reader respond with a specific emotional response. McCarthy grew up in the south, which is often reflected in his writing – the scenery, the language, the characters. Most of his life has been lived fairly minimally – he and his ex-wife lived in a barn that he renovated himself for most of their marriage. His sparse, unemotional style of writing adds to the precision of the words and punctuation that he does choose to put onto the page. This allows the tension to build quickly throughout his writing and leaves the reader to his own devices when it comes to interpretation of scene.

Cormac McCarthy is iconoclastic in the sense that instead of using daunting flowery prose or irony, he writes simplistically, with minimal punctuation, short, direct sentences and colloquial language. The lack of commas in his writing causes the eye to travel the page quickly. I felt that the lack of pause in sentences with lists, where he instead chose to put “and,” coupled with the constant use of short, declarative sentences added a great deal to the building tension throughout his novels. The longer sentences using lists add an almost breathless feeling, while the shorter sentences give the reader a jerky ride down the page. These style devices add to the tension that is often building in his stories. In “No Country for Old Men,” McCarthy uses both of these devices often for expository passages as well as to describe action.
In this passage from “No Country for Old Men,” McCarthy uses both of these devices to describe a desert scene: “The antelope were a little under a mile away. The sun was up less than an hour and the shadow of the ridge and the datilla and the rocks fell far out across the floodplain below him. Somewhere out there was the shadow of Moss himself. He lowered the binoculars and sat studying the land. Far to the south the raw mountains of Mexico. The breaks of the river” (8).

Instead of creating a compound sentence, McCarthy chose to break it into two, which adds to the drama of the scene. In the “The sun was up…” sentence, he chose to go the other route and give a list of objects that were casting shadows onto the land, which adds a bit of fast-paced intensity to a fairly demure scene.

Along with his lack of commas, he avoids quotation marks for his dialogue, adding an oral quality to his stories, as if someone were telling the story aloud. He often doesn’t credit a speaker, leaving it to the reader to recall who spoke first in a conversation – this, along with his line-by-line sentences, moves the story along at a faster pace, and gives it a sense of realism as well. His characters speak colloquially, often in the southern drawl and slang that McCarthy surely grew up hearing. This conversation from “All the Pretty Horses” illustrates this:

John Grady looked at Rawlins. Rawlins looked lost standing there hatless and afoot in his shrunken clothes.

Let’s get somethin to eat.

We don’t have any money.

I got money.

Where’d you get money at? Rawlins said.

I got a whole envelope full (209).
The lack of not only quotation marks but apostrophes along with the rare identification of the speaker allows the reader to skim down the page, taking in the whole conversation in a short time. This can add to the tension and realism of the scene at hand.

McCarthy often has scenes of violence or death, but they are rarely sentimental in nature. His descriptions of these scenes, no matter how vulgar, violent or disturbing, are written in a way that is not meant to evoke a specific emotion from the reader. He leaves the decision of how to respond to his scenes and descriptions to the reader. This adds to the overall feeling of reality in his novels. In his novel “Outer Dark,” McCarthy describes the murder of an infant, and while he chose words that would imply a darkness in the scene, he doesn’t seem to hope to get a specific response from the reader. He instead goes for realism and allows the reader to respond as they wish.

"Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a long cat's eye slant and malevolent and a dark smile erupted on the child's throat and went all broken down the front of it. The child made no sound. It hung there with its one eye glazing over like a wet stone and the black blood pumping down its naked belly” (236).

Despite the appalling nature of this scene, McCarthy, as a writer, doesn’t deign it his duty to tell the reader how to feel. This adds something ominous to his writing, what I interpreted as a sort of sociopathic undercurrent that flows throughout the novels.

A scene in “No Country for Old Men” is similarly violent, if not more so, but the writing is done in such a way that, though it does show the reader that the Chigurh character is a cold-blooded murderer, it allows the reader to decide how to feel about the character and his actions.
The deputy was flailing wildly and he’d begun to walk sideways over the floor in a circle, kicking over the wastebasket, kicking the chair across the room. He kicked shut the door and he wrapped the throwrug in a wad about them. He was gurgling and bleeding from the mouth. He was strangling on his own blood. Chigurh only hauled the harder. The nickelplated cuffs bit to the bone. The deputy’s right carotid artery burst and a jet of blood shot across the room and hit the wall and ran down it (6).

This passage is foreboding, but lacks a certain feeling behind it, making it all the more intense to read through as the reader decides how to feel about it. The passage is descriptive and realistic, as is the rest of the novel.

Cormac McCarthy’s simplistic, realism-filled writing gives the reader the feeling that he chose the words and punctuation on the page very carefully, and so they must be important. The stories are easy to read through in a short time, despite having quite vivid descriptions, colloquial language, and sometimes high language. He is a solicitous writer – he uses less punctuation because he feels that it makes his work easier to read, and therefore he must think about his readers as he writes the novel.

McCarthy’s novels, often southern gothic works, show his love for nature in the way he sets up and describes scenery, as well as his ability to see the truth in life. He writes unapologetically realistic novels, even if the premise is slightly unbelievable he makes it come to life by basing it in the gritty, ugly reality that is life.