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'Barren, Silent, Godless': The Southern Novels of Cormac McCarthy

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“BARREN, SILENT, GODLESS”: THE SOUTHERN NOVELS
OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Melissa Davis
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Accepted by:
Dr. William Koon, Committee Chair
Dr. Kimberly Manganelli
Dr. Harold Woodell

ABSTRACT

Though best known for his Western works that have been read widely in the literary community and adapted to film, Cormac McCarthy is rarely discussed in terms of his contribution to Southern literature. However, his first four novels—*The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree*—are set in the mountainous area around Knoxville, Tennessee. In this setting, McCarthy traces the change of the South and humanity from its agrarian, showing the violent and gothic nature of a modernizing society.

In considering the struggle between the old and new South as presented in the characters of *The Orchard Keeper*, the psychological and religious turmoil of the characters in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, and the rapidly approaching urbanization of the South in *Suttree*, McCarthy forces his readers to recognize the changing society and its effects on humanity both in the South and throughout the world. McCarthy continually focuses on the nature of mankind in its questioning of God and the purpose of existence as the South turns away from ideals like closeness to community and nature. His physical and literary movement to the American West brings a change of scenery, yet the content of his novels are consistently gothic, pointing to the darkness that exists within all people, both in the South and elsewhere.

McCarthy seems to return to the South with his most recent novel, *The Road*, in which he finally brings a struggling society into a post-apocalyptic world where men and women reproduce strictly for the purpose of cannibalism, a world where no man can be trusted as any sense of community has been lost and where all hope of God or some

greater being seems lost. Yet, McCarthy places within the darkness a little boy whose goodness is both unexpected and inexplicable, and in this boy, McCarthy gives some hope for the world.

Through his depictions of darkness in his early Southern texts, McCarthy develops the depraved nature of man, yet he masterfully depicts this ugliness of man through beautiful language. Finally, in *The Road*, McCarthy reveals that there may be some unforeseen light among the darkness; one must simply search for it.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Gary Steven Davis, who passed away far too soon. Yet, in the brief time we shared together, Daddy taught me to love the South for all of its beauty, ugliness, and quirks. Many thanks are due to him for the endless stories I happily share with family, friends, and those who have never known what it means to be Southern through and through.

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In addition, I owe my mother, Kathey McKinney Davis, many thanks for her constant love and support, without which I would not have made it through the stressful days and long nights of graduate school.

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INTRODUCTION:

Cormac McCarthy gained notoriety for his attention to the American West in novels like *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, and *No Country For Old Men*. The latter two brought McCarthy off the shelf and onto the silver screen as film adaptations, allowing far more people to receive his perception of the darkness in the contemporary world. Though most widely recognized for this contribution to Western literature and film, McCarthy is a name that must also be considered when discussing the genre of Southern literature. Vereen Bell comments on “[h]is ear for nuances of human speech” and the “dense and specific” manner in which he lays the “texture of the world in his novels,” tools that certainly mark him as a master of Southern dialect and scenery (Bell xiii). More beautiful than his language is McCarthy’s grasp of what it means to be a Southerner. Throughout his Southern literary canon, he meticulously crafts the Southern experience, paying careful attention to the things which make the region unique:

a feeling for the concrete and the specific, an awareness of conflict, a sense of community and of religious wholeness, a belief in human imperfection, and a genuine and never wavering disbelief in perfection ever developing as a result of human effort and planning; a deep-seated sense of the tragic, and a conviction that nature is mysterious and contingent. (*Intro to SR* 263)

These themes are illuminated and also challenged in McCarthy’s Southern novels. These, along with his use of elegant prose and the grotesque, place him alongside greats like William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor in the realm of Southern literature.

Yet, only two of McCarthy's Southern novels, *The Orchard Keeper* and *The Road*, have received significant recognition from the literary community. *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965, received an American Academy of Arts and Letters fellowship and a William Faulkner Foundation Award, now called the PEN-Faulkner Award (Jarrett xiii). It was not until 2007, a year after *The Road* is published, that McCarthy received the attention he deserves in winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with his depiction of life after the world ends (Pulitzer 2). McCarthy, though, seems content without the recognition, choosing to live his life eluding interviews and refusing, as friend Doug Erwin says, to "do the literature game" (qtd. in Kushner 44). This alone gives McCarthy the air of being a writer who is true to his vocation, a man who cares more about "the quality or nature of his work" than the profit the work brings to him (Bell xi). His reclusive nature places the reader's attention solely on his work, the dark yet beautiful texts which give insight to the nature of being.

McCarthy's Southern literary canon begins with *The Orchard Keeper* which was published in 1965 but set sometime between 1920 and 1930. The novel's time period places it within the Southern Renaissance, a period in which Allen Tate claims the South "reentered the world" but not without giving "a backward glance as it slipped over the border" (qtd. in *Intro to SR* 262). In this novel, there is an obvious struggle between the new and old ways of Southern life as represented by Arthur Ownby, an old recluse who possesses a close bond with his natural setting, and John Wesley Rattner, representative of the youth in Red Branch, Tennessee, who treat nature with violence and disregard. Ownby becomes representative of a doubt in the ability of progression and "industrialism

[to] provide a cure for human ills” while the younger generations resemble the manner in which “an all-out technocratic society” can strip “from man his basic humanity” (*Agrarians* 431-432). In the novel, McCarthy reveals how the new generation of Southern men become engrossed in a Modernist way of thinking, focusing on one’s self and becoming lost within the constructs of society; he shows the change in the American Dream as those who once sought to move from an impoverished childhood to a self-sufficient adulthood turn to bootlegging, murder, and manipulation of members of one’s community. The old South fades away in McCarthy’s first novel, leaving “[n]o avatar, no scion, no vestige” of what once was, and “[o]n the lips of the strange race that now dwells there” the traditions become “myth, legend, dust” (*Orchard* 246).

While *The Orchard Keeper* deals heavily with the South as it undergoes a change into the modern world, it is important to recognize that Southern writers have typically tended “to depict man’s nature as being religious, to view the individual very much as a creature of time and history, to assume the individual’s commitment to society” (Rubin and Jacobs 12). True to form, McCarthy pays attention to the individual and his relationship to God and society in his second and third novels, *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1974). Within each novel, the main characters, Culla Holme of *Outer Dark* and Lester Ballard of *Child of God*, exist within the structure of society despite their situation as exiles. Culla struggles with his sin of incest, attempting throughout the course of *Outer Dark* to escape the child who represents his guilt, while Lester undergoes a psychological and moral breakdown due to his exile from the community and becomes both a murderer and a necrophiliac. The struggles of these two men, as well as other

characters within the novels, stems directly from a society which attempts to bring order through social constructs like law or religion. Each must “define himself in terms of the community in which he lives,” creating a conflict between being an “individual within society” and simultaneously a victim and “product of it” (13).

Eventually, the progression of the imposing society reaches a pinnacle, leaving members of the South to struggle internally with the changing world and to question the past, present, and future of existence. The fourth installment of McCarthy’s Southern literary canon, *Suttree* (1979), explores the South during the 1950’s as “industrialization moved into high gear; towns became cities and cities became huge metropolitan areas” (Rubin 463). In *Suttree*, buildings and highways literally bury the natural setting that was beloved by Arthur Ownby in *The Orchard Keeper*; in fact, *Suttree* very much resembles the difficulty of transition that appears in *The Orchard Keeper*, yet now McCarthy presents the “the philosophical musings” of old in conflict with “a fully realized postmodern vision of the South” (Guinn 103). The novel presents Cornelius Suttree, a man born into high social status who attempts to escape both the constraints of society and death. In the shifting landscape, Suttree exhibits a nihilistic viewpoint of Knoxville, Tennessee, and of the world in general. The reader sits back to watch Suttree as he tries to understand, to know his “place in an apparently meaningless and absurd universe,” a place and time full of “loneliness, of separateness from family, society, and the natural world” (*Second Generation* 466).

The purpose of the following chapters, then, is to not to reveal Cormac McCarthy as a Southern writer or to offer his work more recognition, but to examine his

contribution to Southern literature and to trace the evolution of Southern themes as they explore the nature of humanity as illuminated in *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree*. In his first four novels, McCarthy paints the South in its modernizing as an area “in which family structure is deteriorating, and love is no longer a dominating force” (*Second Generation* 466). The novels unveil the changes of a place throughout the course of history, but also the development of people. Though McCarthy does eventually leave the South for the exciting landscape of the American West, he never abandons the gothic style of writing he exhibits in his Southern works, revealing that the darkness and violence that appear in the American South can be found in all regions. Interestingly, his most recent novel, *The Road*, appears to bring McCarthy back to the South as the entire world faces an apocalypse. McCarthy choosing to focus on life after the apocalypse for the whole Earth rather than life after the destruction of just the South suggests that McCarthy concerns himself not just with the decay of one area, but with the downward progression of society and human beings as a whole. In the five novels of his Southern literary canon, McCarthy combines beautiful and artistic language with dark, violent content which may be specific to the South in terms of literary themes, yet at the core of his novels, he speaks to and of every human soul, Southern or not, making his depiction of the world significant to all regions and all people.

Bell is correct in saying that “[w]riting about McCarthy is an oddly embarrassing project because one is always saying either more or less than needs to be said” (xiii). His novels are complicated in their darkness and beauty, through portrayals of the world through both art and science, and by being specific to the traditions of a region while

indistinct in offering no clear resolutions. However, these complications and the implications they make about humanity in the South and the world as a whole are the reasons his novels need to be explored.

CHAPTER ONE:

“CHARRED SKELETONS OF THE CEDARS”: GOODBYE TO AGRARIAN LIFE IN

THE ORCHARD KEEPER

Cormac McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, introduces Kenneth Rattner on a dirt road in Georgia searching for someone who still possesses the hospitality of the Old South, someone who will pick up a man hitchhiking towards Knoxville. Rattner watches as one truck comes and another goes, each truck's breeze leaving "his cocked thumb" swinging as the "[l]ittle fans of dust scurried up the road shoulder and settled in his cuffs" (*Orchard* 8). The struggling hitchhiker and the litter of "newsprint and candypapers pressed furtively into the brown wall of weeds at the road edge" portray a growing disinterest in land and in community within the Southern region. In doing so, McCarthy sets up a contrast between the old and new South as Rattner expects Southern gentility but does not instantly receive it. With the establishment of a loss of hospitability in the South, McCarthy might have left Rattner on the dirt road to waste beneath the scorching sun; however, he sets up a growing tension between the old South and the new South in allowing Rattner to find a trusting soul in the decaying landscape. Rattner claims to have a daughter in an Atlanta hospital in order to gain access to a stranger's vehicle, a falsehood that quickly allows him to seize the driver's seat and head towards Knoxville; McCarthy shows Rattner literally calculating the two hundred miles between Atlanta and his desired destination, an action which points to his manipulative nature and shows the rapid movement away from a focus on community which existed in the old South. In portraying this transition at the novel's beginning, McCarthy prepares the reader for the

conflict between the old and the new South which will pervade the remainder of the novel.

Delving into the oppositions between the old South and the new South requires attention to the construction of the novel. McCarthy employs “conventional motifs” of “the southern modernist tradition” in his structuring of *The Orchard Keeper* (*After Southern Modernism* 95). He creates a decaying community in the mountainous region of Tennessee which consists of characters of varying ages with unique relationships to one another; he also portrays the setting as it parallels both the waning traditions and lifestyles of the old South and the sense of anxiety which dominated the Modernist period, a place where “the corn patches stand parched and sere, stalks askew in defeat. All greens pale and dry. Clay cracks and splits in endless microcataclysm” (*Orchard* 11). The implication that Kenneth Rattner commits murder and robbery within the first four pages of the book suggests that “traditional embodiments of value [like] religion, community relationships, [and] agrarian connections with the earth” will be replaced in the new South as monetary value and social power gain importance with “the increasing pressure of urban culture, commercial interests and governmental intrusions upon the lives of the novel’s essentially rural characters” (Ragan 17).

With these new elements affecting the characters and their region, the plot quickly develops into a strange dynamic. Kenneth Rattner, the thief, is murdered during a roadside fight with the bootlegging Marion Sydler. Interestingly, Sydler becomes a father figure to Kenneth’s son, John Wesley Rattner, giving the boy a replacement that is similar to his original father in terms of occupation and morality. Even so, neither Sydler

nor John Wesley realize that Sylder murdered the boy's biological father. Sylder finds his foil in the loner orchard keeper, Arthur Ownby, who lives on Red Mountain in the tradition of the old South, his interactions limited to his dog, Scout, the landscape, and the youth of the community. The greed-driven Sylder and the nature-oriented Ownby develop a voyeuristic relationship. Ownby observes Sylder's pursuit for personal satisfaction through sexual intercourse on the mountain's dirt road; this sexual encounter is indicative of Sylder's total focus on the self with little concern for his surroundings. Sylder watches Ownby resist unwanted authority as he shoots a government gas tank which has been placed on the orchard grounds in a demonstration of his disdain for the societal constructs that have begun to replace the old, agrarian lifestyle. As Ownby fits into the tradition of the old South and Sylder the new, McCarthy establishes a connection between the differing eras; each recognizes the existence of the other, but neither can comprehend the other's motive.

In the style of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the novel mingles the perspectives of characters in order to form one inclusive plot, a technique which causes some initial difficulty in its ambiguous portrayal of time, place, and characterization. Within this structure, each of the three main characters—Marion Sylder, Arthur Ownby, and John Wesley Rattner—aligns himself with one side of the conflict between the old and new Southern perspectives. As the novel progresses, the three story lines join together, allowing the reader to analyze how each character is affected by the landscape, the time period, and the community in which he lives as the old South faces the encroaching new.

Marion Sylder lends himself to the new South with his existential feeling that man should “call on someone closer than” God and his easy acceptance of irrational and emotionally chaotic responses “if a man steals from greed or murders from anger” (*Orchard* 40, 215). Also, Sylder finds interest more in financial satisfaction, as well as gluttonous and lusty behavior, than in laboring to achieve some sort of self-sufficiency; his acceptance of a life of bootlegging because it is a simple way to make “more money in three hours than a workin man makes in a week” shows Sylder to be the antithesis of the mythic agrarian of the old South who takes pride in industry which develops character and his land (213).

Arthur Ownby, also referred to as “the old man” or “Uncle Ather” in the Tennessee dialect, contrarily follows the old Southern tradition; his sections closely examine the natural surroundings using sensory descriptions which often incite recollections on his life within the region. As a statement of his alignment with the old South and as an indication of his relationship to the natural surroundings, McCarthy employs a pastoral writing style in developing Ownby’s plot line. One passage in particular within *The Orchard Keeper* is reminiscent of “Yeats’s famous pastoral ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ in Ownby’s reveries of building ‘a log house’ by ‘a Clearwater branch’ where his ‘bees would make black mountain honey’ and he ‘wouldn’t care for no man’” (*After Southern Modernism* 97). Here, McCarthy evokes the old South through pastoral language while establishing three ideals of the old generation: self-sufficiency on one’s own land, connectedness to nature, and the idea of not being “unneighborly neither” (*Orchard* 55). His embodiment of these three ideals leaves Ownby with the

responsibility of sharing the old traditions with the community's youth through stories and folklore:

Uncle Ather, said the boy, was they really painters back then?

Warn's face, a harlequin mask etched in black and orange by the lamplight, turned to the old man. Tell him about that'n, Uncle Ather, he said. That'n you had.

Uncle Ather had already started. Oh yes, he said, allaying doubt with an upthrust of his chin. Yes, they was, long time back. When I was a young feller... (151)

Through the storytelling, Ownby promotes a sense of history and community to the younger generation, and in doing so, he gives the old South a needed breath of life.

However, it is unreasonable to expect stories of "wampus cats" or "painters" to successfully instill the mentality of the old South into the younger generations; all too often, "dialogue proves an inadequate means of asserting cultural values and instilling them into younger generations" as is apparent in considering John Wesley Rattner, the boy who becomes representative of the youth in *The Orchard Keeper* (Ragan 18).

Because he has a mother who asserts the old South in her persistent teachings of loyalty and dedication to one's family, a father who prefers the self-fulfilling creed of the new South and cares nothing for community, and an adoptive father in bootlegging Sylder, attempts at classifying John Wesley's alliance as either old or new become difficult.

However, conversations with his mother suggest that he aligns himself more with the new South as he often attests his loyalty to family, but hardly ever does so without force.

You *swear* it, boy.

His arm was growing numb in pain...could feel her tremble through the
clutched hand...I swear, he said.

You won't never forgit.

No.

Never long as you live.

Long as I live.

Yes, she said.

Long as I...

I won't forgit neither, she said, tightening once more on his arm for a
moment, leaning her huge face at him. And, she hissed, he won't forgit
neither.

I live... (*Orchard 67*)

The conversation is not a conversation; she is not asking him to consider the importance of family values as much as she is insisting that valuing his father and her is a duty he will not shirk. Using intimidation and force, she inflicts physical pain and emotional, perhaps psychological, abuse onto the boy in forcing him to swear on his life while simultaneously suggesting that he is never safe, that she and his father are capable of punishing him postmortem should he fail once they both are dead. Combining this mother-son relationship with the fact that John Wesley only “thought he could remember his father” illuminates the lifelessness of the family unit (62). The boy is necessarily a

part of the new South as he was born into a home of “disintegrating cultural values” (Ragan 18).

More interesting than family values, though, is John Wesley’s interactions with nature. He seems to have the “intrinsic need to order, or to at least interpret, the world of nature” as he seeks out creatures and spends a majority of his time within the mountain creeks (Ragan 18). Yet, John Wesley deviates from the manner in which the older generation hunts; rather than using dogs and a rifle, John Wesley strategically places metal traps throughout the landscape upon which unsuspecting creatures might stumble, removing any need for skill and ending the concept of hunting as sport. As the old South sought a challenge in nature, aimed to in some way dominate the region, there is an obvious change in mentality and in the purpose of capturing animals; for John Wesley, it’s not about a successful chase or a gaining some sense of order in the world. His interest is in profit, in capturing a “first-class mink to bring twenty dollars” (*Orchard* 207). The change in thinking towards nature appears again as John Wesley watches Warn Pulliam fly a turkey buzzard as if it were a kite.

He pulled the bird out of the sky by main force, heaving on the cord against the huge and ungiving expanse of wing, lowering him circle by circle until he brought him to earth. There the buzzard flopped about on its one good leg and came to rest eying them truculently, beady eyes unblinking in the naked and obscene-looking skull. (Orchard 134)

Here, the relationship between the two boys and the bird is not one in which both man and nature are treated with dignity, nor is it one in which the boys are seeking some sense

of satisfaction for taming the untamable; instead, the boys adopt a God-like role over a creature too weak to challenge their asserted authority, creating a dynamic in which man oppressively assumes the right to dominate another creature's existence. In this sense, John Wesley fails to respect the natural world and rejects the code of honor to which the old South adheres, again placing him on the side of the new South as the antithesis of the old tradition of honor and "progression toward higher civilization" (Croce 215).

While Sylder, Ownby, and John Wesley lend themselves to a respective side of the battle between old and new Southern life, none of the three wholly adhere to all traditions within the old South or all viewpoints within the new South, nor do any of the three wholly reject either viewpoint. For instance, each represents a sort of Southern Modernism in terms of immobilization, embodying the question, "Do I dare?" that Eliot presents in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (38). Sylder, who seems most aligned with the new South, is interestingly immobilized by his attempt to take a paternal role, to act for the betterment of another within the community as he aims to protect John Wesley from the corrupt law enforcement of Gifford. Sylder manages to turn his attention outwards, insisting that John Wesley "stay away from Gifford" and away from him as well in order to keep him safe from the power-manipulating law. His selfless action leaves him trapped within a jail cell as John Wesley possesses freedom; Sylder will be unavailable to play an active, fatherly role because in saving the boy, he separated them indefinitely. The final thing McCarthy offers from Sylder is an internal monologue, his quiet screaming of desperation to the boy he truly had no desire to push away: "you're welcome to shoot him, burn him down in his bed, any damn thing, because he's a

traitor...he sells his own neighbors out for money and its few lie that deep in the pit, that far beyond the pale” (*Orchard* 215).

While fulfilling his role as the storyteller, Ownby faces similar immobilization as he turns his focus inward, losing himself in reminiscences of personal loss and hardship:

[Ownby] kept on for a week, coming back each night to the dark and empty house. Then he stopped going to work. That morning he took the few things [his wife] had left—a housecoat, odds and ends, and put them on the bed. He sat and looked at them for a long time. When he got up it was evening. ...

On the sixth day he went out and knocked a plank from the back of the barn with the poll of his axe, cut from it two boards...carefully incised her name with the point of his knife...and nailed the two together in the form of a cross. ...he scooped a hole, buried the clothes, and with the shank of the spade pounded the cross into the ground. ...

I ain't goin back. ...

You aim to sell your place?

It don't...I don't care.

Well. I do.

He looked at him for the first time, the older face dark and hard as a walnut. Why? He asked.

Count of you owe me two hundred dollars, mainly. (155-156)

As Ownby carries the burden of the loss of his wife and the weight of debt, even he considers the pointlessness of work, choosing to focus his energy on inner turmoil rather than into physical labor. Others similarly adapt this Modernist thinking, seeking personal comfort or satisfaction through various outlets. He eventually becomes a part of the change in times as his community and he breaks ties to the land and to his neighbors, choosing to indulge in personal and carnal impulses. The signs of a modernized South surround him. Ownby hears the promiscuity of youth in “a girl’s laugh on the road” (*Orchard* 21), and he discovers Kenneth Rattner’s “eyeless sockets and green fleshless grin” left in the orchard’s insecticide pit by Marion Sylder (54). He faces the weight of society as a government tank manipulates the landscape he loves in posing, “seeming older than the very dirt” on which it stood and when he suffers exploitation at the hands of a justice system managed by Gifford, the “rogue...who sells his own neighbors out for money” (93, 214-215). Gifford literally immobilizes Ownby in locking him away in an asylum, keeping him from nature and disallowing him to continue his role as the storyteller for the old South. Ownby’s tale closes similar to Sylder’s as he is haunted inwardly by the memory of Kenneth Rattner, “*the green cadaver grin sealed in the murky waters of the peach pit, slimegreen skull with newts coiled in the eye sockets and a wig of moss,*” silently defending his choice to keep “*peace for seven year sake of a man [he] never knowed,*” and asserting that he “*seen them fellers never had no business on [the orchard] and if [he] couldn’t run em off [he] could anyway let em know they was one man would let on that he knowed what they was up to*” (224, 228-229).

John Wesley, too, becomes immobilized in his search for his father's killer early in *The Orchard Keeper*. As his mother, Mildred Rattner, declares, "You goin to hunt him out. When you're old enough. Goin to find the man that took away your daddy," John Wesley is overcome with uncertainty of where and how to begin the search (*Orchard* 66). As he begins to cry, he asks what to do, and his mother claims, "Your daddy'd of knowed how" (66). While the reader recognizes that the nature of Kenneth Rattner is noncompliant with the ideals of the old South, Mildred believes that he was a "Godfearin man" who deserves to be avenged; in her eyes, her husband, the man who refused government disability from his supposed war injuries, "was a provider," and had Kenneth Rattner survived, she and John Wesley "wouldn't want for nothin" (72). Through the eyes of his mother, the lack of urgency John Wesley exhibits regarding his father's murder at the beginning of the novel points to a difference between Kenneth and John Wesley, the old South and the new South, the diligent and the immobile. In the end, though, John Wesley has a choice; he will be the last to choose his place within the struggle between the old and new South.

John Wesley, the remaining main character, the one who seemed to side with the new South throughout the novel, appears to have a change of heart. He, having traded a hawk earlier in the novel in order to purchase his hunting traps, returned to the courthouse with hopes of restoring some aspect of nature, some aspect of the old South, to its rightful place.

Well, [the courthouse worker] said, what can I do for you?

It's about the bounty, mam. Hawks.

Oh. You have a hawk. She was looking down at him.

No mam, I done give it to ye. He had the dollar out in his hand now and waving it feebly, wondering could the price have gone up. I was figuring on trading back with ye if you-all don't care, he said. ...

When did you bring it in?

He looked to the ceiling, back again. Let's see, he said. I believe it was around in August but it could have been early in September I reckon.

They Lord God, son, the woman said, it wouldn't still be here. Last August? Why...

What do you do with em? ...

Burn em in the furnace I would reckon, she said. They sure cain't keep em around here. They might get a little strong after a while, mightn't they?

Burn em? He said? They burn em? ... And thow people in jail and beat up on em. ... Here, he said. It's okay. I cain't take no dollar. I made a mistake, he wadn't for sale. (*Orchard* 232-233)

In refusing to keep the dollar and in his shock at the burning of healthy birds, John Wesley finally develops the inner tension between the old and new South, a tension that was already present in Ownby and Sylder. Now, though, the only main character not imprisoned or murdered is left alone, waiting and watching as the community loses any remaining connection to nature and to community.

As the novel comes to a close, urbanization makes itself known in the eastern Tennessee setting, and John Wesley makes his choice. When a car stops for the clicking

“lightbox at the intersection,” John Wesley waved to a man and woman as they wait to progress forward in life; he waved “and the man turned, saw the green light and pulled away...[s]o he waved to her as the car slid from sight behind a hedgerow, the wheels whisking up a fine spray from the road” but she does not return the gesture (*Orchard* 245-246). With the onset of urbanization, the stop light serves as a timer, offering seconds for human interaction, seconds that no one is willing to spare for a simple wave. The hospitality that was once present in the old South has dwindled, and John Wesley decides to leave for good.

In the end, John Wesley is not immobile, yet his mobility is not motivated by the wishes of his mother or some duty to search for his father. With the remains of his father’s body found and his mother dead and buried, John Wesley gains his mobility simply because he can. Forced to become a part of the new Southern tradition as the old South dies out, he needs no person but himself. Therefore, he will focus on him and only him. Because there are no bars holding him in the Tennessee setting and there is no obligation left in Red Branch for him, he is free to wander, to fly away “from the enclosing spaces of his home;” but “[a]bove all, he is in flight from the graves of his ancestors” and any reminders of the way Southern life used to be (Ellis 57). He has the opportunity, unlike Sylder and Ownby, to leave the decaying age and setting, the lack of community, and the memory of his broken family.

In choosing to leave, John Wesley declares the end of an age in the South. The community has no more Arthur Ownby to share stories of the wild cats within the rural setting, and the youth that once listened is walking away. Within the region, “[n]o avatar,

no scion, no vestige of [the old generation] remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells their names are myth, legend, dust” (*Orchard* 246). As John Wesley passes through “the gap in the fence, past the torn iron palings and out the western road,” he leaves behind a place which uses corrupt law to structure life and ruthlessly dominates creatures in nature (246). With the old Southern traditions left behind, he—and the reader—walk blindly into the unknown.

CHAPTER TWO:

FAILED ORDER “IN THE WOODS AND IN MEN’S SOULS”: A TRANSITIONING LANDSCAPE AND PSYCHOLOGY IN *OUTER DARK* AND *CHILD OF GOD*

In *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy begins his play with the modern South, forcing his characters into a new era where community is lost and the individual is left to sift through what is left of the tradition and discover his or herself within the new setting. In McCarthy’s second and third novels, *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, characters continue to struggle with modernism while simultaneously beginning a battle with postmodernism. Modernism, as used here, is accompanied by anxiety as the individual recognizes the world as chaotic and begins a personal and psychological struggle with the chaos of the external world whereas postmodernism is the realization and acceptance of the world as chaotic, accompanied by that same sense of anxiety as the individual copes with personal and psychological struggles with the additional effort to both embrace chaos and define the world. In the novels following *The Orchard Keeper*, characters interact with one another far less and exist primarily outside society, exhibiting the modern transition away from Southern tradition, as well as the individual attempts to cope with the changing world.

In *Outer Dark*, the characters travel around the Appalachian setting, searching primarily for some method to deal with the obscurity of the world. The journey becomes much less an attempt to reach some physical place as it is an effort to reach some stability of existence. Similarly, *Child of God* reveals the methods in which humanity attempts to

achieve order within the world and within the self. However, each of these efforts proves futile, leaving man to cope with chaos or to suffer psychologically trying.

Outer Dark: Journeying through Land and Faith and the Failure of the Father

The conflict presented in *The Orchard Keeper* between the old Southern focus on land, family, and community and a new South in which the psychological and emotional aspects of the individual takes precedence brings McCarthy and his reader to a point of “ontological uncertainty” and to his second southern novel, *Outer Dark (After Southern Modernism 98)*. The “sun did not return” to the rural and isolated Tennessee setting within the novel, leaving it a “pit of hopeless dark,” a place where the old agrarian lifestyle is abandoned and replaced by the psychological journey of individuals (*Outer Dark 6*). Culla Holme and his sister Rinthy wander separately and aimlessly through a dark world carrying the weighty guilt of an incestuous union which results in the conception and subsequent abandonment of a baby. The siblings travel, Rinthy searching for the child and Culla searching for himself, occasionally crossing paths with murderous and cannibalistic outlaws. Rinthy has no particular place to search for her child, and Culla claims to be heading “nowhere,” placing both journeys within a veil of darkness demonstrated further as they encounter the villainous outlaws; the journeys of the three parties lack direction, representing an individual sense of uncertainty with regards to purpose of being and direction in life and a larger sense of unknowing within the brutality and decaying morale of the new South (*Outer Dark 181*).

The conflict within the novel stems from the incestuous relationship and the birth of the baby, both of which Culla seeks to handle. Culla disposes of their newborn son

“without looking back,” leaving the boy by a wooded swamp howling “redgummed at the pending night” (*Outer Dark* 16). In abandoning his child, Culla physically separates himself from the spawn of his sin, showing his inability to face the guilt of his incestuous relationship with Rinthy. Rinthy, however, is capable of accepting the guilt and the consequence of their union; after being told that her child has died, she continues to accept her role as mother, hoping to give her baby a name and to “put some flowers” on the boy’s small grave (31). She is willing to recognize her sin and its consequence in aiming to play her role as mother. The contrasting viewpoints of Culla and Rinthy create a parallel between the siblings and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* as the conception of a child occurs offstage, “before the novel begins” in each (Grammer 17). Both novels see the men and the women contrasting in terms of acceptance or denial of sinful actions and guilt; where Rinthy and Hester recognize and admit their sins, choosing to accept and even want the children which embody their transgressions, Culla and Dimmesdale attempt to hide from their indiscretions. However, the setting of *Outer Dark* becomes significant in terms of retribution for the sins. The conflict for Culla and Rinthy is not societal as it is for Hester and Dimmesdale; as the leader of a church in the Northeast during the seventeenth century, Dimmesdale is constantly under the scrutiny of others while Hester, a supposedly unmarried woman, commits an unforgivable sin in conceiving a child out of wedlock. Unlike Puritanical Boston, the mid-twentieth century Southern setting of *Outer Dark* presents the similar plotline with a focus on the individual and his or her attempt to cope alone as the South lacks the old focus on community, religion, and possesses a

growing sense of isolation and darkness. For example, Rinthy asks Culla “Who is they to tell?” when he refuses her a midwife during the birthing process, underlining the idea that there is no one who would know or care about them, their incest, or the resulting child (*Outer Dark* 10). Knowing that the setting is isolated and that relationships between members of the community are nonexistent reveals that the issue is Culla’s own sense of guilt rather than a fear of punishment from society.

The union between the siblings crumbles as Rinthy insists that she visit the place where her son is supposedly buried only to realize that the ground there holds nothing but “packed clay, unsevered roots” (*Outer Dark* 32). The discovery causes Rinthy’s face to be painted “bland and impervious” which Culla mistakes to be an “accusation, silent and inarguable female invective,” alienating the siblings from one another (33). Culla’s attempt to abandon his son and to deceive Rinthy spawns two of the three journeys within the novel. At this point, the two walk alone with their own respective internal conflict; Rinthy searches for the child that, should she locate and have him, will serve as physical representation of her sins and her acceptance of them, and Culla runs from his guilt, denying blame with his “clenched hands above him threatful, supplicant, to the mute and windy heavens” (33). The literal traveling of the characters serves as a representation of an inner journey for the individual. Where *The Orchard Keeper* develops a grand struggle between time periods and people within a region, *Outer Dark* develops an internal struggle for Culla and Rinthy, a struggle that seems to be directly related to the issue of sin and God. Rinthy’s journey to locate her son is actually an attempt to admit her role as sinner by accepting her role as mother. Culla, however, claims his traveling is a search

for Rinthy when, in fact, he is retreating from the place where his sin has literally stained the incestuous bed. The paths of the two are crossed by the grotesque journey of the three outlaws as they scavenge the Southern setting, representing a mission of self and familial preservation within the callous landscape.

As the South historically focused on family which tended to be headed by the father, the contrasting families presented in *Outer Dark* become interesting in terms of individual purpose and an overall direction in life. The first family structure appears with the Holme siblings and their bastard child; the two journey because the family structure is shattered, Rinthy searching for a son she is willing to accept while Culla running from being a father. The three outlaws, though, contrast this broken family as they bind themselves together into the typical family construct—“[t]he bearded outlaw functions as father and leader, Harmon as oldest son, and the nameless mentally retarded mute as dependent baby” (Jarrett 17). The violent and disturbing actions they take—graverobbing, cannibalism, murder—all act as a means of “takin care of [their] own,” of preserving the family structure (*Outer Dark* 181). The outlaws act within their patriarchal family structure, doing anything possible to sustain life, to have *something*; their family differs from the shattered Holme family, particularly Culla who, in his refusal to accept his child, destroys his family and himself. He becomes a man who is basically “nothin at all” as he “[n]ever figured nothin, never had nothin, never was nothin” (233). Rinthy, conversely, strives for something in her optimistic belief that her son survives and can be found; her desire to take responsibility for her sins in assuming her maternal role, to

achieve some form of a family structure, is thwarted by Culla's insistence on familial nothingness.

In the final pages of the novel, the three paths finally converge as Culla encounters the three outlaws, his son, and the deceased tinker who had cared for the abandoned baby. In the meeting, the bearded outlaw, patriarch of the outlaw family, infers Culla's sins and passes judgment on him.

I figure you got this thing here in her belly your own self and then laid it off on that tinker.

I never laid nothin off on no tinker.

I reckon you figured he'd keep him hid for ye.

I never figured nothing.

...You never did say what you done with your sister.

I never done nothing with her.

...I'll be the judge of that. (*Outer Dark* 233-234)

In this passage, Culla has the opportunity to confess his sin, to face up to his guilt, yet he refuses. Similarly, the bearded outlaw gives Culla the opportunity to claim the child, to accept his role as father, in asking "What is his name?" to which Culla responds "I don't know" (*Outer Dark* 235-236). At this point, Culla denies his fatherhood and "repudiates his child, his sin, and his responsibilities as lover" (Jarrett 22). In doing so, Culla determines the fate of his child, as well as the direction for his and Rinthy's travels. After Culla denies his child and his sin, the bearded outlaw finally casts his judgment on the Holme family as a whole.

The man took hold of the child and lifted it up. It was watching the fire. Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a 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. (*Outer Dark* 236)

In the child's death, Culla's opportunity to discover himself, to exist as a father despite his sins, is lost. Similarly, Rinthy's attempt at motherhood, to acknowledge her guilt, is lost as well. It is significant to note that Rinthy is absent in the meeting, showing her lack of control for her own destiny and that of her son, as well as displaying the nothingness that has been forced upon her and the child. Due to Culla's failure as father, Rinthy has no chance of successfully obtaining the role of mother; in the end, she will find "only the smoldering rib cage of her baby" after he has been eaten by the three outlaws (Koon 69).

In *Cormac McCarthy*, Robert L. Jarrett considers Culla's rejection of fatherhood through a play on words in 1 John 2:23 of the Bible (22). The passage reads "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also" (New Oxford Annotated Bible, 1 John 2:23). In applying this passage to the contexts of *Outer Dark*, the literal aspects of fatherhood are accompanied by religious connotations. As Culla denies his literal son, he both loses the ability to be a father and is simultaneously separated from the Christian Father and the Son, from God and Jesus. This denial affects his family, also, as his refusal to name the baby places the baby among the "people in hell [who] ain't got names" (*Outer Dark* 236). Plus, Rinthy is denied the

opportunity to claim her son, a child she “never even seen,” placing her alongside Culla in her failure as a parent (114).

Culla’s religious struggle is first apparent as he raises his fists to the “mute and windy heavens” after Rinthy discovers her son’s empty grave spot, physically representing his blaming, almost reprimanding, the heavens and God for his disgrace; in labeling God as “mute and windy,” McCarthy raises the theological questions of His presence; in the landscape of *Outer Dark*, God is silent, unfixed, and ineffable (33). The inability to hear God, to see or to place Him, leaves the idea that God is generally unknown. This sense of unknowing becomes essential to the novel as a whole, and can first be considered in looking at the title *Outer Dark*¹. The term comes from Matthew 22:13 as Jesus offers a parable about a king who calls for a man to be bound and cast into the “outer darkness” (New Oxford Annotated Bible, Matthew 22.13). McCarthy’s use of this particular verse leaves room for much speculation about his statement on religion in the South or the effect of religion on his characters. For instance, the use of parables—simple stories that are meant to portray an ethical or religious stance—in Jesus’s speech reduces the word of God, that which is often labeled religious truth, to fiction which may be interpreted,

¹ The title, *Outer Dark*, comes from Matthew 22 where Jesus speaks to man in a parable, comparing the kingdom of Heaven to a king’s wedding feast. In the parable, many are invited, most of whom refuse to attend, choosing instead to abuse or murder the slaves sent to offer invitations. Eventually, though, the wedding feast occurs with many guests, “both evil and good” (New Oxford Annotated Bible, Matthew 22.10). Among the guests, the king singled out one man who was not dressed in proper attire and who offered no justification for this infraction. The king tells his servants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen” (New Oxford Annotated Bible, Matthew 22.13-14).

twisted, or disregarded entirely. The question, then, is why the use of parables? Why create a conflict of communication rather than simply stating the essential point or truth? Without exactitude, the parable creates a separation from God through imprecise language and an inability to know Him, His purpose, and in turn, the purpose of human beings. In choosing “outer dark” as a title, McCarthy leaves room for the assumption that the South is doubly separated from God—both in terms of being cast from the kingdom of Heaven and in the inability to construe meaning from the words of the Bible. This double separation shows best in Culla as his journey begins with his threat to the heavens. He blames God for his sins, for his incest and the child that it creates. Because the parable in Matthew 22 ends in stating that “many are called, but few are chosen,” one assumes that McCarthy places Culla (and all characters attempting to find order and meaning within the Southern setting of *Outer Dark*) among those who are not chosen as they have been cast from Glory through their inability to accept the mystery or darkness of God (New Oxford Annotated Bible, Matthew 22.14).

Darkness, then, becomes less synonymous with evil and relates more closely to a lack of vision or the idea of unknowing. The concept of vision aligns with the unknown in *Outer Dark* as Culla nears the end of his journey. He wanders into the virtuous path of a blind man who claims to be “at the Lord’s work” (*Outer Dark* 240). The blind man embraces the concept of God as the Unknown, a being that is “a nothingness, a mystery, a darkness which [exists but] lies above our rational understanding” (Metress 148). In doing so, the blind man gains the ability to see and follow a path towards divinity. Culla, though, plays the victim, choosing to blame God for his confusion, ignorance, and

ignominy; his need for literal vision—to see, hear, and place God—traps him in the outer darkness which the blind man attempts to pull him from in asking “[i]s there anything you need?” (*Outer Dark* 240). Culla, though, is caught up in the physical world, assuming the blind man to be a preacher attempting to earn money, failing to understand the blind man’s claim that God is “plain enough” and that he does not need eyes “to see his way when he’s sent there anyhow” (240-241).

The blind man takes on the role of Jesus from the Book of Matthew, choosing to tell Culla a story rather than blatantly stating that Culla is blinder than he. Ironically, the blind man recounts a tale about a fake preacher, expressing his desire to reveal the “darksome ways afoot in the world” because if the world fails to see them no one will ever “have no rest” (*Outer Dark* 241). His story parallels Jesus’s parable in Matthew as an indirect communication of a mysterious God. Culla walks away from the blind man, “shambling, graceless,” clueless that the encounter may have offered him salvation, and instead, wondering “where the blind man was going and did he know how the road ended” (241-242). The opportunity arose for him to learn that *he* is blind, but he cannot discern the parable. In Culla’s insistence that “[s]omeone should tell a blind man before setting him out,” he displays his realization that the world is chaotic, yet he still searches for a way to order it, for someone to tell the blind man—to tell him—how to manage (242).

The novel concludes with Culla still wandering. Yet, the reader is now aware that any hope of salvation has vanished as the child’s death eliminates any chance of Culla accepting his sin and adopting his role as father in the typically patriarchal South.

Through the aimless and solitary journeys of Culla and Rinthy, McCarthy establishes the themes of isolation and of unknowing within the new South. Culla will never be able to distinguish his own blindness. Rinthy will never be able to have the child which would allow her to openly express her sin and free her from guilt. Both will remain cast into the outer darkness, isolated from salvation within the Tennessee setting.

Child of God: The Gothic Tale of Lester Ballard and the Human Condition

McCarthy establishes psychological disruption in the Eastern Tennessee setting of *Child of God* through the character of Lester Ballard and the community that makes him an outcast. The novel begins with the auctioning off of Ballard's home as a large congregation gathers around the auctioneer to listen, watch, or purchase as Ballard approaches, insisting that he wants the "sons of bitches off of [his] goddamned property" (*Child of God* 7). In his language alone, a discord is established between Ballard and the community due to his refusal of etiquette as he uses profanity despite the fact that there are "ladies present" (7). The dispute is settled when a member of the community attacks Ballard with an axe, leaving him on the ground "bleedin at the ears" (9). With his home confiscated, Ballard becomes a drifter, moving from vacated homes to mountain caves, circling outside of the community which soothes their fear by treating him as a story.

The novel itself is a tale of Lester Ballard with the narrator giving his own account of the events that unfold. In using a member of the Sevier community as a limited narrator rather than choosing an omniscient narrator, McCarthy allows the novel to follow the postmodern form as it is disjointed, failing to follow a historical or linear structure. Further, in using this viewpoint, McCarthy establishes the society's need to

talk, to justify the actions of the eccentric community member, in order to create a false sense of control. Yet, Lester Ballard is more than an eccentric community member; he is a homicidal necrophiliac, a man who murders women and uses them as concubines postmortem. In his mind, Ballard constructs a “family of rotting corpses” to act as a community all his own (Wallach 17). The chaotic nature of being, the instability of the human mind, and the haphazard nature of social constructs exist within the self-created world of Ballard’s corpse family.

But, at one point, Ballard existed within the social construct. At one point, he was just a child in a broken family where the “mother had run off;” then, he was just a child who “stood there and watched, never said nothing” as the men of Sevier County removed his father from a barn rafter after he had committed suicide—“just cut him down, let him fall in the floor. Just like cutting down meat” (*Child of God* 21). Essentially an orphan, Ballard was left to manage his own existence. Despite the many side stories which outline Ballard’s instability, the land and home Ballard claims are his in the beginning of the novel suggest that he did subsist on his own. Because owning land symbolizes dominance and power for men in the South, the confiscation of his home initiates Ballard’s social and psychological decline.

The stripping of his land acts as a stripping of Ballard’s masculinity, and the effects of that emasculation becomes apparent in Ballard’s careful attention to his rifle. The rifle acts as a phallic symbol, and in possessing skill with the rifle, Ballard attests that he is, indeed, still possesses power as a man. For example, at the county fair, Ballard asserts his masculinity by shooting “out the small red dot” printed in the center of three

white cards (*Child of God* 63). The game turns into a battle of manliness with the shooting gallery operator as Ballard possesses the skill to beat the game, but the operator has the ability to force Ballard to quit playing. Despite being turned away from the fair game, Ballard earns three trophies in the form of large stuffed animals for his shooting ability, for being manly. These stuffed animals become more than just rewards for his masculinity, eventually serving as an audience for Ballard as he ceremonially cares for the rifle itself. At home, “[t]he two bears and the tiger watch from the wall, their plastic eyes shining in the firelight and their red flannel tongues out” (67) as Ballard follows his ritual:

He sits and dries the rifle and ejects the shells into his lap and dries them and wipes the action and oils it and oils the receiver and the barrel and the magazine and the lever and reloads the rifle and levers a shell into the chamber and lets the hammer down and lays the rifle on the floor beside him. (66-67)

This careful treatment of the rifle symbolizes the manner in which his masculinity, already injured by the taking away of his land, must be coddled.

The trauma in his childhood and the wounding of his masculinity takes its toll on Ballard, showing itself in the hostility he exhibits towards his surroundings. The violence first manifests itself in his youth as he bullies Finney boy, who was “some bit younger’n him,” when the child does not fetch a softball that Ballard hit into a patch of briars (*Child of God* 17). Finney boy’s rejection results in Ballard punching him in the face, leaving his nose “swoll up and bleedin’” (18). The one-sided fight brings forth in the narrator and the

reader a sense of injustice as Ballard assaults someone smaller for refusing to be manipulated, yet Ballard, already showing psychological damage from the cruel world, feels justified in his actions. These psychological effects become more apparent as Ballard later points his “rifle at a large mottled tom and [says] bang” (26). Again, he focuses on a creature smaller than he, a statement of both his insecurity and his emasculation. Yet, this time, the violence escalates to a desire to kill rather than injure.

Ballard reveals his sexual perversion when he stumbles upon the corpses of a young man and woman, their bodies in the back seat of a car, “half naked sprawled together” (*Child of God* 86). The sight of the young woman’s “breasts peaking from her open blouse and her pale thighs spread” proves too tempting (88). After carelessly moving the dead man aside, Ballard moves to the back seat.

A crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured into that waxen ear everything he’d never thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she did not hear him? When he’d finished he raised up and looked out again. The windows were fogged. He took the hem of the girl’s skirt with which to wipe himself. He was standing on the dead man’s legs. (88-89).

His ability to sexually assault a dead woman while standing on her dead lover shows that Ballard, in his psychological and mental decline, has no concept of the value of human life or the sanctity of the human body. His necrophilia strengthens his sense of masculinity, giving him a sense of power in the ability to achieve dominance over a woman and to achieve a new freedom of speech. Tasting this power once causes Ballard

to desire it often, leading him to homicide and a collection of female bodies in the mountain cave in which he makes his home.

In seeing Ballard as “outcast from the community, as crazed patriarch of his underground world,” it becomes obvious that the community that forsakes him in some sense creates him. The broken family, the manner in which the community takes down his father’s corpse, the challenges to his masculinity all lead to his mental instability, and in turn, his murders and sexual interest in dead women. Yet, rather than recognizing its faults, the Sevier community deals with Ballard through storytelling, making him a “mythic hero” in his own story; treating him as folklore or fiction is the community’s refusal to consider their role in his creation, as well as their hope of “preserving the community in its myth of wholeness” (Witek 83-84). Eventually, though, those that fear the mental instability of Lester Ballard must recognize that they are also capable of extreme idiosyncrasy. As McCarthy labels Ballard a “child of God like yourself,” he suggests that all people are like Ballard (*Child of God* 4). Therefore, Ballard is not some crazy person, pushed from his home and his community; he is, in fact, the most honest representation of humanity should it be pushed past its limits by the external world. In representing insanity as the true mental state of all people, McCarthy’s subverts “the myths upon which culture rests, calling all certainty into question,” forcing his characters and his readers to question themselves, the world around them, and their purpose in being (*Ruder Forms* 109).

Like the treatment of unconventional people or aspects of life as stories, the patriarchal structure of the family unit is an attempt to order the world. However, as

shown in *Outer Dark*, the failure of the father to maintain order results in greater chaos within individuals, the family, the community, and the world as a whole. Ballard's father was unable to maintain control in his family, resulting in the wife's leaving and the father's suicide. A similar patriarchal failure occurs in the family of the dumpkeeper who tells Ballard that a family "is a grief and a heartache" as you do nothing but "raise enemies in ye own house to grow up and cuss ye" (*Child of God* 111). His failure as father is apparent in the actions of his daughters, women who move "like cats in heat" falling "pregnant one by one" as they, similar to cats, "sensed his lack of resolution" (26-27). He, like Ballard, is broken by his inability to assert his masculine dominance. Eventually, his weakness results in an incestuous rape when he discovers one of his daughters in a sexual encounter. Though the rape may have been an attempt to demonstrate his authority, it occurs in a way which suggests he loses control of himself; "the air about him grew electric. Next thing he knew...he was mounting her," and once he finished, he "lumbered off toward the dump like a bear," like a primitive creature which is detached from moral contexts (27-28). The dependence on patriarchy, then, appears ineffectual as men lack control of their family and themselves, tossing the family structure into a downward spiral.

Similarly, the law enforcement by which society attempts to create order fails the community in *Child of God*. Ballard, having "failure to comply with a court order, public disturbance, assault and battery, public drunk, rape" as well as murder on his a list of criminal offenses, does not stay within the law's hands for long (*Child of God* 56). When charged with rape, his jail stay is no longer than "a week or better" (55). The Sevier

County High Sheriff Fate and his deputy are unable to catch Ballard for murdering men and women as they travel on the mountain road, unable to answer the questions of the townspeople when they ask, “You ever find any of them people missin from them cars” (164). Even a band of Sevier County men coming together as a type of civil law, kidnapping Ballard from a hospital to force him to reveal the location of the corpses, are unable to thwart him as he takes them to the mountain cave and escapes, leaving them trapped and directionless inside the caverns. In the end, Ballard “was never indicted for any crime,” illustrating that the law, another attempt by society to impose structure onto chaos, fails (193).

Though Sheriff Fate and the societal law that he represents are unable to stop Ballard, fate does bring about his end. Yet, in his death, Ballard becomes once again subjected to society’s attempt to order; he is sent to a medical hospital where students would use his body in hopes of gaining knowledge.

He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. (*Child of God* 194)

The reference to haruspices, or an ancient Roman diviner who bases “his predictions on inspection of the entrails of sacrificial animals,” suggests that the Ballard is nothing more than an animal to be examined for the advancement or a comprehension of the world and

the people in it (Merriam Webster, Haruspices). Yet, McCarthy is careful to point out that the four students “*perhaps* saw monsters worse to come in their configurations” (emphasis mine). In destroying his body, the students will never be able to put him back in his precise arrangement, never be able to exactly discern who Lester Ballard was physically or psychologically; this inability suggests that even medical science is flawed, and this form of controlling humanity is, like all things, impossible. Further, it is significant to note that the band of men from the community who kidnapped Ballard insist that they do so for the sake of humanity, so that they might locate the people he murdered “so they can be given a decent burial” (*Child of God* 182). Ballard, while deeply disturbed, is still human, yet his remains are handled more in a manner that resembles “medieval torture and execution of some grievous heretic than the practices of modern science” (Cant 97). Therefore, under the pretense of medical research, the students literally and figuratively destroy a piece of humanity.

In *Child of God*, the aspect of human nature that strives for order is shown to be illogical. Just as Ballard recognizes “[d]isorder in the woods, trees down and new paths needed,” the members of the Sevier community and the reader must face the chaos of the world. Ballard claims himself that, if “given charge,” he “would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men’s souls” (136). But man was not given charge, and the land and the souls of man are not capable of being ordered.

CHAPTER THREE:

“A CURTAIN IS RISING ON THE WESTERN WORLD”: MANAGING THE TRANSITION FROM AGRARIAN TO URBANIZED SOUTH IN *SUTTREE*

Suttree, McCarthy's fourth Southern novel, turns away from the rural settings used in his three previous novels as the Knoxville, Tennessee landscape begins to transition from decaying country homes to an urbanized city, a place which is “[i]llshapen or black or deranged, fugitive of all order” (*Suttree* 4). Here, Cornelius Suttree rejects his high-born social status for a simpler life in a houseboat on the river in McAnally Flats, an area which displays the changing world as “the odd grady of the small metropolis [sits] against the green and blooming hills” (120). Suttree develops a connection with the misfits of society rather than with members of the upper class, engaging in drunken bar fights and frequenting the city jail cells in a demonstration of his disdain for social hierarchy and its rules of decorum. Throughout the course of the novel, loss and death loom over Suttree, beginning with the stillborn birth of his twin brother and ending with his separation from the young Gene Harrogate, a “country mouse” who adopts Suttree as a father-figure while in the workhouse (62). Relationships in *Suttree* are fleeting due to death, incarceration, or abandonment, and this constant loneliness becomes significant in considering Suttree's struggle with society, fatherhood, and his own mortality. Eventually, he is left to face the nihilistic world alone, questioning the existence of God, the purpose of his being, and the possibility of an afterlife.

In this metropolitan setting, the agrarian past is gradually sinking beneath the concrete and steel of societal progression. *Suttree* suggests that the advancement of

human culture in Western society is not a display of the development of the human race, but instead an attempt by humanity to gain knowledge so that it is possible to control the chaotic world. Suttree and his young friend, Gene Harrogate, each search for knowledge, but the answers they seek are on two different topics; Suttree seeks to understand death which has haunted him from his beginning and to discover some explanation for what there is to come after life, while Harrogate strives to comprehend and master social hierarchy in his attempt to transition from being a “country mouse” to a “city rat” (*Suttree* 115). As the city and the characters attempt advancement, McCarthy refuses to offer them some sense of certainty or stability, indicating the inability to know and the mystery that is God, death, and human existence. In his texts, knowledge does not guarantee a positive outcome; on the contrary, McCarthy claims that only “[r]uder forms survive” (*Suttree* 5).

For example, Harrogate is introduced as a country boy, so in touch with nature that he actually engages in sexual intercourse with watermelons. Yet, his awareness of the “harpiethroated high ball” wailing of a coming train as he “sank the blade of the knife” into the melon and dropped “the straps of his overalls” to expose his “pale shanks” demonstrates that, despite his affiliation with the agrarian past, he desires to be within the urban world. McCarthy parallels his intercourse with the train, describing his sexual progression in feeling the “ground shudder” and hearing “the huffing breath of the boiler and the rattle and clank and wheelclick and couplingclacking and then the last long shunting on the downgrade...and the low moan bawling across the sleeping land” until there is a “final silence,” after which he adjusts his clothing and returns home (*Suttree*

32). The perverse scene parallels the change of the rural South to urban as sex, perhaps the most basic and natural aspect of human life, resembles the mechanical functioning of locomotives.

Through Harrogate's romp in the melon patch, the reader recognizes that "contemporary urban America is superimposed" onto "the historic remains of an earlier mode of life," continuing the conflict between the old and new South that McCarthy exposes in his earlier Southern texts (Jarrett 45-46). Just as McCarthy's earlier novels show the failure of an advancing society to order human existence, *Suttree* reveals urbanization to be an attempt at ordering that does not better existence, but instead demolishes the traditional Southern life. This threat of urbanization becomes apparent early in the novel, while Suttree watches as a dead man is removed from the river. Suttree is told that the man committed suicide by jumping from a bridge into the river the night before; in leaping from concrete to water, from a man-made structure to a natural structure, he grotesquely represents the result of existing in the urbanized world and the need to reconnect with nature. Significantly, the dead man is pulled from the water wearing "his wet seersucker suit," yet he left his "shoes on the bridge" (*Suttree* 9-10). Wearing a suit, the man is presumably a gentleman, of high social status, but in choosing to take off his shoes before meeting his death in the water, he becomes more like members of a lower class, barefoot among the natural world.

Suttree appears more like the dead man than Harrogate in his resistance to the modern world as he chooses to escape the city of Knoxville, refusing to exist where people want "somebody in men's shoes" and choosing to "stick to the river for a while"

as a fisherman (*Suttree* 10). Suttree recognizes the ominous nature of the new social order, perhaps due to his relationship with his wealthy and pretentious father who believes it acceptable to treat Suttree's mother as "a housekeeper" since, in marrying her, he saved her from a low birth which would have sent her to "the whorehouse" (20). He defines life by the standards of society, and tells Suttree that, if he feels that he is missing life, he should search for it "[i]n the law courts, in business, [and] in government" because "[t]here is nothing occurring in the streets...but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and impotent" (13-14). Ultimately, his father insists that Suttree submit to the social order and "give up his originary needs in exchange for the sublimated symbolic satisfactions of language—the language of the courts, the marketplace, and the centers of government" (Ellis 130). Suttree rejects his father's outlook of the world, surrounding himself with what remains of nature and living outside of the social structure. He views the desire to climb upwards in the social hierarchy as moving closer to resembling his father and further from the "goodness" that his mother, a member of the lower class, possesses (20).

McCarthy demonstrates the need to separate from the social structure as Suttree wanders through an abandoned home; when leaving through the back door, Suttree sees "[o]ld paint on an old sign" which reads "keep out," and he comments that "[s]omeone must have turned it around because it posted the outer world" rather than the private residence (*Suttree* 136). The sign serves as a warning to the state of the world, supporting Suttree's decision to remain within a "runder" space rather than venturing into the contemporary setting. Suttree walks past the painted sign, entering into contemporary

society and declaring “that he was only passing through” (136). Suttree can attempt to isolate himself from society, but he will not be able to wholly remove himself from it as he encounters others who buy into society’s fallacy of progression, accepting and desiring the order and knowledge it supposedly offers.

Of course, Harrogate proves to be one of those people. Upon meeting Harrogate in the workhouse, Suttree noted that he “was not lovable” with his pride and vulgarity, yet “something in him [was] so transparent, so vulnerable” (*Suttree* 54). The vulnerability he recognizes stems from Harrogate’s connection to the old South, a world that is similarly helpless in the face of technology that seeks to destroy it. As a “country mouse,” Harrogate scarcely knows how to exist within this new world, but he attempts to master his surroundings in a manner similar to the mythic agrarian; he plots so that he can order the city, hoping to become wealthy like members of the upper class, a feat that will make it possible for him to abandon melons and “get more pussy than you can shake a stick at” (*Suttree* 420). He plans to achieve his goal by fashioning four schemes in the novel, the first of which aims to manipulate the healthcare community by poisoning bats with strychnine and passing them off as rabid in order to collect a dollar reward per bat. Harrogate fails to realize the capabilities of medical technology as they examine the bats and discover his scam. Interestingly, the doctor who examines the bats becomes engrossed in knowing how Harrogate managed to poison forty-eight bats, as they “only feed on the wing” (218). Upon learning that Harrogate would simply “poison scraps of meat and then shoot them in the air,” the doctor declares his plan “[d]amned ingenious”

(218). This section implies, then, that while Harrogate lacks understanding of the new South, the new South similarly fails to comprehend the simplicity of the old.

Harrogate's schemes become increasingly dangerous, and as they advance, Suttree begins to play a greater role as surrogate father to the boy. For his second plan, Harrogate aims to tunnel "toward the vaults underground where the city's wealth was kept" and use explosives to reach the money (*Suttree* 259). He spends his nights with outdated maps of Knoxville, studying the tunnels underground, the "stone bowels whereon was founded the city itself" (260). The boy is uneducated and unable to figure out the layout of the city; Suttree, having a partial college education, performs a fatherly act in "watching over the city mouse's shoulder" and eventually "describing angles [and] formulas" with "the small face of the apprentice felon nodding at his elbow" (260). However, in doing so, Suttree demonstrates his failure as a parent; he is supporting Harrogate in his attempt to advance within the modern world, contradicting his lesson on the futility of societal advancement that he teaches just one page earlier when the two see a truck which has "fallen through the paving" of the city street (259). Suttree begins:

I saw it.

What if a whole goddamned building was to just up and sink?

What about two or three buildings?

What about a whole block? Harrogate was waving his bottle about.

Goddamn, he said. What if the whole fuckin city was to cave in?

That's the spirit, said Suttree. (259)

In this conversation, Suttree prods Harrogate to consider the decay of the city and society as a whole. However, the use of the words “what if” suggests that Harrogate cannot grasp the futility of society. He does not know the answer to his own question; he does not realize that, like the buildings, society will fall. Harrogate cannot see the decaying structure that society has built, the nothingness that is language, technology, and social order. If he did, he would abandon his plan to gain extreme wealth once and for all.

Yet, Harrogate does continue with his plot to tunnel beneath the city, and as expected, the plan backfires. Suttree hears “a dull concussion somewhere in the city” in the early morning, but disregards it, not knowing that Harrogate had just “pulled the string on his homemade detonator” underneath the city (*Suttree* 268-269). The boy catches himself in the blast, leaving him bloody and beaten; worse, though, is the “moving wall of sewage, a lave neap of liquid shit and soapcurd and toiletpaper” which covered him in the tunnel (270). When Suttree arrives to save him four days later, “bats lined the roof” of the cave, serving as a reminder of Harrogate’s previous failure and a suggestion that the goal of advancing in society is far above his capability.

His next two attempts get the attention of law enforcement; first, he creates a system of collecting the change that gathers in public telephones, and then, he plots a bank robbery. Of course, these efforts fail, demonstrating the inability to manipulate one’s financial and social situation; in the end, Gene realizes that his labors are useless, “everything [he] touches turns to shit” (*Suttree* 436). He loses money on the bat scam due to the cost of strychnine, buries himself beneath human waste and sewage from the underground explosion, goes into seclusion when law enforcement realizes his petty coin

thieving, and lastly, is imprisoned due to the bank robbery. Gene's inability to succeed despite his careful plotting demonstrates the idea that "planning and studying never *are* any use" (Grammer 20). The pointlessness of study presents itself, also, with Suttree as he refuses to complete his education. He realizes that attempts to understand this disordered, uncontrollable world or to plan for it would be to "slip into the gnostic fallacy of the southern pastoral dream," a fruitless effort to attain knowledge about the world and existence that is unattainable (20).

Suttree fails as a father to Harrogate, being unable to show the boy that it is both pointless and improbable for him to climb the social hierarchy. This theme of failing fathers recurs in the novel, appearing first when Suttree refuses his father's views of the world, and again in Suttree as he struggles to successfully play with Harrogate and his biological son. In refusing society in the South, Suttree must also abandon his role as patriarch. Therefore, he leaves his wife and child, and he seems to forget about their existence entirely until one of his misfit friends brings him a piece of bad news:

Your old man called me, he said. He wanted you to call home.

People in hell want ice water.

Hell Bud, it might be something important. . . . Will you not call?

No.

J-Bone was looking at the spoon in his hand. He blew on it and shook his head, the distorted image of him upside down in the spoon's bowl misting away and returning. Well, he said.

Who's dead, Jim?

He didnt look up. Your little boy, he said. (*Suttree* 148)

Though the news does make Suttree reach out to his family, the paternal urge arrives too late, after he has already shirked his duty as husband and father and after his son is already dead.

In what appears to be a final attempt at fatherhood and an opportunity to do something for the child he deserted, Suttree attends the child's funeral. There, he found "[a] pick and two spades," one of which he gathered and "sank it into the loose dirt and hefted it and sent a load of clods rattling over the little coffin" (*Suttree* 154). Though a tractor is available to move the dirt onto the child's grave, Suttree continued until he "pitched a final shovelful of clods over the little mound and dropped the spade and picked up his jacket and turned to go" (155). In attending the funeral and actually burying the child, Suttree places himself within a social ritual and attempts to be the dominant figure in the final stage of the boy's existence. In doing so, Suttree reveals that he is susceptible to the patriarchal society and the human desire for structure that he consistently rejects. But the boy is dead. The patriarchal gesture means nothing because the son no longer physically exists. As the gravediggers snicker at his labor, McCarthy shows Suttree to be both a failed patriarch and a man incapable of achieving control in a world where order is unattainable.

Prior to burying his son Suttree must make phone calls to find the location of the funeral. Once he receives the information, "[t]he words *Suttree funeral* [cause] him to let the receiver fall away from his ear" (*Suttree* 152). At this point, the reader begins to

realize that Suttree's son receives no name. Instead, he becomes an extension of his father, causing one to question whether Suttree returns to his son's funeral to establish himself as a patriarch or to see a part of himself away. During the funeral, Suttree sits at a distance and is unable to hear the service "until his own name was spoken," at which point everything suddenly becomes "quite clear" (153). Again, his recognition of his own name makes his son's death less significant and highlights Suttree's fear that "[d]eath is what the living carry with them," a constant threat that can and will strike against him without warning (153). His anxiety concerning death becomes clearer as he stands over the gravesite, questioning his buried son:

Pale manchild were there last agonies? Were you in terror, did you know?
Could you feel the claw that claimed you? And who is this fool kneeling
over your bones, choked with bitterness? And what could a child know of
the darkness of God's plan? Or how flesh is so frail it is hardly more than
a dream? (154)

In this section, Suttree demonstrates his weakness as a patriarch as the child becomes the one who holds answers and the father becomes the fool. More importantly, Suttree shows his obsession with death and his questioning of God.

The death of his child acts more like a reminder of his own mortality as a piece of him ceases to exist, making his son's death much like the stillborn birth of his twin brother earlier in the novel. Suttree and his twin are mirror images; the stillborn child possessing "[o]n the right temple a mauve halfmoon" birthmark, and Suttree possesses the same mark, his appearing on the left temple (*Suttree* 14). The twins are identical,

neither one more significant than the other, yet in his mother's womb, "life and death battle it out," and for Suttree, "life wins" (Cant 246). With the deaths of two children in Suttree's life, McCarthy establishes the idea that death strikes without reason or compassion. The inexplicable nature of death haunts Suttree as he realizes a father ought to die before a son and he could have been the stillborn child, just as his twin could have been the one to survive.

With regards to death, though, Suttree becomes obsessed with more than just the question of why one person dies and another lives. Suttree develops a relationship with an old recluse, referred to as the ragpicker, and the two spend their time together questioning the purpose of life, as well as the existence or nonexistence of God:

You told me once you believed in God.

The old man waved his hand. Maybe, he said. I got no reason to think he believes in me. Oh I'd like to see him for a minute if I could.

What would you say to him?

Well, I think I'd just tell him. I'd say: Wait a minute. Wait just one minute before you start in on me. Before you say anything, there's just one thing I'd like to know. And he'll say: What's that? And then I'm goin to ast him: What did you have me in that crapgame down there for anyway? I couldn't put any part of it together.

Suttree smiled. What do you think he'll say?

The ragpicker spat and wiped his mouth. I dont believe he can answer it, he said. I dont believe there is a answer. (*Suttree* 257-258)

The mock conversation with God recalls the questions Suttree asks of his son as he hopes the ragpicker can speculate on what purpose God has for humanity. However, Suttree receives no answers from the ragpicker, just as he received none from his child. The ragpicker tells Suttree, though, that the answers will not be attainable once he dies; there are no answers to be attained.

Suttree discovers the ragpicker in his cheap boarding house when he dies. Looking at his “eyes shut and his mouth set and his hands...clenched at either side,” Suttree questions, “There’s no one to ask is there? There’s no...” (*Suttree* 421-422). The ambiguous ending to his question, or perhaps statement, carries Suttree one step further in his opinion of existence, God, and the afterlife. Now, not only are there no answers, but there is no one to ask. There is no God. For Suttree, death is “real as a fact and an idea” which challenges the “illusions of security and teleology” to which human beings cling (Bell 92). No longer can death be treated as a state of being, because there is no state to follow it. Death is the end. Finally, McCarthy brings his reader to a nihilistic existence, to the awareness that life lacks purpose, God is nonexistent, and death is final.

Suttree’s questioning of life, death, and religion becomes apparent early in the novel in the presence of the river. John M. Grammer points to the river and its connection to life by providing “Suttree the fish which sustain him” and death with the “bloated body” of the man in seersucker that was “grappled from its depths” (22). The river plays an obvious religious role, though, as it is both a place for baptism and burial. Suttree, for instance, stumbles upon a baptism where he receives a proposition for salvation:

You been baptized?

Just on the head.

That aint no good. It wont take if you dont get total nursing. That old sprinklin business wont get it, buddy boy.

...Tell him to get down yonder in the water if he wants to be saved.

...It aint salvation just to get in the water, the first said. You got to be saved as well. (*Suttree* 122-123)

Suttree “knew the river well already and he turned his back to these malingerers and went on,” leaving them to idly search for salvation from a God that does not exist (125).

Suttree accepts the nothingness of God, refusing to waste his time submerged in Christian mythology that claims to offer answers and control over one’s future, failing to recognize the absence of a higher power and the nothingness that death brings.

Through a character named Leonard, McCarthy further establishes the meaninglessness of life, and the absence of God becomes clear. He comes to Suttree asking for aid with a family issue; his mother is financially dependent on government aid, getting medical and unemployment benefits for his father, but the old man died several months back, and his mother “stands to lose about half her check” (*Suttree* 242).

Leonard’s concern is not the fact that his father is decomposing in a back room of his home; rather, he worries because his mother “has been savin to get her some things she needs” like “a steam iron,” and “with hot weather coming on,” their secret will soon be exposed and their money gone (242). Leonard creates a plan to dump his father in the river to hide him, the financial scheme, and their guilt, but he needs Suttree and his boat in order to complete the plot.

Suttree refuses to participate, but Leonard shows up at his houseboat in a stolen car with the father “wrapped in the sheets he’d died in months before,” prepared to weigh the body down with “wheelrims and a pile of chain” (*Suttree* 250). With the body present and rotting in the trunk of the car, Suttree caves, agreeing to participate in Leonard’s plot for financial gain. Before burying the father in the watery depths, Suttree asks Leonard to “say a few words,” but Leonard doesn’t “know no goddamned service” (251). Therefore, Suttree places his “foot against the thing and shoved it” into the water and rows away, not speaking to the boy during their journey back to land (251-252).

In this scenario, McCarthy demonstrates a plot in which Leonard and his family are attempting to raise themselves in society, forgetting the value of human life and neglecting any attention to morality. Leonard’s inability to pray furthers the idea that the old South which trusted in a higher power is lost, and the absence of conversation in the passage’s ending similarly shows a strain on community. Finally, in choosing the word “it” when referring to the boy’s dead father, McCarthy underlines the fact that human existence is meaningless.

The scene immediately after the water burial sees Suttree stumbling drunkenly into a Catholic church where he sleeps beneath the statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary. A priest approaches him, asking if he was hoping to confess his sins, but instead, Suttree declares God to be a fallacy:

...God’s house is not exactly a place to take a nap, [the priest] said.

It’s not God’s house.

I beg your pardon?

It's not God's house.

Oh?

Suttree waved his hand vaguely and stepped past the priest and went down the aisle. The priest watched him. He smiled sadly, but a smile for that.

(Suttree 255)

Suttree blatantly states that the church cannot be God's house because there is no God. If there were, He would have shown Himself when a family used its dead patriarch for financial gain or tossed him, leaden, to the depths of a river. The response of the priest, his sad smile, becomes a quixotic moment. Perhaps the priest smiles because the drunken man leaves the church but is saddened by the blatant disrespect shown in what he believes to be the house of God, or maybe he smiles sadly to know that Suttree is right. The church is not God's house. It is just a church, a place built by man to uphold a system created by men who hope to instill structure within the chaotic world.

As the novel nears its end, Suttree falls victim to typhoid fever, entering into a fever induced hallucination in which he "no longer knew if he dreamt or woke;" the hallucination acts as a mixture of reality and imagination within which Suttree believes he gains further knowledge about life, death, and himself (*Suttree* 449). Having entered the hospital under an pseudonym, Suttree becomes concerned that death will find him when he is unidentifiable and alone, wondering "who will come to weep the grave of an alias? Or lay one down?" (460). In his delirium, Suttree becomes obsessed with time. He envisions a court trial initiated because there "wasnt nary a clock in the place knowed what time of day it was," and another clock was "wound but it wouldn't run;" both

scenarios symbolize his fear of the cessation or loss of time, as well as the loss of some semblance of control in the world (452). All of this touches on the mutability of life, the realization that his clock may run out, but the world and time will continue to move forward without him. With this thought, Suttree recognizes that “all souls are one and all souls lonely,” suggesting that every person faces life and death alone but are connected in that loneliness, linked by the brevity of the soul, life, and memory (459).

Suttree emerges from his fever just as he emerges from his mother’s womb, without being taken by death. From his fever, he recalls the idea that “[n]othing ever stops moving” and that “there is one Suttree and one Suttree only,” echoing the idea that life is both solitary and insignificant (*Suttree* 461). After his fever, Suttree truly is alone in life; Harrogate has been imprisoned and the majority of his rebel friends have died. He returns home to McAnally to find the area swarmed with “yellow machines” which “groaned over the landscape...ashy fields shorn up and leveled and dead turned out of their graves” (464). More shocking, though, is the discovery of a dead man “sleeping in his bed;” when the city ambulance comes to retrieve the dead body from Suttree’s houseboat, Suttree is gone. No one can identify the body, but his remaining friends stand back, watching and knowing that “Old Suttree aint dead” (470).

And he’s not. Suttree is heading westward, leaving the South, its technological advancement, and his past behind. But he cannot escape one thing; McCarthy ends *Suttree* by showing death following his trail.

Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of cities. His work lies all

wheres and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them.

(*Suttree* 471)

For now, *Suttree* manages to walk away from death for the third time in the novel. Death, “the huntsman” will follow him to the West, and eventually, win over *Suttree*.

With the conclusion of *Suttree*, McCarthy seems to complete his Southern works. After its publication, McCarthy moves westward, proving that his literary work also “lies alls wheres.” Between 1979 and 2006, he establishes himself in the Western genre, leaving the Appalachian setting that appears in *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree* behind. While the scenery in his works changes, McCarthy continues to deal with violence and death and human existence. In doing so, he continues to explore subjects that are relevant to all people, despite the region they inhabit.

CONCLUSION:

THE ROAD

Cormac McCarthy's Southern works deserve the attention that has been given to his Western texts. It is significant to note that McCarthy's physical and literary movement westward continues the violent and nihilistic path towards the apocalypse which has been paved throughout his early Southern works. For his Southern characters, heading to Western America serves as an attempt to find meaning in the world as is apparent in John Wesley Rattner of *The Orchard Keeper* and Cornelius Suttree of *Suttree*, both of whom move westward in search of something other than the nothingness of the area surrounding Knoxville, Tennessee. Even so, McCarthy's literary trip westward will prove to be as futile as the Appalachian setting of McCarthy's first four Southern novels. Leo Daugherty looks to *Blood Meridian*, arguably McCarthy's most celebrated Western novel, which tells of "pilgrims" who are "exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta" (*Blood Meridian* 46). Daugherty sees this passage in correspondence with the meaningless, Godless settings of *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree*, suggesting that McCarthy intends his readers to conclude that "our own Earth is Anaretic" or, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is a "planet which destroys life" (Daugherty 26). Interestingly, McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road*, appears to return to the Southern setting of his first four books. *The Road* demonstrates the importance of his Southern works as it sees life to its destruction in the South and all over the Earth. Finally, McCarthy brings his readers to the post-apocalyptic era which had been building within his novels for over forty years.

The Road reveals a world of fire and ash, where “the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp” and “[t]he mummied dead [are] everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires” (*Road* 32, 24). In the world, all living things cease to be, but also “[t]he names of things [are] slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true” (89). Within this post-apocalyptic damnation, a father and his son wander along what were once state roads, scavenging for food in constant fear of bloodcults, the “[c]reedless shells of men tottering down the causeways” in the blighted world (28). This fight for survival seems unusual as the nihilistic ideas that are presented in McCarthy’s earlier Southern texts have come to fruition. In the post-apocalyptic setting, men and women reproduce strictly for the purpose of cannibalism, no man can be trusted as any sense of community has been lost, and all hope of God or some greater being seems lost. Yet, the man and the boy challenge the threats of other human beings, starvation, and freezing temperatures, refusing to relinquish their title as “the good guys” in a world where goodness and beauty have vanished (77). In clinging to goodness, the man and the boy bring light to the shadowy scenery, a kind of hope that is absent in McCarthy’s first four novels.

But before hope can be realized, McCarthy again submerges his readers in darkness. In *The Road*, McCarthy returns to the futile yet instinctual human desire for control that appears in each of his Southern novels. The characters in *The Road* strive to control fate, dodging death and destruction at the turn of each page as the man and the boy persevere “beyond will in a drive that is instinctual, or primordial,” pushing for

survival as they travel southward to live through another winter (Kennedy 2). Like control over the agrarian setting is no longer available to the characters in *The Orchard Keeper* and as *Suttree* promises Cornelius Suttree will eventually lose his power struggle with death, the man and boy in *The Road* feel their hold on order slipping away as quickly as the world did. The loss of order becomes apparent when the technology of the once advancing world fails. At the onset of the apocalypse, for example, “[t]he clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear light and then a series of low concussions...[The man] went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone” (*Road* 52). The stopped clock reveals the end of an era and the beginning of a period in which man has no means of controlling time. The power outage both figuratively and literally leaves humanity without light, with no means of seeing where to go or what is coming next. The effects of the breaking down of these man-made objects and inventions appear in the boy’s subconscious, in his nightmares.

I had a bad dream. ...I had this penguin that you wound up and it would waddle and flap its flippers. And we were in that house that we used to live in and it came around the corner but nobody had wound it up and it was really scary.

Okay.

It was a lot scarier in the dream.

I know. Dreams can be really scary.

Why did I have that scary dream?

I couldn’t know. But it’s okay now. I’m going to put some wood on the

fire. You go to sleep.

The boy couldn't answer. Then he said: The winder wasn't turning. (36-37)

The toy, which was created to be controlled by the human hand, suddenly controls itself and turns against those who create it. The boy's fear stems from the fact that the toy no longer works as it should; once the world ends, humanity no longer possesses control in the world, not even over the things created by man.

With the loss of control comes the end of social order. Before *The Road*, before the world has ended, Southern society relied on patriarchy, yet relations between fathers and sons in McCarthy's novels are continually plagued by failure. The attempts at fatherhood in each novel are upset by the inability of the father to act due to some inner turmoil caused by an oppressively patriarchal and increasingly commercial society. Kenneth Rattner lives life for thieving and financial gain rather than for his family. Incestuous guilt pushes Culla Holme to dispose of his son, the embodiment of his sinful action. Outcast for failing to fit within the structures of society, Lester Ballard copulates with corpses that are incapable of bearing children. Cornelius Suttree abandons his wife and son due to a passionate hatred for the social hierarchy with which his own father contended. Yet in the darkness of *The Road*, McCarthy "sounds the limits of imaginable love and despair between a diligent father and his timid young son" on their mission for survival in a world that has lost any structure (Warner 2). Unlike the first four novels, there is no patriarchal society and no more need to climb to a higher social rank. Material goods and the memory of things are without meaning and value. The father, for example, takes a billfold from his back pocket and examines the contents. "Some money, credit

cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife" (*Road* 51). Eventually, all of these are left on the road as he moves forward.

Moving forward, though, does prove to be a challenge for the man initially, due to his memories of the world prior to its destruction. While moving through the "[b]arren, silent, godless" setting, the father desperately seeks a connection to his past, much like Lester Ballard of *Child of God* who obsessively returns to the home which was confiscated from him by the government. When in a roadside gas station, the father examined the office, pondering over a metal desk and the linoleum flooring, and he finally "picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father's house in that long ago" (*Road* 7). This action points to a subconscious desire for normalcy, to be taken back to a time when the world seemed right and the man felt safe. He repeats this sort of desire for the past in revisiting his childhood home, taking his frightened son into the shamble of a house to point out his old bedroom or the area where he once celebrated Christmas, perhaps attempting to offer the child some semblance of family history or explanation of how the world once was. More likely, though, the man returns to this place "half expecting to find his childhood things," hoping to find some piece of the world still intact (27).

Eventually, though, he realizes that he and his son are "each other's world entire" (*Road* 6). The typical push for patriarchal or societal power becomes pointless as there is nothing in the world for either the father and the boy but each other or death. The father, therefore, differs from previous fathers, seeking nothing more than to love and protect his child, claiming that his God-given "job is to take care" of the boy (77). This selfless

purpose for living further distinguishes him from previous fathers in McCarthy's Southern literary canon as his fear is not his own mortality, but the child's. At one point in the novel, the son asks his father in the darkness:

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay. (11)

This scene directly relates to the scene in *Suttree* where Suttree attends his biological son's funeral. Where Suttree becomes haunted by his own mortality, fearing the death that constantly looms over him, the father in *The Road* refuses to admit the possibility of death, constantly reassuring the boy that they are "not going to die" because to acknowledge the reality of death is to allow himself, the boy, and hope to die (94).

But the man struggles to be a successful parent because he and the boy are from different times and places. The boy, born after the unnamed catastrophe that leaves the world ravaged, does not know the world from which his father comes. The father one day realizes that "that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed" (*Road* 153). The boy knows nothing of gas stations, blue ocean water, Coca Cola, or crows that are mentioned in books. These memories of the past, of a world that possessed simple pleasures, of a time where a man did not fear every other man, haunt the father as he realizes that he cannot share his past, cannot "enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own" (154). Instead, the boy will only know this world in

which community is not just disconnected, but “everyone, finally, is the enemy” (Warner 2). This extreme portrayal of separation between older and younger generations is reminiscent of the transition into modernism that McCarthy explores in *The Orchard Keeper*. Like Arthur Ownby and the youth in McCarthy’s first novel, the father recognizes that he will also be unsuccessful in relating his past to his son through storytelling, a technique that is insufficient to relate the various nuances of a place during a specific time period.

His stories not only fail to bring comprehension of the past, but also attempt to deny or suppress the reality of the present. Eventually, the boy refuses the stories because they “are not true,” telling his father that “in the stories we’re always helping people and we couldn’t help people” (*Road* 268). In refusing the stories and acknowledging the truth of their existence, the boy asserts his coming of age. Here, the idea that the father is the caretaker and the boy is “not the one who has to worry about everything” becomes questionable; the boy, the father, and the reader realize that the post-apocalyptic world is the boy’s world and will be his world when his father dies, leaving him as the self-proclaimed carrier of burden: “Yes I am...I am the one” (259).

Truly, though, the relationship between father and son displays a balance between “the rank self-centeredness necessary to survive as an individual and the altruism required to survive as a species” (Holcomb 2). The father holds true to his God-given job in caring for the boy, trying desperately to shield him from the sight of amputees who are chained and waiting for their next limb to be taken for a meal or of a headless and gutted baby roasting on a spit. But the boy gradually proves that he is, in fact, “the one” as he

occasionally adopts the role of caretaker. The fear caused by the persistent threat of bloodcults on the road and the need to continually check the “chrome motorcycle mirror that he used to watch the road behind them” brings the man into moments of psychological self-destruction (*Road* 6). His distrust for his surroundings and for other people heightens as he and the boy inch closer to death by starvation, forcing them to venture into the ruins of old homes from which they would have originally skirted. At one point, inside an abandoned home, the man sees his reflection and the reflection of the boy in a mirror, at which he “almost raised the pistol” until the boy assures him: “It’s us, Papa, the boy whispered. It’s us” (132).

While the man distrusts, the boy holds hope, causing the father to claim that if the boy “is not the word of God God never spoke” (*Road* 5). This passage, appearing at the beginning of the book, reiterates McCarthy’s theme concerning the mystery of God. In his claim, the man suggests both that God speaks and that He may not exist. This questioning of God appears throughout McCarthy’s Southern canon, as is shown when Culla Holme “clenched his hands above him threatful, supplicant, to the mute and windy heavens” (*Outer Dark* 33). Significantly, the man in *The Road* mirrors this scene as he seeks answers for the hell he and his son face: “Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God” (12). Again, the scene rings with both belief and doubt in the existence of God. However, where Culla Holme and the other characters in McCarthy’s early Southern novels refuse God and salvation, the man and the boy almost search for Him as some sign of hope. For instance, the father allows

the boy to shoot a flare gun that he discovers, and the boy worries that “they couldn’t see it very far;” when the man asks if by “they” he means God, the boy replies, “Yeah. Maybe somebody like that” (246).

The boy continuously exhibits signs of goodness and hope in his desiring to help another young boy or performing a sort of prayer as he thanks the dead who left food that the man discovered in an underground cellar. This goodness against a damned background, accompanied by the fact that his birth sees a new period of time on Earth, places the boy in a Christ-like roll, bringing new meaning to his title as “the one.” As the novel concludes and the man dies, the boy is left with instructions to “find the good guys” and to “carry the fire” that is inside of him and always has been (*Road* 278). The little boy, then, becomes McCarthy’s first Southern character to possess “the breath of God,” the first to carry light against the darkness and chaos on Earth (287).

Though the boy exists in a world that “could not be put back” nor “be made right again,” McCarthy may be suggesting that there is no way to define what should and should not be put back or what is and is not right (*Road* 287). Throughout his Southern works, McCarthy presents characters who question God, the purpose of human existence, and themselves. As the setting comes to a post-apocalyptic state in *The Road*, the reader can fully recognize that the characters presented in *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree* who attempted to control and order their world were truly ignoring the fact that the world “hummed with mystery” (287). McCarthy unveils within these four novels traditional Southern themes like the connection to land and community, gothic landscapes and characters, and the modernizing South, but he does so while also

giving his characters a constant feeling of uncertainty and a sensation that the world is corrupt and ugly. With the arrival of *The Road*, McCarthy seems to be suggesting that there is a “tender pricelessness of the here and now” and that the “beauty and goodness” of the South is all too often overlooked because of attention to society or the self (Warner 3).

With *The Road*, McCarthy does leaves space for speculation on the beginning of a new world as the man and the boy discover morel mushrooms, an edible fungus often “found in large numbers where there have been forest fires or trees dying” (Novak 1). This discovery suggests that, perhaps, life can regenerate on the destroyed planet. One of McCarthy’s colleagues at the Santa Fe Institute discusses this possibility for rebirth, saying that “[t]he deforestation described in *The Road* would release nutrients from the land into rivers, lakes and the ocean, encouraging further growth. Eventually slower growing species would begin to reemerge” (Erwin 1). McCarthy, who for forty years exposed the darkness of the South, gives the world a Christ-like child whom “[g]oodness will find” and the possibility for a new world with new mysteries through the presence of new life on the destroyed Earth (*Road* 281).

Masterful in his depictions of human depravity and violence, McCarthy creates “an exquisite nightmare” in *The Road* that somehow “does not add to the cruelty and ugliness of our times,” but instead “warns us now how much we have to lose” (Warner 3). McCarthy believes that human beings have lost sight of the value of the world, having been quoted in saying that “[w]e are going to do ourselves in” before an environmental apocalypse can occur (Kushner 46). Therefore, McCarthy, through the darkness of his

novels and the proposal of hope in *The Road*, seems to suggest that searching for the light within the darkness, to not be blind to the natural world as his early Southern characters were in Appalachia, should take precedence over attempts at ordering human existence or questioning God. After all, who knows when the world as it is now will be gone?

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