A path to nowhere: Violence, sex, and humor in Cormac McCarthy's "Child of God" and "Suttree"

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A PATH TO NOWHERE: VIOLENCE, SEX, AND HUMOR IN CORMAC McCARTHY'S CHILD OF GOD AND SUTTREkkey

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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ABSTRACT

A Path to Nowhere: Violence, Sex, and Humor in Cormac McCarthy’s Child of God and Suttree discusses some of the uses of three prevalent elements in two of McCarthy’s works. Chapter One introduces violence and its importance to his fiction, demonstrating that it is often linked with sex and humor, and it discusses the two novels’ lack of closure. Chapter Two describes McCarthy’s use of the three elements in Child of God. Chapter Three illustrates his use of the elements in Suttree. Chapter Four concludes the essay by offering some reasons why Child of God and Suttree lack closure.
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VIOLENCE, SEX, AND HUMOR

Roughly a third of the way through Cormac McCarthy’s third novel, Child of God, its protagonist, Lester Ballard is on his honeymoon. He has gone into town to buy his wife lingerie, and he returns breathless with anticipation of the night ahead. He comes back to the crumbling cabin he has appropriated for a home, retrieves his wife from the attic, and builds a romantic fire for them to enjoy. Unfortunately, the bitter cold of a wintry East Tennessee day has caused problems which are not typical for most honeymooning couples. McCarthy writes:

She was standing on tiptoe, nor would she fold.
Ballard came down the ladder and undid the rope from around her waist. Then he dragged her into the other room and laid her on the hearth. He took hold of her arm and tried to raise it but the whole body shifted woodenly. Goddam frozen bitch, said Ballard. He piled more firewood on. (102)
The problem is not first-night jitters. The problem is that Ballard’s bride is, quite literally, frigid. She is a
corpse, benumbed and hardened by the sub-freezing temperatures during the time Ballard has been shopping. This girl is the first of many "wives" with whom Ballard will commit acts of deviance and perversion. Despite the horror of this scene, it is designed to evoke an amused response.

In Suttree, the novel following Child of God, Cornelius Suttree has brought home a young girl from a bar for a one-night stand. Just as he gets her home to his crumbling houseboat, which sits on the banks of the Tennessee River near downtown Knoxville, there is a knock on the door. Until he discovers who the visitor is, Suttree had forgotten about the bizarre conversation he has had with his friend Weird Leonard the night before. Poor Suttree always seems to be volunteered into assisting his buddies with rather unusual odd jobs. Leonard tells Suttree that he needs help getting rid of his father. The problem is that his father has been dead for six months and left to rot in his bedroom so that his family can continue to collect his social security checks, but by the time Leonard comes to Suttree for help, the family cannot stand the odor anymore. Suttree tells Leonard to count him out, but the next night, as he prepares to escape into the arms of his underage companion, Leonard appears. McCarthy writes:
I got him, he said.
You what?
I got him. He’s in the trunk.
Suttree tried to shut the door.
You’re breaking my goddamned foot, Sut.
Get it out of the fucking door then.
Listen Sut . . .
I said no, goddamnit. (247)

As is his custom, however, Suttree cannot turn down his friend’s plea for assistance, and he helps drag the rotting corpse into his skiff so that they can give the old man a burial at sea. The girl leaves in haste before she can discover just how bizarre Leonard’s schemes are. In Suttree, as in Child of God, McCarthy has juxtaposed elements of sexuality and humor with an aura of violence and death to create a scene to which it is difficult to react.

What is the appropriate response? Laughter? Disgust? Horror? This is up to the individual reader. McCarthy simply sets the scene, using complex, multi-layered symbols with no clear meaning. Violence, sex, and humor mean something specific to McCarthy, but their ultimate meanings are not easily determined because he actively attempts to make them, and his ultimate purpose, unclear. However a reader chooses to incorporate them, violence, sex, and humor are three important elements in Child of God and Suttree.
The Climate of Violence

Of these elements, violence is perhaps the most prevalent, and it affects the other two. Sexuality in Suttree, and especially in Child of God, is never an act of love but is, instead, often linked with violence and death. Even the humor of the works is usually violent, involving, for instance, exploding pigeons, the slaughter of bats, and visual and verbal “sight gags” concerning corpses. Although McCarthy has gone to great lengths to protect his privacy, he has given one full-length interview, to the New York Times, in support of All the Pretty Horses. His responses to questions concerning his writing are irreverent, but he does discuss the violence of his art with conviction. “‘There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed,’” he states:

“I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.” (Woodward 36)

McCarthy’s statements could be a blueprint for the violent fictional worlds of Child of God and Suttree, novels which render All the Pretty Horses quite tame by comparison. To
McCarthy, violence and bloodshed are "red badges of courage" proving that one is facing life honestly and directly. He apparently believes that those who love and work for peace have forfeited their souls. If his novels are held up as a mirror to his statements concerning violence, however, then there is a good deal of distortion in the resulting image. Perhaps Lester Ballard and Suttree do live deliberate lives by Thoreauvian standards, but at what cost? Neither character gains anything but loneliness, loss, and the omnipresent threat of violence and death. They do not ultimately fare much better than peacemakers.

Perhaps the difference is in the means to an end. At one point in his novel, Suttree is "seized with a thing he'd never known, a sudden understanding of the mathematical certainty of death" (295). He determines that it is a given that both hawks and doves die. Suttree and Ballard sense this finality and understand that the job of the living, therefore, is to guard one's spirit for the day of the inevitable. How one chooses to accomplish this task can only be up to the individual person. However, even this conclusion, that Ballard and Suttree are attempting to guard their spirits, is problematic, since Ballard's attempts to live his life on his terms result in the slaughter and desecration of countless other innocent human beings. He makes this connection only after he has been apprehended and
then has eluded his captors. He walks down a country road in the dark, alone and friendless and has a vision of himself. A church bus passes, and a boy stares out of the back of it, directly at Ballard. Ballard feels that the boy is familiar, realizes that it is himself, and begins shaking uncontrollably, finally turning himself back in to the authorities. The vision is equivocal, but it seems to indicate that Ballard has seen an image of his spotless self—a boy whose mother has not yet left him and whose father has not yet committed suicide and left him as well. By turning himself in to the authorities, he is attempting to return to that state of innocence.

There is a similar epiphany in Suttree. After Suttree (just barely) pulls through a bout with typhoid, he, too, is visited by hallucinations which cause him to reappraise his existence, to do some unaccustomed soul searching which causes him to alter the course of his life. One of these hallucinatory images is a nun who sums up what could be called Suttree’s “career” to that point. The nun states:

Mr Suttree it is our understanding that at curfew rightly decreed by law and in that hour wherein night draws to its proper close and the new day commences and contrary to conduct befitting a person of your station you betook yourself to various low places within the shire of McAnally
and there did squander several ensuing years in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpoils, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, topers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees.

(457)

Although the vision affects Suttree greatly, causing him to reassess his life, the nun's judgment is not without humor. It, too, connects McCarthy's central elements of violence, sex, and humor. Immediately after leaving the hospital, Suttree leaves Knoxville, presumably for a new and different life, in contrast to Ballard, who checks himself back in to the hospital presumably for the same reason. Both discover that they have done little but ruin their lives.

McCarthy, then, "hedges his bets." He spends most of Suttree and Child of God championing his protagonists' attempts to live deliberate lives filled with violence, bloodshed, and death. He produces hundreds of pages which do not attempt to explain his characters' actions. McCarthy merely seems to follow them around, as it were, and observe what they are doing without condemning them to any authorial structure--their fictional lives are as without direction and seemingly random as the lives of living, breathing human
beings. As the novels draw to a close, he indicates that he has, in fact, been spying on his characters and testing them and that they have not acted in accordance with his principles. As a writer, McCarthy lives by his own version of the Hays Code, the cinematic dictum of the thirties and forties which stated that characters could create any sort of mayhem during the course of a film, just as long as they finally received their comeuppance before the movie’s closing credits. McCarthy comes dangerously close to denying his own ostensible convictions concerning the importance of living one’s life on one’s own terms. The result is that the novels lack any definite conclusions. On the one hand, Suttree and Ballard are praised for facing the violence of their lives, but, on the other hand, this same violence of which they have been a part, is condemned.

A Path to Nowhere: Cormac McCarthy’s Lack of Conclusions

As Mark Royden Winchell notes, "McCarthy so consistently avoids the transitions and connections of a well-made novel that we suspect neither accident nor ineptitude but some more insidious design to be at work" (295). "Insidious" may not be the appropriate word, but there is no doubt that a stroll through the nightmarish terrain of Suttree and Child of God will lead the reader along a path to nowhere. McCarthy’s reasons for creating an
extremely hostile and deadly environment for his characters are never fully explained. Many critics have compared McCarthy to Faulkner, but with Faulkner, one can ultimately find a bedrock of moral stability. There are many evil characters in Faulkner’s works, but the reader is clearly supposed to understand that they are evil. With McCarthy, this is not so. Lester Ballard of Child of God commits unspeakable acts of perversion and breaks as many taboos as he can before he finally decides to turn himself in to the authorities. Nonetheless, he manages to remain at least a marginally-sympathetic character. Suttree is “good,” but his almost fatal passivity embroils him in scores of near-misses and close scrapes, and, by the close of his novel, he has apparently decided to leave his former life well behind him. McCarthy’s lack of a clear moral and ethical vision, combined with novels which devote themselves to violent episodes and persons, renders his work enigmatic. Critical essays and reviews of Child of God and Suttree have a tendency to be focused on reaching the conclusions that McCarthy avoids. Violence is McCarthy’s “white whale.” It must mean something, but it does not clearly mean anything.

His use of sexuality and humor is no less confounding. In both novels, the protagonists appear to view sex as, on the one hand, an escape from death, and, on the other, as equivalent to the same. For Ballard, this conflict is
explicit. He enjoys only the company of dead women, but his “care” of them, at times, verges on the heroic. During a sweeping flash flood, Ballard carries his corpses “to safety” on higher ground, for instance. The result is that Ballard appears, like Suttree, to face, and even control, death. As Edwin T. Arnold notes, “What Lester wants is permanence, even (or especially) the permanence of death, but what he experiences in his life is change in the form of desertion and denial and loss. He expects to be abandoned” (39). By attempting to impede this desertion through murder and necrophilia, Ballard feels that he can temporarily cheat death. In a similar fashion, Suttree becomes involved in short-lived relationships as a way of temporarily retreating from the omnipresent violence and threat of death implicit in his daily existence—it is no accident that his two most prominent relationships remove him from his houseboat for a time—only to find that they are, indeed, only temporary escapes. His “offscreen” marriage apparently ended in a shambles as well, judging from the violent reaction of his ex-wife’s father elicited by Suttree’s appearance at his estranged son’s funeral. As John Lewis Longley, Jr., notes in “Suttree and the Metaphysics of Death”:

This marriage is one of the three pair-bond relationships in Suttree’s life. All of them are terminated violently, and in each case, the
'resolution' grows out of inner tensions in Suttree himself; powerful emotional and moral conflicts. (83)

The conflicts of both Suttree and Ballard create a complex conception of sexuality which leaves its ultimate meaning shrouded and left beside the same path to nowhere along which violence travels in Suttree and Child of God.

Determining the meaning of violence and sex in these novels is often akin to deciphering hieroglyphics, and the third prevalent element of Suttree and Child of God is no less complex. Humor is used for different purposes in the novels, and it usually takes the form of low humor, such as farce, and not wit. At times, the humor is designed to evoke laughter at what would seem to be an inappropriate time. Often, these displacing japes occur when one of the other, or both, of the remaining elements are used, as, for example, when Ballard finds his new bride less-than-limber. At other times, the humor in Child of God and Suttree is simply designed to keep these works from being too dark.

Another prominent use of humor is the type of slapstick most often associated with tall tales. Gene Harrogate of Suttree, for example, is a one-man sideshow, creating pockets of light in what would be an almost unrelentingly cheerless novel. Nonetheless, even his genuinely amusing activities involve violence or sex. He kills bats; he very
nearly blows himself up amid an explosion of urine and feces; he deflowers watermelons. The fact that the humor in these two works is so often combined with the other principal elements of violence and sex indicates that it holds a prominent place in McCarthy's mysterious designs.
CHAPTER 2

CHILD OF GOD

Child of God was published by Random House in 1973, and it was McCarthy's third book, following The Orchard Keeper (1965) and Outer Dark (1968). As Vereen Bell has noted, "Cormac McCarthy’s novels are as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot" ("Ambiguous" 31). Therefore, it is no surprise that Child of God received mixed reviews upon publication. While most critics understood that, despite its violence and perversion, the novel was not designed to appeal to prurient interests, they could not reach a consensus regarding McCarthy's purpose. While Robert Buckler, in The Listener, states that, "There is not much moral sophistication, despite the title" (590), Arnold Asrelsky, in Library Journal, opposes Buckler's view and states that Lester Ballard, the novel's protagonist, "is an emblem of the spiritual degradation of man" (153). In a mixed review, Richard P. Brickner asserts that, "What we have in 'Child of God' is an essentially sentimental novel that no matter how sternly it strives to be tragic is never more than morose" (7). Peter Prescott, in Newsweek, on the
other hand, discusses the lack of sentimentality in *Child of God* and notes "McCarthy's admirably distilled prose from which all emotion has been pared away" (67). The final inconclusive word belongs to Robert Coles in his profile/review for the *New Yorker*:

> [McCarthy's] mordant wit, his stubborn refusal to bend his writing to the literary and intellectual demands of our era, conspire at times to make him seem mysterious and confusing--a writer whose fate is to be relatively unknown and often misinterpreted. (90)

The discordant interpretations of *Child of God*'s first reviewers are hardly surprising. It is a novel which resists interpretation, with its beguilingly simple plot line, pared-down prose, and lack of character analysis. Lester Ballard, a 27-year-old resident of Sevier County in East Tennessee, "a child of God much like yourself perhaps" (4), gets his house auctioned out from under him for failure to pay back taxes on it. After he is dispossessed of his home, Ballard then finds other shelter—first an abandoned cabin and later a series of caves—and attempts to create a family for himself. Ballard's family is not traditional by any standard; it is composed of a few stuffed animals for pets and a number of dead women for wives. He is finally
caught and sent to a mental institution in Knoxville, where he dies of presumably natural causes in 1965.

**Violence in *Child of God***

The secrets of Ballard's diseased mind are not revealed, and the only clues to his motivation are given by some of the bemused Sevier County townsfolk. They try to place Ballard squarely within a canon of violence that has been evolving since the early history of their county. Ballard himself is the descendant of a "White Cap" (local version of the K.K.K), his mother ran off with another man, and his father committed suicide in the family barn. The White Caps, the reader is informed, "were sorry people all the way around, ever man jack a three hundred and sixty degree son of a bitch, which my daddy said meant they was a son of a bitch any way you looked at em" (165). Ballard's father is discovered by his son, who goes to the local country store for help. One of the men who assists in cutting Ballard's father down discusses how he found the elder Ballard: "The old man's eyes was run out on stems like a crawfish and his tongue blacker'n a chow dog's" (21). The grotesque condition of the elder Ballard prompts the man to declare, "I wisht if a man wanted to hang hisself he'd do it with poison or somethin so folks wouldn't have to see such a thing as that" (21).
In addition to the less-than-auspicious violent or depraved figures found in his own family, there are many other figures of Sevier County history and folklore who fall short of being paragons of virtue. Indeed, a point that McCarthy seems to be making is that violence is the natural state of affairs in this and in other parts of the South. W. J. Cash, in his landmark, *The Mind of the South*, believes that violence is a result of the region's ingrained character. Cash notes:

This character is of the utmost significance for its corollary was the perpetuation and acceleration of the tendency to violence which had grown up in the Southern backwoods as it naturally grows up on all frontiers. (44)

Violence, then, while common to all, would appear to be an even more omnipresent fact of life for Southerners. Be that as it may, the reactions of Ballard's fellow townsfolk indicate that he is beyond the pale of his father, mother, grandfather, and anyone else for that matter. They discuss his family and some of the other disreputable characters in Sevier County's history, but as one Sevier County resident states, "You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddam if he didn't outstrip em all. That's the god's truth" (81).
If McCarthy is merely making the point that the South is a violent region, then his purpose for doing so remains unclear. I disagree with Roy Foster of the Times Literary Supplement, however. In his review of Child of God, he states that "while Mr. McCarthy excels in capturing what H. L. Mencken superbly called 'the simian gabble of the crossroads,' it raises no echoes outside Tennessee" (445). The only "excuse" McCarthy offers for Ballard indicates that he does indeed see Ballard as a figure who should "raise echoes outside of Tennessee." During a severe flood discussed in the last third of the novel, the reader observes Lester trying to move his stuffed animals and dead lovers to higher ground. He is nearly killed when trying to traverse a river that has swollen its banks, but, in one of the few philosophical passages found in Child of God, McCarthy muses:

He could not swim, but how would you drown him?
His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to work here. See him. You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. But they want this
man's life . . . How then is he borne up? Or rather why will not these waters take him? (156) McCarthy perceives Ballard as some sort of archetype of violence, an example of what Northrop Frye calls the *pharmakos* or scapegoat:

The pharmakos is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes . . . He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. (41)

Ballard is a less-innocent *pharmakos* than Hester Prynne, for example, but the theory McCarthy posits, indicating that Ballard's crimes in some way fulfill the needs of his community, places his guilt in a gray area. If Ballard exists because his community "wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it," then he is effectively God's scourge, and just how culpable, therefore, is he for the violent crimes which he commits?

In addition, McCarthy makes it abundantly clear that Ballard is himself a victim. His criminal activities begin after his property is taken away from him, leaving him without a home, and, as Louise Gossett notes, "The defeat, actual or threatened, of man by economic change is one of
the most productive sources of violence for Southern writers" (18). The violence begins as Ballard attempts to disrupt the auction which opens Child of God, but, at this point, he is a joke and certainly not a menacing figure. When he brandishes his shotgun to try to scare off the crowd, he gets knocked unconscious with the blunt side of an ax for his trouble. After this incident, the reader learns from a Sevier County resident that "Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that" (9), meaning literally that the blow of the ax puts a permanent crick in his neck, but the figurative meaning of the resident's statement is equally obvious. Ballard's home, his very existence, is stolen from him by the state; no wonder he cannot "hold his head right after that."

The once laughable figure impotently brandishing his shotgun does not remain a joke to his community for long. He is left to create a new home for himself, and he gains it through acts of increasing violence. As William J. Schafer notes in "Cormac McCarthy: The Hard Wages of Original Sin," "We see Ballard gradually reverting to a pre-human state, becoming an ignoble savage, as he loses his acculturated identity" (115). Ballard does not simply lose his "acculturated identity," though; it is forcefully wrested from him. In addition, Ballard may revert to a pre-human state as far as his thirst for violence is concerned, but
his actions are usually designed to help him acquire a pale, distorted version of the American Dream. He desires shelter, love, companionship, money, and possessions. Therefore, Ballard's motivation can be understood in normal human terms. During the course of Child of God, he makes repeated attempts to retrieve some sense of a home life, and though his actions may be mad, they are committed for reasons quite sane. In this light, Ballard is unquestionably a victim, a pharmakos, a creation of his environment. Vereen Bell, in the first book-length study of McCarthy, The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy, states, "Uninhibited by even the most basic taboo, Lester has passed into a state that is a parody of innocence, as his ramshackle squatter's house and his caves will become parodies of home" (61). Once the means for achieving the American Dream are lost, what else is there to create but a parody of its spoils?

Ironically, it is by chasing his own peculiar version of the American Dream that Ballard achieves a place of importance and some distinction in Sevier County, as Terri Witek and Vereen Bell have noted. In reference to the chapters interspersed throughout the first half of the novel, which are written like transcripts of interviews with Sevier County residents, Bell states:
Since it is clear that all of the stories told about Lester are being told at some point after the events of the novel have taken place, it is also clear that Lester has become a part of the mythology of his region and has thereby achieved, ironically, a place in the community that has eluded him otherwise. (54)

Witek notes that McCarthy "gives Lester a place in town myth, which re-imports him as a folk hero into the world from which he has been excluded" (59). The double irony, of course, is that Ballard is not "re-imported" into his community until after he is dead (or at least removed from his community and institutionalized) and not until after he commits several random acts of violence and takes countless numbers of innocent victims with him. He is famous, not as a man, but as a boogie man. Finally, as Mark Royden Winchell notes, if Ballard has indeed become a figure of popular urban myth for the men and women of Sevier County, then "we have to wonder what it is about that community that causes it to make such myths" (303).

**Sex in Child of God**

Divesting violence from sex in *Child of God* is not easy because of the nature of Ballard's crimes. Through Ballard, McCarthy explicitly pairs sex with violence and death. His
victims are both men and women, but men are only killed to remove "rivals" from Ballard's perverted mating rituals and to silence any witnesses. It must be noted, however, that Ballard is not the only character in *Child of God* who eschews traditional sexual unions. One of his few friends, the local dumpkeeper, has a house full of barefoot and pregnant daughters whom he has named from a discarded medical textbook:

> Urethra, Cerebella, Hernia Sue. They moved like cats and like cats in heat attracted surrounding swains to their midden until the old man used to go out at night and fire a shotgun at random just to clear the air. (26)

The "old man" has his own improper sexual union, belying Vereen Bell's assertion that

> the community of Sevier County, Lester's habitat, is presented in the novel as being all but pathologically placid. No distress is shown to evoke anxiety or to disturb the calm surface of tested structure and polite social amenity. (54)

If, in Sevier County, "polite social amenity" extends to raping one's own daughter, then the region is most certainly "pathological." The point is clearly made by McCarthy that Ballard is not a complete anomaly in his hometown. When the dumpkeeper surprises one of his daughters in the act of
copulating with one of the "old lanky country boys with long cocks and big feet" (Child 27) who frequent his homestead, he runs him off. Afterwards:

The old man began to beat the girl with the stick he carried. She grabbed it. He overbalanced. They sprawled together in the leaves. Hot fishy reek of her freshened loins. Her peach drawers hung from a bush. The air about him grew electric. (27)

The result is what some might consider stereotypically Southern. "His daughter's response," writes Anatole Broyard, "ought to go down in the annals of Southern history. 'Daddy quit,' she says" (283). McCarthy includes this father-daughter encounter in Child of God to alert the reader to the fact that Ballard is not the only figure in the book who surprises copulating couples in the woods. He is, ultimately, beyond the pale of the dumpkeeper, however. Whereas his friend the dumpkeeper merely sleeps with one of his daughters, Ballard is content only to sleep with women who are dead.

His first corpse is given to him like an early Christmas present. Ballard’s usual form of entertainment is to spy voyeuristically on couples who have back-seat sexual encounters at the Frog Mountain turnaround, and for the first half of the novel, he is content merely to observe
their actions, to be "a misplaced and loveless simian shape" (20) lurking beside rusty quarterpanels. One night, however, he finds something unusual: an asphyxiated couple in the back seat of a still-idling car. As the still-playing radio emits the ghoulishly ironic background music, "Gathering flowers for the master's bouquet. / Beautiful flowers that will never decay" (86), Ballard removes the boy from his lover and rolls him onto the floorboard. Then Ballard drops his pants and has his first sexual encounter: "a crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she did not hear him?" (88-89). Afterwards, he drags the woman's corpse to his "home," an abandoned cabin which he began inhabiting after being thrown off of his former homestead.

The episode in which Ballard loses his virginity opens Part Two, and it is at this point in Child of God that the novel's tone begins to change. Throughout Part One, one can easily sympathize with Lester Ballard and his pathetic life, but when Ballard begins to explore the "darker provinces of night" (Child 23) and his own budding sexuality, one's sympathies are not as easy to gauge. As Schafer writes:

He goes mad in his loneliness, and his sexuality is warped into voyeurism, rape, sadism, transvestism, and ultimately necrophilia. (115)
Necrophilia is the centerpoint of *Child of God*. Ballard’s needs grow darker, and very little time elapses before he stops letting fate hand him more bodies and begins murdering couples in order to gain more domestic partners.

This prospect is agreeable to Ballard because the accumulation of dead lovers is one of his few successful pursuits. It is an activity which allows him an opportunity to “hold his head right” again, and it is almost as though he is a genuine child of God, a *pharmakos* whose path is forged by unseen forces. If Ballard were more literate, he could proclaim with the righteous fury of Hamlet: “I do repent; but heaven hath pleas’d it so / To punish me with this, and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister” (3.4.173-175). If Ballard is, like Hamlet, an agent of God’s displeasure with the human race, then, like Hamlet, he gains very little for his acts of service. For what does Ballard procure but more loneliness, a few stuffed animals, a stockpile of decaying women, a shot-off arm, time in a mental institution, and, ultimately, dissection? Gary M. Ciuba suggests that what Ballard gains is perhaps a position as ruler of the dead and a secure place of his own beyond the pale of “normal” human existence. If he cannot garner success through typical means, then he can gain victory through more unique forms of intercourse. Ciuba states:
Ballard flouts the system of differences that culture constructs against divine rage by making mortality the very realm for carnality. His ghoulish intercourse with the dead is thus the conjunction of violence with violence. Having overseen its violent end, Ballard violates the body of the victim, which itself is undergoing the internalized violence of decay. Necrophilia is the only form of lovemaking left by sacred violence. What else can a destructive god love but a corpse? (80)

Consequently, even as Ballard's violent pursuit of the American Dream reinstates him in his community by making him something of a myth in Sevier County, it simultaneously offers him a nearly limitless, albeit lonely, kingdom in which he can experience success, power, and even love. Within his realm, Ballard is indeed a "destructive god." Nonetheless, he is later institutionalized and dissected, so his success is not only dubious, but fleeting as well.

McCarthy is not, of course, the first Southerner to discuss sexual perversion with such frankness; it is, in fact, a hallmark of Southern literature. Perhaps no other writer has gone quite so far as McCarthy has, however. As Don Williams suggests in an article for the Knoxville News-Sentinel, "McCarthy makes anything William Faulkner wrote
seem like a Sunday school picnic” (El). Lester Ballard is not altogether execrable. His actions are monstrous; his sexual deviance is horrifying, but he is not gratuitously horrifying. He commits his acts of violence to survive and to be, in his own way, successful, and he does it in the manner which, ultimately, works best for him. He seems to have no aptitudes save murder and necrophilia, but he is a master of these pursuits. As Schafer notes, “Ballard is a killing machine refined for preying on society” (115).

Perhaps this is why McCarthy includes an apparently irrelevant scene in Child of God concerning a blacksmith. The blacksmith is himself a master of his dying craft, and he gives Ballard a long lecture concerning the way to properly sharpen an ax. What he says as he finishes is, ironically, equally good advice for Ballard and his frenzied pursuits: “It’s like a lot of things . . . Do the least part of it wrong and ye’d just as well to do it all wrong” (74). As soon as Ballard does let his emotions get the best of him, he makes the misstep of trying--while wearing the clothes and hair of one of his victims and thus denying his own identity--to kill John Greer, the man who now owns his childhood home. By doing so, he violates the blacksmith’s code, and he is nearly killed. “The passion to return,” Bell writes, “is his undoing” (60). Ballard’s arm is shot off during this encounter, and he is captured. While in the
hospital, he is dragged out by a vigilante group who intends to lynch him after discovering where he has hidden all of his lovers. He craftily leads the group to his current home, an unmistakably vaginal cave replete with "walls with their softlooking convolutions, slavered over . . . with wet and bloodred mud" (135) and even "a row of dripping limestone teeth[!]" (133). The suggestion is that, by the novel's end, Ballard is attempting a return to the womb. Deep within the womb of the cave, Ballard eludes the mob and escapes. He is not caught until he turns himself in, soon after this incident. He dies in a mental hospital, but the reader is informed that Ballard is "never indicted for any crime" (193), thus rendering his guilt even more questionable.

Until he gives himself up, Ballard's murderous activities remain largely unchecked. The only time he is jailed is after he has been, ironically, accused of a rape he did not commit. While walking the environs of the infamous Frog Mountain turnaround, Ballard finds something besides young lovers in pickups and old Fords. He finds a woman in an alcoholic sleep who has obviously been the victim of sexual misconduct. Just to make conversation, or perhaps in a rare show of concern for another human being, Ballard asks her, "Ain't you cold?" (42). She responds by snarling at him like a wildcat and ultimately throwing a
rock at his chest. "I knowed you'd do me thisaway" (42), she tells him. Ballard responds by ripping off what remains of her garments, leaving the woman naked and shivering beside the road. His actions catch up with him this one time, however. When the aptly named Sheriff Fate arrives at Ballard's squatter's cabin to arrest him, Ballard responds to his summons by stating, "You got it all" (50), referring to the fact that he has already had his land and whatever dignity he may ever have possessed stripped away from him just as he stripped the garment off of the raped woman.

When Ballard is taken back to headquarters, he is confronted by the woman, who wishes to press charges, even though Ballard had not had any sexual contact with her. The myriad injustices he has encountered finally cause him to explode, and he goes after the woman's throat; she promptly knees him in the groin. Despite the violence Ballard exhibits, he is let go after spending only nine days in the Sevier County Jail because the woman ultimately fails to press charges. This, of course, turns out to be Fate's big mistake. During his incarceration, Ballard is sympathetic, even pitiful. He loses his freedom, is falsely accused of sexual misconduct, and is bullied by Fate, who gives Ballard a friendly push toward his subsequent path of murder and necrophilia by asking him, "What sort of meanness you got laid out for next" (56). As John Lang notes, during the "rape" scene
"McCarthy briefly shifts to the present tense . . . as if to recall the similar shift in the novel’s second paragraph. Both scenes portray Lester as a victim" (90). Often, one sides with those who are victims of the system, and McCarthy uses such ingrained sympathies to his advantage. They allow Ballard to remain humanly, and not inhumanly, monstrous, and, at least to some degree, to remain an object of sympathy.

Miraculously, McCarthy even makes Ballard appear a victim when he loses his first lover, the one he had found asphyxiated in a car along with her boyfriend. During the time that they are together, Ballard experiences something akin to married bliss. For a time, he is, in his own odd way, perfectly content. He goes into town and buys lingerie for his new "wife." He dresses her up and buys her presents and admires her, sometimes staring in at her from the outside of their cabin as though he just cannot get enough of voyeurism, even with his own lover. Or perhaps he just likes looking into his house and seeing someone waiting for him. She is "one measure of his desperate longing for intimacy" (Lang 91). Ballard is not the most courteous of lovers. Since he finds his first wife during the wintertime and stores her in the unheated attic of his cabin, she is not exactly limber when he tries to dress her in her new lingerie, and he yells in frustration, "Goddam frozen bitch"
Most of the time, however, Ballard displays an odd tenderness toward his wife, and their relationship is more authentic than those between countless couples in countless best sellers. Perhaps this is why Winchell speculates that "in a bizarre way, Child of God may well be the most human of [McCarthy's] first three novels" (300).

Ballard's state of bliss does not last long, however. When the child of God attempts to confront God the father directly, the results are less than auspicious for Ballard. The dead of winter becomes even deader, and the mercury drops below zero. Ballard builds a huge fire in his cabin, cramming "brush and pieces of stumpwood right up the chimney throat" (103). As this unholy fire blazes with a rattled intensity, Ballard screams at the night, "Now freeze, you son of a bitch" (103). The night indeed grows colder, but Ballard falls asleep in front of the fire. Providence once again saves him, however. "He woke in the night with some premonition of ill fate" (104). His premonition is correct. His massive fire is beginning to consume his cabin from top to bottom, and though he tries valiantly to save his wife, he is only able to save his stuffed animals. The next morning, Ballard pokes around the ruins of his squatter's cabin to no avail. "He found not so much as a bone," McCarthy states, "It was as if she'd never been" (107). Consequently, Ballard is again left alone after experiencing
the successful fruition of his American Dream. He thus begins in earnest to acquire a veritable harem of dead women, presumably so that he will never be alone again. As Bell notes, "Lester is most deadly once he has a vision of his life and imposes a form upon it and in so doing achieves a mirrored inversion of what communities are supposed to do and be" (55). After acquiring a taste of the good life, Ballard thirsts for more.

His first victim is an acquaintance, the daughter of Ballard's friend Ralph. McCarthy includes two scenes concerning Ballard, the daughter, and the daughter's son or brother (it is not clear which), a "hugehead bald and slobbering primate that inhabited the lower reaches of the house . . . perennially benastied and afflicted with a nameless crud" (77). Ballard apparently feels something of a kinship with this primate because, in the first of the two scenes, he brings him a "playpretty," a nearly-frozen robin. After giving the child/thing its toy, Ballard talks to the daughter, and at one point during their conversation, this ominous exchange takes place: "'I got somethin I'm a goin to bring you,' Ballard told her. 'You ain't got nothin I want,' she said. Ballard grinned" (77). During the next scene involving Ballard and Ralph's daughter, Ballard fulfills his prophecy. Another presentiment of what is to come occurs while Ballard is busy chatting up Ralph's
daughter. The idiot child, left alone with its playprettty,
has chewed its legs off. Ballard understands the child’s
action: “He wanted it to where it couldn’t run off” (79).
The primate has given the man described early in the novel
as “a misplaced and loveless simian shape” (20) a good idea,
but, as Vereen Bell notes, this may not be the first time
such an idea occurs to Ballard. Bell states:

The connection between this episode and Lester’s
necrophilia is plain enough, but the necrophilia
itself has a prior source in Lester’s unprotected
exposure to raw time and his conditioned belief
that what is living—his mother, his father, and
his home—is what is lost. In this novel, since
both Lester and the barely human idiot child share
that perception, it is represented as being
primal. (64)

A further explanation may simply be that Ballard and the
idiot child simply share with Gordon, the sculptor character
of William Faulkner’s Mosquitoes, a similar view of the
perfect lover. “’This is my feminine ideal,’ Gordon states,
’a virgin with no legs to leave me, no arms to hold me, no
head to talk to me’” (23).

The second scene involving Ballard, Ralph’s daughter,
and the idiot child, occurs after Ballard has lost his first
wife and second home in the unholy fire. An aura of sex and
danger permeates this scene from its very beginning. When the daughter opens the door on Ballard, “he [is] standing there already wearing his sickish smile, his lips dry and tight over his teeth” (115). The image suggested is that of a skull, of Ballard as the grim reaper. From this point on in *Child of God*, Ballard often dons the guise of judge; he frequently decides who is to live and who will die. Although he poses the perfunctory question regarding Ralph’s whereabouts, Ballard is not there to see his friend. He directs increasingly offensive remarks toward the daughter, first implying that the “bald and slobbering primate” is her child and then making an harassing remark about the opaque, loose-fitting pink slacks she is wearing. Perhaps what spurs Ballard to be able to commit murder (one of the few taboos he has left at his disposal) is this exchange: “I guess you too young to know when a man’s teasin ye. You ain’t even a man. You’re just a crazy thing. I might be more than you think, said Ballard” (117). Ballard, in the chapter directly preceding this one, runs into Greer, the man who bought his original homestead, and denies himself. “You’re Ballard ain’t ye,” Greer asks. “No, I ain’t him,” Ballard replies (114). This encounter with Greer which marks the nadir of Ballard’s downward socioeconomic spiral, coupled with Ralph’s daughter’s subsequent denial of his manhood, his very selfhood (“just a crazy thing”), forms a
powder keg which immediately explodes. Ballard is thrown out of Ralph's house, and, as John Lang puts it, immediately thereafter, "he manufactures a new corpse" (92). Actually, he manufactures two. Before departing the house with Ralph's daughter's corpse slung over his shoulder like some spoil of war, Ballard sets the house on fire with his "primal companion," the idiot child, inside. "It sat watching him," McCarthy states, "berryeyed filthy and frightless among the painted flames" (120). Ballard has broken the final taboo, and now he is free to reign as a "destructive god," burrowing underground into his Freudian caverns, judging who will live and who will die and, in addition, whose corpse will be violated in the process.

Interestingly, it is at this point in Child of God that McCarthy collapses his narrative. Ballard apparently begins a county-wide spree which leaves countless corpses, violated and otherwise, in his wake, but the reader does not gain information about these murders. Clues are given when the reader observes Ballard trying to sell the watches of his victims in a country store near his cave and, more ominously, when the reader follows Ballard back to his cave and views the subterranean "ledges of pallets of stone where dead people lay like saints" (135). The number of violated corpses Ballard keeps is apparently considerable, but McCarthy chooses not to go into particulars. The most
probable reason for the collapse of narrative events is that it keeps Ballard at least marginally sympathetic. Although the murder of Ralph's daughter and the idiot child is described vividly, he murders her to have new companionship after losing his first love in the fire that also claims his second cabin. This is not to say that Ballard's actions are "acceptable" or "nice," but at least they are somewhat understandable. All of the events in Child of God which lead up to Ballard's first murder seem designed to force him to commit it--God needs his backwoods scourge--but multiple, detailed scenes of violence and sexual perversion would render Ballard completely unsympathetic. Murdering one woman and keeping her as a lover after losing one is an odd and twisted sort of atonement, an Old Testament form of justice, but a steadily-climbing body count eventually exceeds "an eye for an eye" and becomes entirely reprehensible. McCarthy clearly does not want Ballard to become simply a gun-toting, backwoods stereotype; he wants Ballard to remain an object of compassion.

In addition to being an atonement, Ballard's actions appear justifiable in other ways. Winchell, for instance, notes a parallel between Ballard and writers who choose "undying love" as their subject, writers as diverse as Poe, Goethe, and Faulkner. Winchell writes:
No human sentiment is more understandable than the desire that passion should transcend death itself. Yet strictly speaking, this desire is profoundly "unnatural." Unchecked by a sense of reality, it can lead to morbid fixation and— at its most extreme— necrophilia. In fact, to some twisted minds, it may seem paradoxically necessary to kill the beloved in order to cheat death, or simple change, of its natural advantage. (301)

Winchell's observation rings true, and it places Ballard on the same stage as Poe's Roderick and Madeline Usher and Faulkner's Miss Emily Grierson, among others. These characters understand the "unnatural" to be perfectly natural. However, McCarthy comes perilously close to going too far with his descriptions of Ballard's mayhem. As Winchell notes, "For sheer lunacy [none] of these lovers of the dead can touch McCarthy's Lester Ballard" (301).

Part Three of Child of God depicts Ballard's downfall, and it is the section of the novel in which he finally comes closest to becoming simply a stock, two-dimensional, fairy tale villain. Sympathy for Ballard never completely ceases to exist, however, and McCarthy's ability to keep it in place for his murderous, necrophilic creation at times verges on the miraculous. One likely reason for this miracle is that McCarthy never explains Ballard's motives.
He simply presents Ballard's story and leaves the reader the arduous, confusing task of fitting all of the pieces of Ballard's short, violent life together. Ballard and his actions, then, are left at a safe distance. As Robert Coles states, "Lester Ballard destroys and is destroyed, but we have not a clue as to why. It is as if the author thinks his character is beyond scrutiny" (89). The result is that no matter how many lives he claims, Ballard is never without sympathy. As Brickner notes, "It seems to be true in fiction--and it may be in life--that there are characters so flattened by fate before they crawl into our view that they exist beneath the reach of tragedy" (6). Ballard certainly qualifies as one of these characters, and this is what keeps him from becoming a mere stereotype.

During the final murder to which the reader is an unwilling eye-witness, however, Ballard, for once, does not appear in his guise as a victim, and his actions cannot be viewed from a distance. In this scene, occurring near the beginning of section three of Child of God, Ballard kills a final set of victims in what is, most likely, a very long line of victims. Ballard, like the legendary figure of countless urban myths, finds yet another young couple who are apparently eager to line up to be easy marks. These kids never learn. One would imagine that they would stop having sex at this particular location of Frog Mountain, but
they never do. It is not clear what Ballard is wearing when he surprises the couple, but section two ends with the detail that he has taken to wearing not only his victims' underwear but to wearing their outerwear and makeup as well. Ballard is "a gothic doll in illfit clothes," McCarthy notes, "its carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape" (140). With one sentence, Ballard loses his sexual identity ("it") and adds androgyny to his list of perversions. Consequently, when he stops the couple in the middle of their activities and asks the boy for his driver's license, the boy's answer is comical, considering the circumstances. "You ain't the law" (149), the boy tells Ballard, who apparently is standing there with his rifle, wearing trousers but God only knows what else. On the other hand, Ballard is, indeed, the law. He is so far outside the boundaries of acceptable morality that he can stand on the outside of them and judge others by his standards with immunity. Ballard is the god of vengeance of his own private underworld.

Ballard, the "destructive god," gives a chilling retort to his impending victim: "I'll be the judge of that" (149). His judgment is typically swift and deadly. Within minutes the boy is shot through the neck as he tries to start his truck. The girl is led out beside the truck, and Ballard
forces her to turn away from him. In his simple but direct prose, McCarthy relates the action of the ensuing scene:

I have to go to the bathroom, the girl said.
You don’t need to worry about that, said Ballard.
Turning her by the shoulder he laid the muzzle of the rifle at the base of her skull and fired.
She dropped as if the bones in her body had been liquefied. Ballard tried to grasp her but she slumped into the mud. (151)

Before long, Ballard is “kissing the still warm mouth and feeling under her clothes” (151) until he stops because he discovers that she has indeed wet herself. After taking care of this problem, Ballard returns to the business of violating his new lover for the first time, but he has been careless. The boy is not dead, and as the truck rumbles to life and begins rolling down the mountain, Ballard screams after him, “You won’t get far, you dead son of a bitch” (152), but the boy escapes. The scene ends with Ballard toting home his latest prize, and McCarthy renders Ballard’s actions ambiguous by suggesting that, once again, Ballard is the victim, and the girl is the victimizer. “Scuttling down the mountain with the thing on his back,” McCarthy writes, “he looked like a man beset by some ghast succubus, the dead girl riding him with legs bowed akimbo like a monstrous frog” (153). A succubus is an evil spirit who returns from
the dead to have sex with the living. Thus, even after a scene in which Ballard is at his most reprehensible, his actions least comprehensible, he remains, as ever, the eternal victim.

Immediately following the scene between the dead son of a bitch and his dead girlfriend, Ballard encounters the flood which cannot kill him and then makes his second, and more fatal, careless mistake: he directs his anger and frustration toward Greer, the man who has taken his original homestead. This encounter gives Ballard one fewer arm and delivers him into the hands of the authorities. After escaping them by luring them to his cave, ostensibly to reveal the bodies of all of his lovers, he confounds his pursuers in a manner that would make Bre’r Rabbit proud. As the vigilante group stumbles around in the darkness of Ballard’s cave, he escapes to have the vision of the boy on the back of a church bus who stares out the rear window, even though there is nothing to see. McCarthy writes:

As he went by, he looked at Ballard and Ballard looked back. Then the bus rounded the curve and clattered from sight . . . He was trying to fix in his mind where he’d seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. This gave him the fidgets and though he tried to shake the
image of the face in the glass it would not go.

(191)

After receiving this vision of himself, Ballard walks back to the county hospital and simply states, “I’m supposed to be here” (192). He is committed to a mental institution in Knoxville and dies of pneumonia some years later. In a 1974 article on McCarthy for the University of Tennessee’s Tennessee Alumnus, Neal O’Steen sums up Ballard’s story:

Perhaps the overriding impression left by Child of God is one of darkness and hopelessness. The protagonist, Lester Ballard, loses his land, and there follows a disintegration of mind and spirit into something approaching total depravity, just as a child of God who loses his Father-anchor may drift toward total depravity. (15)

At least Ballard himself winds up on the receiving end of Old Testament justice as the novel ends. After he dies, his body is donated to the University of Tennessee Medical School, where he is carved up by medical students, and “[t]here is a certain poetic justice in the expeditor of corpses becoming an exploited corpse” (Winchell 305).
Humor in *Child of God*

Although *Child of God* is indeed a novel which leaves the reader with an "overriding impression of darkness and hopelessness," it is not without comedic touches. In fact, if *Child of God* leaves its readers with anything besides a sense of hopelessness, it leaves them amazed that McCarthy could have made the story of such a pathetic, violent, disgusting, and vile creature as Lester Ballard so funny so often. Different approaches to humor are used in *Child of God*, everything from farce to satire, and their ultimate purpose in the novel is as ambiguous as is McCarthy's use of violence and sex. Most critics noted *Child of God*'s humor in their reviews of the work. In her review for *The New Republic*, Doris Grumbach links McCarthy's humor with the inevitable Faulkner comparison: "Again like a child of Faulkner, McCarthy is capable of black, reasonable comedy at the heart of his tragedy" (27). In *Commonweal*, Robert Leiter notes that "Lester's extravagant violence unleashes McCarthy's dark humor" (92). The anonymous reviewer in *The Atlantic Monthly* was quick to point out that *Child of God*'s humor is always deliberate, and, like Leiter, she also links it with Ballard's violent impulses. "[H]e composes a scene," the reviewer states, "in which it is possible to
place horror without being gratuitously grotesque or--a worse possibility--inadvertently comic" (128).

The comic tradition in Southern literature is one of its hallmarks, stretching at least from George Washington Harris' Sut Lovingood tales to the writers of the Southern Renaissance. As Louise Gossett notes in reference to Faulkner, "Although violence and grotesqueness in Faulkner's work are generally related to the dark side of man, these elements also appear when Faulkner is being humorous" (43). But McCarthy does not even go as far as Faulkner. He does not differentiate between humor and "the dark side of man"; for McCarthy, there is apparently no strict demarcation between the two. One gets the impression that McCarthy includes humor in his works, not because it is a hallmark of Southern literature, but because he uses it to face the darkness found in his own life. Although it is rare to find any comments from McCarthy in the articles written about him, and it is even rarer for him to be caught pontificating on the nature of writing, his reply to a anonymous reporter for the Knoxville News Sentinel who had the nerve to ask him about his craft demonstrates his sense of humor. "'I don't know why I started writing,' McCarthy snaps, 'I don't know why anybody does it. Maybe they're bored, or failures at something else. Look at Spiro Agnew. He's now a novelist" (G7). Although it is not particularly enlightening,
McCarthy's comment about Nixon's conniving vice president represents a topical pairing of humor and "the dark side of man."

*Child of God,* then, is replete with humorous scenes, descriptions, and lines of dialogue. Some of the humor of the first section of the novel comes from the Sevier County townsfolk who reminisce about the man who has become a mythical figure to them. The humor resulting from many of the stories is found simply in the manner in which they are told, a manner drifting effortlessly between the simple diction of tall tales and the elevated diction of wit. As Terri Witek notes:

>Cormac McCarthy moves effortlessly from the laconic dialogue of hill characters and street people, and from clean-edged, understated narration, to descriptive sections so dense with learned vocabulary and refined linguistic effects that the people who come so vividly to life in the former would quite patently not understand the latter. (58-59)

The tension between levels of discourse, then, figures prominently into *Child of God.* For instance, when the Sevier County citizen who cuts Ballard's father down from the Ballard family barn discusses the scene, he asserts: "I wisht if a man wanted to hang hissel he'd do it with poison
or somethin so folks wouldn’t have to see such a thing as that” (21). This man misses the subtle gradation between “hanging oneself” and other methods of suicide; for him, they are one and the same. Another, more direct example, of tension formed by discrepancies between “laconic hill characters” and McCarthy’s use of elevated diction can be found, not in one of the anonymous soliloquies of Ballard’s compatriots, but in the first scene involving Ballard and his incestuous friend, the dumpkeeper. The dumpkeeper, not knowing or not caring what the words mean, “spawned nine daughters and named them out of an old medical dictionary gleaned from the rubbish he picked” (26). The result is a brood of “gangling progeny” (26) bearing names such as “Urethra, Cerebella, [and] Hernia Sue” (26).

Besides discrepancies in language, another way in which the “interviews” with Sevier County residents are often humorous is in their subjects’ inability to stick to the topic at hand. They become, in effect, like the tall tales of George Washington Harris or Samuel Clemens. One man begins by discussing Ballard’s craziness before launching into a story about a man named Gresham who sings the “chickenshit blues” at his wife’s funeral. Another man wins the prize for the most redundant testimony because, although he begins by discussing Ballard’s ability with a rifle, he immediately uses this tale as the springboard for a long
story concerning a deceitful employee with a traveling fair who would challenge others to a live-pigeon-shooting contest. The challenger won every time. The man recalls:

They was a bunch of us hotshot birdhunters lost our money out there fore we got it figured out. What he was doin, this boy was loadin the old pigeons up the ass with them little firecrackers. They'd take off like they was home free and get up about so high and blam, it'd blow their asses out . . . They like to tarred and feathered him over it. (58)

The storyteller is not through, however; the long story of one carnival reminds him of an even longer one concerning another. The gimmick of the second was a gorilla who had been trained to box. The man discusses how his friends and his girl pushed and prodded him so much that he finally decided to strap on the gloves; after all, if he bested the gorilla, he could earn fifty dollars. At first, the gorilla did nothing but look at him. He hit the gorilla, still getting no reaction, and the man began mentally counting his money. However, the second time was a charm: “I ducked around to hit him again and about that time he jumped right on top of my head and crammed his foot in my mouth and like to tore my jaw off. I couldn’t even holler for help. I thought they never would get that thing off of me” (60). Of
course, there are parallels between a gorilla who is docile until provoked and Ballard who would likely have remained harmless himself if not provoked, but the man relating his yarns does not know this.

The Sevier County citizens are not the main source of humor in Child of God, however; that honor belongs to the novel’s protagonist, Lester Ballard. There is always something faintly amusing about Ballard, even after he has begun to slaughter innocent people and have sex with his female victim’s dead bodies. I disagree with John Distky’s assertion that “for the most part, the humor [of Child of God] is of a black sort, designed to chill and repel” (7). Although the humor is black, I do not feel that McCarthy intends it to chill and repel. Occasionally this is true, but, for the most part, McCarthy simply wants to prove, as other writers have, that no subject is impervious to comedy.

Ballard is a joke as his story opens. If the auctioning of his home is, indeed, a carnival, as McCarthy suggests, then Ballard is unmistakably its clown. When he is introduced, Ballard is standing in his barn near the rope his father had used to hang himself, and McCarthy uses his elevated diction for humorous purposes again. Rather than simply stating that Ballard has just relieved himself, McCarthy notes that “the man stands straddlelegged, has made in the dark humus a darker pool wherein swirls a pale foam
with bits of straw” (4). Part of McCarthy’s purpose with this scene may be to introduce Ballard as a figure of the carnivalesque, since, as Bakhtin notes, “in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare. This positive element was still fully alive and clearly realized in the time of Rabelais” (148). It is also clearly realized in the work of Cormac McCarthy. Connecting urine with death (his father’s death rope) and loss (the dispossession of Ballard’s house) has a very important purpose, according to Bakhtin. He states:

In the sphere of imagery, cosmic fear (as any other fear) is defeated by laughter. Therefore dung and urine, as comic matter that can be interpreted bodily, play an important part in these images. They appear in hyperbolic quantities and cosmic dimensions. (336)

By using such elevated diction to describe Ballard’s act of urination, McCarthy is injecting *Child of God* with such hyperbolic quantities. The result is that “[c]osmic catastrophe represented by the material bodily lower stratum is degraded, humanized, and transformed into grotesque monsters. Terror is conquered by laughter” (336). Ballard, whose actions are so associated with the material bodily
lower stratum, is certainly a grotesque figure as well as a clown.

As Ballard tries in vain to keep his house from being sold, he brandishes his rifle to no avail. By the novel’s end, of course, Ballard with his rifle is most definitely not a sight to elicit laughter. The parallel between an “impotent” rifle versus one that shoots often and another element of Bakhtin’s material bodily lower stratum is too obvious to be discussed in detail, but it does add an occasional element of farce. Ballard gets to a point where he almost never lets go of it. He keeps it with him at all times, like some totemic object, and he comes to think of his rifle as being a living entity. Winchell has noted that Ballard and his rifle represent a satire of the frontier hero in the Davy Crockett mode. As Winchell notes, Ballard and his rifle are “a modern-day parody of the frontier [in which] it is only a matter of time before Lester’s firepower and cunning are turned against his fellow man. And even then, his prey are not real live enemies so much as human trophies” (303). These trophies allow Ballard to retrieve some of the security he has lost through the usurpation of his family home; consequently, his rifle becomes extremely important to him. On a few occasions he has to leave it behind so that, for instance, he can sell some of his victims’ watches to some men in a convenience store without
arousing suspicion. During this particular economic venture, Ballard leaves his rifle under a bridge. When he returns to the bridge, eight dollars the richer, he has a moment of panic as he sees tracks that are not his own near the ones he has left. He reaches up to the beam where he left the rifle, and there for a moment he flailed wildly, his hand scrabbling along the concrete, his eye to the river and the tracks there which already he was trailing to the end of his life. Then his hand closed upon the stock of the rifle. He fetched it down, cursing, his heart hammering. You’d try it, wouldn’t ye?” (132)

The curious detail of the tracks “trailing to the end of his life” implies that Ballard suspects the existence of a double, an even darker version of himself, perhaps, which is personified by his rifle. For a moment, one suspects that Ballard believes that his rifle has grown legs of its own and walked off, unlike the robin he had earlier given to the idiot child. This is one of the few instances in which McCarthy’s humor does seem designed to, in the words of John Ditsky, “chill and repel.”

One other aspect of humor in Child of God is that it is often directly linked with irony. Irony is often found lurking behind laughter, and it makes for some of the most
humorous scenes in the novel. One scene which contains multiple levels of irony has Ballard going into Sevierville to buy clothes and personal effects for his first wife, the woman found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning. First, he asks the sales clerk how much a dress in the window costs, and then he is asked what size his lover needs. Ballard considers, and the reader is told, "He rubbed his jaw. He'd never seen the girl standing up" (97). Irony is also present because the reader's knowledge of Ballard's wife's condition is significantly more informed than the sales clerk's. One wonders whether the bored salesgirl would be so complacent with her customer if she knew the true nature of his relationship. In addition, Ballard's shamefaced request for panties is ironic. This is a man who thinks nothing of having sex with a dead woman, but he cannot ask a live one to get him some women's undergarments without blushing. Of course, this may be one of the main reasons that he prefers the dead to the living—they don't ask or answer embarrassing questions.
Cormac McCarthy’s fourth novel, Suttree, was probably written well before Child of God, his third. Though published in 1979 and not released as a Vintage Contemporaries paperback until 1986, it is very likely the first book McCarthy began. As Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce note, McCarthy had worked on Suttree for at least twenty years before it was finally published (8). In addition, Mark Royden Winchell states:

Both thematically and technically, Suttree makes a good deal more sense if we see it as an earlier rather than a later product of McCarthy’s muse. There is much of the apprentice novel about it and very little that resembles either Child of God or the more recent Blood Meridian. (305)

Perhaps this is true, “thematically and technically,” but in its use of the thematic elements of violence, sex, and humor, Suttree does bear more than a passing resemblance to Child of God. However, whereas Child of God puts the most emphasis on the second element, often explicitly linking sex
with death and violence, Suttree places more on the first, explicitly connecting violence with death. It is a very violent society in which Cornelius Suttree chooses to live, but it is also full of rough-hewn beauty and moments of grace; it is a world in which life must, in Thoreau’s terms, be lived deliberately.

Suttree is an important work in McCarthy’s canon because it is his first to use an intelligent, literate, college-educated protagonist, and this can seem to add greatly to the reader’s understanding of psychological insights into Suttree’s character. However, the depth of Suttree’s character only makes him more human, more like “one of us,” than Lester. Ultimately, for all of Suttree’s insights, complaints, lamentations, and psychological musing, his motivations are little clearer than Ballard’s. Perhaps the most obvious question raised by the novel is, why does Suttree choose to leave all of his education and middle-class upbringing behind to live in a dilapidated houseboat next to one of Knoxville Tennessee’s worst urban slums? No answers are given, and, as with Ballard, one ultimately has to guess at Suttree’s motivations and McCarthy’s purpose in placing his protagonist in such a hostile environment. One is ultimately led to believe that Suttree is trying to confront life directly, or, even more
likely, death. He must continually grapple with the latter while simply trying to survive the former.

**Violence in Suttree**

Critics noted McCarthy’s (and Suttree’s) obsession with death and violence in *Suttree*. Edward Rothstein of the *Washington Post* states that “it is a homologue of hell itself, a realm of the dead and dying” (B2) and later notes that “Suttree’s adventures, then, are weighted with significance. He moves in a world so violent it nearly becomes a parody of our darkest ends” (B2). The anonymous reviewer for *Publisher’s Weekly* declares that *Suttree* tells the story of some years in the life of its eponymous hero, a man who, having left his well-connected family and deserted his wife, turns river fisherman and consorts with a gaggle of robbers, ragmen, whores and other outcasts, all walking a razor-sharp line between survival and sordid death. (54)

In the *Sewanee Review*, Walter Sullivan eloquently states that “within the ordinary world where most of us parse out our days—Knoxville, Tennessee, in the case of Suttree—McCarthy builds another twilight kingdom, a land of evil and viciousness and dark motivations, an outpost of rebellion both mundane and spiritual against the status quo” (342).
Finally, Jerome Charyn notes the connection between Suttree and another hero of American fiction who encountered miscreants and danger during his life on the river. Cormac McCarthy, he states, "gives us a sense of river life that reads like a doomed 'Huckleberry Finn'" (7:14).

Suttree is not doomed, although the novel bearing his name often implies that it will likely end with his death. After a near-death bout with typhoid, he returns to his nearly-sunken houseboat, only to find a dead body (the last of a great many found in the novel) which some have apparently mistaken for Suttree himself. The kids who help push the mud-stuck ambulance sent to collect the anonymous body deny knowledge of who has lived in the houseboat. As the ambulance pulls away, "the boys watched them go. Shit, one said. Old Suttree aint dead" (470). Instead he, like Huck, has left Knoxville, heading for parts unknown. In contrast to Ballard, who turns himself in during a rare moment of clarity with the appropriate statement: "I'm supposed to be here" (192), Suttree makes the opposite realization about Knoxville. One gets the sense, as Suttree hitchhikes away, that he has escaped certain death and learned finally to appreciate being given the opportunity to escape it. Suttree has the last of several visions as he leaves Knoxville behind, one which conjures up both Armageddon and its evasion:
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. (471)

Suttree is one of the lucky ones; he does indeed "fly them," but many others in the novel are not so lucky. It is unlikely that a Catholic from birth like McCarthy would be able to ignore completely the Church's assertion that suicide is an unpardonable sin punished by an eternity in hell. Perhaps this is why Anatole Broyard succinctly states, "In this novel, hell is local color" (19). To some extent, nearly all deaths in Suttree are self-inflicted; it is a novel awash in self-inflicted violence. The first action of the novel, following its atmospheric italicized preface and atmospheric opening paragraphs, concerns the retrieval of one of these nameless, self-doomed individuals:

Hey Joe, [Suttree] said. Did you see it?
No. They say he jumped last night. They found his shoes on the bridge.
They stood looking at the dead man . . . The crowd had come to press about like mourners and the fisherman and his friend found themselves going
past the dead man as if they’d pay respects.

Suttree experiences an odd feeling when he notes that the suicide’s watch is still running. He is probably affected by the realization that human beings have created many devices which can outlive them—devices which, in essence, do not need them for any reason. Or perhaps he calls to mind the idea of a “watchmaker God” who created the world only to leave the running of it to human beings, often with less than auspicious results. Before they leave the scene, Joe tells Suttree, “That’s a bad way to check out” (10). Self-inflicted violence and death are so omnipresent in Suttree that they do seem more like “checking out” of a motel than like events of any real importance. When his near-fatal illness manifests itself, Suttree echoes Joe and tells his friend J-Bone, “Dear friend, it’s checkout time” (450). Suttree is one of the few escapees from McAnally Flats, the slimy, low-rent district of Knoxville, and the awesome body count of Suttree cannot help but affect the reader, as Broyard notes:

Yes, there are a lot of dead people in “Suttree,” but then people do die, especially poor and stubborn and violent ones. And Southerners, including Southern writers, don’t believe in abandoning their dead. If you read Mr. McCarthy’s
book, you won’t escape his dead either. They will haunt you, which is what they are supposed to do.

(19)

They haunt the reader, in part, because they arrive in so many different ways. Various characters are shot, buried under an avalanche of rock, beaten to death, and, like Lester’s women, left to rot. There is no doubt that the underworld inhabited by Suttree and his friends is a violent, deadly place in which death is an omnipresent possibility. Suttree himself lives under a self-imposed spell of impending doom until he chooses life by leaving Knoxville behind. “[W]hile not consciously willing or able to kill himself,” Frank W. Shelton writes in “Suttree and Suicide,” “certainly he subconsciously seeks death by immersing himself in the destructive element, in a city where death is ever present” (76). As with Lester Ballard, one is never clear just what exactly it is that attracts Suttree to violence; though unlike Ballard, he remains a passive participant in the carnage which surrounds him. The only straightforward clue the reader is given is a piece of a letter sent from Suttree’s father to his son. “If it is life that you feel you are missing,” the elder Suttree writes, “I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of
the helpless and the impotent" (14). But Suttree disagrees, believing that "[f]rom all old seamy throats of elders, musty books, I've salvaged not a word" (14). The implication is that his father is incorrect. There may be nothing important occurring on the streets of Knoxville on a macrocosmic level, but on the level of immediate and palpable experience, Suttree cannot have a better arena in which to encounter the violence and ugliness which is so much a part of life, even, one would imagine, a part of the life of the selfsame lawyers, businessmen, and politicians about whom his father is so adulatory. At least the denizens of Knoxville are honest about their violent, ugly impulses.

If violence is Suttree's objective correlative, then McCarthy is typically silent about its ultimate meaning. Suttree's attitude toward his father would have one believe that he feels that a life spent in a "useful" occupation or in "polite" society is effectively death and that the kind of life Suttree and his friends choose to live is inherently more heroic and, oddly enough, life-affirming. As Bell notes:

Reese and a small cluster of Suttree's other friends--Billy Ray Callahan, Ab Jones, Gene Harrogate--considered together form an odd little band of ragtag existential heroes, each defining
life in his own exclusive terms and each finding his own symbolic leverage against necessity. (81)

However, in considering these “ragtag existential heroes,” one must decide whether their ends justify their means.

Reese is the head of a large family who chases get-rich schemes along the Tennessee River; he is the “Duke and Dauphin” of Suttree. He loses his eldest daughter—and, not-so-coincidentally, Suttree’s lover—Wanda, to a rock slide. Until this happens, Reese remains a comic figure, but when he pulls his daughter from the rocks, the scene is anything but amusing:

He seemed to be making for the river with her but in the loose sand he lost his footing and they fell and he knelt there in the rain over her and held his two fists at his breast and cried to the darkness over them all. Oh God I caint take no more. Please lift this burden from me for I caint bear it. (362)

Billy Ray Callahan is shot in the face by a bartender and dies a slow, agonizing death. Ab Jones is a black man who owns a successful floating tavern near Suttree’s houseboat. He is continually being harassed by the police because, in his words, “they dont want no nigger walkin around like a man” (203). He is later beaten to death by them after Suttree finds him badly beaten in a back alley of downtown
Knoxville and tries to walk him home. McCarthy’s
description of this beating echoes the language of Suttree’s
father’s letter. “Jones came to bay,” McCarthy writes,
“with his back to a brick wall, standing widefooted and
gasping while the officers approached. A bloody dumbshow
and no word spoken” (442). The language also brings to mind
the “slaverous and wild” hounds of the huntsman which
Suttree “flies” at the end of the novel. Ab is not so
fortunate.

Gene Harrogate, like Reese, remains a comic foil to
Suttree until he is also removed from the novel at the hands
of the police. The last the reader sees of him, he has been
arrested for a botched armed robbery and is in a train bound
for Brushy Mountain State Prison, his face so pale and
ghostly that he seems to disappear before the reader’s eye.
The police figure into both Child of God and Suttree, and
they do not fare well in either novel. At least those who
brutalize the denizens of McAnally Flats have a more
successful arrest rate. Fate, the “high sherrif” of Sevier
County seems powerless to bring Ballard to justice.
Suttree, as Child of God, is to some degree concerned with a
battle between authority and personal choice.

Consequently, those who defy authority in Suttree may
appear heroic, but theirs are Pyrrhic victories at best
which often end in violence and death, or at the very least, in the loss of personal freedom. As Butterworth notes:

However much they try to carve out a life, they are always already doomed, in McCarthy’s world, never to be able to rise above the materiality of their circumstances. However heroic their cruelties and violations, they are usually inert and passive objects with little or no control.

(96)

The same is, of course, true of Lester Ballard, but there is rarely anything heroic about his actions. Consequently, Suttree contains conflicting messages. On the one hand, the novel appears to side with the residents of McAnally Flats, but on the other, these residents never prevail, and they rarely even endure. Is McCarthy stating then that Suttree’s father is correct? Is the kind of life lived by his son and his friends worthwhile? Suttree himself, by the novel’s end, seems to decide that it is not; he leaves Knoxville and has undergone an important psychic change. Besides learning that “there is one Suttree and one Suttree only” (461), as he states to a priest after his bout with typhoid, he has figured out that God “is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving” (461). This is a cryptic statement, but it calls to mind the still-ticking watch on the suicide’s wrist—an idea strengthened by the way that Suttree introduces this
metaphysical notion. The priest who visits him in the hospital tells Suttree that God must have been looking over him. Suttree replies, "You would not believe what watches" (461). The watch metaphor implies that Suttree's conception of God is similar to that of the eighteenth-century Deists. There is a God who set everything in motion, but he probably cares very little for specifics. Unlike the existentialists, however, there is no indication that Suttree (or McCarthy, for that matter) believes that God is dead. As Suttree's friend and mentor the ragpicker puts it, "I ain't no infidel. Don't pay no mind to what they say . . . I always figured they was a God . . . I just never did like him" (147). God certainly does not seem to give much consideration to the citizens of McAnally Flats. As the ragpicker later notes, "I got no reason to think that [God] believes in me" (258). Whatever form his God ultimately takes, Suttree's understanding has broadened considerably on his own. He has learned a great deal from the carnage and mortality with which he has surrounded himself during the five years covered in the novel, and, therefore, I strongly disagree with John W. Aldridge's assertion in a recent article that Suttree "takes on considerable physical weight but does not grow in profundity. Part of the reason is that Suttree himself does not enlarge his understanding of his experience" (93).
Aldridge's assertion is understandable, however, since McCarthy, once again, chooses in Suttree as he does in Child of God to leave his characters' motivations to his characters. He does not attempt to explain their violent and short lives, nor does he attempt to explain where his sympathies conclusively lie. Suttree's father's world is one of dead souls, but Suttree's is full of a biblical number of dead bodies. The messages conflict with one another. As Robert Coles writes about the lack of conclusiveness in Child of God, "The author is not indifferent to our curiosity; he simply cannot, for reasons of his own as a novelist, oblige us" (88). Considering the almost certain autobiographical element of Suttree, and knowing that McCarthy, like his protagonist, chose to live in relative squalor in Knoxville, despite being a member of an upper-middle class family, does give one some potential clues. However, as Arnold and Luce note, "While the story is based in experience--the characters, events, and places often identifiable by local Knoxvilians--the extent of its autobiographical nature is difficult to determine" (8). From what can be ascertained about McCarthy's life, one senses that he shares with Suttree and Lester Ballard an interest in exploring extremes. Consequently, his life has been lived about as haphazardly as theirs, and if this is true, then it goes a long way toward explaining why
McCarthy's novels pose so many unanswered questions. In a short interview with Mark Morrow for the book *Images of the Southern Writer*, McCarthy gives a wry comment concerning the apparent aimlessness of his—and his characters'—character. Standing behind a window of the abandoned L & N Railroad station in Knoxville, he states, "This is the window where you get a ticket with the destination left blank" (52).

Explanations of Suttrees's motivations, therefore, are not forthcoming from McCarthy's life. The often inexplicable nature of his literary universe must be detected by inference. The violence and destruction so omnipresent in *Suttree* (and *Child of God* and, for that matter, the other works of his canon) are certainly not without precedent in Southern literature. As Don Williams notes, "Suttree is one of those figures you find throughout Southern literature—a young man who has lost faith in family, tradition, old-time religion, he wanders an aimless, decaying terrain" (El). The wayward and often violent path of Suttree calls to mind such figures as Twain's Huck Finn, Faulkner's Joe Christmas, and O'Connor's Hazel Motes, among others.

Critics have also focused on parallels between *Suttree* and other genres in an attempt to explain Suttree's violent environment. Louis H. Palmer notes its links with the traditional Gothic. He states:
The Gothic elements in the story are profuse. There are many deaths, even though Suttree is allowed to escape. There is a decaying mansion, Suttree's childhood home, but his castle is the houseboat . . . The doppelganger theme recurs again and again, from Suttree's vision of his dead twin. (172-173)

Shelton suggests that Suttree's doppelganger is the main cause of his attraction to violence and death because "with the awareness of his dead twin, he is born with the knowledge of death in his bones . . . there are times when he feels completion can only be attained through the death he desires and fears, through union with his twin, his other half" (75). Indeed, McCarthy observes Suttree's "subtle obsession with uniqueness" and how it "trouble[s] all his dreams" (113). Dorothy Wickenden, in her review of Suttree for the New Republic, also notes its connection with the traditional Gothic:

Suttree is a neo-gothic novel, appalling in its insistent concentration on the grotesque, in its frank portrayal of the unspeakable. Like its 18th-century predecessors, Suttree exposes a fragmented existence in which old beliefs and social structures are no longer secure. (46)
Of course, this lack of secure social structure is also applicable to other genres, such as fiction of the absurd and existential literature. In “Absurd Reasoning in an Existential World: A Consideration of Cormac McCarthy’s Suttree,” William Prather points out that Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* outlines the five elements which jostle one awake to the absurdity of existence. He notes:

Briefly, the five instigative elements identified by Camus are as follows: the passage of time, the horror of death, the hostility of nature, the inhumanness of other human beings, and a sense of weariness with the mechanical aspects of daily life. (104)

Certainly all five of these elements are strongly represented in *Suttree*, from the suicide’s mechanical timepiece, to Wanda’s death under tons of shale. Still another theory is that *Suttree* should be read as a naturalistic novel since “McCarthy’s people more often resemble the Darwinian creatures who inhabited the naturalistic novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Winchell 295).
Sex in Suttree

For the most part, Suttree, unlike Ballard, inhabits a world of "men without women." Hemingway meant the title for his second full-sized collection of stories to be "an indication that 'the softening feminine influence' was missing in all the stories, whether as a result of 'training, discipline, death, or other causes'" (Baker 182). Ballard and Suttree lack the stoicism and discipline of many of Hemingway's heroes, however. Child of God is full of women, but most of them are dead or about to die at Ballard's hands. Sexuality in that novel is so interconnected with violence that divesting them from one another is all but impossible. The reader can only guess that Ballard desires this "softening feminine influence"—he does, after all, begin dressing in his victims' clothes—but that, at the same time, he is repelled by it. Suttree is much the same. At various times of his life, he has desired and obviously does desire the company of women. Suttree has divorced his first wife before the novel begins, and he has two relationships in the novel; the first is with Wanda, Reese's ill-fated daughter, and the second is with a hooker named Joyce.

The relationship with Wanda is purely sexual. She is sixteen and attractive, and Suttree obviously intends their relationship to be merely a "fling." As noted, she dies in
a particularly horrible way, buried under an avalanche of rain-loosened rock. Her death seems particularly sinister in its timely occurrence; she is killed at roughly the time Suttree has decided that he is through with her. Wanda’s family had obviously begun to sense that their daughter and Suttree were becoming a couple. Reese, for instance, asks him, “I believe that gal’s a better cook than her mother . . . What do you think” (354). Suttree says nothing, prompting Reese to follow up with the statement, “That little old gal is special to me . . . She’ll just do a man’s work” (354). The point is not lost on Suttree; a few nights later, he tells Wanda, “We’ve got to stop this” (355). After one last dalliance under a gentle rainfall, Suttree ends their relationship. It is less than a week before she is killed in the landslide. This is one of the few instances in which Suttree, like Child of God, explicitly links sex with death. In his dissertation, “The Extremities of Cormac McCarthy: The Major Character Types,” William Christopher Spencer states:

Somehow in [McCarthy’s] vision, women, sexuality, and death become confused together, perhaps helping to explain Suttree’s trouble with women: his estrangement from his wife; his wariness of a permanent relationship with, at one extreme, the
innocent Wanda; his doomed affair, at the other extreme, with the bisexual prostitute Joyce, which is based wholly on sex and money. Because the medusa is both partly woman and deadly to men, it symbolizes the linking between Suttree’s obsessive fear of death and his inability to sustain a healthy sexual relationship. (143)

Consequently, although Suttree does not go to Ballard’s extremes, he is moved by many of the same desires which link sex with death and violence.

Suttree’s relationship with Joyce is more traditional than his relationship with Wanda (and certainly, more traditional than any of Ballard’s), but it does not offer the solace and completeness that it appears to promise as it begins. When they meet, they forge an immediate connection, as with one ne’er do well to another. Suttree follows Joyce and her fellow-hustler Margie into May’s café. He discovers them “appraising” him, and Joyce asks him what there is to do in Knoxville:

Not much, he said. Where you all from?
Chicago.
How long you been here?
Off and on for a couple of months.
Off and on is right, sweetie, said the older one.
The other one smiled at Suttree. We’re hustlers, she said. But we won’t hustle you.
Suttree liked her. (386)

They begin a relationship of several months which seems designed for someone like Suttree. Joyce hustles in and around the East Tennessee area. Although he does not serve as her pimp, she gives a substantial amount of her take to Suttree, and when she’s in town, they go out and enjoy one another’s company, or they stay in and enjoy one another. He seems to have met his match. "Joyce is, in short," notes Thomas D. Young, Jr., "the only other character in the novel who approaches equal footing with Suttree both intellectually and verbally" (88). Finally, however, even this arrangement becomes untenable to Suttree. He and Joyce get a place together, and Joyce begins to put on weight, to douche endlessly, to wear bright metal haircurlers that make her look "like the subject of bizarre experiments on the human brain" (404). Suttree does little but sit around their apartment "like a fugitive" (404). Although it ends explosively some time later, Suttree knows, one morning as he looks at himself in the mirror, that he can take no more. McCarthy writes:

He surveyed the face in the mirror, letting the jaw go slack, eyes vacant. How would he look in
death? For there were days this man so wanted for some end to things that he'd have taken up his membership among the dead. (405)

Once again, though more subtly, sex is linked with death, and Suttree decides to leave Joyce behind. As Spencer notes:

McCarthy dispenses with the women perhaps partly for dramatic reasons since a man with a doting lover at his side may seem less than heroic. But another reason for the separation is that McCarthy, himself twice divorced, seems to indicate that loving women are a comfort that can seduce men away from the life of struggle which is their proper calling. (175)

Loving women do not offer Suttree any of the answers he is looking for. He tires of them because they do not offer him the solace and completeness that he seeks; it takes the near-death experience with typhoid to cause Suttree to accept that he is complete within himself. Before this experience, however, he turns from relationships and fishing and the violence of his daily existence to seek answers in magic--voodoo, to be precise, and the result is a scene of sexual perversion that manages to rival any found in Child of God. However, whereas in Child of God, Ballard does all of the violating, in Suttree, Suttree is himself violated by
dark forces. "[I]n perhaps the most outlandish scene in the novel," Dorothy Wickenden writes, "the city's resident witch lures Suttree into her wretched lair and proceeds to drug and rape him" (46). McCarthy consciously recalls an episode from *Child of God* in giving the reader the details of this rape. At one point, one of Ballard's victims is ironically described as a "ghast succubus"—ironic because a succubus is an attacking female spirit—and in the case of Ballard, it is he who has done the attacking. The epithet is more appropriate in Suttree's case, however. Suttree is given a strange potion which makes him feel sick and puts him into a state of dreamlike consciousness. As a feeling of helplessness overtakes him, he sees the witch moving toward him:

Dead reek of aged female flesh, a stale aridity. Dry wattled nether lips hung from out the side of her torn stained drawers. Her thighs spread with a sound of rending ligaments, dry bones dragging in their sockets. Her shriveled cunt puckered open like a mouth gawping. He flailed bonelessly in the grip of a ghast black succubus, he screamed a dry and soundless scream. (427)

Whether this rape actually occurs or is merely a horrific vision is, as usual, for the reader to decide, but McCarthy's description makes this passage come close to
surpassing even the gruesomeness of Ballard’s sexual activities. It is as though McCarthy is sending retribution for crimes against humanity down onto the wrong head.

Another sexual union in Suttree which is far less gruesome but arguably just as improper concerns not Suttree, but his comic foil Harrogate, and it is used for comic effect. Suttree meets Harrogate in jail, where Suttree is doing a short span of time for being an accomplice to a robbery. Actually, he was passed out drunk in the back seat of the getaway car. Harrogate is mum about the reasons behind his incarceration and rightly so; he has been arrested for destroying a farmer’s patch of watermelons. The details of this destruction call for amplification:

[Harrogate] could see the plump forms supine and dormant in spaced rows . . . To steal upon them where they lay, his hand on their ripe warm shapes, his pocketknife open . . . He pulled it between his knees and sank the blade of the knife into its nether end. He shucked off the straps of his overalls. His pale shanks keeling in a pool of denim. (32)

Sandra Salmans of the Times Literary Supplement offers a comment insulting to Knoxvilians which notes that Harrogate “is arrested in a watermelon patch for sexual exploits unusual even by Knoxville standards” (500). Perhaps it
would not be unusual by Jefferson, Mississippi, standards. McCarthy’s lurid description of Harrogate’s deflowering of “warm, supine” watermelons is reminiscent of the “love scene” in Faulkner’s The Hamlet, in which Faulkner discusses Isaac Snopes’ love of Jack Houston’s cow.

**Humor in Suttree**

The appearance of Gene Harrogate lets the reader know that, thankfully, Suttree will not be without its humor. Poor Harrogate, the so-called “moonlight melonmounter” (48), is a modern comic masterpiece. He can never win, but he never stops trying. He attempts scheme after scheme in an attempt to transform from a “country mouse” to a successful “city rat” (McCarthy’s descriptions), and his exploits are never without their homespun ingenuity—that is, until his foiled armed robbery. Until his final capture by the police, though, his spirit is indomitable, as noted by the farmer whose watermelon patch he violates:

> He’s damn near screwed the whole patch. I don’t see why he couldn’t of stuck to just one. Or a few.

> Well, I guess he takes himself for a lover. Sort of like a sailor in a whorehouse . . . What was he, just a young feller?
I don't know about how young he was but he was as active a feller as I've seen in a good while.

(33)

He is an "active feller," a redneck Don Quixote de la Mancha whose exploits fall easily into a long tradition of tall tales and the spinning of "yarns." Or, as Suttree tells him when he suggests escaping jail and heading for Knoxville, "You look wrong. You will always look wrong" (60).

Harrogate, like Ballard, is one of those characters who is "flattened by fate," but, in Harrogate's case, the results are less dismal. Harrogate's actions run to farce and slapstick, and not to despair and loss. There is a darker connection between Harrogate and Ballard, however. As noted by Vereen Bell, there is something faintly sinister about Harrogate, even though he is the focus of some of the most outright humorous passages of Suttree. The problem is that, in his sheer determination and cloak of innocence, he perhaps resembles Lester Ballard a bit too much. Bell states:

In the right context, or given a damaging knock on the head Harrogate could as easily be a Lester Ballard simply because of the ease with which he transcends normal restraints. Even his otherwise comical infatuation with watermelons . . . is
clouded for us slightly by the memory of Lester and his bizarre innocence. (85)

Like Lester, Harrogate breaks laws to survive, but unlike Ballard, he rarely acts with any malice. It is when he does that he disappears from the novel.

Before he exits Suttree, however, he has been responsible for some of the most outlandish (and hilarious) get-rich-quick schemes in American literature. The first involves bats. Due to a rabies scare, the Knoxville Board of Health temporarily puts a bounty of a dollar for each dead bat brought to its office. Harrogate devises a plan for killing them which involves a slingshot, strychnine, meat, and boat formed from the hoods of two different model trucks welded together. He rows out into the middle of the lake, shoots the poisoned meat into the air, and fishes the dead bats out of the water after the poison quickly kills them. He is so successful that he bags forty-two bats, but when he goes to collect his windfall, he is discouraged.

The doctor informs Harrogate that the bounty was not designed for the “wholesale slaughter of bats” (218). He does, however, offer him a dollar and a quarter—bargained up from a mere dollar by the ever-crafty Harrogate—to tell him how he managed to kill so many bats. The doctor, though disgusted, cannot help being somewhat impressed:
Did you poison scraps of meat and then shoot them in the air?
Yeah. Them sons of bitches like to never quit fallin.
Very ingenious. Damned ingenious.
I can figure out anything.
Well, I’m sorry your efforts were for nothing.
Maybe a dollar and a quarter aint nothin to you but it is to me. (218-219)

The most incredible scheme undertaken by Harrogate, and the one which most connects him to Lester Ballard, involves the caves that run underneath the city of Knoxville. Harrogate lays his plans immediately after his lack of financial success in the wake of the bat episode. Suttree comes to visit him, and Harrogate details his plan for blowing up the city bank’s vault by setting dynamite off in the cave directly underneath the bank. After hearing of the plan, Suttree wisely opts out: “I dont want to look. I dont want to hear” (219). As with his friend Weird Leonard, however, Suttree cannot ultimately stay out of his friend’s bizarre scheme. After he has all but forgotten about Harrogate’s plan, Suttree is awakened one night by a hollow boom. When he sees the next day’s headline, “Earthquake?,” he instantly knows what has happened. It takes Suttree four days to find Harrogate deep within the recesses of
Knoxville's underlying caves, and when he does, he wishes he had not, for Harrogate's explosion missed the bank vault.

McCarthy writes:

A sluggish monster freed from what centuries of stony fastness under the city. Its breath washed over him in a putrid stench. [Harrogate] tried to crawl . . . He was engulfed feet first in a slowly moving wall of sewage, a lava neap of liquid shit and soapcurd and toiletpaper from a breached main.

(270)

As with Ballard, Harrogate's actions link him with Bakhtin's conception of the material bodily lower stratum. Bakhtin states:

Dung and urine lend a bodily character to matter, to the world, to the cosmic elements, which become closer, more intimate, more easily grasped, for this is the matter, the elemental force, born from the body itself. It transforms cosmic terror into a gay carnival monster. (335)

By being nearly drowned in filth, Harrogate gives Suttree one of the few weapons at its disposal for dealing with the cosmic terror of its characters' daily existence.

Characters like Harrogate, and even like the more definably evil Lester Ballard, constantly evoke amusement in the readers of their stories. This amusement often seems
inappropriate, coming as it does at times when these “gay carnival monsters” have committed appalling or disgusting acts. Perhaps this is why such characters manage to remain sympathetic in spite of themselves. As Spencer suggests:

One might think they [McCarthy’s born losers] would evoke only tremendous sympathy because of their tribulations, but instead, they also evoke amusement or even laughter because these characters are so extremely pitiful and are placed in such incredibly pathetic circumstances that they are absurd. (65)

This puzzling response to humorous characters and circumstances is akin to McCarthy’s complex use of the elements of violence and sex. For that matter, humor is often paired with one or both of these elements, increasing its potential to shock and disturb even as it provokes laughter. The result is that the humor in Suttree and Child of God adds to the complexity and to the lack of conclusiveness of the novels.
CHAPTER 4

TERMINUS

In Suttree and Child of God, Cormac McCarthy takes his readers on a journey filled with violence, sex, and humor, along an apparently aimless path strewn with confusion. Deciphering his intentions is the job of the reader, if he or she chooses to accept it. The juxtaposition of the aforementioned elements is one of McCarthy's hallmarks, and it is largely responsible for the complexity of his work. Violence stretches back in American fiction at least to the novels of Charles Brockden Brown. Exploring sexuality and its politics has been a staple of the novel since its very inception. Finding humor in unlikely places is a trademark of literary categories as diverse as Southern Gothic and the absurd, but McCarthy does not fit easily into any genre. He is like his characters, the dumpkeeper of Child of God and the ragpicker of Suttree, who scour through piles of debris to find useful and valuable objects. Often it is difficult for anyone else to determine their value, and perhaps that is McCarthy's true genius. The man who has stated that "the ugly fact is books are made out of books" (Woodward 31), has
a singular talent for sifting through the debris of other writers to determine the elements in them that are of particular value. Perhaps he feels that all of these writers have spent enough time answering questions, and he would prefer to just postulate some new ones. The exploration of violence, sex, and humor is a prevalent theme of *Suttree* and *Child of God*, and these explorations generally leave readers with a sense of having experienced an incredible voyage which ends too suddenly and too inconclusively. Nonetheless, most readers are likely to feel that they have had a satisfying journey which has allowed them to reach their own conclusions and to create their own meanings.
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