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McCARTHY'S *OUTER DARK* AND *CHILD OF GOD* AS WORKS OF
APPALACHIAN GOTHIC FICTION

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Gothic imagination might be said to have been around since the first unsettling stories were told around a fire. The modern idea of the Gothic novel, however, originated in Europe near the end of the 1700s, in part as a reaction against the formality of Neoclassical writing. The European Gothic style worked with what existed in the writer's environment to create suspense in readers. Settings were often castles or abbeys fallen into ruin, full of dark unexplored places such as dungeons or basements. In addition to the elements of gloom presented by the setting, Gothic novels also usually prey upon the reader's fear of the unknown, adding to the overall suspense of the piece with characters from unknown backgrounds or ancient prophecies and family mysteries. The Gothic novel can often seem overwrought and melodramatic, with emotions played to the utmost to engage the reader. The main purpose of these Gothic pieces is to thrill the reader through its elements of superstition and fear.

American Gothic literature developed at first as a natural extension of Gothic literature in Europe. It wasn't long, however, before both authors and readers realized that the devices used in American novels "should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe" (Brown). Castles in Connecticut simply weren't believable, and it was impossible to have centuries-old family legends wreaking supernatural havoc when the country was so new. Instead, American writers began to focus on elements of their situation and society that provoked unease. American Gothic literature came to be typified by exposure to the wilderness, isolation, religious guilt, and strangeness in the familiar, as well as more psychological fears. No longer were the dangers all external; much of the threat in American Gothic novels was self-inflicted, due to a character's own psychological instabilities (such as in Charles Brockden Brown's short story "Somnambulism" or Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House*). Furthermore, the protagonists often reach their demise by their inability to think logically, a direct contradiction to the Enlightenment movement prizing logic and rational thinking as means of liberating the self.

As the country expanded westward, so did the imaginations of writers and their audiences. Capitalizing on natural fears, Frontier Gothic novels focused on a fear of wild, untamed spaces. In these works there is an emphasis on the unknown and the unclaimed. Anxiety is created by being lost in the woods, or not knowing what might be in the woods with you. Instead of nature as a peaceful place to reconnect with the self, nature is an embodiment of the unkempt mind, a mind that actively resists the influences of civilization and the efforts of others to mold it.

While American Gothic and Frontier Gothic literature have long existed across a broad literary spectrum, the Gothic novel in America has become even more diversified with elements unique to locales. Southern literature in particular has become practically synonymous with American Gothic, with authors like Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner being recognized internationally for their literature. The Southern Gothic narrative introduces more complicated social dynamics, with the South's history of violence and slavery. Much of Southern Gothic literature focuses on repressed guilt, channeled through twisted religion that haunts a character's every action. The characters in these novels suffer from being surrounded by the grotesque in a culture that emphasizes seclusion and violence.

The Appalachian Mountains inspire a unique type of gothic writing, which combines elements of both Frontier Gothic and Southern Gothic literature. Appalachian Gothic emphasizes the isolation of groups of people who live in the mountains, as well as the social conflicts that are amplified in the Appalachians, such as racism, poverty, and clannish religious and family dynamics. The mountains serve as an identifying feature in these novels, as they limit the characters in terms of social interaction, geographical mobility, and psychological openness. The forests and hollows and caves of the Appalachians insulate the characters, removing them from the outside world, and they also provide a barrier. Much like in the Frontier Gothic, landscape represents an untamed space, one that is frightening to outsiders, and resistant to the change they might bring. Appalachian Gothic novels tend to center on darker themes, with the characters suffering from an inability to change their own fates, driven perhaps by the

stagnation of their minds plagued by ancestral guilt. These novels use disturbing characters and derelict settings to display the ugly events, their causes and effects, which stem from the cultural elements of isolation, violence, poverty, racism, and guilt.

While Appalachian Gothic novels continue to gain notoriety through modern works by Ron Rash and Wiley Cash, the author who laid the foundation for this genre was Cormac McCarthy. Born in the 1930s, he relocated with his family at a young age to the northeast corner of Tennessee, and he continued to live there into his adult life. His first published novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, focused on the Appalachian region, exploring social problems through the lens of the Gothic. Since then he has published several other novels in the Gothic vein. In his later works, McCarthy shifts away from Appalachian literature, maintaining his Gothic origins but instead portraying them in a Western setting. *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, his second and third novels respectively, remain his most clearly Appalachian novels, both in setting and theme.

In both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, McCarthy does a masterful job of blending the elements of Appalachian Gothic to present a novel that is darkly suspenseful and grimly thought-provoking. *Outer Dark* focuses on the complex incestuous relationship between a brother and sister and their interaction with others. The novel follows the two on a journey through the wilderness where they must cope with the unknown qualities of that wilderness, as well as the guilt stemming from their own behaviors. In *Child of God*, McCarthy explores the grotesque nature of a life lived in isolation and poverty in the mountains. This novel focuses more on an individual descent into the gruesome depths that illustrate the main character's depravity. In these two novels

McCarthy examines the darker side of life in Appalachia, and forces readers to question the purpose and meaning for the characters' lives and actions.

Chapter 2: *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and the Appalachian Gothic

Outer Dark is McCarthy's first novel firmly rooted in the Appalachian region, and it uses elements of the Appalachian Gothic to create a horror story with a purpose. Set in northeastern Tennessee, the novel follows the journey of two main characters through the wilderness. These two are siblings, isolated together in the mountains and embroiled in an incestuous relationship. Culla Holmes is the brother, and Rinthy is the sister.

The novel opens with the end stages of Rinthy's pregnancy. Isolated from society, as well as any other kind of familial influence, the two have produced a child. After the birth, while Rinthy recovers, Culla takes the newborn and abandons it in the woods, telling his sister "It died" (25). When Rinthy discovers this deceit, she sets off in search of her lost infant; her only goal is to find the tinker that, as her sole point of contact with the outside world, she is sure must have taken her child. Rinthy encounters a variety of people on her journey to find her son, all of whom go out of their way to help her. She is often fed and housed when all she asks for is a glass of water. It isn't until she finds the tinker that she is treated cruelly, as he discovers the truth behind the infant's parentage.

When Rinthy leaves home, Culla leaves as well, though his motives are unclear. While Rinthy often finds acceptance and kindness from the people she meets, Culla meets with nothing but suspicion and hostility from everyone he encounters. After he meets with the trio of outlaws who haunt the story with their acts of violence, they seemingly pursue him through the landscape until their final encounter with him and his thrown away child at the end of the novel.

Child of God explores some of the same issues as *Outer Dark* (albeit more graphically): the inadequate nature of the words “good” and “evil,” as well as the necessity for transcending the need for these words. *Child of God* follows the descent of a man, Lester Ballard, through the depths of moral depravity as McCarthy forces his readers to grapple with an inherent desire to dismiss the novel as unnecessarily depraved and with no basis in reality.

Our first introduction to Lester Ballard is during the auction of his house. The county has either foreclosed or condemned his land, it isn't clear what has happened, and they are now auctioning it off. Lester is introduced as a "small, unclean, unshaven" man, who is watching the scene unfold before him (*Child of God* 4). This description of him fits in with the scene that is unfolding. He is powerless to stop the actions of the people around him; he is “small” and cannot even hold on to what has belonged to him and his family. McCarthy goes on to say that Lester is a “child of God” (4), much like the reader may be. McCarthy creates sympathy for Lester, while at the same time indicating his place in society. The auctioneer clearly looks down on him, both literally (from the back of his truck) and figuratively in his sneering contempt and lack of concern for the

gun Lester carries. Throughout the first section of the novel, McCarthy intersperses narration of Lester's actions with accounts of Lester as told by the people who live in the nearby town of Sevierville. Even though Lester may be a "child of God," it is clear that the townspeople do not view him in the same way that they view themselves, and that they have created their own mythology for him, even before he becomes the perpetrator of immoral actions.

It is through the townspeople's narratives that we learn the little of Lester's background that we are privy to as readers. One person describes how as an adolescent Lester assaulted a child who wouldn't do what he wanted (18) and another describes how Lester found his father dead—a suicide (21). It is in this narration that we begin to see the origins for Lester's fascination with watching things. He watches as they cut his father down and "never said nothin" (21).

The townspeople continue to build a mythology for Lester, sprinkled with anecdotes about their own lives. Even when talking specifically about Lester, they are unable to stay on one topic, as is the case with the man who tells the story about how Lester came by his rifle; Lester is so unimportant to him that he spends easily three times as long talking about himself as he does talking about Lester (60). The townspeople create a history, scarce as it is, for Lester and mark him a man of violence and displacement, with no family and no value. There is no way of knowing if we can rely on the townspeople as there is "no single reliable narrative voice" (Winchell 27). Instead there are a bunch of monologues told to an unknown listener by townspeople, and a "seemingly omniscient" narrator of Lester's actions (Winchell 27). As the novel

progresses, the reader begins to question some of the reports, which reek of the desire to produce titillating gossip about a local oddity, especially when the townspeople spend longer talking about themselves than about Lester, or as is the case with one narrative, which tells a story solely about the sheriff rather than Lester (44).

The novel begins its steep downward descent when Lester stumbles upon the asphyxiated bodies of two lovers in a car. After coupling with the dead woman, Lester takes her body back to the shack he is living in. This starts his necrophiliac tendencies, but it is only after his shack burns (along with the body of the woman), that he becomes violent. He then starts killing people and adding women to his collection of bodies as he retreats to the caves in the woods that surround the town.

Lester is eventually captured and transported to a prison for the insane. Only much later are the bodies of the women he killed discovered, languishing in a cave in a gross parody of a communal family abode.

Both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* feature isolation and loneliness as prominent parts of their structure. This is a prevalent motif in much of Appalachian Gothic literature. The setting of the Appalachian Mountains lends itself to feelings of isolation and enclosure. The forests are old, and full of places that are not often tread by humans. The people of the mountains take their lead from their surroundings. The forest keeps her secrets, and so to do the people who live there. As a result, the people of the Appalachian Mountains have developed a reputation for being clannish and secretive, living in small communities, sometimes with only a single family, and very little contact with anyone beyond their group.

In *Outer Dark*, the two main characters are extremely isolated, though Rinthy more so than Culla. Wholly dependent on her brother for everything, Rinthy has no contact with the outside world. When a traveling “tinker” comes to their hut her brother will not even allow her to see him, keeping her inside where her only exposure to the tinker is by listening to Culla’s conversation with him outside the hut. Her brother travels to the store occasionally to buy supplies, but she has never been. In fact, it does not seem as if she has recently (if ever) been beyond the small clearing where their hut is located. As she herself says, there is not a single person in the world “but what is a stranger to me” (*Outer Dark* 29).

They are also, at least in the novel’s time, completely without any parental influence, another sort of isolation and abandonment. The only mention of parents is when Rinthy accuses Culla of messing up “daddy’s gun” (*Outer Dark* 30). This loss of parents has influenced their relationship (incestual), and this in turn influences how they interact with others they meet. They have been without guidance for much of their lives, and this shows up in Rinthy’s lack of knowledge about religion and other elements of social interaction. For instance, she seems confused when she realizes there is more than one tinker, and not just the one she is looking for. Culla also has to answer for the convoluted relationship he has with Rinthy, when the snake hunter questions him about why he is pursuing his sister across the countryside at all.

Lester Ballard also suffers from the isolation that the mountains invoke. Though he lives on the outskirts of a town, he is constantly relegated to the liminal space between society and the wilderness. He is thrown out of his home and left to find his

own place to live. When he retreats to the caves, he is embracing the isolation that has been thrust upon him. He creates his own community of dead women, mirroring the isolated pockets of clannish communities that the Appalachians have to offer.

Like Rinthy and Culla, Lester is also without a parental figure. In *Child of God*, we are told by one of the townspeople that Lester's father hung himself when Lester was young and that his mother ran off even before that. It is unclear what happened to him after his parents were gone, but nothing is said to imply anything other than the fact that he raised himself. As with Rinthy and Culla, the absence of parental guidance combined with a lack of societal involvement has contributed to Lester's poor sense of social niceties and his inability to function as part of the community he creeps around.

Both novels also feature another element of Appalachian Gothic: a sense of the wilderness as being "other," an unknown space filled with monsters. In *Outer Dark*, this is clearly manifested by the marauders. They are a complete unknown, appearing without explanation and acting without reason. There is also a constant sense of the woods representing something alien; when Culla leaves the infant to die there, the trees are described as "malign and baleful shapes that reared like enormous androids" (*Outer Dark* 17). The forests are alien and threatening, conspiring to lead Culla back to the infant he has abandoned in the storm. Rinthy also experiences the woods as a home of the other, when she meets the old woman whose androgynous form lends mysticism to her presence and her cabin the woods.

In *Child of God*, Lester does not so much meet the monsters in the woods, as he is the monster in the woods. After he retreats from his burned down shack (which

represents at least a semblance of humanity), he becomes a menace to the town. Emerging from the woods he kills, and then drags the bodies back into the forests to his subterranean lair. Lester represents the fearful thing that the townspeople might encounter, if they wander too far from the safety of the limits of society. He haunts the woods around the town, creating a tangible representation of the unknown fears in liminal spaces.

These two novels exhibit the success with which McCarthy solidified Appalachian Gothic into its own genre. He took the landscape of the mountains and turned it into an alien world, where the wilds represent a place something more than just a forest. Instead, the landscape turns into a foreign entity, at times merely unknowable and at times seemingly malignant. Time is relative and setting is shiftingly surreal as the characters blunder through a world that is not their own, a wild that belongs wholly to some other power. Influenced by the religious guilt and anxiety that seems to torture the very landscape of the Appalachians, the characters struggle through the novels only to fizzle out at the end, allowing the wild to return to fill the void they have left, as the vegetation reclaims the tinker's body near the end of *Outer Dark*.

Chapter 3: *Outer Dark* and the Christ-Haunted Wilderness

While both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* are works of Appalachian Gothic, *Outer Dark* emphasizes the elements of religion and the guilt associated with religion that are commonly seen in works of this genre. *Outer Dark* also displays a fear of the wild and of

being misplaced in the woods that is reminiscent of the themes present in many works of Frontier Gothic literature.

After the birth of her child, Rinthy is overcome by exhaustion, and is unaware when Culla takes the child and leaves it in the wilderness to die. The scene in which Culla abandons the child is full of ominous images: the trees are described as “malign and baleful” (*Outer Dark* 17) and the whole scene has a feeling of “spectral quietude” where even the animals are silent in dread (16). Culla’s fear and confusion in the wilderness, coupled with his haphazard flight and return to the scene of where he placed the child (illuminated appropriately by a flash of lightning), display the gravity of the burden he is trying to rid himself of. The woods are a place of darkness and fear, especially once he has done something he knows is wrong, and he is then forced to confront his wrong again as he crashes recklessly through the wilderness, lost and turned around seemingly by the wild itself.

This scene also solidifies the indication that Culla at least realizes incest is morally repugnant. He does not want the product of their relationship to survive, and he goes to great and panicked lengths to rid himself of the child. While it could be argued that he does not want to care for the child, or that he doesn’t want anything disrupting his life, it seems more likely that McCarthy is illustrating the dichotomy between Culla and Rinthy’s awareness of society, especially considering the unease that Culla seems to feel when questioned by the tinker and his refusal to call the midwife when Rinthy goes into labor. Thinking about the midwife, and perhaps the tinker’s curiosity about his sister, seems to plant the seed of doubt in Culla’s mind, and remind him that some

people, at least, will be around to ask questions. Eventually there could be repercussions. Culla's difficulties in fleeing from the child, running through the forest at a "demented pace" (17) only to crash into the clearing he left the child in and collapse to "lay there gibbering" with his "hands putting back the night" (18), indicate that he is at least slightly ashamed and aware of the wrongdoing of that course of action as well. Many of these notions stem from the omnipresent religion that haunts the Southern landscape and the entire novel. Culla is constantly haunted by his sins, just as the South is haunted by the twisted religion to which it is tethered.

When Rinthy becomes well enough to ask Culla what happened to the child, he lies and says that it died and he has buried it. Rinthy does not question her brother at first, but the issue of her child's death seems to weigh on her mind. Eventually she asks where the child is buried so that she can visit its grave. Culla points her in a direction, and she happily sets off, picking "shy wildflowers" (32) to place on the baby's grave. At this point she is content. There does not seem to be much grief over the infant's death itself, now that she feels she knows the child's resting place. This seems to be another reference to the subtle overlay of religion on the novel. Without a proper grave and the proper rites, the baby cannot go into the afterlife peacefully. Though Rinthy does not seem to consciously know that it is religion driving her actions, she can at least take solace in being able to comfort the infant's spirit—and her own—with visits to the grave and niceties such as flowers.

It is the journey through the wilderness that figures most prominently in this novel, and it is the events of the journey that drive the meaning for the characters'

existence. The two main characters are driven by a “restlessness and desperation of spirit” (Cawelti 2) that urge them onward in their respective quests. As McCarthy moves Culla and Rinthy through the setting, it is sometimes difficult to tell the actual purpose for their movements. Is Culla pursuing Rinthy, or is he merely running from his own crimes? Or are the two purposes hopelessly entangled, as inseparable for the character as they are for the reader? Is Rinthy seeking her lost child, or is she seeking herself? When combined with McCarthy’s dream-like description of settings, it can be difficult to tell if theirs is truly a journey through space and time, or if the real journey is the one happening in their own psychology. This is indicated by the marauders seeming to assess Culla’s readiness to meet them, leaving him alone the first time, but seeming to be expecting him the second time they meet. It is as if Culla needed to be ready to meet the marauders before they could fulfill their role in his journey. In many of McCarthy’s novels, *Outer Dark* being no exception, the end goal for each journey is hard to decipher. Rinthy is seeking her child, but it is unclear if by doing so she seeks her salvation as a mother and life-giver, or her damnation as the perpetrator of a morally depraved sin.

This confusion of purpose as the characters move through the wilderness echoes Culla’s confusion in the wilderness at the very beginning of the novel. Though the trees and the forests are not as threateningly displacing Culla as during his initial flight from the abandoned infant, he is still being moved through the landscape by a will that seems not his own. It even seems as though he is constantly being driven to return to the wilderness, to continue being lost in the woods, as every town or community he tries to

stop in quickly runs him off (sometimes violently). He is lost morally, and thus is consigned to being physically lost, left to struggle with the “other” of the wilderness and his own mind.

Though the two Holmes siblings cross paths, even visiting some of the same locations, Culla is plagued by a continuous stream of negative events, perhaps all in punishment for his original sins: first incest, and second killing (or attempting to kill) his own blood. Rinthy, on the other hand, finds help where none is asked. She often is offered a place to stay, or an entire meal, when she has asked only for something to drink. She is the “positive life force” (Winchell 14) of the entire novel, countering the vicious violence that is present in almost all of the other characters’ lives. Despite her positive nature and the innocence she represents, she cannot seem to overcome the hopelessness of her situation, and the hospitality she encounters never amounts to more than brief moments of kindness from strangers in a life filled with confusion and defeat.

The three marauders that plague the landscape of the novel through the early chapters and eventually interact with Culla play strongly into both themes of the wilderness representing a place of the “other” and the tensions placed on the minds of the characters by guilt born of religion. Though it is unclear where they have come from, or what their purpose is, the marauders’ importance is suggested by their being featured on the first page of the novel. They continue to play a part in small asides, seemingly following in Culla’s footsteps, killing many of the people he comes into contact with.

Culla's first encounter with the marauders happens after he has just survived a ferry boat crash in the midst of a river crossing. While, symbolically, crossing a river should be a cleansing experience and sometimes represents leaving evil behind, Culla has walked straight into a meeting with the purveyors of much of the senseless violence in this novel. This is noteworthy especially for the prevalence of "river baptisms" in the Appalachian area religions. By being covered in the river water, Culla has, in a sense, been baptized again, and yet the wild has conspired against him. Instead of bringing him to safety, he has come to a meeting with the embodiment of the "other" in the woods.

During his conversation with the leader of the trio of outlaws, the issue of naming and names becomes a focus. Earlier in the novel, Culla himself emphasized the importance of naming when he dissuaded Rinthy from naming the infant. This conflict is also rooted in religion, with the fate of the infant's afterlife possibly riding on being named and baptised before death. The leader demands to know Culla's name, and also demands that Culla ask his. He then refuses to give his name, and also tells Culla that one of his band is unnamed. As he says, "[I]f you cain't name somethin you cain't claim it. You cain't talk about it even" (*Outer Dark* 177). This verbalizes the reason that Culla did not want to name the infant. If he allowed it to be named, he would have to allow it to be claimed, and as the infant's father, it would be his place to claim the child and his sin in its creation.

The three outlaws provide one of the most mysterious elements of the novel. It is not clear where they came from, what their purpose is, or where they end up going. In the scene of this first meeting, it is unclear why they do not kill Culla, when they have

killed everyone else that they have encountered. The leader of the band actively protects Culla, even after he steals his boots, by stopping Harmon (one of the other outlaws) from interacting with him. The lead marauder seems to have decided that Culla is not who he is looking for, or perhaps that Culla has not yet become the person that he is looking for. As he says when Culla tells him he is going “nowhere,” “You may get there yet” (*Outer Dark* 181). These three marauders bring to mind the three Fates of the Greek myths, or perhaps the Holy Trinity immediately because of their number, but also in the fact that their purpose is so unknowable, outside of the understanding of humans. They act beyond the realm of “thinking or supposition” (*Metress* 9), with a creed that seems to be both rigidly defined and morally disturbing.

A few days later, Culla comes upon the outlaws again. They have found and hung the tinker, and have the child, his son, with them. Again, it seems as if the three outlaws are fulfilling some unknown purpose, as the leader says, “I see you didn’t have no trouble finding us” (*Outer Dark* 232), and goes on to say, “We ain’t hard to find. Oncet you’ve found us” (233). The scene quickly turns ominous with the mute, nameless member of the trio crouched “like something waiting to be fed” (234). The issue of naming again comes up as the leader of the outlaws asks if the child has a name, and states that the child was not the tinker’s to name. Culla suddenly makes an effort to save the child for his sister to raise, but it is too late. In what is perhaps the most disturbing and difficult scene of the entire novel, the child is killed and then eaten by the mute.

This scene, perhaps more than any other in the novel, is thickly religious in its intonations. The leader of the trio seems clearly to be some force beyond what is simply human, an embodiment of the twisted religion that pervades the novel. When Culla asks them what they are (not who they are), the leader says, “We’ve heard that before, ain’t we,” and then nods “as if spoken [to] by other voices” (*Outer Dark* 234). He proceeds to accuse Culla of fathering his own sister’s child and then trying to pawn him off on the tinker to keep him hidden. He has made himself Culla’s judge, and Culla accepts it, standing “with his feet together and his hands at his sides like one arraigned” (235). He is also Culla’s executioner. When the man kills the child, Culla loses his chance of atoning for the original sin he has been pursued by the entire novel.

The last chapter of *Outer Dark*, though more blatantly written about religion, is important as a culminating moment for Culla. With the blind prophet comes the emphasis on vision that the leader of the marauders also emphasized, saying, “some folks has two [eyes] and cain’t see” (232). The blind prophet tells Culla that he has no use for his eyes, after all: “What needs a man to see his way when he’s sent there anyhow” (241). Only minutes after passing the blind man on the road, Culla finds that the road leads into a swamp, a “spectral waste” with trees taking on “hominoid [shapes] like figures in a landscape of the damned” (242). This is an appropriate place for Culla’s journey to end, at the entrance to hell, where the wilderness and religion have consigned him.

While Culla can never seem to find even a brief period of peace, Rinthy is constantly supported on her journey to find her child. She meets with several families,

all of whom offer to share food with her (even if some of them do not hold to that promise). For most of the novel, she continues to lactate, providing a source of embarrassment and anxiety for her in her dealings with people. It is this lactation, however, that contributes to her image as a “life force” in the novel, as she continues to produce milk for the child she has not seen since the day it was born months earlier.

Along the way, her innocence and ignorance play a major part in the way she communicates with others. She is devoid of understanding when it comes to geography or religion, and she cannot even tell people what the tinker who took her child looks like. In this way, she is the opposite of Culla. Even with his rudimentary knowledge of religion and the world he cannot succeed in his journey, but her ignorance aids her. She is not plagued by the guilt that troubles Culla, with his knowledge of sin, or the suspicion that he invokes from everybody he meets. She is not lost in the woods; instead the wild seems to guide her towards people who will, if not help her find her child, at least receive and care for her for a time.

Rinthy finally encounters the tinker after she has been traveling for months. During her last confrontation with him in a remote cabin, she maintains what she has been saying all along, that she just wants what is hers; she just wants her child back. The tinker has a moment of clarity and he realizes that the child was fathered by her brother and is the product of an incestuous relationship. In this pivotal moment, Rinthy is unable to lie, whether because she does not realize she should, or because she is worried a lie will lose the infant forever. It is also, however, her inability to lie that redeems her in the eyes of religion and from the sin she has committed by sleeping with her brother. For

the tinker, however, the truth does not redeem her and he leaves Rinthy in the cabin, forbidding her to follow him, and marches into the darkness to meet his doom at the hands of the three marauders.

Some days later Rinthy stumbles upon the camp of the outlaws, and in her innocence and ignorance, she is unable to understand the ashes and bones she sees. She is “slender and trembling and pale,” and she moves with “a frail agony of grace” (237). But in this novel, innocence does not win out. It is merely confused and wandering, hopelessly lost and forever searching, as Rinthy waits by the abandoned camp site “all through the blue twilight and into the dark” (237).

At first, the novel seems unbelievably nihilistic. There is no real closure; neither good nor innocence is allowed any kind of victory. The novel seems to assure readers of an almost hopelessly barbaric answer to any quest for the meaning and purpose of life. Culla’s guilt carries him throughout the novel, and he will never be able to escape from it, just as Rinthy will ostensibly never receive closure. While it would be easy to point to this novel as little more than an exercise in nihilism, McCarthy is instead asking us to leave behind preconceptions, and to leave behind what we “know,” not because what we know is wrong or unreal, but because “what we believe in can’t really be known” (Metress 7). He tries to erase the assumption that darkness and redemption are two sides of an equation, and that what happens on one side must be balanced by an equal reaction on the other side. Instead, darkness and redemption supplement each other, with one moving in to consume space that the other has abandoned. As readers, we follow the characters through continual darkness, as they become accustomed to

ignorance. Not knowing is part of the human condition, and this explains why the characters and readers alike spend so much time blindly moving through the dark, without anyone warning them of the dangers in the wild before “setting them out that way” (242).

Chapter 4: *Child of God* and the Monster in the Woods

In *Child of God*, McCarthy moves from the monsters of the wilderness being displayed by secondary characters, such as the marauders, to the main character being the “other” in the woods. Lester’s story focuses more specifically on the traditional Gothic monster and mixes it with elements specific to Appalachian Gothic, such as an emphasis on the wilderness providing a haven for the grotesque and monstrous.

Much of our early information about Lester comes from the stories told by the people who live around him. Many of these stories, however, seem questionable when taken in contrast to stories told by the omniscient narrator. Lester is not totally outcast, or at least does not desire to be so. He even attends church at one point, though the townspeople seem to condemn him even in this, all turning at once “like a cast of puppets” (*Child of God* 31) at the opening of the door, then turning back around more slowly when they realize it is Lester in their midst and judging him for his inability to keep quiet in the pew while he has a cold. There is also the instance with the woman that he finds at the Frog Mountain turnaround (which will become the site of many of

his transgressions), the victim of some kind of assault. At first Lester does not seem to harbor her any ill will. Reminiscent of many famous monsters (John Gardner's Grendel and Shelley's Frankenstein), his early actions show no malice when he asks her if she is cold (42). It is not until she responds on the offensive that he becomes aggressive and rips her clothes. This fight with the woman, continued later at the sherriff's office, seems to severely upset and embarrass Lester, and by the end of it he is "almost crying" (52) and cursing everyone in the vicinity.

Lester continues trying to integrate himself, at least somewhat, when he tries to impress the daughter of the local dumpkeeper by bringing her mentally challenged brother a baby robin as "a playpretty" (77). She blames Lester for the horrific scene that follows, with the robin struggling to walk on nubs of legs that have been chewed off by the child. Lester is "uneasy" with this outcome, but he also foreshadows the actions to come when he seems to understand the child's desire to want the bird to where it "couldn't run off" (79). It is possible to draw a parallel here to Lester's treatment by the society he lives in. He is continually pushed away by the community he tries to interact with, as they choose to believe the folklore and gossip about him that is springing up. The people of the town are uneasy with him because of his isolation, his inability to posses or be possessed. Not only did his family leave him, but he has also been unable to remain in his home, or maintain any kind of stable relationships. The townspeople insist on Lester's remaining isolated, because even though it is his isolation and life in the wilderness that make them uneasy, they can more easily accept their uneasiness

with his being constantly absent than they can dwell on the reason for their anxiety in his presence.

Lester's first forms of rebellion against the society that has shunned him and his movement toward becoming the Gothic monster are non-violent, even if they are disturbing. By watching a couple having sex in a car parked at the Frog Mountain turnaround, he is exerting some form of the scrutiny that he has always been under. He is also taking control of the situation, making these two unaware people into something for his own personal use as objects to be watched, much as the townspeople have turned him into something of a local legend to be used for their own gossip and judgment. Lester judges the couple in the car, looking down upon them because one of the two is black, feeling a sort of power in his ability to elevate himself over them, all while watching unknown. This follows the same pattern his life has: he has been scrutinized by the people around him, judged to be guilty of their preconceived notions, and used as a figure in their stories. The same thing happens with the woman he finds at the turnaround. Though his first inclination was to help her, or at least inquire if she was okay, her violence inspires his own deviance. He rips her dress off, not only exposing her to himself, but also forcing her to return to society exposed, giving him power as a watcher.

In his final act of social defiance before he begins his killing spree, Lester happens upon the couple asphyxiated in their car in the middle of having sex at the well-used turnaround. In a way, Lester's sexual acts with the dead woman, and his subsequent treatment of her body, are one of the most depraved scenes in the book.

The reader can not, however, escape feeling badly for Lester. He is using the dead woman to fill a void in his life as he "poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman" (88).

Lester goes on to treat this corpse with the utmost care, making sure to retrieve her makeup, and even buying her a new dress, as well as staging a romantic night by the fire. Here again we see elements of his voyeuristic nature as he leaves the shack to view her firelit body through the window. It is as if he is trying to create a life with events he has witnessed in the lives around him; he needs to view the situation from outside because that is how he has been forced to view things his entire life. Although it is hard to move past the basely disturbing images of his having sex with the dead, his treatment of the woman reveals that he is not by nature perversely violent. The scene is most disturbing in its proximity to "normal." Here McCarthy shows us that "mockery of the normal becomes a special kind of perversion" (Winchell 26), a perversion that is more powerful than the abnormal alone could be.

Lester's contentment cannot last long, however, and he loses his companion to a fire that burns down his home. The burning of his companion seems to trigger the next phase in Lester's descent into infamy and monstrosity. Instead of idly waiting and watching as he has always done, he takes matters into his own hands, revisiting the dumpkeeper's house and the daughter that he has maintained an interest in. She denies him what he asks for, and then goes on to insult him, saying that he "ain't even a man... just a crazy thing" (*Child of God* 117). Lester does not seem phased by her insults and instead warns her that he "might be more than you think" (117). She then proceeds to

kick him out of the house. Here is where Lester snaps. After leaving the house like the girl has ordered, he doubles back with his rifle, watching through the window “the back of her head above the sofa” (*Child of God* 118). He shoots and kills her just as she turns around to look out the window. He then takes her body and sets fire to the house, leaving the mentally deficient child to burn. Lester has finally become what the townspeople have all subtly accused him of being: a violent and unpredictable man, a true monster.

After this murder, Lester no longer seeks the approval of the community that has shunned him. For a while, at least, he is content to create his own community. He seems to have taken the law’s word to heart when the judge tells him that he needs to “find some other way to live or some other place in the world to do it in” (*Child of God* 123). He lives in isolation, but it is a chosen isolation, and not one enforced upon him by others because they think that is what he deserves. Lester begins to kill more people and bring them to his network of caves, creating his own society and community with which to play. The enclosure of the caves mimics the strict enclosure he has been in his entire life. Though he has not been physically pressed into tight spaces, he has been confined into a specific mold of others’ expectations. His descent to the caves is a tangible embracing of the mental transformations he has undergone.

While Lester might have started out a “child of God,” much like any other man, as McCarthy’s narrator suggests early in the novel (4), he has become, at this later point, “god of his own world” (Lancaster 14). Lester even moves beyond the bounds of his own caves as he gains confidence in his newly invented self-image. He imagines

changing the outside world, making things “more orderly in the woods and in men’s souls” (*Child of God* 136) and telling “the snow to fall faster” (139). Lester seeks to change the aspects of his surroundings that “God has abandoned” (Lancaster 14), like the disorderly woods and the disordered souls of men. It is possible that Lester feels abandoned by God in his monstrous state, certainly abandoned by a society that he struggled to integrate with. He is a true Gothic monster not for the crimes he commits, but for the fact that his labeling as a monster occurred because of his representation of the unknown wild.

Even as Lester tries to remove himself from society and live in his own created world, it becomes clear that he cannot sustain this level of isolation. While he seems in control of his life and his community of the dead, he has flashes of returning to his past self where a voice questions his actions “from time to time in the name of sanity, a hand to gentle him back from the rim of his disastrous wrath” (*Child of God* 158). He later dreams of himself riding a mule, approaching his own death (171). The day after that, Lester goes to kill the man who is now living in the house that was taken from him at the beginning of the novel. Wearing the clothes of the corpses he has accumulated, he forsakes his role as creator and God as he “assimilates” (Lancaster 15) with the society he has created. Once again, he is trying to be a part of a group, albeit an all female one (the only group he has ever felt in control and a part of), and not the outsider.

Lester fails at killing the man who displaced him, losing an arm to a shotgun blast in the process, but succeeds in gaining the townspeople’s attention. He goes from being largely ignored to being targeted by those around him, such as the men who drag him

from the hospital in an attempt to find the bodies. Even though Lester is able to slip away from them, he has clearly forsaken his created community and still desires the attention and embrace of the town. On his way back to the hospital to turn himself in, Lester sees a child on a bus that reminds him of himself. The boy is looking out the window, and even though there wasn't anything there to see, "he was looking anyway" (*Child of God* 191). He recognizes his own voyeuristic tendencies in the boy, as the child looks just to be looking, and not for the vision itself. Even though Lester knows that punishment awaits him, he returns to the society that has neglected him, realizing that it is more his home than the cave world he has created, even telling the nurse at the hospital, "I'm supposed to be here" (192).

Lester has become the embodiment of a Gothic monster, on par with Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein* or Gardner's Grendel. Unlike Shelley's monster, however, Lester forces society to recognize what it has done to him by returning to it. He does not simply remove himself and melt away, but returns to the hospital. Yet he never gets the acceptance or sympathy he craves, and after he dies, he is dissected with clinical precision. Society uses him one last time for its own edification. The death and dismemberment of Lester does not indicate the success of society, however, but rather the "end of hope" (Lancaster 17). In his entrails, the medical students see visions of "monsters worse to come" (194), foreshadowing the violence that outcasts will continue to perpetrate against a society that shuns them.

It would be easy to say that Lester Ballard was a product of the community that made him, and his perversions are all a result of his being an outcast, but McCarthy's

message is more complex than that. Lester represents a man who descended past the depths that most could even imagine, and yet he still remained recognizably human. McCarthy is asking his readers to transcend the need to strictly define good or evil, and to have these balance out in life. Lester is an embodiment of both, and in death he is as human and nonessential as any other corpse, another child of God like the reader (Winchell 32).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Appalachian Mountains provide a perfect backdrop for Gothic stories. Scattered with pockets of clannish communities, the mountains keep their secrets, and do not let go easily. The isolation that the mountains' very geography influences ensures that "contention, inactivity, and wretchedness must ensue" (Crevecoeur 1), as seen in both novels. These characters drift through alien landscapes dotted with unknown monsters, or become monsters themselves; isolated from the outside world, they are unable to break free of their atonement for ancestral sins of oppression and violence. Away from the influence of government and a greater cultural diversity, "many families exhibit the most hideous parts of our society" (Crevecoeur 1), such as with Rinthy and Culla, or the dumpkeeper's family in *Child of God*. These characters move in darkness, constrained by the landscape around them as well as by their own emotional and mental states.

While it is true that “in all societies there are off-casts” (Crevecoeur 1), it is different for men who live in the mountains. As Lester exhibits, “by living in or near the woods, their actions are regulated by the wildness of the neighbourhood” (Crevecoeur 1); this creates violent tendencies as well as “ferocious, gloomy, and unsociable” natures (Crevecoeur 1). The proximity of the wild and the savagery with which both Lester and Culla must act to survive in the forests influences them in an irrefutable manner. The wilderness creates hard men, who may stray too far into the savagery of the forests and become monsters in the eyes of humanity.

McCarthy’s novels *Child of God* and *Outer Dark* both serve as defining works in the genre of Appalachian Gothic. These books share an emphasis on the isolation that the mountains impart as well as a fear of the wild spaces that make up a majority of the Appalachian Mountains. *Child of God* focuses more on the fear of wilderness being inspired by a “monster” living in the woods, while *Outer Dark* emphasizes the elements of religion that pervade and torture the region. These novels paved the way for many modern writers, such as Ron Rash or Wiley Cash, to continue within this genre.

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