
Myth and Truth in Cormac McCarthy's Southern Narratives: Reframing the Portrayal of Landscape, Society and Humanity

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Abstract:

Cormac McCarthy's novels share a common concern with humanity. They almost hinge entirely on its dark side thriving upon extremes, (common) abnormalities and cloaked reality. They also probe into ethical dilemmas and national myths while deploying a style that—in all its richness—does not waver away from poignancy and solemnness. Particularly, his Southern works explore of cultural myths in an attempt to revise prevailing visions. By exposing the horrors of the past and how they survive into the present, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Child of God* (1973) and *Suttree* (1979) unveil the failure of white American civilization with its nurturing of violent, egoistic, and supremacist myths. The narratives focus on social outcast who abandon society and seem to find no refuge in a decaying nature. Hence, the analyses show that their moral struggles, which result from foundational southern myths, represent a deeper reality within southern culture and carry universal significance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous are the literary works which portray—wittingly or unwittingly—the American national character. From Thoreau's *Walden* to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, from Cooper's *The Last of Mohicans* to Dickinson's poems, from Hawthorn's *Scarlett Letter* to Roth's *Indignation*, from Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Faulkner's *Light in August*, from Melville's *Moby-Dick* to Robinson's *Gilead*, the American is portrayed as an exceptional individual who is bound to his nation by a set of creeds. The latter not only define him but even subjugate his character to an assessment of value and belonging. Discussing the so-called American Exceptionalism, S. M Lipset asserts that "in Europe, nationality is related to community, and thus one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish. Being an American, however, is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American" (1996). The recurrence of a complex of ideals, which through successive generations seem to have gained popularity and acceptance, is easily detectable.

Several texts endorse a belief in the historical exceptionalism and cultural superiority of (regional) Americans. A few works attempt to reframe the inherent 'truth' that underlays national myths such as the 'redeemer nation', the "manifest destiny", the "melting pot", the "last best hope", the "champion of the free world", and "the self-made man". R.W.B. Lewis demonstrates that such a mythic American is "the hero of a new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling ... [he is] most easily identified with Adam before the Fall" (Lewis 4).

1. Cultural Myths and the American Consciousness

The myth of the Old South, alternately dubbed as the Deep South or the Plantation Tradition, describes the region's past in a glorious, overly-romanticized way. It is seen as a land of nobility, fineness, prosperity and gentility. Its slave-holding history is overlooked and many of the societal ills are overshadowed by such idyllic visions. Even long after such visions ceased to exist—or make sense—the insistence upon seeing the South as a region of prosperity, peace and harmony between man and nature continued reproduced in literary/filmic narratives, such as Larry McMurtry's, that focus on pastoral and romantic renderings. Only a few writers, realizing the importance of narrative in the inter-generational transmission of national experience(s), ventured into a territory that is daunting to say the least. To revisit, question, deconstruct, or counter such myths, a writer must be fully attuned to the experience of his people and fully aware of the weight such mythical symbols bear on the nation's history and culture. In other words, due to the transmittable/ inheritable nature literary representations, challenging certain prevailing flawed/narrow visions requires powerful and profound writing in order to reshape collective understanding.

In an attempt to understand literary responses to the prevalence of such cultural myths in American literature, the study examines the works of novelist Cormac McCarthy. Notably, in *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Child of God* (1973)

and *Suttree* (1979), a distinct vision is drawn to demonstrate the region's adherence to universal dilemmas. In other words, despite the prominent representation of the South as a unique and outstanding cultural community, it is in reality subject to many of the ills that drive human conduct. The land, its people and the ideals deploy, as any other land, people or ideals, glaring vulnerabilities and flaws.

2. The South: Language and a Landscape of Decay

Cormac McCarthy is one of the few writers whose literature genuinely—and ingeniously—captures the double-edgedness of America's mythical self-conception. In fact, he betrays a doubtful—but knowledgeable—insider's perspective. His brutal rendering of the American South (and later on West), with the unforgettable cast of characters that inhabit such world, forms a mosaic of paganish violence, sacred quest, romantic pastoral and neurotic oddity. The peculiarity of America-ns, that McCarthy's fiction denotes, seems to reside in its self-destructive mythology (though peculiarly enough those are exactly the myths which construct most of the American mindset). In a comparative essay between McCarthy's and O'Conner's works, entitled "The Killer Wears the Halo: Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor and the American Religion", Timothy Parrish contends that "the American does not merely find god within himself; he creates the god he finds within" (Parrish 2002, 38). He adds, the "belief that God is on America's side is the nation's most dangerous and destructive myth" which, coupled to others, led to "the bloody consequences" depicted throughout all of McCarthy's novels (Parrish 74). Therefore, it is necessary to closely examine the texts, against the background of notions widespread throughout portrayals of the south in order to gauge the author's reframing of common (canonical) representations.

The Orchard Keeper (1965) is McCarthy's first novel. Set in the Appalachian Mountains it belongs to a nuanced lineage of works belonging to the region and depicting its nature, people and (hi)stories. To use McCarthy's words, it is story about a land that is "seethed with an inchoate violence. (of) Scared men, (who were) torn, unclothed and crushed, (with a) mounting outrage and indignity" (*Orchard* 19). As in many of his other novels, friends and foes are confounded, sons, knowingly or not, turn against fathers and the world of chivalry, morality and innocence recedes into obliteration. It is simply a world inhabited by ghosts and tattered souls.

To speak about or for those souls is almost impossible that is why McCarthy's characters are often silent, their thoughts are scarcely revealed. To balance such wordlessness McCarthy's novel is fraught with plenty of descriptive passages that depict these men's surroundings: the dry, rancid, red and hot atmosphere seems to reflect the rigidity and fatality of the southerners who inhabit such world. Though their motives and schemes are concealed or unrevealed, they gravity of their acts is embodied through the language of the narrative and the rural setting in which mysteries do not unfold and tales about catastrophes are stifled.

The language that is employed is complex, lyrical, resonant and sublime. It slowly depicts a world of (misleading) stillness and monotony.

East of Knoxville Tennessee the mountains start, small ridges and spines of the folded Appalachians that contort the outgoing roads to their liking. The first of these is Red Mountain; from the crest on a clear day you can see the cool blue line of the watershed like a distant promise. In late summer the mountain bakes under a sky of pitiless blue. The red dust of the orchard road is like powder from a brick kiln (McCarthy 6)

Such description draws an image of the setting as grandiose and imposing on the scene of the narrative while also evoking a sense of ruggedness and natural beauty. This re-creates the original atmosphere and geography of the south to be pictured by a reader—who is either aware or not—of the region's landscape and its weighty influence on its inhabitants, their thoughts and behaviours. In other words, while the characters themselves are mostly aloof and reserved about their inner tensions, the surrounding natural world reflects the “pitiless” stone-like characters of McCarthy's southerners.

On the mountain the limestone shelves and climbs in ragged escarpments among the clutching roots of hickories, oaks and tulip poplars which even here brace themselves against the precarious declination allotted them by the chance drop of a seed (McCarthy 6)

This is another example of the significant use of descriptive language in the novel in order to highlight the distinctive vision of the south which McCarthy aims at highlighting. The language is both dark and complex. It evokes very strongly William Faulkner's style and diction. In way McCarthy's realistic Red Branch community is similar to Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha in its brutality, darkness and decadence. The passage conveys a sense of the untamed and rugged environment that cannot be made docile with lilacs, belles and idyllic evenings that dominate popular Southern narratives.

Many may regard McCarthy's archaic and obsolete lexicon as a mere novelistic prowess or flamboyance. Yet, as scholar Amy Hungerford asserts in, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* that McCarthy's literary use of the Bible is purposefully emptied of “doctrinal or historical content” because it seeks, through language, to fill the narrative with a “supernatural power, otherworldly communion, and transcendent authority” (xvi). In other words, McCarthy's narrative gains part of its radiance and grandeur through its stylistic proximity to the scriptural cannon. Therefore, themes such as

innocence, corruption, violence, revenge and the disrupted father-son relationship that are deeply rooted in the culture of the South are rendered with the cadence of gothic, melancholic and resounding language in an attempt to shake a resident vision of the South that refuses to be altered.

3. The South : A Venomous Society

Child of God (1973) remains as one of the most disturbing Southern novels. It explores themes of violence, degradation, and the boundaries of human morality. It unflinchingly depicts the descent of an outcast into depravity and madness. The narrative prose creates a stark atmosphere of isolation and harmfulness. In many ways the work succeeds in capturing the desolate environment of the southern village and the inner turmoil of the main character in a sticking manner which readers of popular Southern are seldom acquainted.

“He is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps” (McCarthy 4). With these words Lester Ballard is introduced. The man on whom McCarthy’s third novel is most likely based, Dianne C. Luce demonstrates, is the infamous murderer and necrophiliac Ed Gein (also known as The Butcher of Plainfield) who inspired Robert Bloch’s *Psycho* (1959) and its film adaptation by Alfred Hitchcock (1960). McCarthy revisits the horrific Wisconsin tale and the effect of his Sevier County tale is just as striking. Lester, the central figure in the novel and in town, is a deviant loner whose father’s horrid suicide he and the villagers could never forget. “They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself” (McCarthy 21). He is seen in the opening passages, years later, beaten and driven

out of his barn house. He is later falsely accused of rape. So, he resorts to a cave in the Appalachian mountains.

His attempts to socialize are all failed. Even the congregation at Sixmile Church, “like a cast of puppets” turns when Ballard comes in “with his hat in his hand and shut the door and sat alone on the rear bench ... A windy ruffle of whispers went among them. The preacher stopped”. To Ballard, it is a mere “biblical babbling”. So, he reads “the notices on the board at the back of the church. This week's offering. Last week's offering. Six dollars and seventy-four cents. The numbers in attendance” (McCarthy 31). At odds with such generosity of the Thou-shalt-love-thy-neighbour-as-thyself believers is their conduct towards Lester. “A woodpecker hammered at a drainpipe outside and those strung heads listed and turned to the bird for silence. Ballard had a cold and snuffled loudly through the service but nobody expected he would stop if God himself looked back askance so no one looked” (McCarthy 32). To them, it appears, Ballard is a creature inferior to a bird. He is a misfit and an outcast. Though so far harmless, as one of the local folks, remembering him beating another kid in their childhood, says “I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that. He never done nothin to me” (McCarthy 18). Soon, he begins to perform his sadistic and vengeful atrocities which will be discovered by the Sevier community only much later.

A persisting question that begins to arise with the very first pages is “why is this Ballard called “a child of God”?”. The story unfolds in abrupt breaks, disjointed folks’ talk, and an objective—somewhat indifferent—third person narration. The mountain folk accent, their superficial manners and rigid ways add to the story’s local color. Kenneth Lincoln rightly notes how the narrative exposes the crazy Ballard and his gossip-seeking fellows “in twisted pointillist sketches at some distance through sordid comic riffs. Low dark satire and soiled medieval caricature, *Child of God* is a ragged mutt of a fiction, nothing to please readers of Jane Austen or George Eliot” (Lincoln 52).

It is indeed a very unconventional narrative in more ways than one. Consequently, it is very hard to determine why such a morally disturbing tale is titled *Child of God*. It is a commentary-cum-critique of the southern society and an unflinching case-study of a maniac. The victim-cum-monster Ballard pries on his female victims, either kills them or fetches their corpses, and preserves their decaying bodies in order to satisfy his perverse lust. Always an outcast and never a member of one, he attempts to construct his own community and “recreate a domestic home in the unhomelike [that] conflates graves with houses, and living family with dead strangers” (Ellis 72). His longing for a family and desperate rage at a society that mistreats him may be the reason for his descent into barbarous violence and savagery yet the novel never—explicitly or implicitly—aligns with or refutes the probability of such a claim. The reason for their mistreatment is unclear as well. Yet, his neighbors often speak about his lineage. His grandfather “was a by god White Cap” (McCarthy 81); one of those Post-bellum South vigilantes who were “a bunch of lowlife thieves and cowards and murderers. The only thing they ever done was to whip women and rob old people of their savins. Pensioners and widows. And murder people in their beds at night” (McCarthy 165). A man engaged in that genealogical hearsay asserts “you can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn't outstrip em all” (McCarthy 1993, 81). What caused Lester’s insanities may have little to do with his blood ties, but even so isn’t he introduced to Christian readers as “Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God *much like yourself perhaps*” ? [emphasis added] (McCarthy 4). If he is much like his fellow Sevier Countians, much like Southerners, Christians, Americans and perhaps all ‘children of God’—humans at large—then what right have others to condemn him? While the few first pages prepare readers for a Christian

understanding of *Child of God*, the subsequent unfoldings defy such expectations and trigger instead questionings of identification, sympathy and judgment. It becomes problematic whether readers feel that Ballard is “much like” themselves and if not they are called to re-examine their reaction to his atrocities and miseries.

Hence, the novel delves into the darkest aspects of human nature, forcing readers to confront uncomfortable truths about society and the individual. It raises questions about the nature of evil and the fragile boundaries that separate civilization from chaos.

4. The South: Humanity in Crisis

Suttree (1979), which is the longest and the most “humorous” of McCarthy’s works, reflects once again its author’s attitudes towards his southern society. It is a narrative of frustration, wilderness and meditations on life in proximity to nature. Told in archaic diction, and sometimes wholly fabricated words accentuates the novel’s symbolism and complexity of concerns.

Cornelius Suttree, the protagonist, lives in a houseboat near the polluted Tennessee River after abandoning a life of a privileged son and a dogmatic Knoxville society to join a cast of “thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, toppers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees” (McCarthy 457). His search for an asylum away from urban life leads him to starvation, hallucinations, but enriching experiences as well. His identity crisis is manifested in his self-conscious wonderings “am I a monster, are there monsters in me?” (McCarthy 366) and existential questions “what deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of hydrophobia could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh” (130)? The

narrative reflects a struggle (un-tragically rendered) between the rural and the urban, the sacred and the profane, the communal and the individual, the material and the spiritual, the soul and the flesh, the terrestrial and the transcendent, the temporary and the eternal. As Potts notes in his study of the novel “Suttree's crisis of identity is, in truth, a crisis of sociality” (“Ragged” 77).

The recurrent motif in literature, i.e alienation, is often an indication of discontent and renunciation of some—or all—social order. Yet, Suttree seems to find peace nowhere; he even appears unable to locate his own being as he could “scarce tell where his being ended or the world began nor did he care” (McCarthy 286). So his self-exile and reserved communication with a community of “simmering sinners” only helps him achieve a limited reconciliation with his own world and himself. “His departure from the stygian river and the ‘Dis-topian’ city, described in the epilogue, is a symbolic departure from the purgatorial/gnostic world that has been his experience” (Luce 229). Thus, his undefined and unattained spiritual quest is only half-rewarding and half-fulfilled as far as traditional quest narratives are concerned. Gerhard Hoffmann discusses McCarthy’s relation to the southern tradition and notes his unique perspective among contemporary novelists. In “Strangeness, Gaps, and the Mystery of Life: Cormac McCarthy's Southern Novels”, he argues that McCarthy’s concern with “normal” people who are also “unnormal” because of their “primordial nature” and his stylistic innovations in language and form sets him—simultaneously—with and apart from the southern and postmodern literature (Hoffmann 237).

“While all of Cormac McCarthy's fiction is recondite, most of his characters are primitives who, in high contrast to their maker, have only a rudimentary facility with language” (Rothfork 385). This statement is largely true of all of

McCarthy's southern novels. Whatever sinister or vile disturbances his fiction depicts, it is done in such a way as to suggest primitiveness and inarticulateness. His novels are often described as bleak, opaque and defying psychological depth. Yet, intriguingly enough, the vision they draw, of the south for instance, is penetrating and profound in its cutting through the region's most endearing and enduring images. Dianne C. Luce, who is one of the most cited scholars in the field of McCarthy studies, presents the aggregate of her years-long research in *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. Her monograph focuses on the early works yet it helps elucidate a worldview that is envisioned by McCarthy the poet and the philosopher. She notes, "issues of value and vision concerning humanity's understanding of its very nature, of its history and culture and of its place within the natural environment inform all of his work. But they are seldom presented overtly, sociologically, politically" (vii). It is this very quality which grants McCarthy's literature its magnificence, though mostly appearing detached or unconcerned it draws the reader into such enigmatic—and eternal—questions as those regarding life, nature, humanity and its value or meaning. She adds, "his bedrock philosophical concerns" is the deeper engagement with "human and natural history or, more essentially, with the universal questions of humanity's place within the cosmos and the relation of our spiritual nature to our psychological and material being" (vii). The Tennessee period hence reflects his earlier vision of the world. His adventure in writing about such a region, which is known with a problematic history and a complex of cultural and psychological underpinnings, reflects his determination to search for answers in the "most cursed" of places. Luce's approach consists of tracing what McCarthy read, saw or heard in order to understand what he wrote. Her method is quite successful as far as McCarthy's literary reading of the world is concerned. Many of her remarks regarding incidents or works that correspond to—or inform—McCarthy's literature are

insightful and may help readers situate the novels within a concrete frame of reference for they often seem to spring out of an exotic imagination rather than an actual reality.

Suttree could be seen as McCarthy's pronounced denunciation of the Southern society and its conventions. The protagonist's search for meaning in a harsh and unforgiving world reflects the complexities of human nature that transcend boundaries of region or country. Thus, the novel explores universal questions about moral and ethical dilemmas that help revisit many of the make-believes that are prevalent in southern literature.

5. McCarthy's Southern Fiction: Counter-myth

Christopher J. Walsh asserts that McCarthy's southern work can be viewed "as part of a broader Appalachian discourse which critiques foundational Southern and American myths and cultural narratives. This discourse gives a voice to those individuals and groups who inhabit this 'other America' and who have been absented from official historical records and artifacts" (254). In a similar vein, John G. Cawelti, in "Cormac McCarthy: Restless Seekers" probes deeper into questions of myth. He says, regarding the author's "central themes of the failure of white American civilization and its inescapable burden of guilt" that:

[works such as McCarthy's are] compelling reevaluations of the basic myths of American Exceptionalism and superiority and powerful critiques of the multiple failures of the American dream ... a profound loss of confidence in America's uniqueness, moral superiority, and global omnipotence. In the context of this ongoing spiritual crisis, the south and the west, which once helped define America mythically and symbolically through their otherness, are now being pursued by both intellectual critics and conservative fundamentalists as symbols of the real truth of America (313-14)

Grotesque and eccentric as they may seem, McCarthy's southern characters are imbued with a sense of reality that may

appear too penchant or shocking to reconcile to yet their tales are part and parcel of the deep southern culture. In fact what renders these works memorable is their universal significance; they are indeed entrenched in regional history and local setting yet they fundamentally seek to portray the naked reality of humanity elsewhere and everywhere. Doing so, these works transcend not only generic but also space-time boundaries and hence offer a critique of humanity's self-measurement i.e its righteous theology, racial structure, supremacist ecology, psychological bigotry and mythical self-definition. The reader is called to join the (author's) spiritual quest to "accept the role of storyteller and witness" (Lilley 3). Ballard seeks asylum from himself in a hospital for the demented. Suttree inhabits a dilapidated houseboat and Sheriff Bell eventually retreats back—defeated against Chigurh's outlandish criminal narcissism—to the confines of his abode. The illiterate kid, who carries a bible and sleeps in churches which—as his soul—are ruined, is exterminated. And the judge dances on and on. These narratives take the reader in a journey back in time to the southwestern lands. It is a horrific journey but also an eye-opening one. It seriously attempts to damage the reader's ignorance about these regions' past. And it eventually turns to a journey into the self as—or more—profound than Marlow's journey to the Congo River.

In fact, what makes these narratives even more impactful is their penchant connection to the present-day dilemmas. It appears the seeds were long since planted and watered, and what is now discussed as a postmodern crisis is no more than those thorns' punctures. It is simply a matter of seeding and sawing:

Oil pollution, cyanide poisoning, cultural meltdown, and political chicanery take place in the caliche hardpan between storylines. Wars ravage *other* lands, the politicians say, as they once ravaged this land in border and civil wars, and the wounds stay with us ... The Alamo, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, the Civil War between North and South, global wars to end all wars, foreign conflicts of slavery, conquest, territory, imperial power, faux democracy, oil,

uranium, outsourced productivity, our righteous War on Terror. And the Southwest keeps resettling, or unsettling (Lincoln 153)

McCarthy's works, taken collectively, seem to suggest that the origins of the country's sickness lies in its very roots, its myths, and as long as these are not understood for what they really are—violent, egoistic, supremacist, and unholy—more trouble will come. That is why all of his works evoke these myths—and use them—to re-conceptualize an anti-version of the American society, culture and history. Yet, in a way, it cannot be said that McCarthy uses the master's tools to dismantle the master's house because what he tries to expose is that there is no master's house to begin with. In effect, it is not the greed for larger possessions and richer opportunities that can be blamed for such mindless violence; it is the will for power, supremacy and holiness that seems to nurture such acts. It is the sacralization, the legitimization of such acts in the name of an imagined deity that caused these long-lasting effects.

6. CONCLUSION

The analyses of McCarthy's early fiction, namely *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Child of God* (1973) and *Suttree* (1979), show that its cast of morally-struggling spiritually-impoverished characters, is an inextricable syncretic representation of a society that is so self-destructively conservative about its sacralized notions of faith, identity, power and community that its 'members' fail to set themselves free of such notions without bringing down with self, esteem and universe. The journeys depicted in McCarthy's works, while horrific, offer profound insights into the past and the self. The texts suggest a counter-mythic version of Southern society, culture, and history, by exposing the flawed nature of tradition, supremacy (in all its forms), and the sacralization of violent acts.

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