Where "dead people lay like saints": Gothic Modernism in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Cormac McCarthy uses Gothic and Modernist modes in *Child of God*, a novel primarily known for its place in the Southern Gothic genre. In Gothic Modernism, writers blur traditional literary techniques—in the form of Gothic tropes or stylistic choices such as the framing narrative, unsettling landscapes, or depictions of madness—into Modernist techniques, using experimentation to evoke alienation or engage in social critique. I argue that *Child of God*, though published in 1973, is a Gothic Modernist text due to McCarthy's stylistics, aesthetics, themes, and tropes. By looking at the novel through the lens of Gothic Modernism, we better understand McCarthy's reasoning, influences, and methodology for telling the story of Lester Ballard. For example, McCarthy depicts the grotesque, death, and decay in eerie settings suggesting isolation, alienation, disillusionment, and individualism, layering the novel with nuance and experimentation. By bridging gaps between genres, eras, and aesthetics, McCarthy challenges readers' expectations of the novel form and how we are complicit in our communities. I use research from Gothic Modernist scholars such as John Riquelme and Charles Crow to support the argument that McCarthy, consciously or unconsciously, uses Gothic and Modernist tropes in his stylistic approach to the novel.

Horace Walpole's 1764 novel Castle of Otranto is generally the literary work that most scholars agree for where Gothic literature begins as audiences now recognize the genre.[1] Despite the "Gothic" term's long semantic history, Walpole is generally considered the first author to label his own tale as "Gothic" (Groom xiii). Gothic literature, and its characteristic darkness and despair, laid a foundation for what are now considered classic horror elements: ghosts, monsters, supernatural happenings, and so on. While most contemporary Gothic tales do not focus on a now-classic style of monster—as seen in novels such as Bram Stoker's Dracula with vampires or Mary Shelley's Frankenstein with reanimated corpses turned flesh golems—the monstrous instead appears with a more realistic focus on the monsters within humanity itself. Virginia Woolf comments on this shift, noting that "monsters who once froze and terrified us now gibber in some dark cupboard of the servants' hall" and that "[i] t is [now] at the ghosts within us that we shudder" (133). However, psychological elements of the Gothic, such as manifestations of trauma, guilt, anxiety, or memory, continue to persist in contemporary literature.

Over time, the Gothic genre has expanded and become versatile, often overlapping with other genres, such as Modernism. Experimentation, particularly with genre and form, is an important element of Modernist literature. For example, writers such as T. S. Eliot and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) blended poetry with myth, Biblical references, and other literary allusions to create poems more akin to an experience than an ode to a beautiful thing. This Modernist experimentation reflects its time in its scientific and logic-based development, as Sigmund Freud's work on the uncanny and dreams rose in popularity and Ezra Pound made his now-infamous advice to artists to "make it new." Gothic literature and Modernism share many characteristics, including elements of the "unconscious," the "subconscious," and the "influence of unseen agencies" such as social codes, which often directly affect characters beyond their control (Groom xv). The blending of the two genres is what scholar John Riquelme calls "Dark Modernity," or what scholar Taryn Norman simply calls "Gothic Modernism."

Gothic Modernism is "a strain of Modernism that makes use of the well-established language and conventions of the Gothic terms to express recognizably Modernist concerns about the nature of subjectivity, temporality, language, and knowledge" (Norman 2). This dual genre happens when writers blur past

1. I will capitalize "Gothic" in keeping with the scholarly norm, but I will also capitalize verbiage like "Gothicizing" when using my own words. When citing a source, however, I will preserve their preference for capitalization

literary techniques—in the form of Gothic tropes or stylistic choices like the framing narrative—into Modernism, usually using experimentation, alienation, or social critique. Regrettably, Gothic Modernism scholarship is generally lacking; thus, the correlation "between the Gothic and modernism is still critically under-explored," which is a gap I seek to help fill (Wurtz 103). Despite Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God* being published in 1973—a time long past Modernism's prime, reaching into Postmodernist territory with all chronological certainty—I argue that *Child of God* is, nonetheless, a Gothic Modernist text because of its style and contents. McCarthy uses Gothic elements—such as the grotesque, death and decay, and eerie settings—which he weaves in tandem with Modernist concerns and stylistic choices—such as isolation and alienation, disillusionment, and individualism—to craft a tale exploring and questioning both modern progress as well as the fragmentation of community in a post-Industrial Revolution, post-agrarian Southern United States.

Cormac McCarthy is "[k]nown for his exploration of violence and human degradation in bleak scenarios" and is thus usually categorized as a Southern Gothic writer alongside authors such as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Conner (Kimak 76). In a careful overview of the formal stylistics in *Child of God*, one begins to see that the novel's structure and style—not just its characterization, setting, and plot—are also interwoven with Gothic and Modernist elements. For example, Part I of *Child of God* has seven short anecdotal chapters told by different community members which are usually in an unnamed first-person point of view. Six out of seven anecdotes tell short, snapshot memories about Lester. These short anecdotes are where readers get the majority of their information about Lester's past, including the suicide of his father and interactions from his childhood with other former friends and playmates. These short memories, presented in a social storytelling fashion, evoke the classic Gothic structure of "stories-within-stories" or "inserted narratives," much like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Groom 77).

While most of the novel is told chronologically, the anecdotal chapters appear to be connected like one long conversation. However, when the anecdotes are compared to the rest of the novel, they seem to happen chronologically *after* Lester becomes a hot conversation topic. After finishing the novel, most readers will probably assume these conversations happen either after Lester is arrested or when he is officially "sent to the state hospital at Knoxville," both of which would be natural gossip starters within the small, rural community (McCarthy 193). Cormac McCarthy leaves the exact time and reasoning for these conversations ambiguous, which is in itself Gothic, lending a sense of mystery to the text. As scholar Charles Crow notes, many Gothic writers use

differing "time sequence[s] and shifting points of view to create ambiguity" in their writing ("Realism" 93). This ambiguity opens the story up for multiple readings and interpretations, allowing readers to study the parts of the novel for themselves and try to place them into a logical sequence. But to understand more fully McCarthy's decision to include these ambiguous anecdotes, the Modernist sense of ambiguity must also be considered.

In addition to their Gothic roles as inserted narratives, these anecdotal chapters could also be considered a Modernist stylistic choice. Modernist authors often used multiple points of view and stream-of-consciousness to question the nature of truth, perception, and reality. The most well-known example of this in Modernism is William Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*, where Faulkner uses viewpoints from Benjy, Quentin, and Jason Compson to tell differing parts of the story. For example, the Benjy section is told through stream-of-consciousness, where one memory flows into the next without many clear indications of chronology. While not explicitly unfiltered like Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness, it is clear that Cormac McCarthy allows the conversations of one memory to flow into another without stopping during the anecdotal chapters. The clearest example of this technique is when an unnamed character is telling a story about Lester and his rifle. The narrator says that Lester is an incredibly skilled shooter, getting "run off out at the fair one time" because of his skill in winning stuffed animals in a shooting game (McCarthy 57). This anecdote directly leads to the narrator's sharing another memory about shooting and fairs where a con man pretends to shoot pigeons but has an assistant "loadin the old pigeons up the ass with them little firecrackers," showing the con man for an unskilled shooter (McCarthy 58). Without a pause, another memory is told of a different carnival where one man paid to try and fight an ape to impress a girl when he was a teenager (McCarthy 59-60). The flow of these stories, shared without indicating a pause, heavily resembles both Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness technique in its unstopping, natural flow and a conversation between people standing around together. Both techniques feel conversational and unedited, making little sense broken apart but feeling like a guided flow together.

Similarly, Cormac McCarthy's writing style should be examined closer as being both Gothic and Modernist in its actual stylistic qualities. These separate sets of stylistics play off each other, adding a deeper nuance to McCarthy's language. His writing is Gothic in its dark descriptions and occasional ambiguity. I also argue that McCarthy's writing is Gothic because of the occasionally beautiful, poetic, but nonetheless grotesque or violent prose he produces in *Child of God*. The poetic Gothic often has lush, detailed descriptions of darker themes, and this style can easily be seen in classical Gothic tales such as

Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*. One example of this poetic-yet-unsavory description in *Child of God* is when Lester urinates: "He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. . . . Wasps pass through the laddered light from the barnslats in a succession of strobic moments, gold and trembling" (McCarthy 4). This scene, "wherein swirls a pale foam with bits of straw," is Gothic in its evocation of the excreted, grotesque by-products of the body (McCarthy 4). Likewise, McCarthy's language here is celebratory in its poetic description of urinating on a barn wall. Such topics often hinge on the taboo in literature because of their association with being an unsaid act occurring behind closed doors and off screen from the narrative eye. Such a beautiful description of a traditionally unsavory act brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body. Bakhtin posits that functions like urinating, defecating, copulating, et cetera, are all seen as celebrations of the body because doing these essential acts means the body is alive (Dentith 240-41). Since Bakhtin's grotesque body has been heavily associated with Gothic literature and its scholarship, it is no surprise that poetic urinating further Gothicizes the novel by celebrating a minor, unsavory act.

Another example of Cormac McCarthy's style where the grotesque becomes celebrated as beauty can be seen when Lester watches hunting dogs take down a boar: "Ballard watched this ballet twirl and swirl . . . watched the lovely blood welter there in its holograph of battle . . . [watched] the dark heart's blood, pinwheel and pirouette" (McCarthy 69). This violent description is beautiful, making what should be a gruesome act of killing into a "ballet" or an artistic, sanguinary performance worthy of witness and spectacle (McCarthy 69). This observed violent moment draws a line of inspiration to Lester's later underground playhouse, which he populates with his careful arrangement of Gothic dolls in the form of corpses in the caves. Between both the grotesque, nearly taboo topics of urinating and killing or death, scholar Charles Crows suggests that these are examples of the "Gothic's power to suggest topics [usually] hidden from the public discourse" ("Realism" 81). Thus, the Gothic stylistics in his descriptions create a vehicle for McCarthy to make the taboo and grotesque beautiful. While Gothic literature is no stranger to violent acts, McCarthy carefully shows the reader what Lester sees in his descent to madness: violence and blood are no longer things to be feared, and an act of violence can be artistic expression. However, while occasionally poetic in its darkness, McCarthy's language is just as often filled with Modernist fragmentation, complicating the narrative to further reflect the lack of simplicity in Lester's situation.

Cormac McCarthy's writing is not entirely Gothically inspired, despite the abundance of his grotesque and violent descriptions. McCarthy's writing is also

interlaced with sparse, occasionally fragmented, or run-on bits of experimental prose that feel at home beside Modernists like Ezra Pound with *The Cantos* or T. S. Eliot's landmark piece *The Waste Land*. For example, the very first sentence of *Child of God* is a run-on, a wandering figure of stitched-together fragments:

> They came like a caravan of carnival folk up through the swales of broomstraw and across the hill in the morning sun, the truck rocking and pitching in the ruts and the musicians on chairs in the truckbed teetering and tuning their instruments, the fat man with guitar grinning and gesturing to others in a car behind and bending to give a note to the fiddler who turned a fiddlepeg and listened with a wrinkled face. (McCarthy 1)

This opening sentence reflects natural human speech patterns more than polished prose, leaving readers glad to take a metaphorical breath after finally finishing it. Modernists were keen to experiment with language and form, especially if that experimentation broke previously traditional forms, such as the classic sentence's grammatical structure. Fragmentation was a common way for writers to attempt to mimic humanity's emotional and subconscious states more accurately, as William Faulkner does in *The Sound and the Fury*. Modernists were also interested in multiple or different viewpoints, particularly because "the nature of truth is never certain," leading readers to question whether the eye telling Lester's story is a reliable narrator (Campbell 2). Between the fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness, and multiple points of view from the anecdotal sections, McCarthy creates a distinctly blurred and Gothically ambiguous style, leaving more questions raised than answered. These complications from the stylistics of the two genres add to the sense that McCarthy tells readers not everything in Lester's tale is easy to digest or judge.

Cormac McCarthy's experimentation with formalistic concerns is both Modernist and Gothic in *Child of God*. As aforementioned, experimentation with language and breaking formal and traditional language boundaries was common in Modernism. One of the clearest examples is McCarthy's breaking of the fourth wall, where his unnamed narrator speaks directly to the reader. The narrator tells us that Lester is "[a] child of God much *like yourself* perhaps" (McCarthy 4, emphasis added). The narrator directly speaks to the reader a second time toward the end of the novel, bidding the reader to look at Lester and "[s]ee him. You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, *like you*" (McCarthy 156, emphasis added). Breaking the boundaries of the understood fictional space adds a complicated layer to the novel, raising a question of how much of a part the

reader plays in hearing Lester's story. McCarthy further experiments with the traditional novel's form and eliminates many formal language conventions, such as quotation marks, chapter markers, and often dialogue tags. While there are "Part" markers for each third of *Child of God*, McCarthy forgoes the tradition of adding more frequent markers, such as "Chapter One" or even a number, to indicate where one chapter ends and another begins. McCarthy does have page breaks, but these do not serve the same purpose in ease of access that a referential marker like "Chapter Seven" normally would for readers. By not engaging in traditional boundary-marking of the novel, McCarthy is experimenting with the novel's structure as a whole, implicating that the tale's purpose is more of an experience, or perhaps a warning, than entertainment. This Modernist experimentation is taken further by McCarthy's Gothic additions, amplifying the reader's experience of unease around the tale.

While McCarthy's lack of boundary-making implies a certain level of blurring and blending that Modernists often did with genre or point-of-view, it also has a distinct sense of Gothic ambiguity. McCarthy's dialogue is generally easy enough to keep up with when it is between two characters, as there is a lack of room for confusion with only two speakers. However, when multiple characters are speaking, the lack of quotation marks, and often dialogue tags, makes the ambiguity much more challenging for a reader to accurately decide which character speaks. A perfect example of this is when Lester escapes the group of men who pull him from the hospital:

> That little son of a bitch.
>
> Where is he?
>
> He's by god gone.
>
> Well let's get after him.
>
> I cain't get through the hole. (McCarthy 185)

There is simply no way to say for sure who says what line, but this Gothic ambiguity "tempt[s] readers to construct their own narratives" from the missing information (Crow, "Realism" 75). The speakers' identities are ambiguous because of the lack of dialogue tags, but the tone and level of emotions from the men are also unclear due to McCarthy forgoing exclamation points or even commas to provide contextual clues. For example, "I cain't get through the hole" implies a calm or resigned tone, whereas "I cain't get through the hole!" or "'I cain't get through the hole,' he spat," would imply a more nuanced tone of panic or anger (McCarthy 185). McCarthy keeps parts of his dialogue Gothically

ambiguous and tempts his readers with puzzle pieces of half-withheld information, as it brings to mind other Gothic "found evidence" tales, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* with its newspaper clippings, journal entries, and letters.

Cormac McCarthy also builds the various settings in *Child of God* to be both Gothic and Modernist in their configurations. The city scenes—here defined as the industrial center of the county with a post office, grocer, and police station—are where McCarthy gives readers a glimpse into Modernism, albeit briefly. When Lester is within the city limits, he is only there because he is either dealing with the police or has the means to spend money, such as his cash theft or property theft (e.g., the wristwatches) from his victims. McCarthy makes a subtle commentary here on the progress of industrialism in small, rural communities: society has changed from its past of heavy reliance on agrarian lifestyles to a more cash-based system. Lester Ballard is "lean and bitter" (41) when he has to hunt for himself, or he buys plenty of food on credit from the grocer where he racks up "[t]hirty four dollars and nineteen cents'" worth of debt in groceries (McCarthy 125). There is an undercurrent in these binary images, which suggests the traditional path of hunting and growing one's own food is no longer viable, or at the very least, not comfortable or easy. Modernity's industrial progress has likewise changed the point-of-view of the citizens (both within the fictional space of the novel and in America's reality) to where the idea of living without an hourly or salary-paying job is now often seen as shameful.

This shift of views toward a more industrial-minded and cash-based society can be seen in the sheriff, Fate, who has a more acceptable job and is being paid a salary to do service work rather than making a living through agrarian means. Fate comments to Lester while arresting him that a "*[m]an of leisure* like yourself . . . outghtn't to mind helpin *us workers* unscramble a little misunderstandin" (McCarthy 51, emphasis added). Despite his ability to survive by shooting his own game and collecting leftover corn from fields, Fate looks down on Lester's lack of a "real" job. Of course, Lester's crimes of theft to eat are not to be commended, but even before the events of the novel, he has a farm with crops and animals; therefore, Lester has never had a "real" job within the space of this increasingly cash-based society he lives in. He lacks the skillset and knowledge to do many hourly-paying jobs, yet Lester has an entirely different set of abilities in farming, hunting, and gathering. As scholar Rebecca Peters-Golden puts it, Lester showcases the "difficulties of failing to be modern, being failed by modernity, [and] attaining modernity" in his inability to assimilate with society and be gainfully employed (4). Modernity rejects Lester, showing its Gothically-inflected "horrors of capitalist reality" as agrarian lifestyles are pushed out in favor of industrial progress (Peters-Golden

11). While Modernism critiques all governing systems—industrial and technological progress included—it is the erasure of agrarian skills and the implied horrors of wage slavery that adds a very Gothic inflection to the comparison between the urban and rural areas in the novel.

The Gothic inflection continues as McCarthy sets his tale in Sevier County, Tennessee, which is notable for its lack of identification. The place is described by its county, a collective name, rather than a singular city's name. The setting for Lester's tale becomes ambiguous enough to feel mysterious, reminding readers of classic Gothic tales with settings that call to distant places away from the predicted readership.[2] This deliberate choice makes it clear that the settings in *Child of God* are largely rural and pastoral; while there are city scenes in the novel, much of the plot takes place in the forest, caves, and the countryside. The relationship between out-of-the-way settings is often inherent in the Gothic, which scholar Charles Crow comments on as "materials for the Gothic can be found in apparently mundane small towns and rural communities" ("Realism" 66). The horrors of a small town are different, but no lesser, than their city counterparts in tales such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

However, the Gothic genre has expanded well beyond its popularized European beginnings. The Southern United States has now become "the principal region of American Gothic" due to "its legacy of profound social and economic problems" (124) as well as its notorious reputation of Southern people clinging to "memories of the past, and to faded symbols of the dead" (Crow, "American Gothic" 125). Topics such as the South's reluctance to socio-political progression, in the sense of being haunted by its past, in the post-antebellum period are in no short supply. Novels such as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* all show the ties between the South, race, rural or small communities, and clinging to the past. But McCarthy goes one step further, where the forest and caves within the rural Sevier County are the most Gothic settings of *Child of God*, further contrasting the novel's more modern, civilized, and urban area.

The Gothic forest is so archetypal in its "topographical" inclusion that it has nearly become an expected cliche in both Gothic literature and horror, particularly for horror films (Groom 77). Ecogothic scholar Elizabeth Parker calls the Gothic forest "an archetypal site of dread in the collective human imagination," alluding that the forest is more often an untamed wilderness than an enchanting wood in Gothic tales because of

2. Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto is set in Italy, but it was first published in England. Similarly, The Romance of the Forest by Ann Radcliffe is set largely in France.

its potential for isolation (1). This archetypal fear of the forest appears in many classic Gothic tales, from Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* to Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntley*, or to a lesser degree in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Lester's connection to the landscape is evident and profound through several points in the novel: he is connected to the land by his abilities to hunt, forage, navigate the woods easily, and find out-of-the-way places to live. The first offense in the novel is the county's taking his family farm and land away from him for not paying taxes; this connection implies that Lester does not just see the farm and its land as property but as part of himself and his familial legacy. When Lester is first expelled from his ancestral land, he takes shelter in a primarily abandoned hunting cabin, and he mostly steals food from surrounding farms or prowls the woods for animals to kill for survival.

Lester becomes more closely intertwined with the forest as he comes to rely on it and its animals for food. Rather than being a visitor like hikers or lovers-to-be, Lester slips into being a dwelling predator. However, this increasingly wild and predator-like behavior means the forest becomes haunted by Lester's comings and goings, starting with his voyeurism of the couple having sexual intercourse in a car (McCarthy 20). Lester's haunting of the forest increases with his crimes of necrophilia and body stealing (87-88), then murder directly followed by more acts of necrophilia (McCarthy 151). The forest becomes a "fearful space [because it is] inhabited by threatening characters (or creatures) and marked by deep-seated secrets," which means that Lester Ballard is, in a sense, the monster in the woods, looking for his next opportunity (Hughes and Smith 9). Lester's secrets grow as his monstrosity does, and the trajectory of Lester's loss of civility and self is clear as his crimes become more heinous. McCarthy not only Gothicizes the forest by making it a place haunted by Lester and his horrific crimes; it is further Gothicized in its innate isolating ability to aid Lester in finding easy victims, and that isolation helps Lester commit his crimes largely uninterrupted.

Lester Ballard, too, is inherently built with both Gothic and Modernist characteristics in mind. However, the most prominent and overarching indication of Lester's characteristics as a Modernist-built man is simply the novel's focus on him. Modernists were deeply concerned with Individualism, where a single person and their point of view became more important than the society around them at large. This Modernist focus on the individual can be seen in Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight,* with its focus on the inner workings of Sasha Jensen, or Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* revolving around the character John Singer. While Lester never gets a first-person point-of-view chapter, readers instead get to see the Individualism in *Child of God* as a narrative over-the-shoulder view combined with the anecdotal chapters, most

of which likewise focus on Lester Ballard and his past. Ballard, too, is individualistic in his isolation and, indeed, his alienation. He isolates himself regularly, from taking shelter in an abandoned hunting cabin—which he cleans up to the best of his ability—to the more extreme isolation of his cave system. He is even isolated by choice before the novel begins, living at his ancestral farm away from other people. Ballard likewise often provides for himself by whatever means he finds necessary, such as stealing food or shooting game to cook and eat; Lester does not seek community help because he knows he will not receive it.

While Lester leans into his self-made isolation, it is crucial to note that his community has also alienated him long before the events of the novel unfold. As readers see in the anecdotal sections, many people seem to have off-putting or violent stories to tell about Lester, from the suicide of his father to the childhood story of bullying turned worse. Lester is at least partially alienated from his community when, as a child, he hits a fellow child in the face. The unnamed narrator of this anecdote tells the reader: "I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that. He never done nothin to me" (McCarthy 17-18). Between his mother's running off and causing a scandal, his father's committing suicide, and a childhood mistake of lashing out, it seems that Lester has been avoided and alienated for much of his life. Unfortunately, this alienation only continues when Lester is an adult. As I discussed earlier, Lester is alienated by his community in the example of the sheriff, Fate Turner, by his refusal to participate in gainful, cash-based employment.

However, this alienation shows up again when Lester tries to flirt and seek sexual companionship legitimately (i.e., not through voyeurism, rape, or necrophilia, as he does in other parts of the novel). For example, Lester seems to believe that the daughters of Reubel, the dump keeper, are easy sexual targets because Reubel's nine daughters are sexually active and falling "pregnant one by one" (McCarthy 27). Instead, he is rejected by at least two of the daughters in turn, being told "[*y*]*ou* ain't got nothin I want" in response to Lester's offer of a gift (McCarthy 77, emphasis added). No one owes Lester sexual companionship, and the rejection is justified for many reasons. But it is clear he does not expect to be rejected with such finality. Later, another daughter of the dump keeper scornfully tells Lester, "[y]ou ain't even a man. You're just a crazy *thing*," effectively creating an even more profound sense of alienation, as Ballard is equated to an object rather than a person (McCarthy 117, emphasis added). Much like Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein*, Lester Ballard spends his time as "a being in constant search for personal companionship," making him akin to a socially alienated monster himself (Lancaster 133). His failures to connect with living women socially, romantically, and

physically lead to Lester's demented drive to take those connections for himself via rape, necrophilia, and murder.

Lester Ballard's social alienation is only amplified by his Modernist sense of disillusionment in governing systems, whether they be the police or rules of sociability. Lester is falsely accused of rape early in the novel, and while he did steal the woman's dress and slap her—which are crimes in themselves—he found the woman after her rape occurred. Though he tries to tell the police that he has nothing to do with the actual rape of the woman, the police do not believe him. In fact, the police allow the accusing woman to start a physical altercation with Ballard as she "slapped Ballard's mouth," and when he begins to fight back, the police restrain him instead of her (McCarthy 52). The woman is allowed to kick Ballard while the deputy has a knee in his back to bring Lester to his knees. His disillusionment with justice is shown when he says, "[y]ou sons of bitches . . . Goddamn all of ye" and is described as "almost crying" at the treatment he receives (McCarthy 52). Despite the lack of evidence tying him to the woman's rape, Ballard is sentenced to nine days in jail, and presumably, his other crimes—physically assaulting her with a slap and stealing her dress—are not brought up to the police, let alone punished.

When Lester is released, however, his Modernist disillusionment with ruling systems—in this case, the police—is deepened once more as the sheriff asks him mockingly, "[w]hat sort of meanness have you got laid out for next" (McCarthy 56). Despite Lester's vehement denial of having any such plans, the sheriff presses him:

> I figure you ought to give us a clue. Make it more fair. Let's see: failure to comply with a court order, public disturbance, assault and battery, public drunk, rape. I guess murder is next on the list[,] ain't it? Or what things is it you've done that we ain't found out yet. (McCarthy 56)

By reminding Lester of all his real and imagined past mistakes, the sheriff makes it clear that he and, by extension, the entire police force, looks down on him. The sheriff's accusation of Lester murdering in the future further cements the disillusion, causing Lester to snap back at the sheriff with "I ain't done nothin" and returning the accusatory blow with "[y]ou kindly got henhouse ways yourself, Sheriff," implying that the sheriff is corrupt himself (McCarthy 56). This disillusionment is later revisited when Lester is brought in again to be questioned about his behavior and the burning down of the hunting cabin. When talking to the police, Lester says, "I know how they do ye . . . [they t]hrow ye in jail and beat the shit out of ye" in answer to why he was in a place where no one

could find him (McCarthy 122). He has no faith in the justice system, which seems to only hurt him. By extension, Cormac McCarthy reminds his readers that the police are not always ready to help, especially if someone is already an alienated Other of their society. However, Lester is alienated not just because of his status as an outcast but also because of his Gothic grotesqueness.

While I mentioned Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body earlier in this paper, I believe Cormac McCarthy likewise uses Lester as a grotesque character. Scholar Alan Spiegel's definition of the grotesque character is an archetype largely found in Southern Gothic texts. According to Spiegel, the grotesque in Gothic literature is a "type of character" who is almost always a "physically or mentally deformed figure" (428) whose "existence tells the society something about itself" (431). Lester is hit on the head with an axe early on in the novel, very probably causing brain damage, as he "could never hold his head right after that" and "was bleedin at the ears" (McCarthy 9). This incident obviously causes a physical deformity since Lester's neck never heals correctly, but there is also a good chance that it has caused severe mental damage as well. Regardless of whether or not Lester had existing mental health problems (e.g., trauma from his father's suicide), I think it is an easy argument to say that Lester Ballard is mentally unwell, as he commits necrophilia, murder, and occasionally wears the scalps of his victims. However, Lester is also a grotesque character because his "existence tells the society something about itself" (Spiegel 431). Rather than just his fictional society, Lester's character tells the reader and their real society something about themselves: a monster can be human, and people like Lester exist in our world, perhaps even in a small rural community. McCarthy's characterization of Lester also implies "that the source of Ballard's degradation issues [are] as much, if not more, from nurture as his nature" (Hillier 306). Since Lester's mother left him and his father killed himself, it is difficult to say for sure how—and by whom—Lester was raised. Nonetheless, Hillier implies that McCarthy makes Lester a sympathetic character who might have turned out differently if he had had more nurturing and community. By making Lester a Gothic grotesque character, McCarthy implicates readers and their societies in how monsters like Lester are created and sustained, suggesting the social norms that guide us are also Gothicized.

However, Lester Ballard is also a Gothic character in his relationships with death and decay. Lester decays rapidly through the course of the novel in physical, social, and moral ways. While decay is often represented through architecture in classic Gothic literature, such as the decaying abbeys of Ann Radcliffe's novels, decay in a moral or mental sense also appears in novels such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* with madness and desperation. Lester's physical decay begins when he is knocked in the head with

an axe, probably causing severe brain damage, as he was hit hard enough to bleed from both ears and "could never hold his head right after that" (McCarthy 9). While this injury no doubt also contributes to his mental decay, it is worth mentioning as the first actual physical injury he has in the novel. His physical decay grows as he must live off what he can steal or shoot, with McCarthy describing him as "grown lean and bitter" from partial starvation and homelessness (McCarthy 41). Since he is not getting the proper nutrition that he needs, Lester's body weakens and grows gaunt, or corpse-like, in its starvation. Lester also later sustains frostbite on his feet, where "his toes lay cold and bloodless" in his shoes, and upon trying to dip his feet into the water of a creek, his toes burn in agony because the freezing water feels hot (McCarthy 158). While physical decay often represents mental or moral decay in Gothic literature (e.g. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"), Lester's emotional decay is far worse than what his physical form shows.

Lester's social, mental, and moral decay worsen throughout the novel, following a Gothic descent into madness as he becomes more monstrous. As Lester Ballard decays physically and morally, people seem even less inclined than usual to speak with him. For example, when he walks into a store, the "group of boys and men . . . stopped talking when Ballard entered" (McCarthy 129). Even when he tries to directly engage with them by asking "[c]old enough for ye'ns," there is no response: "[n]obody said if it was or wasn't" (McCarthy 129). The men even seem hesitant to do business with Lester, and they pointedly go back to ignoring him as soon as the transaction of wristwatches is finished, despite Lester's hanging around afterward. This lack of give-and-take sociability, or even basic manners from the men at the store, contributes directly to Lester's sense of alienation, further sending him down a path of mental and moral decay. Lester is becoming less welcome everywhere he goes, even amongst people who should be his equals or, at the very least, his most eligible group for sociability.

Lester's mental and moral decay is difficult to read, and the sense of its permeating the novel is almost overwhelming in its quickly moving deterioration. From the novel's first chapter, Lester begins to mentally and morally decay; first, he sneaks back onto his ancestral property that he feels the county has stolen from him, and he threatens the potential buyers there with a gun (McCarthy 2). His mental decay largely begins here as well, due to the head injury he sustains because of his threats. Lester's moral decay grows as he commits voyeurism, throws a rock at a sleeping woman, and cheats at a game of rubber ducks at the fair. However, it does not deepen significantly until he finds the dead couple in their car. There he reaches a point of no return in his emotional decay, sexually assaulting through touching and then raping a woman's corpse

like a "crazed gymnast" (McCarthy 88). Not only is his moral decay deepened because of his committing rape, particularly to a corpse, but Lester's mental decay grows as well. Generally speaking, people are disgusted by corpses, as they remind us of our mortality and turn the body into a by-product of death. But Lester, rather than shying away from the corpse, invades the dead body, getting as physically close to the corpse as possible by penetrating it via rape. Clearly, Lester no longer has a mental barrier of disgust nor a moral barrier against using the woman's body as an object for his pleasure. Lester's connection to the corpse is Gothic in its dark, disturbing implication of finally finding a connection he craves in a dead person.

The path of decay is all downhill from Lester's first act of necrophilia as he takes the woman's body back to his cabin and commits several more necrophilic acts before the cabin burns down. It is clear after the cabin burns, however, that his mental state decays even further. McCarthy describes the scene of Lester's giving up on finding the woman's remains as he casually eats sandwiches, not upset seemingly at all, as his "eyes [were] dark and huge and vacant" (McCarthy 107). This series of incidents has changed Lester to the path where he becomes a serial killer and serial necrophiliac, his mental and moral barriers eroding further with each crime. As Lester continues to kill and his mental and moral states continue to decay, he begins to build the community he craves with the bodies he brings back to his cave. This cave is where he can almost pretend he has a community of people who will not—and indeed cannot—run away from him. He arranges the bodies like playthings in the cave, where our unnamed narrator describes the tableau as where "dead people lay like saints" (McCarthy 135). As Lester looks over these figures appreciatively, almost reverently in their description of "like saints," it is clear that he has made a Gothic dollhouse populated with his victims, a clear sign of Gothic madness (McCarthy 135).

Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* is a text that remains a Southern Gothic staple for many reasons. While many scholars have looked closely at the novel, there is shockingly little scholarship on McCarthy's blending of genres beyond studies about his poetic prose, particularly the novel as a Modernist text. Unfortunately, the scholarly relationship "between the Gothic and modernism is still critically under-explored" (Wurtz 103). There is still a significant gap in Gothic Modernism scholarship to develop, and I believe there is a wealth of analysis to be done in *Child of God* and McCarthy's other Appalachian-based novels, Suttree and The Orchard Keeper. Gothic Modernism may not be a popular lens through which to look at McCarthy's work, but it is still worth the effort to fill in research gaps, gain insight, and further push the scholarly boundary to look more closely at how McCarthy mixes other genres in his works. McCarthy's *Child of God* contains

more Modernist and Gothic elements than I was able to cover in this short space, such as a closer look at doubling (through social mimicry and his alter ego of a Gothic doll), taboo topics (such as delving deeper into the psychology of necrophilia, power, and control), other Gothic elements (such as prophecy), a closer look at the Gothicizing of settings (such as the forest and caves, which has much more to be said about them), other forms of disillusionment (with social codes, romance, and the government), ambiguity, loneliness, further studies of fragmentation in the novel, and many more. Nonetheless, my close analysis of the grotesque, death, decay, Gothic settings, isolation, alienation, and individualism shows ample opportunities to continue delving into the Gothic Modernism of McCarthy’s work.

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