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TITLE: The Dispossessed White as Naked Ape and Stereotyped Hillbilly in the Southern Novels of Cormac McCarthy

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CRITICS, WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, have granted Cormac McCarthy a prominent, if not exalted place in American letters. Deemed brilliant and extraordinarily gifted, he has received praise equal to, if not exceeding that given William Faulkner. Doris Grumbach, for example, writing in the *New Republic*, has rendered McCarthy's *Child of God* a reading experience "so intense, so ... religious, as to elude description" (26). And Guy Davenport, in the *New York Times Book Review*, has given McCarthy credit for a "wise" and "compassionate" understanding of human nature (7:4).

Many of these panegyrics seem to have been written in the heat of the moment, and perhaps their authors have since had second thoughts. Nonetheless, such praise in influential periodicals has served to establish McCarthy's current reputation among scholars and general readers as one of our foremost American writers.

A careful re-evaluation of his fiction will, however, show that his "tooth and claw" world vision is neither compassionate nor wise, but rather a warmed-over nineteenth-century Social Darwinism widely propagated in the 1960s in best-selling "scientific" paperbacks. It will further show that many of his characterizations are neither sympathetic nor dispassionate, as has been claimed, but rather some of the most blatant stereotypes of Southern "rednecks" in contemporary American fiction.

McCarthy differs from most writers in that he does not seem interested in his character's actions within society, but rather outside of it, his attempt apparently being to show them as allegorical individuals, inhabiting a Hobbesian world of collision and conflict, a world where survival does not depend on thought processes but rather on the instinctual drive to overpower one's fellow creatures. This is undoubtedly why McCarthy has garnered such an avid following, for he very pointedly projects an image of man as extremely isolated, alienated, violent, and amoral—an image present-day readers might understandably accept as true.

A basic problem, however, is that the "tooth and claw" view of nature McCarthy accepts as a given has been held in disrepute by the scientific community for most of this century. One might at first wonder where he acquired it. A possible answer might be found in a group of widely circulated "scientific" studies published during the time he was getting his start as a writer, the 1960s. These best sellers—*On Aggression*, *The Territorial Imperative*, *Human Aggression*, and *The Naked Ape*—were widely read during the period, serving to briefly revive this nineteenth-century theory, at least among the general public.

In fact, McCarthy protagonist Lester Ballard's intuitive sense in *Child of God* (1973) that "all things" fight can easily be seen as anticipated by Konrad Lorenz's phenomenally popular *On Aggression*, whose subject, according to the author, was "the fighting instinct in beast and man" (ix). Moreover, McCarthy's Neanderthal-type cannibals in *Outer Dark* (1968) who roam the woods searching for victims, slaughtering and eating a human baby, appear to be fictional manifestations of Lorenz's since-discredited prototype of ancient man "who learned to preserve fire [and] used it to roast his brothers," engaging in "the occasional taking of the heads of women and children encountered in the woods" (231-32).

This is not the only instance of erroneous reporting of scientific findings by Lorenz or the others. In fact, scientists of the day tried to alert the public to this fact. Critics

of *The Territorial Imperative*, for example, noted at the time that the author was not a scientist but a playwright, and Lorenz's fellow ethnologist J. P. Scott wrote that Lorenz had not taken into account "most of the scientific discoveries of the past 50 years" (137). But these pronouncements went unheard by the vast reading public.

Psychologist Leonard Berkowitz accounted for this phenomenon in his 1969 article, "Simple Views of Aggression." The reason the books were so popular in the 1960s was, he said, that they offered "easy formulas" to what the public perceived as the overriding human dilemma of the time—man's apparently aggressive nature. The explanations offered by these books helped to "relieve the anxiety born of the public's concern with war, social unrest, race riots and student protest" (39).

Apparently in response to this anxiety, McCarthy set out to illustrate the thesis developed by Lorenz and the others by creating characters like the mass-murderer Lester Ballard who represents not merely a dispossessed farmer, but "a child of God much like yourself" (4). Moreover, McCarthy seems to feel that such a character need not be motivated in the usual sense, for if aggregate humans can be explained in Lorenzian terms, what need is there for purely individual motivation?

There are many readers, of course, who believe in the existence of unadulterated evil in human nature, which in turn leads to a belief in the need for individuals to either submit to some form of absolutist government—such as the secular monarchy of Hobbes—or to find redemption in a force outside of nature—such as the Christian God. Such readers do not always demand psychological motivation beyond man's basically corrupt nature; in fact, the insertion of individualized motivation often disrupts what they feel should be the central theme of literature, that is, man's need for subservience to either an earthly or a supernatural power, or both.

But McCarthy doesn't seem to offer a political or religious option, or if he does, it is well concealed. Therefore, his fiction would not appear to satisfy the reader looking for redemption through government or religion any more than it satisfies the reader who demands psychological motivation. It can only satisfy on the level of allegory, but without the ultimate appeal to secular or religious authority, one wonders what McCarthy's allegory alludes to, if anything.

Further, the question remains as to whether McCarthy has effectively bridged the gap between realism and allegory. For those very qualities that are assets to his fiction—his ear for speech and mannerisms, his capacity for rendering vivid realistic detail—tend to pull his characters out of allegory, where they might be safely seen as archetypes, to the realm of realistic fiction, where they become stereotypes.

In *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), McCarthy hints at the type of figure that will dominate his future fiction, even anticipating the title of his next novel in his characterization of Kenneth Rattner, a man so alienated from society he is constantly "seeking ... that being in the outer dark with whom only he held communion, smiling a little to himself, the onlooker, the stranger" (24).

We see McCarthy's Lorenzian theme developed to a fuller extent in *Outer Dark*, especially in the passages where three mysterious killers roam the countryside. The black-haired leader, attired ominously in a black suit, slits a baby's throat and belly and gives it to his companion to eat, for no other reason, it seems, than that he is completely depraved. And, as if to add cruelty of authorial attitude to cruelty of character, the omniscient narrator describes the baby just prior to its being slaughtered as "dangling ... like a dressed rabbit ... one eye opening and closing softly like a naked owl's" (235-36).

In his next novel, *Child of God*, McCarthy creates the ultimate outsider in the necrophilic mass-murderer Lester Ballard. He does, however, establish a partial motive for Ballard's revenge on humanity in that he is evicted from his farm; his motivation is

further explained by a neighbor who tells us that "he never was right after his daddy killed hisself." Moreover, his terrible loneliness and alienation from normal human existence are established when he first mounts a female corpse and "pours into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman" (21, 88).

But these hardly account for his becoming a mass-murderer who carries his victims into caves where he stores their bodies, pausing now and then to copulate with the females. Nor does McCarthy mean for us to take these as sufficient motivation, for he goes out of his way to portray Ballard as an archetypal scapegoat, a perverse Christ-figure, "sustained by his fellow men ... a race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants this wrong blood in its history and will have it" (4, 156).

The insertion of this thesis does, of course, lend itself to an overall Social Darwinist interpretation that people at the lower end of the economic scale represent lingering "bad blood" and, as such, should not be sustained by either public or private charity. They should instead be allowed to die off as a part of a natural evolutionary process.

Ballard's extreme alienation from society forces him further into the world of nature where he enters a valley and watches "the diminutive progress of all things" which appear to him so "lovely" that he lets "his head drop between his knees and he begins to cry" (127). That this natural world is one of eternal violence and conflict is evident when Ballard watches hounds chase a boar and overtake him, at which time the boar turns on them, disemboweling one. McCarthy clearly does not wish his reader to be repulsed by this image, but rather to see the beauty of nature "tooth and claw":

He watched this ballet tilt and swirl and churn mud up through the snow and watched the lovely blood welter there in its holograph of battle, spray burst from a ruptured lung, the dark heart's blood. (69)

McCarthy also clearly wishes us to see his protagonist as having reverted to prehistoric man, emerging only now from his anthropoidal background, as he sits in the cave, "gibbering a sound not quite crying that echoed from the walls of the grotto like the mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes" (159).

What provides a great deal of the unevenness in these two novels is not only McCarthy's wavering from allegory to realism, but his dipping into comic stereotypes of disadvantaged and dispossessed white Southerners as well. This is evident in his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, which only hints at the Lorenzian theme he develops later, but nonetheless contains extremely broad stereotypes, as witness this description of a group of families as

gaunt hollow-eyed and darkskinned people ... who reproduced with such frightening prolificness that their entire lives appeared devoted to the production of the ragged line of scions which shoeless and tattered sat for hours on the porch edges, themselves not unlike the victims of some terrible disaster and stared out across the blighted land with expressions of neither hope nor wonder nor despair. (12)

If the thematic and stylistic Faulkner influences here are too readily apparent, the source of some of his humor seems to spring from the comic strip "Snuffy Smith," especially the episode in which liquor-guzzling hillfolk sit stupidly in the Green Fly Inn, which is "built on a scaffolding of poles over a sheer drop" and whose "one corner was nailed to a pine tree that rose towering out of the hollow." On windy nights, these dim-witted mountaineers "trod floors that waltzed drunkenly beneath them, surged and buckled with huge groans. At times the whole building would careen madly to one side as though headlong into collapse," at which point the drinkers would pause briefly, then return to their talk and liquor. At one crucial point the porch actually falls into the gap, carrying with it a group of the drinkers, after which, "torn" and "unclothed," they crawl out of the precipice, reenter the inn, and immediately fall upon each other, "murderously" fighting into the night (12-13, 25).

McCarthy is also fond of Faulkner's practice of rendering rural whites in animal imagery, comparing, for example, a group of farm boys to "curious birds," another to cows, and Rattner's wife to a toad (16, 18, 61). He further describes a principal character, Sylder, as "courting with ribald humor the country slatterns that hung on the city's perimeter," experimenting with one of them by wetting his finger to "cut a white streak on the grime" of her neck. He also assumes, like Caldwell, that young "poor white" females love to copulate with any man who comes. Sylder and his friend June, for example, stop along the road and proceed to "screw" two passing girls—one in an empty church and one in an outhouse (29, 21).

McCarthy does, however, create characters in this novel that are, to various degrees, sympathetic, even admirable. One such character is the boy John Wesley Rattner, the son of a degenerate tenant farmer, who, in Sartie Snopes fashion, breaks away from his family's influence at the end of the novel. He is given various episodes that demonstrate a sensitivity that separates him from his father. One is his finding a young rabbit in a well and attempting to keep it alive by tossing down lettuce leaves, until at last the rabbit dies. Another is when he encounters a wounded sparrowhawk on the road and unsuccessfully attempts to nurse it back to life (63-64, 77). He is also not stereotyped as lazy, as we see in this passage: "He cut wood, went out early to the rising stacks of new pine kindling.... He worked hard at it." Some heroic stature is even added when he rescues Marion Sylder from a car wreck (72, 112).

Unfortunately, John Wesley's characterization becomes completely sentimentalized when, in the final episode, he visits his mother's gravesite, touches the gravestone, and realizes he owes allegiance to an old man who has been kind to him, rather than to his despicable father.

The old man to whom he owes allegiance is Arthur Ormsby, another sentimental character whose actions and thoughts are frequently cliché-ridden. He is, in fact, a "hillbilly" Thoreau, with a touch of Yeats thrown in, who shuns mankind to sit on his porch with one foot tapping out "the tune of some old ballad" while he studies "the movements of stars," an old hound dog by his side (20):

If I was a younger man, he told himself, I would move to them mountains. I would find me a clearwater branch and build me a log house with a fireplace. And my bees would make black mountain honey. And I wouldn't care for no man.... Then I wouldn't be unneighborly neither, he added. (55)

A touch of what appears at first to be sensitivity is revealed when, as a teenager, he and some neighbor boys pass a house and see, through the window, a woman undressing for bed. When the others go back "for a second look," he does not and they laugh at him. The old man, however, remembers this episode "with dim regret," possibly feeling now that he has missed out on an aspect of life that would have been nice to experience, but it is not apparent otherwise that he ever needs or desires a woman (89).

His involvement with John Wesley comes about through his insistence on maintaining his isolation. For when he comes upon the dead body of the boy's father, he proceeds to cover it up and then to shield it for the next seven years, presumably to keep others away from his property. He also proves to be the perfect host when John Wesley comes to his cabin to visit, which accounts for the boy's allegiance.

In *Outer Dark*, McCarthy creates not only a Faulknerian wilderness landscape, but two characters who are reminiscent of Lena Grove and Byron Bunch, albeit stripped of the latter couple's humorous aspects and capacity for even elementary thought. McCarthy's characters never rise above such primitive observations as "I'd admire to have me a drink of that there fresh spring water" and "I bet I ain't eat two pones of lightbread in my life" (28, 60). The fact that they are brother and sister introduces the much overworked theme of incest into an already bleak picture of mankind.

As the novel opens, the sister is giving birth to a baby in an isolated cabin where she and her brother have taken up temporary quarters. When the baby arrives, the brother takes it out and buries it still alive, in a shallow grave. It is found by a passing tinker who pokes "a finger at it as one might a tomato or melon," then carries it down the road to a woman who agrees to care for it (20-22).

The further Faulknerian theme of traveling-down-the-road is introduced when the brother, Culla Holme, leaves the cabin looking for work and the sister Rinthey, waking up alone and not knowing where her brother has gone, takes off down the road "a-huntin' that tinker," asking from house to house and store to store, telling the people that the tinker has stolen "somethin' belonged to me" (54, 60). The brother spends the bulk of the novel, in turn, looking for his sister.

Faulkner's penchant for rendering the Snopes clan in animal imagery is once more indulged by McCarthy in his descriptions of these disadvantaged whites. Holme's "eyeballs," for example, tilt "like a toad's," and a boy's mouth snaps "open like a turtle's." As if to compound the imagery, one old woman is described as various animals at once, peering "sideways at the others like a cowled mandrill" who "lost her beak" when "a stovepipe ... fell and sliced her off slick as ... a frog's belly." Another character, reminiscent of Ike Snopes, is described as having a sexual preference for "she-hogs." Yet another emerges from a "slattern shack," appearing as a "hooded anthropoid" with "an aged face and ... hair all hung in clots like a sheep's scut" (175, 69, 216, 109).

The references to anthropoids and mandrills, of course, place the characters at an early stage on the evolutionary scale and help to establish them as near-representations of prehistoric man, a theme carried even further in the description of an itinerant family that "could have been stone figures quarried from the architecture of an older time" (77).

Moreover, throughout this novel, dispossessed rural whites are, for the most part, presented in the most stereotypical forms possible—for example, "the toothless old woman who bent nearsightedly into her plate with smacking gums, a sparse tuft of long white chin hairs wagging and drifting above the food," or the boy who stands with "his hands deep in the rear pockets of his trousers, scraping his feet on the ground like a man who has stepped in manure." The latter description, of course, once more recalls Faulkner (60, 63).

There is also a good bit of stereotyping in *Child of God*, principally in the "dumpkeeper" and the nine daughters he has "spawned," who appear to have emerged from God's Little Acre only to be tainted by further grotesqueness. "Gangling progeny with black hair hanging from their armpits," they sit "idle and wide-eyed day after day in chairs and crates about the little yard" blinking "their sluggard lids," pursued by "lanky country boys with long cocks and big feet." McCarthy describes them in Caldwellian terms:

They moved like cats and like cats in heat attracted surrounding swains to their midden until the old man used to go out at night and fire a shotgun at random just to clear the air.... They were coming and going all hours in all manner of degenerate cars, a dissolute carousel of rotting sedans and niggerized convertibles. (26-27, italics mine)

The latter reference is especially offensive, coming as it does from the omniscient narrator, who rivals this racism with cruelty when he elsewhere calls an "idiot-child" a "drooling cretin" (116).

In Suttree (1979), McCarthy creates another dispossessed figure in Gene Harrogate, who moves from his rural home to the heart of the city and, unlike his rural counterparts in the earlier novels, engages in illegal activities without doing any real harm to his fellow-man.

Actually this character is a co-protagonist, sharing that role with Cornelius Suttree, a middle-class, college-educated man who comes into contact with Harrogate when he flees from his marriage and his status-conscious father to take up residence in a houseboat on the river, renouncing his middle-class ancestry and associating exclusively with the truly dispossessed, the homeless and the destitute. The two are placed in juxtaposition so that we are made to see what McCarthy perceives to be Suttree's ever-present angst and Harrogate's equally persistent ease with his destitute condition—the former illustrating educated man's existential condition, the latter demonstrating the innocent naivete and contentment of a simple country boy.

The two meet when Suttree is arrested for drunkenness and is thrown in jail and Harrogate, an eighteen-year-old fresh from the country, appears in Suttree's cell "crouched above his bed like a wizened bird," staring at Suttree with "witless equanimity" (54). The animal imagery is further extended to include Harrogate as a "skinned spidermonkey," "country mouse," and "city rat" (58, 92, 211). Arrested for copulating with a watermelon, and thus dubbed "the moonlight melonmaster," he sustains "incipient good will" throughout the novel (48, 42). Unfortunately, he also takes on attributes of comic characters in numerous country-music shows, in particular when he emerges wearing a shirt "fashioned from an enormous pair of striped drawers, his neck stuck through the ripped seam of a crotch, his arms hanging from the capacious legholes like sticks." He is also the proud wearer of a pair of shoes four or five inches too long, proclaiming happily, "I cain't stand a tight shoe" (115).

His glee is sustained even though he takes up residence beneath a viaduct, noting the dust, rubble, and trash all around him, "slapping his thigh" and exclaiming, "Hot damn ... I'll have her fixed up slick next time you see it" (118). And sure enough, he drags in some crates, old bricks, and a mattress, then catches pigeons for food, inviting Suttree for a meal. As they sit, hearing the "sewage gurgling and shuttling along through the pipes hung from the bridge's underbelly overhead," he cries out, "Slick, ain't it?" And to a Black whose pig he has stolen, he says, "I like it down here, don't you? I mean you're close to town and all. And they don't bother ye" (137, 141). When asked if he'd like to work out the cost of the hog, he replies, "Work. It's how most folks get their livin'. Them that ain't prowlin' other folks' hogpens" (142).

Lewis Simpson gives perhaps the best justification for McCarthy's fiction in that the "dark narcissism" of characters such as Lester Ballard illustrates "a democratic solitude of the self" which, liberated "at all cost" from the community, represents a dead-end. "The ultimate expense of this liberation," Simpson writes, "is not only the imprisonment of self in self but the closure of history in the self" (189-90).

This is certainly an important theme. The pity is that it is illustrated with stereotyped characters, whether grotesque killers or comic hillbillies, and situations which make it less than convincing. How much more powerful the statement would be had it emerged through believable situations and characters.

ADDED MATERIAL

DUANE R. CARR critiques the redneck stereotypes who populate the fiction of Cormac McCarthy as poorly developed grotesques providing little wisdom and much contempt for backcountry folk. Currently Adjunct Professor at Western Kentucky University, Carr has published articles on Steinbeck, Albee, Joyce, and Glasgow. The present article is drawn from a broader survey published as *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Literature*.

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