

Ignoble Savage: Lester Ballard of Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*

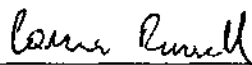
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“And he knew now what he had smelled in the huddled dogs and tasted in his saliva. He recognized fear. *So I will have to see him*, he thought, without dread or even hope. *I will have to look at him.*”

From “The Bear” by William Faulkner (155)

Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *Child of God*, is the chilling tale of a man who disregards all boundaries of decency and morality. This novel, set in the 1950s in Sevier County (pronounced “severe”), Tennessee, is based on a historical murder case in the state. As opposed to writing a standard murder mystery about the killer, McCarthy creates a devastating yet remarkable tale of the lost and morally confused Lester Ballard. Though this man commits numerous acts of murder and necrophilia, McCarthy manages to fashion the character as more than merely despicable: Ballard is a monster, yet ultimately human. McCarthy, a definitively American writer, is influenced by American mythology of the “noble savage” in his characterization of Ballard. As Ballard’s thoughts, actions, and reactions define him as a kind of noble savage, through both his innocence and wild nature, he is excluded from the community in which he lives. Because of this rejection, both by the community and the reader due to his offensive and often disgusting behavior, Lester invites feelings of pity. The reader thus becomes an unwilling victimizer.

Lester Ballard, one of McCarthy’s most horrific characters, is allowed depth and complexity as he is characterized as both innocent and guilty, both childish and mature in action. His contradictory disposition leads the reader into the darkest depths of fear and horror, while concurrently asking for sympathy and concern for his mental health and physical well-being. McCarthy constructs Lester’s character within a constant framework of offset positives and negatives. In one moment, Lester induces compassion, as he sits in stark embarrassment caused

by overtly sexual aggression directed towards him; within mere pages, Lester Ballard is copulating with the dead body of a woman he murdered in cold blood, eliciting pure horror. It is because of this dichotomy that Ballard becomes such a puzzle to the reader, stirring conflicting emotions of fear and compassion almost simultaneously.

The main issue to be explored in this paper is the method by which McCarthy constructs the enigmatic character, Lester Ballard. The opposing methods of characterization, both positive and negative, wild and tame, reckless and domestic, serve to create an almost mythological being, incapable of existing in reality. Yet, the stark realism with which McCarthy portrays this person forces the reader to accept Lester's contradictory nature. The novel ends up a more accurate reflection of pure human desire than a frightening tale of an evil man. The reader comes to realize the humanity of Ballard while accepting his loathsome traits as a necessary element of all mankind, though often suppressed and hidden.

Lester Ballard is a twenty-seven year old, simple-minded, nearly nonverbal man living in Sevier County, Tennessee. The novel begins with the auctioning off of Lester's family home, much to Lester's dismay. A man whose mother left when he was a child, a man still haunted by his father's death as the noose with which his father used to hang himself still hangs in the family barn, Lester is very much a loner. After being removed from the only home he knows, Lester moves into a ramshackle cabin in the woods, completely *vulnerable* both to the elements and wild animals. Once Lester reaches this level of disconnect with the human community, he begins his reign of terror. Upon seeing a dead couple in a car, killed by carbon monoxide poisoning whilst in mid-copulation, Lester steals the female and has sex with her dead body. Then, claiming her as his own, Lester takes her home to his cabin and carefully stores her. Later in the novel, Lester kills a couple in their car with a shotgun, only to take the woman back with him, adding to his community of the dead. Eventually, Lester moves from this cabin, as an

unintentional fire burns his home to ash, to a cave in the woods that is often *vulnerable* to flooding. Moving his victims with him, he remains in this cave until he is forced from it. The novel ends with a chase, as the citizens of Sevier County get wind that Lester may be the cause of so many missing people and take it upon themselves to find the dead women. Though Lester eludes the townsfolk, he ends up turning himself in, to remain in jail for the remainder of his life. Though this brief plot summary appears to be quite an indictment of Ballard and his actions, McCarthy is able to construct a means by which to identify with and, at times, feel compassion for this untoward being.

As an innocent, simple-minded loner amongst the American landscape of rolling mountains and rushing rivers, Lester Ballard seems quite the picture of an American hero: living off the land, only associating with “civilized” society when necessary, acting only upon immediate wants and needs. Yet this hero, because of his isolation, mental deficiencies, and ignorance of the world, acting purely on instinct and desire, comes out all wrong. He is, quite obviously, not the accepted vision of the purity of nature. He is, in fact, quite the opposite, proving a violence and darkness inherent in nature, so primal as to be impenetrable by any social, cultural, or civil law, so deep as to terrify the soul.

Edwin T. Arnold, in his essay entitled “McCarthy and the Sacred,” identifies “McCarthy as a mystical writer himself, a spiritual author who venerates life in all its forms, who...acknowledge[s] and engage[s] our oneness with the natural, atomic, and finally cosmic world” (216-217). While engaging “oneness with the natural” world, McCarthy also, as left unsaid by Arnold, acknowledges a great divide between the natural and manmade worlds. The natural, so it seems, with all its violence and death, is above the world created by man. As McCarthy writes within the idealized framework of natural virtue and purity first established by

Romantics, such as John-Jacques Rousseau, and Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, he constructs its antithesis: this American-hero-gone-wrong, this ignoble savage.

Frederic Carpenter defines American mythology in his “The American Myth: Paradise (To Be) Regained” of 1959 as entrenched with the idea of the “American Adam.” Exploring two conflicting views, Carpenter posits Adam first as “Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’ merged with ‘the American farmer,’ living innocent and uncultured in the New World” (600). Rousseau’s conception of the noble savage can be understood as:

...such as he must have issued from the hands of nature; I see an animal less strong than some, and less active than others, but, upon the whole, the most advantageously organized of any; I see him satisfying the calls of hunger under the first oak, and those of thirst at the first rivulet; I see him laying himself down to sleep at the foot of the same tree that afforded him his mean; and behold, this done, all his wants are completely supplied (172).

Essentially, the noble savage is a primal being, subject to basic physical desires, yet simple enough as to remain innocent. Lester Ballard fits this mold, somewhat. He is primal; he is subject to physical desires almost completely, yet his innocence, and the meaning of innocence, remains in question.

This more experienced version of “Adam” is not the same inexperienced and sinless man of the Old Testament, described by John Milton in his *Paradise Lost* as “innocence / Deserving Paradise!” where “love unlibidinous reigned nor jealousy / Was understood” (5:445-450). This Adam is someone altogether different. He has the “maturity of Adam after the fall” due to “dislocation and disillusion caused by the industrial revolution and the subsequent closing of the physical frontier” (Carpenter 600). Thus, Adam’s purity only able to be retained through ignorance is lost due to his experience of folly and imperfection in the real world.

This first conception of Adam is, in a certain way, innocent: his morality and values are consistent with ideals formulated upon the original settlement of America, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. On the other hand, the modernization of the world has caused a type of melancholic growth in maturity, resultant in wisdom and newfound purpose. It may be argued that Lester Ballard reaches the level of melancholic maturity at the end of the novel, as he turns himself in to the authorities following his long escape, insisting, "I'm supposed to be here" (McCarthy 192). However, since this is the last moment in which Lester appears in the present of the novel, his growth is never witnessed and is not truly verifiable.

The other vision of the "American Adam" that Carpenter explores is similar to "Adam before the fall...His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent" with a kind of "primal perfection" (601). The most important aspect of this quote is "prior to experience," suggesting that this version of Adam is fully cut off from the civilized world—so much so as to be unable to judge the morality of a given action. Similarly, Lester Ballard is removed from civilization, however not of his own volition. Ballard is rejected by the community in which he lives, as he is cast from his family home and later told by the county sheriff, "You are either going to have to find some other way to live or some other place in the world to do it in" (McCarthy 123). His primitive, innocent ways are both a cause and result of his alienation from humanity. His childlike, primitive nature causes unease, yet it is taken to extremes and fully expressed as violence only *after* Ballard has been fully alienated. Primal perfection itself, as an ideal, is thus rejected by the society in which Ballard attempts to live. Yet, the ideal still exists, in many works of literature, as the ultimate form of perfection.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay "Nature," argues for the perfection and purity found in nature, most importantly, nature unexposed to human folly. To Emerson, "Nature never wears a mean appearance" (75). There is no such thing as evil in nature, he insists. In nature lies the

purity of the world. McCarthy adheres to this very concept of nature within *Child of God*, throughout his many descriptions of the natural world that Ballard inhabits, even when describing death. Though the brutality of the following scene is obvious, it is approached with a sense of awe and longing, as well. The killing of one animal by another, though frightening, is also a beautiful and lovely dance, only understandable by those who can see such purity:

The boar did not turn until the first hound reached him. He spun and cut the dog and went on. The dogs swarmed over his hindquarters and he turned and hooked with his razorous tusches and reared back on his haunches but there was nothing for shelter. He kept turning, enmeshed in a wheel of snarling hounds until he caught one and drove upon it and pinned and disemboweled it. When he went to turn again to save his flanks he could not.

Ballard 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, pinwheel and pirouette, until shots rang and all was done (McCarthy 69).

According to Emerson, and expressed through McCarthy's narration, all things natural, "even the corpse has its own beauty" (Emerson 79). Numerous other passages throughout the novel suggest this sense of beauty in death when brought upon by natural means.

To add to the conflicting nature of Ballard's character, McCarthy very clearly relates the scenes in which Ballard causes death as horrific, stilted, and completely ungraceful. Thus, there is a distinction between death caused by animals and death caused by human beings. When Ballard kills his first female victim, the scene is a complete wreck:

Turning her by the shoulder he laid the muzzle of the rifle at the base of her skull and fired.

She dropped as if the bones in her body had been liquefied. Ballard tried to catch her but she slumped into the mud. He got hold of her dress by the nape to raise her but the material parted in his fist and in the end he had to stand the rifle against the fender of the truck and take her under the arms (McCarthy 151).

This scene provides stark contrast to the “ballet tilt and swirl” of the death of a boar by a pack of dogs (69). Such an awkward and very uncomfortable moment marks the difference between natural animal death and human-caused death. Though Ballard is, in many ways, natural and primitive, McCarthy draws a distinctive line between his acts and the actions of animals in nature. This difference can be attributed to, according to Emerson, a kind of poisoning, a loss of natural innocence, which is brought upon by society. Had Lester been able to live in the wilderness without being thrown from his home or heckled by members of his community, Emerson might argue, his murders would be mere natural occurrences, not malevolent or misguided in any way.

The idea of purity and goodness existent only in things natural, even those things the civilized world finds ugly or scary, such as death, has a direct influence on the conception of the innocence of the “American Adam.” The ideal of a primitive, “fundamentally innocent” human being suggests the lack of exposure to all things evil, and if no evil can come from nature, all evil must be man-made. Thus, to be innocent is to be removed from civilization and its effects. Murder has no moral value in Emerson’s ideal of the state of nature.

The obvious danger in this particular view is that of innocence itself: without experience, without context, how can one distinguish between right and wrong? Though Emerson argues that all things natural are good, a person can kill another human being, because of a “natural” impulse. Nearly all of humankind would agree to the immorality of murder, no matter how natural it may seem. Yet, in nature, animals kill one another regularly. If a human being is

unexposed to the understood rules of a culture, only gleaning understanding from “nature,” murder becomes acceptable, in Emerson’s view. Ballard would simply be acting in accordance with his nature, had he been fully removed from society.

The ambiguity of American innocence thus becomes a major problem in defining the American ideal. Innocence can easily be understood as an inability to comprehend evil, such as murder, providing a window for the execution of evil itself. This ideal way of being can create the opposite effect intended, turning in on itself and creating evil with a such purity as to be highly horrific, and dangerous. Carpenter suggests that this way of understanding and vilifying innocence has led to characters who “defiantly embrace evil, like Huck Finn, or have learned to adopt an innocently amoral opportunism, like Saul Bellow’s Augie March” (602). Huck Finn, of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is one of Mark Twain’s most infamous characters. Though less maligned than his coconspirator, Tom Sawyer, Huck is an expression of the childish self-centeredness that results in the suffering of others, namely an African American runaway, Jim. Augie March, similarly, will stop at nothing to orchestrate his individual successes, as he unwittingly loses friends and destroys important relationships because of his “innocent” selfishness and ignorance of the feelings and needs of others.

Americans have recognized this problem of innocence and have reacted in nearly violent opposition to the ideal of some kind of perfection in primitive innocence, argues Carpenter. “America has celebrated the principle of progress, which is the exact opposite of this primitivism. Moreover, America has recognized very little nobility in the savages whom she has conquered...a return to primitive nature is patently absurd” (604). As Vince Brewton, in his 2004 article writes of McCarthy’s earlier novels, *Child of God* included, “One persistent theme...is the loss of the American myth of innocence...Lester’s dispossession obliquely represents the national loss of innocence” (124). Nevertheless, the American ideal of

primitivism, the noble savage, and innocence itself greatly influences American values and is therefore expressed in its national literature. Wilderness, wildness remains “an antidote to excessive civilization” and is thus valued, though it is, within the same breath, so passionately rejected. To reach this level of Adam after the fall, Americans must turn their backs on this ideal, like Isaac in William Faulkner’s “The Bear,” as he “kills the wild thing that he loves, but learns thereby a deeper wisdom” (Carpenter 606). In postmodern American literature, such as McCarthy’s *Child of God*, this necessary evil, and its destruction, is required for us to become what we, as Americans, must eventually become, for our paradise (to be) regained.

Lester Ballard is, in many ways, the epitome of American innocence, primitivism, and savagery. He is the perfect illustration of an inexperienced “American Adam.” Even within the novel itself, Ballard is referred to as analogous to this ideal by a member of the Sevier County community: “I’ll say one thing about Lester though. You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn’t outstrip em all” (81). Not only is Lester similar to Adam, so much so that you can “trace em back,” but he is, in fact, a better, closer version of Adam than anyone else in modern times. His innocence and savagery are immediately recognized in identification with this ideal, though ultimately, these features are the cause of his rejection.

As the novel begins, Lester is thrown from his family home in Sevier County because of its foreclosure, and a carnivalesque scene of greedy people surrounds him as his home is auctioned off. Though he has already been put in jail once for attempting to stop the foreclosure, Lester believes in the innate compassion of others. Lester cannot comprehend that anyone would kick him out onto the streets, simply to make a dollar. He reacts to the insensitivity of his fellow human beings with, what he believes to be logically, anger: “I want you to get your goddamn ass off my property. And take these fools with ye” (7). After finally being thrust from the only home he knows, Lester “never could hold his head right after that” (9). His final comprehension

of the avarice and greed of others, in opposition to his original innocent optimism about people, leads to Lester's first real taste of experience, beginning his fall from paradise.

Throughout the novel, Lester remains innocent, even childishly so. His lack of maturity, especially in dealing with women, is astonishing for a twenty-seven-year-old man. When Ballard speaks to a young girl that he has some form of romantic feelings for, she answers his remark, "Just let me owe ye," with, "Say you want to blow me?" (29). Her comment causes Ballard to redden immediately. This young girl, merely joking in trite sexual innuendo, is able to cause a man who is eventually capable of killing people to blush. A similar incident occurs when Ballard goes to a clothing store to buy his first true love interest, the found dead girl, some new clothes: "He made another sortie among the counters of lingerie, his eyes slightly wild as if in terror of the flimsy pastel garments there" (97). He literally panics in this uncomfortable and alien situation. When confronted by a sales clerk, Ballard's face quickly turns "afire" as he asks for help on sizes and colors (98).

Lester's embarrassment when faced with mature subject matter such as sex is only one illustration of his childish nature. During a county fair, Lester competes, and wins, two plush bears and a large stuffed tiger, due to his excellent marksmanship. He does not care about the competition, as many men would, but about "them big'ns [stuffed animals] yonder" (63). These stuffed animals mean as much to Ballard as any young child's toy. They are precious to him, as he keeps them with him in his cabin in the woods, even carrying them to safety during an accidental fire *before* retrieving the dead girl he had so loyally kept hidden. In his final home, a dark and damp cave in the woods, Ballard keeps his stuffed animals safe, storing them on the mattress in which he sleeps, off of the wet and often flooded cave floor.

Before Lester wins his prized stuffed animals at the fair, he witnesses an older man cheating at a game in which players retrieve live fish from a small pool, using nets: "While he

[the game attendant] was so occupied an old man next to Ballard was trying to steer two fish into his dipnet at the same time... You must be crazy, she [another player] said. Or drunk one" (62). As Lester observes this grown man cheating at such a simple game, he takes the man's action as acceptable behavior and begins cheating, himself. Much like a child reenacting the behavior of those around him, Lester cannot make his own decisions as to the rightness or wrongness of an action. He simply takes what he sees to be the appropriate way to act.

Similarly, Lester attempts to say, do, and think as other "mature" men around him, without the actual ability to understand the meaning of his actions. Like a child, Lester mindlessly imitates others: "All the trouble I ever was in, said Ballard, was caused by whiskey or women or both. He'd often heard men say as much" (53). Like a child, Ballard agrees with any information given him, without a thought to its legitimacy. The following dialogue occurs between Lester Ballard and a man who calls himself "Nigger John." Ballard is in jail for the alleged rape of a woman, though he is ultimately found innocent. Though unclear as to why John is in jail, the reader learns that he is awaiting capital punishment, his death.

White pussy is nothing but trouble.

Ballard agreed that it was. He guessed he'd thought so but he'd never heard it put that way. (53)

Without full context of the social world around him, Lester remains innocent of much of the sarcasm, negativity, and cruelty of the world. "Fly like a motherfucker" are John's final words to Ballard, as he is escorted from their shared cell. Though obvious to the reader that John is being led to his death by the sheriff because of the sheriff's response to John, "You'll be flyin all right... Home to your maker," Lester remains clueless. Lester, completely ignorant to the fate awaiting his newfound acquaintance, simply answers, "Take it easy... The nigger didn't say if he would or wouldn't" (54). Though seemingly mentally challenged at times due to his inability to

see the ugly truth of the world, Lester Ballard remains a figure of both optimism and reckless innocence (and ignorance) of the ways of man, much like Emerson's vision of the righteousness found in nature.

Included in the realm of childish innocence and primitivism is Lester's love of and attention to the natural world and most markedly, animal life (besides stuffed recreations of the same). He finds the natural world to be both interesting and entertaining, a constant barrage of excitement. When walking through the woods, Ballard stumbles upon a flock of robins in a glade. The following scene is a lovely illustration of the childlike joy that Ballard feels when chasing after these tiny birds:

He entered a glade and a robin flew. Another. They held their wings aloft and went skittering over the snow. Ballard looked more closely. A group of them were huddled under a cedar tree. At his approach they set forth in pairs and threes and went hopping and hobbling over the crust, dragging their wings. Ballard ran after them. They ducked and fluttered. He fell and rose and ran laughing. He caught and held one warm and feathered in his palm with the heart of it beating there just so (76).

This scene, along with others in the novel, allows the reader to see into the happy moments of Ballard's life. These moments may not be the epitome of contentment for a cynical, modernized adult, but the modern world of an adult is not Ballard's realm of existence. Ballard lives eternally in the world of a child, without the worries or cares of most people his age.

There are many problems with a childlike innocence such as Lester's, as previously mentioned through Carpenter's commentary on "innocently amoral opportunism" and the embracing of evil because of the absence of moral context (602). A wall blocking Lester from the reality of the social, modernized world prevents him from knowing right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, dangerous and safe. Without the context of the society in which he

lives, Ballard is a completely alienated and primitive being, a being who could express himself through any given person who has been drastically cut off from society. George Guillemin, in his “‘See The Child:’ The Melancholy Subtext of *Blood Meridian*,” observes that a childlike adult becomes much more frightening than a thoughtful, vengeful, adult, as “this monstrous child is a discursive expression for the terrifying return to the real” (254). As Vereen Bell, a preeminent McCarthy scholar, so aptly explains,

Events imply that deep at the core of the normal waits this child in us as well, insatiable, self-gratifying, and solipsistic. Lester has never achieved even elementary maturity and is therefore without discipline or taboo, has never passed over from the child’s fictional world into the adult’s world, where fact expresses itself in the otherness of other people (61).

It is through Lester’s inability to understand what it means to be “the Other,” wrong, or bad, that he engages in the brutal and horrifying acts that McCarthy narrates, and this is what makes Ballard so terrifying. Lester Ballard pushes the notion of primitive violence to its extreme, as he goes above and beyond tolerable anti-societal, anti-cultural notions. Though his early life was difficult, his actions are in no way excusable. His intensifying fervor to not only take life, but to defile the dead, no matter how “natural,” is enough to turn even the toughest of stomachs.

What makes Ballard’s actions even more disturbing than the actual violence itself is the marked indifference with which he reacts when finding himself witness to violent events. Before Ballard’s true rampage begins, he witnesses a girl being raped by her father, after the father caught her having sex with another boy. This intense, sparse, frightful scene causes disgust in any reader, but only “narroweyed and studied indifference” in Ballard (McCarthy 28). He merely observes the scene and moves on, as if rape were an everyday occurrence. Indifference, in Lester’s case, may also be an expression of ignorance and innocence. Not knowing the harsh

realities of the world, Lester is uncomprehending of the gravity of the scene upon which he has stumbled. This passive engagement with violence results in Ballard's active participation in similar kinds of violence shortly thereafter. Though he mimics others in their petty words and actions, Ballard is uncomprehending of where to stop, of where his actions move from creepy and weird to horrific and unforgivable.

Ballard's disturbing coldness and ease, his indifference when confronted with violence continues once he actually begins acting on his own impulses. The violence begins almost as innocently as cheating in a game at the fair, as he stumbles upon another couple who had been copulating in their car but were asphyxiated due to carbon monoxide poisoning. They are literally "frozen" in the act, and Ballard's reaction is to take a closer look: not to run and find help, but to see what death is really like, much like a curious child or animal. When certain that the couple is truly dead, "He didn't even swear. He knelt there staring at the two bodies. Them sons of bitches deader'n hell, he said" (87). Rape seems to be of little consequence to him, and this experience with death has a similar effect: unconcern.

If the scene stopped here, it would be problematic enough, but Ballard goes a step farther, from indifference to interest: sexual interest. He "finally" begins touching the woman in overtly sexual ways, as if he were actually courting her (87). He then does the unthinkable: commits necrophilia. To end his evening of unforgivable acts, Ballard steals all of the couple's money and takes the dead woman home with him, to keep as his own. All of these actions can be read as Ballard's first response to the stimulus provided. He does not consider his actions or weigh the aftereffects. He simply wants to do something, and he does it. Though natural, Ballard digresses far beyond acceptable. This dead woman remains with Ballard as a companion or toy, of sorts, until a fire destroys his home, with the woman inside. Ballard leaves this woman behind

to burn, as he prefers his treasured stuffed animals, his tributes to childhood, to the company of a woman.

Lester's brutality and coldness when dealing with what most people find beyond bearable serve to illustrate his extreme nature. He is not simply a man without cultural and social context; he is beyond that. Lester Ballard is a completely blank slate, who seeks and acts based on desire and immediate reward only. Unlike the typical view of a "noble savage" who wanders the woods alone, striving to fulfill his needs only, understanding the concept of pity above all else, Lester Ballard seems to have no conception of any proper human connections. Much like an animal in nature, not a man, Lester does not consider the consequences or the gravity of the situations in which he finds himself, nor does he consider the sanctity of the lives of the people he kills. He simply wants what he wants, and does what he can to get what he wants, regardless of the cost.

McCarthy develops the characterization of Ballard not only through his thoughts and actions, but through extended metaphors, which are spread throughout the novel as very short chapters. These interludes are direct representations of the true form of Lester Ballard. In the following scene, spoken by a member of the Sevier County community, a group of oxen are pushed by their owner to do something they do not wish to do. Once pushed beyond the breaking point, the oxen turn on the owner, physically harming him and establishing their own independence:

That reminds me of that Trantham boy had them oldtimey oxes over at the fair here a year or two back. They sulled up on him and wouldn't go till finally he took and built a fire underneath of em. The old oxes looked down and seen it and took about five steps and quit again. Trantham boy looked and there set the fire directly in under his wagon. He hollered and crawled up under the wagon and commenced a beatin at the fire with his

hat and about that time them old oxes took off again. Drug the wagon over him and like to broke both his legs. You never seen more contrary beasts than them was (36).

This scene is much akin to the beginning scene of the novel, in which Lester is pushed from his only home. He tries, like the oxen, to fight, to stay where he believes he belongs, but in the end, he recognizes that his battle is in vain, thus turning on those who try to oppose his way of life. Yet, like the oxen, Ballard does not turn on those who reject him because of a need for vengeance. Instead, he simply *appears* to retaliate, when in reality his retaliation is just an acting out of his nature and his instinctual need to follow his desire. Like the oxen, Ballard is very much a “contrary beast,” fighting to live in the way he wishes, not knowing that his actions are more than just taboo; they are purely vile.

Though Ballard is completely misguided in all of these situations of illegal and immoral activity, the narration occasionally calls for a rethinking of Ballard’s situation. When describing the look of Ballard taking his final female victim back to his cave, the narrator refers to Ballard as “a man beset by some ghastr succubus” and the girl like a “monstrous frog” (153). This is a major turning point for McCarthy’s readers. Amidst Ballard’s heinous crimes, it is Ballard who has been turned into a victim, as the victim, along with the reader, becomes the victimizer.

As Ballard’s crimes, murder, rape, necrophilia, are witnessed by the reader as brutal, horrific, and disgusting, Ballard becomes othered. His actions put him in a separate category from those who witness his crimes. This separation is also sought by the community members of Sevier County, with whom the reader is invited to form a strong social tie. Thus, the reader, along with the community, forces Ballard from society, furthering his sense of otherness, furthering his inability to see right from wrong. The reader, then, becomes part of the problem, part of Ballard’s alienation.

Within the short chapters of the novel spoken by local townsfolk, McCarthy gives the readers a view into the psyche of the “normal.” Each of these chapters take place after-the-fact, looking back upon Ballard and his actions, searching for answers, providing reasons for the events that took place. Much like anyone after a tragedy, the members of the Sevier County community are forced to examine any possible reason that Ballard may have done what he did. Like anyone, the last thing the community would ever do is blame itself and its treatment of this sad creature. Excuses are offered, such as “They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself” and “They [Lester’s family] wasn’t none of em any account that I ever heard of,” but never once does the community question itself (21, 80). Much like the passive reader, these people find themselves to be nothing more than witnesses, and in no way responsible for the actions of another. Thus, the “community” becomes a collection of selfish individuals, much like any reader, seeking only entertainment and the satisfaction that normalcy and decency exist.

In addition, the reader can easily identify with the townsfolk in their horror at Lester’s actions. In this way, the “others” in the novel (not the main character) represent normality, as they react to death with stunned concern, not cold indifference, like Ballard. A simple instance of this occurs when a person in town narrates a time when Lester Ballard, as a young boy, bullied another child because he would not fetch a softball from a patch of briars. As the boy refused, Ballard decides that the only course of action is violence. Although not a reaction to death, the reaction of the narrator for Ballard’s victim is of pity and concern:

He [Ballard] just stood there a minute and then he punched him in the face. Blood flew out of the Finney boy’s nose and he sat down in the road. Just for a minute and then he got up. Somebody give him a kerchief and he put it to his nose. It was all swoll up and bleedin. The Finney boy just looked at Lester Ballard and went on up the road. I felt, I

felt...I don't know what it was. We just felt real bad. I never liked Lester from that day (18).

Rousseau, in his *Discourse upon the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality among Mankind* states that "...men, in spite of all their morality, would never have been better than monsters, if nature had not given them pity to assist reason" (193). Interestingly, Rousseau also argues that the only place to find or understand true pity is in nature. Had man not some part of the natural state of being within him, pity would not exist, and human beings would never feel one another's pain. Again, in this instance, Lester is placed as the Other, the "monster," as different from the normal, the acceptable, because he feels no pity for his victims. The reader and the people of Sevier County feel pity for those who suffer at Lester's hand and are further horrified by Lester's own lack of remorse.

If this were the end of the story, if the reader and the people of the community were nothing but moral, upright, concerned individuals, this tale would be a simple indictment of an evil man. Yet, this is far from the case. Lester Ballard is othered, even in situations when alienation is not necessary, even before his immoral actions are revealed. Lester is treated, always, like an animal, like a child, and like a crazy person, though his actions do not always warrant this treatment. In one particular instance, past the first scene of the novel where Lester is thrown from his home, Lester attempts, at a county fair, to show off the one thing he is truly good at: shooting a rifle: "He could by god shoot it [his rifle]. Hit anything he could see." Instead of being complimented or encouraged, he is stopped, almost immediately, from having any real success: "They run him out of the fair... Wouldn't let him shoot no more" (57). Though McCarthy's tale, as Steven Shaviro suggests, causes "shock, horror, revulsion at Lester's deeds," he also shows "a simultaneous awareness of Ballard's potential for other roles, other identities"

(109). Perhaps Lester could have been the best shot in town; perhaps he could have become famous and successful, winning money for his skill, had he been allowed to succeed.

In addition, Lester is considered both crazy and dangerous long before he proves himself deserving. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, the town sheriff, after arresting Lester for the rape charge, asks Lester, "What sort of meanness have you got laid out for next." Lester responds, "I ain't got any laid out." And he doesn't, at the time. The sheriff then responds, "I guess murder is next on the list, ain't it?" (56). Instead of giving Ballard a chance, the sheriff tells Lester what his next act will be, and he is eventually proven correct. Similarly, the reader follows right along, expecting Lester's next event to be his first act of murder. At this point, Lester loses control of his own life, as his actions are dictated by the expectations of others. He thus becomes the abject.

Julia Kristeva defines abjection as "a recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (5). Cycling back to Lester's embodiment of the American Adam, he does, in many ways, signify and illustrate a desire inherent in American life, to become a perfect, natural, innocent being. Yet, the other part of abjection, also seen in the treatment and understanding of Ballard, "is not a lack of cleanliness or health...but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Lester is unable to define borders, acting as an animal, basing his actions upon instinct alone. His innocence, meshed with his violent and fearsome nature, creates the ultimate in abjection, the ultimate "in-between". Kristeva states, "the abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition [like murder], a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts" (15). It is not that Ballard knows that murder is bad and wrong, but does it anyway because it is fun to do evil in the world. Ballard murders because he wants to, plain and simple, and there is no one around to stop him. Laws be damned.

Ballard's abjection, the horror with which he is viewed, is what eventually elicits concern within the reader. Knowing what Ballard does when no one is looking, knowing that when having sex with the first dead girl he encounters (remember, a woman he does *not* murder but finds dead), "he poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman," there emerges the problem with pure horror, with abjection (88). The reader is able to, unlike the people in Sevier County, see into the monster, and recognize emotional elements inherent in all people: vulnerability, fear, self-consciousness, awkwardness, and loneliness. As Gary Ciuba makes note of in his 2002 article, "McCarthy's *Enfant Terrible*: Mimetic Desire and Sacred Violence in *Child of God*," Lester is "unwilling to risk the necessary vulnerability of unprotected self-exposure" that happens when forming real relationships with human beings (96). Like many "normal" people, Ballard fears rejection, and it is this fear which causes his acceptable mental reactions to manifest: fear, self-consciousness, awkwardness, and loneliness. The difference is simply the way in which his emotions manifest, which suggests an inability to determine social and cultural standards, which again, is a result of Ballard's alienation. In this way, he is the expression of pure human fear and longing, without the lens of social context. Lester can then no longer be understood as the Other, but as a representative of humanity itself. When Lester is finally recognized as "A child of God much like yourself perhaps," the reader is indicted (4). How can someone who is in so many ways like anyone else go so wrong? McCarthy might answer, "Because we made him go wrong."

As Lester mimics the immoral or inappropriate behaviors of others, so do his actions reflect the world in which he gains context. If his perspective for appropriate behavior, amongst other instances, is a father raping his own daughter, it is no wonder he turned out this way:

Next thing he [Lester] knew his [the father's] overalls were about his knees and he was mounting her. Daddy quit, she said. Daddy. Oooh.

Did he [her boyfriend] dump a load in you?

No.

He pulled it out and gripped it and squirted his jissom on her thigh. Goddamn you, he said. He rose and heisted up his overalls and lumbered off toward the dump like a bear (27-28).

Another less horrific, but equally disturbing instance of human malevolence occurs when a flood takes place in Sevier County, toward the novel's end. A hardware store had just been broken into, due to the ready distraction caused by the flood. Though a woman remarks, "Seems like trouble ought to make people closer stead of some tryin to rob others," the flood provides, instead, a perfect opportunity for immorality and mischief (161). Interestingly, what is important to the sheriff of the town is not finding the perpetrator of the robbery or aiding the jilted storeowner, but getting his mail. Instead of spending time helping the storeowner clean up the mess, the sheriff goes to the post office and is taken aback when receiving less mail than he had hoped for. The postal worker remarks, due to an inquiry about recent local murders (soon to be revealed as Ballard's work), "I never knew such a place for meanness." Then, "The sheriff smiled. It used to be worse, he said" (164). This instance of unconcern for the plight of others is eerily similar to Lester's indifference when dealing with death. Though the sheriff's reactions are more socially acceptable, and subtle, the effect is the same: no one cares about anyone else. This selfishness is also identifiable within the reader. Seeking entertainment, a good read, the reader does not care about the people represented in the novel (remember it is loosely based on a *true* murder case), but the way that McCarthy makes the reader feel while reading. The ability, the luxury, of abjecting Lester Ballard becomes quite an uncomfortable situation once the reader recognizes that all people in the world of the novel are, in effect, bad. As the reader identifies

with the Sevier County townsfolk, the reader too becomes a cold, selfish perpetrator of crimes against humanity, of not caring about the plight of others.

However, as Steven Shaviro points out in his “The Very Life of Darkness: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*,” the fictional worlds created by McCarthy are worlds in which “Exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primordial and positive condition” (147). If exile is truly Lester’s condition, not a marker of loss, then is the reader, are the townspeople, truly meant to feel compassion? Though an interesting supposition, McCarthy directly addresses those who have victimized Ballard near the end of the novel, as the townsfolk demand that Lester take them to his hideout, hoping to find the missing, and dead, people of the town. Though Ballard leads them to his cave, he manages to elude them. As they chase after Ballard, he escapes their clutches, finding a new way out of the caves through the murk, managing to keep his treasured bodies hidden. McCarthy describes those in pursuit of Ballard, the victimizers:

A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. But they want this man’s life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with lanterns and cries of execration. How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him? (156).

This is the indictment of the townsfolk of Sevier County. It is an indictment of the reader. These people, with whom the reader so readily identifies, though horrified, want a man like Lester Ballard around. They want the fear and otherness of his “wrong blood” in order to make themselves feel more normal. They want the satisfaction of his death, the sense of winning some type of battle: good vs. evil, wrong vs. right.

Lester’s only option in this situation is death, and he recognizes this as he dreams of riding a mule through the woods: “He had resolved himself to ride on for he could not turn back and the world that day was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death”

(171). Though he can see beauty in the world through the innocent eyes of a child, though there may have been a chance for another kind of life for Lester, he is part of a story of good against evil, a story that has been told since the beginning of time. If allowed to create a different future, if given the chance, "Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men's souls" (136). Though confused, morally, socially, and culturally, Ballard could have been different. He could have been good. He is, however, helpless to try to change his destiny. He is hopeless to try to become something other than the monstrous being that has been created for him.

Only in one instance during the span of the novel does Lester Ballard cry. His tears come quite unexpectedly, as he has remained a force of eerie calmness throughout the rest of the novel. They come as a result of Ballard's recognition that he did, indeed, turn out all wrong:

He watched the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the gray fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees were spreading.

Squatting there he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry (170).

When faced with the image of the natural world moving forward, progressing, even in the smallest of ways, Ballard realizes his difference, his otherness. He does not fit in the world of man, nor does he fit in the natural world. He has no place, and recognizing his complete alienation, Lester falls apart. Though human beings have rejected Ballard throughout the novel, he is able to return to nature and find solace, until this moment. It is in this moment that Lester Ballard, the man, disappears. Shortly afterward, Lester turns himself in to the authorities, submitting to the life carved out for him. He is thus made completely powerless, both by his situation within the novel, and by his nature as a character, written, predestined, by McCarthy's words.

As Vereen Bell, in his groundbreaking work, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, states, McCarthy's novels are "convincingly present to us, material but more than usually real" (3). The true achievement of McCarthy's work is that he has created worlds within his novels that actually mimic the real world: a place in which meaning is subjective and truth is unknowable. Shaviro suggests that "subjectivity is not a perspective upon or projection into the world, nor even a transcendental condition for our perception of the world; it is just another empirical fact, intentionally within the world like any other. There is no interiority, no intentionality and no transcendence" (150). The goal of McCarthy's work, then, is not to lecture humanity on the faults inherent in social existence or the responsibility of the reader to the subject, but to reflect reality in the most accurate way possible. The conflicting nature found in Lester Ballard simply marks yet another means by which truth cannot be determined, wrong and right cannot be assigned.

In this way, Ballard is ultimate truth, uncensored. He is pure desire without conscience, fear, or pity. He is, as Thomas Hobbes might suggest, a result of "the discourse of the mind, when it is governed by design [nature]...nothing but 'seeking'" (332). As opposed to romantic or transcendentalist visions of an American ideal of Adam, a purely natural and righteous being, Ballard represents the truthful state of nature, which "should thus dissociate and render men apt to invade and destroy one another" (Hobbes 405). McCarthy's *Child of God* is an adventure into the consequence of pure human emotion and desire, without the constraints of social mores and moral law. This novel is a testament to McCarthy's genius, as he unabashedly depicts humankind, in its purest form, without fear of retribution. As McCarthy sees into our darkest of natures, this novel reflects that very nature from which we try so desperately to separate ourselves. As Mark Royden Winchell states, most fittingly, "Had McCarthy written *The Sound and the Fury*, Dilsey would have been gang raped by a bunch of Klansmen on the way home

from church” (295). McCarthy’s unreserved ability to depict humankind in its purest form results in tales of the most horrific, the most despicable people, like Lester Ballard, who defiantly remain children of God. Like in Faulkner’s “The Bear,” one must see “fear,” “without dread or even hope,” to understand the truth (155).

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