Word Made Flesh: Biblicality in Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian Novels

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WORD MADE FLESH: BIBLICALITY IN CORMAC McCARTHY’S APPALACHIAN NOVELS

By

Brett Daniel Lewis

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Dedication:

To my parents, Marsha and Danny Lewis for always putting up with me and supporting my many educational endeavors.
Acknowledgements:

I would like to express my gratitude for the guidance and support of my advisor, Dr. Terrence Tucker, as well as my committee members: Dr. Will Duffy, Dr. Theron Britt, and Dr. Scott Sundvall. I would like to thank Sarah Ellis for answering countless emails and always guiding me in the right direction. Finally, I would like to thank the University of Memphis English Department for their generous support of my research.
Abstract:

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McCarthy’s Appalachian novels in particular, beginning with his first novel *The Orchard Keeper* in 1965, show the outline of biblicality, a concept which entails the use of religious imagery, the employment of biblical language, the interplay between religious and secular elements, the profound impact of Appalachian landscapes, along with the thematic exploration of faith, morality, and the human condition. *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1972), *Suttree* (1979), and *The Road* (2005), expound, in more detail, upon these ideas through the use of the themes of darkness, light, and objects of divinity, outsiders, and suicide.

McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, showcase biblicality as filtered through the King James Bible, and notable authors of the Southern Gothic genre, and their interplay with his inspirations from antiquity. This research illuminates how Southern and Appalachian Gothic literature engages with the biblical tradition, shapes our understanding of the region’s history and culture, and invites readers to grapple with timeless questions of faith, morality, social justice, and the complexities of the human experience.
For nearly six decades, Cormac McCarthy has been experimenting with, in prose, topics involving religion, science, and the mysteries of life, none of which he has been able to fully resolve. Employing the 'via negativa' as a lens for theological exploration, Cormac McCarthy often seeks to uncover the divine in its absence.

McCarthy’s apophatic approach to theology is exemplified in his exploration of biblical passages and concepts within his East Tennessee novels, throughout which he explores the darkest and most challenging aspects of human life. McCarthy reveals that even in life’s bleakest and most desolate moments, there exists an underlying theme of light and human agency, which characters either tap into or are given as a sort of gift from the beyond. This recurring motif not only emphasizes the depth of McCarthy’s theological inquiry but also highlights the resilience of the human spirit in the face of lack and adversity. McCarthy, throughout these works, sheds light on the hidden connections between the divine and the mundane and reveals goodness and its possibilities through its absence.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Cormac McCarthy, known for his masterful storytelling and evocative prose, has left an indelible mark on Southern and Appalachian Gothic literature, amidst his first four and final three novels. While his renowned western novels have garnered widespread acclaim, it is his lesser-known Appalachian period that reveals a profound exploration of religious themes and imagery within the context of the region. This dissertation delves into the realm of “biblicality” as it pertains to McCarthy’s Appalachian works, unraveling the layers of religious expression, moral dilemmas, and existential contemplation embedded within these narratives.

The study focuses on several key aspects of biblicality evident in McCarthy’s Appalachian period, which are, the use of religious imagery, the employment of biblical language, the interplay between religious and secular elements, the profound impact of Appalachian landscapes, and the thematic exploration of faith, morality, and the human condition. By analyzing McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, notable authors of the genre, and their interplay with his inspirations from antiquity, this research will illuminate how Southern and Appalachian Gothic literature engages with the biblical tradition, shapes our understanding of the region’s history and culture, and invites readers to grapple with timeless questions of faith, morality, and the complexities of the human experience.
Critics and interpreters of McCarthy alike, have been searching for decades to make a proper estimation of the thoughts, values, and symbolism within his work, which often involves biblical texts, with varying degrees of success. Here, I will attempt to combine and examine some of the specifically Christian, theological elements of his Appalachian period. One aspect of this is that his texts are “fraught with meaning” in the sense that Eric Auerbach speaks of in his work *Mimesis*, meaning that “there are large gaps of motive, feeling, intention, and meaning between the sparsely reported narrative details” (Auerbach 119), and these are gaps which we, the reader, feel compelled to fill in.

These gaps in the biblical text have often given way to psychologizing by those from Kierkegaard’s time on, writing within theological and existentialist veins. McCarthy often borrows, in this way, from biblical style and language in creating scenes with great depth in describing rural Appalachian people on their drastic journeys. Auerbach proposes that the “opaque ineffability of the biblical God is the result, rather than the condition, of the text’s opacity. The Israelite concept of God... is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things” (Auerbach 8), and that “Biblical metaphysics arises out of, rather than giving rise to, biblical narrative because humans in these writings bear the same sense of mystery as the deity” (Potts 219). In this same way, the critical matrix of metaphysical interpretation involving McCarthy’s work has arisen out of the text, due not least, in
part to his lack of commentary involving his own writing. In this same way, the body of McCarthy scholars have been those, who from the beginning, interpreted McCarthy without his aid. This theological reading emanates from the text and the body of McCarthy’s interpreters themselves, but McCarthy’s writing is biblical in style and elicits an ‘opaque ineffability’ in its interpretation.

Vereen Bell, the first scholar to write a book-length treatment of Cormac McCarthy’s work, entitled The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy (1989), contained some interesting insights, yet set McCarthy studies off in an unnecessary direction. This and his subsequent article, “The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy,” set McCarthy up as a purveyor of nihilism within the literary world, and as a sadistic hermit to boot. As we will see, McCarthy has always been quite a gregarious person, who is more than happy to help those with whom he is in close contact with. He values his privacy, but has interacted with many local journalists and writers throughout the years. Furthermore, though his work is often fraught with darkness, it is not one that is without hope and agency.

What Vereen Bell fails to account for in calling McCarthy a nihilist, is the role of nothingness in Christian theology or the focus on the “via negativa,” a way of thinking which is present in Auerbach’s theorizing and says that no finite concept is capable of describing God or ultimate reality. This type of theological writing is featured in the work of two of McCarthy’s influences, Eugen Herrigel and Jakob
Boehme. Both authors explore “a kind of apophatic mysticism that informs much of McCarthy’s treatment of religious and theological themes” (Crews 185), meaning that it is a theology that oftentimes knows God by his absence. Far from promoting a viewpoint that nothing truly matters, it shows that belief hinges on being able to hold onto some sort of faith in an unfair world which is full of violence and dread. Michael Crews furthers this by saying, “McCarthy's religious views, if they are indeed indebted to Boehme, might drive some to the comforting arms of atheism. That they do not drive him there is a testimony to how seriously he takes them” (Crews 160).

Jakob Boehme’s work first appears in McCarthy within the epigraph of Blood Meridian. A quote from his 1620 work, Six Theosophic Points, reads, “It is not to be thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness” (Boehme 79). Boehme, here, is proposing that, as we will explore in Chapter Two, that the realm of darkness should not be merely seen as a place of sorrow. Death, which we all must experience, swallows up that sorrow. The biblical passage from which Boehme is likely borrowing from in I Corinthians, says, “O death, where is thy sting?” (I Cor 15:55 KJV) in relation to Jesus being the victor over sin and death. Boehme here uses it in a more mystical and reformatory way, and McCarthy applies this as a lens through which to view his novels of great violence and hurt.
Boehme is also found more subtly within the pages of *The Road*, when McCarthy uses the English translation of a word found only in Boehme, salitter, which roughly translates to “the essence of God.” The quote in *The Road* reads,

> He got up and walked out to the road. The black shape of it running from dark to dark. Then the distant low rumble. Not thunder. You could feel it under your feet. A sound without cognate and so without description. Something imponderable shifting out there in the dark….What time of year? What age the child? He walked out into the road and stood. The silence. The salitter drying from the earth (McCarthy 73).

The earth of *The Road* has never seen such darkness and finality before and salitter being a component of gunpowder, means that there will never be that creative spark amongst humanity again. It is dying and has no hope of restoration. Soon all men will perish and with them all memories of God. The protagonists, the man and the boy still hold out hope of some redemption or salvation from all this darkness and McCarthy’s other works are no different in their hope and agency concerning these realities. It can be said, that rather than being a proponent of nihilism, that McCarthy’s “awareness and appreciation of mystical traditions bely the charge of nihilism that some have found persuasive” (Crews 186).

Crucial to his Appalachian works are the uses of biblical imagery, story, and style, which are often filtered through McCarthy’s literary influences via the King
James Bible. His style is built, in part, on the notion that he writes in a biblical style as Eric Auerbach sets up in *Mimesis*, differentiating Greek and biblical narrative stylings and affect. Auerbach notes that works written in a biblical style, “Are not, like Homer’s, simply narrated ‘reality.’ Doctrine and promise are incarnate in them and inseparable from them; for that very reason, they are ‘fraught with background’ and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning... Since so much of the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon” (Auerbach 129).

Pushing further, Matthew Potts says that “human characters are fraught by these same backgrounds" and "they hide similar depths” (Potts 129). Although most of McCarthy’s characters in this period are nearly taciturn, up until *Suttree*, they are able to stir great emotion from the reader. In this dissertation, I will analyze Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian novels—*The Orchard Keeper, Outer Dark, Child of God, Suttree, and The Road*, along with pertinent portions of his published screenplays, and those works which hearken back to this region—*The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, through the lens of biblicality.

A portion of this term refers to the manner in which McCarthy employs texts from the King James Bible itself and from his literary heroes, through which it has been filtered. The time period of McCarthy’s Appalachian works spans a period of history in East Tennessee from roughly the 1940’s through the 1980’s. McCarthy
acknowledges being “Profoundly influenced by Hemingway, Faulkner, Melville, and Joyce” (Luce 113) and continues by saying, “I like the gutsy writers—Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Joyce, Faulkner. I like Melville, particularly, and more recently, Flannery O’Connor. She has a wonderful sense of the macabre” (Luce 116). He also “still professes an admiration for ‘all the good authors, such as Shakespeare, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Henry Miller’” (Luce 124). In nearly all of McCarthy’s interviews, he returns to these authors, who all share the commonality of being profoundly influenced and inspired by these biblical texts.

One reason for McCarthy’s writing style is a combination of his influences and how he is able to incorporate, distill, parody, and at times, appropriate their material in scriptural retellings and language largely inspired by the King James Bible. This is evident in the margins of many of his works in The Cormac McCarthy Papers at TSU in San Marcos, TX, a collection of drafts with his commentary, where he “often interpolates the work of other writers into his own. This direct admission of his adherence to T.S. Eliot’s views on literary theft “good artists steal rather than borrow, stands out as a rare example of McCarthy admitting to the crime” (Crews 183) as well.

In his review for the Times Literary Supplement, Andre Deutsch writes that, “McCarthy has come up with a sort of sub-biblical rhetoric, which tends to detract from the better things in his books” (Deutsch 1). While the first part of this statement may hold some truth, many critics disagree with the second. It appears that McCarthy
has attempted to blend the highly stylistic and artistic language of the King James Bible with the way people in the Knoxville region actually spoke. McCarthy’s writing style is an integral part of this unique approach, but as we will explore, it also exhibits atypical characteristics. It is a melding of high and low, standard and regional cultures. Vereen Bell refers to the language of this period as “neo-biblical” and suggests that “this was Hemingway’s way of being religious without believing, and it is McCarthy’s as well” (Bell 129). This theory holds some water, but as critics Dianne Luce, Scott Yarbrough, and others have pointed out, despite his experimentation or personal views, McCarthy has been quite religious in his writings from the beginning, whether or not he would agree, or even answer the question.

In her book, Reading the World, Dianne Luce refers to the first four novels of McCarthy as his Tennessee Period, purposefully excluding The Road, in order to focus on issues specific to that earlier time, such as the TVA and other regional concerns. While respecting Luce’s categorization, for the purpose of our study on biblicality, and to emphasize the regional and religious aspects of The Road and McCarthy’s newest works, we will refer to this period as The Appalachian Period, or simply reference his Appalachian novels or works. We now have the benefit as well, of access to his final novels, The Passenger and Stella Maris, which feature multiple homecomings to the town of Blank, just on the outskirts of Knoxville. This
designation highlights both the geographical setting and the religious beliefs present in McCarthy’s works.

**The KJV**

One of the most pervasive influences on McCarthy’s writing during this period is the King James Bible. Though this was not the version used by the Roman Catholic Church or the Irish Catholicism from which McCarthy arose, he would have heard its text shouted in the streets by evangelical street preachers, which roam the pages of *Suttree*, and on the radio most evenings. He also picks up on the implementation of these texts in the Southern Gothic and other stylings as filtered through his influences, such as William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor. The popularity of this version of the Bible in American culture is due to its profound and pervasive impact upon the English-speaking world. As Robert Alter says of contemporary belief, “Even when the fervid faith in Scripture as revelation had begun to fade... the language of the Old Testament in its 1611 English version continued to suffuse American culture” (Alter 1). Just previous to the time of McCarthy’s upbringing, the KJV was extolled by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as “America’s national book” (9). Though McCarthy was raised in a devout, Irish Catholic family, which used the Revised Standard Version, the KJV would have been all around him, and part of the appeal and power of his use of this text lies in that it contains a, “set of values... a set of demands, and a way of imagining man, God, and history, with which we must
wrestle, and which we perhaps never quite succeed in fitting to the shape of our own world” (4).

One of McCarthy’s great inspirations is Herman Melville, whose language borrows thoroughly from the KJV and its symbolism is seen throughout the great American novel, *Moby Dick*. William Faulkner as well, to whom McCarthy was endlessly compared during the period of his first four novels, “claimed that he read all the way through the King James Bible” (86) every few years, stressing the reading of the Hebrew Bible. He often uses its language and employs retellings of its stories as well. In his book *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*, Eric Alter goes on to speak directly of McCarthy saying that his “work, ‘for all its aggressive modernism, vividly demonstrates how the King James Version of the Bible, three full centuries after the Puritan founders, continues to enrich and distinguish American prose’” (113) and that “McCarthy’s ‘Shakespearean-Miltonic-biblical style elevates the motley crew’ such as in *Suttree*, which elevates ordinary country folks to the level of players in a cosmic drama” (114).

Finally, in speaking of the intermingling of influence, Ernest Hemingway, another of his most prominent influences, displays a “characteristic pattern of biblical prose” (151) replete with plain, descriptive language, which in simple terms tells us how we should feel about the scene it describes. In combining these, it has been said that in “McCarthy’s earlier fiction, there was a ‘strong thread of Hemingway’s
paratactic terseness interwoven, paradoxically, with something of Faulkner's more recondite and flamboyant language” (172), which is “accompanied by a simplicity and phonetic compactness of diction, again with the KJV as the great precedent” (173).

THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Had Flannery O'Connor lived to read McCarthy, she might have drawn a comparison between him and her character Hazel Motes in the novel *Wise Blood*. Despite not being a Christian, the protagonist, Hazel Motes, is constantly being asked if he is a preacher. In one passage, he responds to a woman by saying, “Church of Christ?...Well, I preach the Church Without Christ. I’m a member and preacher of that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way. Ask me about that church, and I’ll tell you it’s the church that the blood of Jesus don’t foul with redemption” (O’Connor 101). Motes is tormented by those accusing him of looking like a preacher and he sees Jesus in the back of his mind, “swinging from branch to branch” (12), beckoning him to come back to the faith. As is often seen in the criticism of McCarthy, some accuse him of not being a Christian, yet he is frequently associated with biblical texts and studied in many seminary courses.

According to McCarthy scholar Dianne Luce, McCarthy “gets his Dostoevsky via O’Connor” (Yarbrough 32), indicating that McCarthy’s approach to biblical
psychologizing is influenced, at least in part, by his reading of Flannery O'Connor and her use of biblical texts in the context of Southern Gothic literature. McCarthy’s work belongs under the greater banner of the Southern Gothic, while being a part of the subgenre of Appalachian Gothic as well. This places McCarthy’s work not only within the biblical framework but also within the tradition of the Southern Gothic, as O’Connor is one of the most prolific writers of the genre and its earliest theorist and defender. In the first wave of the Southern Gothic, writers continued the modernist tradition of questioning God while still employing biblical texts as a narrative framework. As a Catholic apologist, O’Connor drew upon the grotesque nature and the presence of goodness amidst violence found in many biblical passages, a common occurrence in McCarthy’s work as well.

McCarthy’s work is also a part of the tradition, within Southern writing and the Southern Gothic of which O’Connor says “By and large…people in the South still conceive of humanity in theological terms. While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The southerner who isn’t convinced of it is very much afraid that he may be formed in the image and likeness of God” (O’Connor 11). McCarthy grapples with this Christ-hauntedness through a host of characters and through various frameworks and like many Southern Gothic writers, “would agree with William Faulkner who said his childhood occurred against such a strong religious background that he absorbed Christianity if by osmosis” (Ketchin xii).
He is not using the grotesque in the exact manner as O’Connor or Faulkner, yet their works interact in many ways. O’Connor, who viewed that the true message of Christianity had been drained of meaning in American culture and her various scenes of people being drowned during baptism, or upending traditional moral mores, was different than Faulkner, who similar to McCarthy, used the powerful language of the Hebrew Bible as a metaphysical structure and backdrop for his novels and short stories. McCarthy takes this one step further, imbuing his characters and scenes with great biblical meaning, which is infused with mystery concerning the theological.

Violence remains a deeply ingrained aspect of life for McCarthy, and he frequently incorporates it as he emerges from this literary tradition. The Bible itself is replete with instances of violence, and McCarthy uses retellings of them to depict the dark aspects of the human condition, their correlation to our world and possible future worlds, and the coexistence of beauty within this darkness. He contends that despite humanity’s seemingly insignificant role in the universe, meaningful actions and agency can still exist within this framework. McCarthy explores the inevitability of death, often portrayed in gruesome ways, and experiments with faith and religion using the stylistic elements of Southern Gothic throughout his works.

McCarthy expands the scope of what the Southern Gothic traditionally encompasses, offering hope and delving into contemporary and future issues related to being human in the evolving South. His exploration of class differs from that of
many of his contemporaries. Coming from a wealthy northeastern family, McCarthy intentionally chose to forsake familial wealth to immerse himself in the local culture. His unique upbringing, combined with his intelligence, forever casts him as an outsider, despite this dedication to location. McCarthy’s familial background significantly influences his writing. His father, Charles McCarthy, served on the legal staff of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) for many years, and his academic achievements at Yale Law School established certain expectations for a young Cormac. This contrast between his heritage and the place where McCarthy grew up creates a tension that shapes his work, in part. As one early review notes, “Cormac McCarthy grew up in the hills and mountain coves east of Knoxville, Tenn. There he must have spent much of his time inspecting flora and fauna, listening to the talk of the hill people, and acquiring a nostalgic yearning for a society not so much outside the law as indifferent to it” (Prescott 5).

Furthermore, McCarthy’s Appalachian works exemplify the Southern Gothic style, and he enriches this literary tradition by drawing inspiration from early writers such as Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, adapting biblical conventions to his own storytelling. A prominent element of Southern Gothic storytelling is the concept of “the grotesque.” Flannery O’Connor was among the first to discuss the grotesque as a literary tool during the rise of Southern Gothic literature in the 1930’s. However, O’Connor’s perspective on the grotesque has since evolved, as the more recent critic,
Philip Thomson points out. In *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom*, he notes that the
grotesque has a number of elements, including, “disharmony (conflicts,
unresolved), the comic (vulgarly funny), the terrifying (uncanny, to supernatural to
disgusting and perverse to extravagance and
exaggeration (extremeness), abnormality (such as physical features), the satiric and
playful” (Thomson 28), to which McCarthy has added emphasized areas of the ethical
and the religious, as well as consciousness involving the modern state of race and
class, a cornerstone of current Southern Gothic writers.

To delve into the beginnings and evolution of the Southern Gothic, which led
to the writings of McCarthy, we have, early on, the British and American gothic
styles of writing, which have largely to do with these settings, themes, and tropes, yet
are quite different, culturally speaking. Self-consciously gothic writing began in 1764
with Horace Walpole’s novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. The style he originated became
known as British Gothic, which borrowed its name from both the Goths, that
Germanic tribe who helped bring down the Roman Empire, and the gothic style of
architecture with its stark, pointed edges, which were found upon the aging castles of
which Walpole wrote. As a style of writing that came out of Romanticism, Gothic
literature includes the traditional trappings of the crumbling mansion and family
secrets but is ultimately darker in its themes. Gothic literature joins the conversation
of Romanticism and its overlap into horror and the Gothic. For instance, Edgar Allen
Poe is often referred to as a “dark romantic” and elsewhere as our first Southern Gothic author, as Poe examines the institution and inner workings of slavery, racism, the dark side of religion, and being an outsider, all topics which we will explore throughout this dissertation.

While Wiley Cash, the Southern Gothic novelist and critic, has referred to Poe as some refer to McCarthy, as “only half a Southerner” (Palmer 13), Toni Morrison’s groundbreaking work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* envisions Poe’s work as essentially Southern, noting that “no early American writer is more important to African Americanism” (Morrison 15). His works, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1838), *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1839), and *The Gold Bug* (1843), along with some of his poems written while in the military, all express this attention to race and regionality and attention and remain relevant in mapping out the trajectory of the Southern Gothic genre, replete with biblical elements. There is a way in which McCarthy inhabits this same space. His work is Southern Gothic in this period yet transcends the Southernness that we typically see from those writing in Appalachia. Somewhat tongue in cheek, Peter Josyph writes about how he sees McCarthy as not Southern at all, saying, “an acclaimed southern novelist’ is probably inadvertent, but that’s about as Southern as I can allow for him: he’s been working down there, not up here. And Suttree is no more Southern than McCarthy, a Rhode Islander, is Southern, or I, a Long Islander, am Southern. He is
even less Faulknerian and so is his book. If you need to call Suttree a name, call him a transcendentalist” (Josyph 40). McCarthy’s Southern, religious roots extend further than this, yet Josyph illustrates the ways in which he and his characters are somewhat out of sync with other writing in this genre.

McCarthy is a product of this region in many ways, yet his Appalachian novels don’t read at all like a Wendell Berry, Dorothy Allison, or Lee Smith--like someone born, raised, and whose family was settled in this area. Berry is on the more lighthearted end of the spectrum, of employing Christian tropes and a way of strengthening beliefs among readers, with little violence. Allison focuses on the trauma of being a woman and a lesbian in rural Appalachia and is at the other end of a spectrum from McCarthy. One Appalachian author who often elicits the same religious sentiment of McCarthy’s early novels, but with a different approach, is Lee Smith. McCarthy and Smith are quite different personalities, dealing with the same region and very similar subject matter at times. Smith seems hardly to address race at all as many of her works are about dysfunctional and insular families. There is also some difference involving roots and psychology. Smith is more concerned with praxis, while McCarthy often uses biblical language, tropes, scenes, and more to coax feelings of depth and the ancient from readers. Smith is also more straightforward in sharing her feelings about faith, life, and writing, even including a heartfelt note at the end of her novel Saving Grace. “In a way, my writing is a lifelong search for
belief. I have always been particularly interested in expression of religious ecstasy and in those moment when we are most outside ourselves and experience the spirit directly,” (Smith 274) she says, also warning us that this novel is a “work of the imagination entirely but I have tried to make it as true as I know how” (274). Smith in her language and tone is very clearly a product of Appalachia and McCarthy is clearly an astute observer, capable of inculcating and distilling his surroundings into a local, yet global literature.

The term Southern Gothic was coined in 1935 by Ellen Glasgow, a wealthy Virginian novelist and literary critic, in her newspaper article, “Heroes and Monsters”. She meant the term pejoratively and applied it to writers such as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, whom she accused of writing lurid and outlandish tales which valued the grotesque over traditional Romantic themes. She encouraged writers of the time to instead “deal as honestly with living tissues as...with decay,” and to keep in mind that “the colors of putrescence have no greater validity for our age, or for any age, than have...the cardinal virtues” (Glasgow 4). She saw this style of writing promoting “aimless violence” and a “Raw-Head-and-Bloody-Bones” (2) brand of prose practiced by “professional rebels against gentility” (2). At first, the moniker was so infamous that Eudora Welty, when asked if she was a Southern gothic writer, replied “They better not call me that!” (Marshall 19). By 1949, however, William Faulkner
had won a Nobel Prize and this style of work was firmly planted within the popular literary imagination.

This golden era of Southern Gothic writing focused on the grotesque and included in-depth ruminations about religion, race, and the working poor. Southern Gothic texts often focus on those who are not privy to the benefits afforded by the American dream and are left in areas of stunted economic and educational growth; such people tend to turn to religion and folklore for help. It also brings to light “the extent to which the idyllic vision of the pastoral, agrarian South rests on massive repressions of the region’s historical realities: slavery, racism, and patriarchy” (Oxford 199). The reality of Southern America was laid bare following the Civil War when this battle-torn area was left without a viable economic plan. Wealthy farmers were left without their means of production (slaves) and slaves were set free without the monetary assistance they were promised, leaving the land an impotent and festering pot of racism and patriarchal dominance, haunted by the specter of slavery. Additionally, Northern writers and travel companies profited from describing the post-war South and giving tours that most had only heard about in books and newspapers. After the profound hardships which many impoverished Southerners faced persisted, violence rose to the surface and these new Southern Gothic writers of the time provided a plethora of pertinent written material, along with the ideal
setting of dilapidated plantations, fallow fields, and vast haunted woodlands that they
would use as backdrops.

Francis Russell Hart, a prominent literary historian, describes Southern Gothic
writing as being “evocative of a sublime and picturesque landscape... depicting a
world in ruins” (Hart 89), and Cormac McCarthy is a writer who has embodied this in
his work, both physically and metaphysically, taking scenes of desolation and
modeling them after scenes and concepts found in the King James Bible. His western
novels are what made him famous, yet his work begins and ends in East Tennessee.
McCarthy is often criticized for being excessively violent and grotesque, yet his
novels contain within them certain dark truths, such as the inseparability of slavery
and religion, the treatment of women and the lower classes, and the working out of
moral dilemmas involving the nature of the children of God, in the same manner as
biblical texts do.

He elucidates the disturbing underbelly of the ‘American Dream’ that so
many have experienced. Marco Petrelli says that McCarthy’s “work reflects an
increasing immersion into the gothic landscape of post-southernness” (18) as well as
reflecting “a deep existential disorientation” (18), which provide not only a new type
of realism but exposits a new type of Southerner, both thwarting and seeking to keep
the old ways alive simultaneously.
The great Southern historian, Louis Palmer argues that this type of “Southern Gothic is produced from a more mainstream ideological position, accepting the poor and other ‘freaks’ as types that, as O’Connor suggests, can still be recognized in the South, but represent universal human types” (Palmer 34). It is also grotesque and designed to shock... a self-reflectory tool amongst the unobservant, “Christ-haunted” (O’Connor 4) terrain of the American South. He goes on to say that “the resistances in the later Southern Gothic tend to represent (in the political sense) religious and gender or sexual preference of minority voices over and above class and racial concerns” (Palmer 34), but late Southern gothic places them on equal footing. Racial and class-based concerns have always been a part of rural American life, but now issues of sex and gender, and the value of the religious are salient now as well.

The Southern Gothic can point out similar issues involving religion and injustice that carry on to this day. McCarthy’s addressing of this is somewhat subtle, yet is present in very valuable ways, showing us the history of these wrongs in many cases. For the study of literature, it can open up the possibility of pondering a God, and the mysteries associated with this type of thinking, in the land where Postmodernism has at times been found wanting. As McCarthy phrases it, “The spiritual nature of reality has been the principal preoccupation of mankind since forever and it's not going away anytime soon. The notion that everything is just stuff doesn’t seem to do it for us” (McCarthy 36) and this is a primary element of the
biblicality that he employs. Working through one of the most troublesome aspects of
Southern and Appalachian Gothic writing, which is the religion of the region,
McCarty explores this in a variety of manners with a variety of source texts and
frameworks. Interestingly, his work is read by English departments and divinity
schools alike, causing the latter to ponder the darker elements of faith and make a
proper assessment of the limits of belief. Christianity has long proposed being a
religion of peace, kindness, and truth, yet those among early American culture, such
as Frederick Douglass pointed out the meanness of Christian slave masters and said
they were, “calling themselves Christian churches and yet are in union with
slaveholders. It is against religion, as presented by these bodies, that I have felt it my
duty to testify” (Douglass 4).

Biblicality then, is situated within the context of the major themes often found
in McCarthy’s work, which include the pervasive presence of violence, which is both
characteristic of the Southern Gothic and an inherent part of human existence. He
also explores the profound beauty of the rural South in which he grew up and
juxtaposes it with humanity’s insignificance within that microcosm, creating darker
undertones. In these works, McCarthy elevates the discussion of moral concerns, the
inevitability of death, and the intricate interplay between the awareness of human
limitations. These, along with the interplay of motifs involving faith and religion,
which deepen the traditional themes of the Southern Gothic, play a vital role in these
works as well. There are elements of race and class consciousness that can be examined in McCarthy’s exploration of these overarching themes connecting his work to Southern Gothic, which offers a contemporary perspective and update within the genre.

As previously mentioned, this dissertation seeks to excavate McCarthy’s use of biblicality as it pertains to concepts within his Appalachian works, which, in unraveling layers of religious expression, moral dilemmas, and existential contemplation embedded within these narratives show us biblicality’s outlines. In focusing on several key aspects of biblicality evident in this period of writing, such as, the use of religious imagery, the employment of biblical language, the interplay between religious and secular elements, the impact of Appalachian landscapes, and the exploration of faith, morality, and the human condition, we will explore how McCarthy employs the biblical text and updates a genre.

Charles Cormac McCarthy was born on July 20, 1933, in Providence, Rhode Island. McCarthy’s father, John, was top of his class at Yale Law School and after practicing in New York and Providence for a time, moved his family to Knoxville to become lead prosecutor of land acquisitions for the newly formed Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). McCarthy’s mother, Gladys McGrail McCarthy, raised Cormac, along with his two brothers and three sisters. The McCarthy’s were a wealthy Irish
Catholic family, in rural and evangelical Knoxville and were out of place in many ways.

McCarthy attended Catholic School in Knoxville, graduating in 1951, and attended UT Knoxville for two years, before joining the Air Force and being stationed in Alaska, where he hosted a radio show. McCarthy returned to UT from 1957-59, publishing two short stories in their literary magazine, *The Phoenix*, “Wake for Susan” and “A Drowning Incident”, which will be employed briefly in our analysis as they are part of his Appalachian work. He left college forever in 1960 and began travelling all over the U.S., living and writing in various places. He returned to Knoxville just before the publication of *The Orchard Keeper*. An early review of McCarthy’s Appalachian novels says that,

McCarthy is a regional writer, an obscure local colorist of the American South. None of McCarthy’s first early novels sold well, he was largely unknown by the reading public and only slightly more so within academia. The author never granted interviews, refused speaking engagements and teaching positions, seemed utterly unconcerned with garnering a wider audience, and apparently relished the aura of mystery and reclusiveness which attended him . . . just another eccentric voice of the American South. Madison Smartt Bell wryly observed that McCarthy “shunned publicity so effectively he wasn’t even famous for it” (Charyn 9).
Newly unveiled interviews with McCarthy in the 1960’s prove that he was more than happy to interact with local journalists and help with the projects of friends, but this lore surrounding him for decades has often promoted certain readings and impressions of his works and person, which have to do with nihilism and his purported hermeticism. The Southern Gothic lore surrounding McCarthy has been built up for decades, thriving on rumor and hearsay, but research suggests that his writings and life are replete with more hope than was previously assumed.

**THE NOVELS**

**THE ORCHARD KEEPER**

McCarthy’s first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965, possesses an Edenic quality that parallels the biblical narrative of being expelled from the garden. Set in rural East Tennessee, the novel serves as a defense of traditional folkways against the encroachment of modernity. It explores the impact of the newly formed TVA on the lives of rural mountain people, displacing them from their ancestral lands and pushing them to seek employment in factories or cities like Knoxville or work for logging companies that are depleting their former properties.

The novel revolves around a small group of characters, each embodying different biblical roles. Uncle Ather, an elderly man, assumes the role of the orchard keeper, a designation typically attributed to God in the King James Version of the
Bible. Ather has been uprooted from his home and is compelled to find his own way while imparting the wisdom and lore of the land to those around him. He can be found discussing regional folklore, witchcraft, the role of suicide in the urban setting, all of which will be further explored in later chapters. He is also prominently associated with McCarthy’s exploration of vessels which contain light and fire and carry various aspects of divinity within the novel.

Ather quietly tends to a corpse which he finds in a pond near his property, which belongs to Kenneth Rattner, a common criminal, whose family believes that he is a hardworking and heroic man. He is the father of John Wesley Rattner, a local boy, whom Ather and later the bootlegger Marion Sylder befriend and mentor. Sylder, in an event provoked by Kenneth Rattner, kills him and leaves his body in the pond, unbeknownst to either Uncle Ather or the younger Rattner. Sylder is also a local bootlegger who seeks to resist the encroachment of modernity by implementing a new way of living off the land, which is lawless and free. The themes explored in The Orchard Keeper lays the foundation for our subsequent chapters, as these characters are vessels of light and darkness, replete with elements contained within both biblical and folkloric traditions.

OUTER DARK

Outer Dark, McCarthy’s second novel published in 1968 by Random House, is set in Appalachia, likely near Knoxville, Tennessee. While rooted in the region, the
novel incorporates certain fantastical geographic features and possesses a mythic quality that transcends the rural setting. Throughout *Outer Dark*, the characters experience a violent physical and existential separation from the land. The novel creates an atmosphere intensified by the nightmarish qualities of the landscape, which serves as a literal “garden of the dead” (McCarthy, Dark 242), an antipode to the book of Genesis’, Garden of Eden.

The narrative of *Outer Dark* revolves around Culla and Rinthy Holme, siblings who inherit a cabin in rural Appalachia following their parent’s death. The story begins with Rinthy giving birth to a child conceived through an incestuous relationship with Culla. After the birth, Culla abandons the child in the woods, assuming the tinker who visited the cabin prior to the birth has taken the child. Rinthy, upon recovering, embarks on an epic journey in search of the tinker and her lost child, while Culla aimlessly wanders the land, encountering work and trouble along the way.

During their journeys, Rinthy and Culla encounter a trio of malevolent individuals known as the “grim triune,” who engage in murder, grave-robbing, cannibalism, and other moral taboos, previously mentioned, which are biblical in nature. This triune foreshadows Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* and serve as figures of retribution, demanding that Culla “name his deeds”. *Outer Dark* showcases influences from both William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, and the novel has
been interpreted as a parable. The biblical references in the title, *Outer Dark*, as mentioned by Diane Luce in *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period*, suggest the existence of an opposing realm of inner light. These concepts will be explored in chapter two, which delves into the biblical themes of darkness and light, respectively, and the objects of divinity which contain them, within McCarthy’s Appalachian works. The title itself is derived from Matthew 8, where Jesus speaks of casting unbelievers “into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8 KJV). While some, like Vereen Bell, perceive only bleak nihilism in the novel, there is also room for hope, grace, and redemption for its characters, as outer darkness is not always the end.

Beyond this, we can observe that “the darkness and nothingness that pervade *Outer Dark*... can take us in a different direction, down a path of ‘unknowing’ that will reveal to us the incomprehensibility, rather than the emptiness, of the divine mystery” (Crews 186). Hearkening back to our earlier point, we can see here, that, “nothingness and darkness are not antithetical to the novel’s metaphysical vision; nor are they to be rejected or overcome in order for the novel to be theologically satisfying” (Crews 158). This novel explores McCarthy’s biblical use of both darkness and light and contributes to his portrayal of outsiders as well.
CHILD OF GOD

*Child of God*, McCarthy’s third novel published in 1973, presents the most unsettling of the biblical and moral dilemmas we encounter in his work. The text challenges us to view its protagonist, Lester Ballard, as a “child of God, much like [ourselves] perhaps” (McCarthy 4). We are immediately tested when Ballard discovers a couple who died of carbon monoxide poisoning while having sex in a car. He engages in sexual acts with the woman, described in the text as “A pair of white legs sprawled embracing a shade, a dark incubus that humped in a dream of slaverous lust” (20). He then proceeds to murder women and collect their bodies in caves, wandering the countryside dressed in women’s clothing, his head cocked to the side from an injury, carrying a shotgun, and speaking in the manner of an extended biblical curse.

Vereen Bell raises concerns about the fact that “Throughout the novel McCarthy has sustained for us the odd illusion that Lester is somehow mysteriously forgiven. This is at once strange and not strange, for if Lester is in a state of grace—if such grace were in fact possible—this seems to be precisely and incomprehensibly what true grace would be like” (Bell 68). This facet of the novel’s morality will be examined in detail. Peter Josyph challenges this notion by asking, “It is wonderful that McCarthy sees Lester, his killer-necrophiliac, as a child of God like all of us, and dares us toward the same understanding, for we cannot be rightly blamed for who we are. But would McCarthy treat him so kindly if, God forbid, one of his own offspring
had joined that gruesome collection?” (Josyph 119). The novel also functions as a “subversive parody” of Bunyan’s, Pilgrim’s Progress (Cooper 220), allowing for intriguing interpretations involving biblicality. These various interpretations highlight McCarthy’s urge for us to reevaluate the stories of the Bible and their function in both ancient and contemporary literature.

SUTTREE

McCarthy’s fourth novel, Suttree was published in 1979 and is his most cosmopolitan and introspective work. It takes place in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1951-56. The story follows Cornelius Suttree, a man who has abandoned a wealthy family, along with his first wife and child, in order to live alone on a houseboat on the Tennessee River. He wanders the streets and taverns of Knoxville at night, accompanied by a cast of ne’er-do-wells, who embody the stories, ethics, and often lack thereof, derived from the region’s religious beliefs. Suttree’s encounters include hermits, prostitutes, preachers, priests, a Geechee Witch (of which we will speak of in detail in chapter three), and individuals from various walks of life. Suttree has been likened to an East Tennessee Ulysses, as the novel shares certain parallels with Joyce’s work, involving wander, stream of consciousness, and playing with biblical texts. Suttree is a seeker, questioning the fundamental reasons for living, religion, and the meaning of existence.
The novel begins with a critique of the Christian settlers of East Tennessee, describing them as,

hunters and woodcutters (who) once slept in their boots by the dying light of their thousand fires and went on, old Teutonic forebears with eyes incandesced by the visionary light of a massive rapacity, wave on wave of the violent and the insane, their brains stoked with spoorless analogues of all that was, lean Aryans with their abrogate Semitic chapbook (the Bible) reenacting the dramas and parables therein and mindless and pale with a longing that nothing save dark’s total restitution could appease (McCarthy 4)

It is a novel critiquing Christianity, as Suttree himself is portrayed as a fisher of men, despite his aversion to eating fish. Early in the novel, he witnesses the fishing or ‘grapplehooking’ of men out of the river, which becomes a recurring motif associated with themes of suicidality in chapter four. Suttree is the most critical of any of the novels as it involves religious themes and remains his most cosmopolitan and deeply introspective work as well.

The narrative is replete with messengers of the King James Version (KJV) as well. There is Gatemouth, a preacher who warns of hellfire near his houseboat, and often frightens Gene Harrogate, Suttree’s unhinged and gregarious former prison buddy who shows up unannounced in Knoxville one day. There is “woman preacher” who visits the prison where Suttree and Gene Harrogate spend time and offers her
own interpretation of biblical tales. Suttree encounters a “bible camp group” engaged in baptisms, and when asked, “You been baptized?”, he replies, “just on the head.” The preacher responds, “That ain’t no good. It won’t take if you don’t get total nursing. That old sprinkling business won’t get it, buddy boy” (122), illustrating both Suttree’s and McCarthy’s internal struggle with his Irish Catholic roots in a rural, evangelical area. The infamous Goatman in the novel is accompanied by a herd of goats and carries a wagon full of “biblical messages” with a sign reading “JESUS WEPT” (197). The Goatman confides in Suttree that he is willing to compromise his morals to accept a fish caught on the Sabbath, as long as Suttree keeps it a secret as they are talking about their respective religious beliefs. Again, this is a novel, which is both highly critical of religious beliefs, while simultaneously being reliant on elements of it, such as imagery and retelling of stories.

As Frank Shelton aptly points out in relation to this work, “Violence, sometimes of the most gruesome kind, runs through all McCarthy’s novels, but Suttree is the only one to explore deeply the potential for violence against self” (73). McCarthy’s previous novels delve into the depths of human depravity and life in a cruel world and Suttree brings us face-to-face with the existential struggle against suicide. While agency and redemption are present in these novels, it is in Suttree that McCarthy first explores these themes through an existential framework.
SCREENPLAYS

Similar to many of his literary heroes, McCarthy ventured into writing screenplays, with varying degrees of success. His three published screenplays—*The Gardener’s Son*, *The Stonemason*, and *The Sunset Limited*—were all released between novels and are geographically connected to McCarthy’s Appalachian works. This is with the exception of *The Sunset Limited*, which shares ideological connections that are important for our purposes. As in McCarthy’s other works, the book of Job plays a significant role in these screenplays, particularly in addressing issues of violence, existence, and suicide within a modern, urban context. Critically, *The Sunset Limited* has been seen as fleshing out certain ontological ideas proposed within *The Road*, another enigmatically Appalachian work. The other two are important both geographically, ideologically, and having to do with racial matters, which we will discuss in chapter three.

THE ROAD

Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, published in 2005, received the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 2006 and it remained McCarthy’s most recent novel for over fifteen years. *The Road* is a harrowing and deeply personal narrative set in a post-apocalyptic world, where humanity has been reduced to but a few survivors. The sky is perpetually obscured by dust and ash, the animals have disappeared, and the remaining flora is charred, covered in soot, and largely inedible and unable to grow
again. Cannibalistic groups roam the roads, while the protagonists, the man and the boy, struggle to survive winter as they journey towards the southeastern coast. Along their journey, they face brutal encounters with other survivors that test their belief systems and will to live. Despite the overwhelming bleakness, their love for each other and their belief in the existence of something greater propel them forward.

The boy, viewed as a vessel of divinity and hope in a ravaged world, can be seen as the holy vessel referenced in the novel’s original title, *The Grail*. The man asserts, “He knew only that his child was his warrant. If he is not the word of God, God never spoke,” and reflects, “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left, and they have taken with them the world” (McCarthy 27). There is a scene involving Eli, a nearly blind man they encounter on their journey, who “sees men as trees,” reminiscent of the biblical account in Matthew of a man healed of his blindness. In this scene, the man’s demeanor appears somewhat unhinged as he asks Eli, “what if I told you he was a god?” (143) a statement which due to the postapocalyptic nature of the world, he hopes in untrue. Throughout the novel, McCarthy skillfully employs biblical rhetoric and imagery, evoking his own experiences of having a child later in life and fostering the reader’s desire to fill in textual gaps involving what this imagery evokes.

Critic Steven Frye asserts that *The Road*, “tends to blend science with deep personal and theological concerns” (Frye 151). McCarthy’s meticulous process of
perfecting his final novels over a span of forty years reveals a shift towards primarily exploring scientific and mathematical-related issues intertwined with existential and ontological themes.

THE PASSENGER AND STELLA MARIS

_The Passenger_, McCarthy’s long-awaited novel, was released alongside a surprise companion piece, _Stella Maris_. Together, they form a complex interplay resembling a Borromean knot or Kekule ring, a concept McCarthy has previously discussed in his article, “The Kekule Problem” which involves the interplay of language and the unconscious. His immersion in science at the Santa Fe Institute for the past two decades has only added to his interest in incorporating science and the literary, while leaving room to explore the mystery and meaning that religion offer. _The Passenger_ initially presents itself as a potboiler centered around salvage diver Bobby Western, who discovers an intact plane, on the bottom of the ocean, thirty feet below, which is missing a passenger. It quickly abandons this tactic and evolves into an exploration of modern science, ethics, religion, and suicide.

_Stella Maris_ consists of six sessions involving Bobby’s sister, Alicia Western, and her psychiatrist, Dr. Cohen. Its purpose is to address profound existential inquiries such as, who are we? Why are we here, and why is there something rather than nothing in the universe, along with how all these questions continue to interact with the concept of biblicality. The title itself, _Stella Maris_, meaning “Star of the Sea”,
carries historical and linguistic associations with the name of the Virgin Mary, which constitutes a compelling narrative gateway into these novels where biblicality is concerned.
Chapter 2: Darkness, Light, and Objects of Divinity

Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian novels are replete with haunting portrayals of human struggle, existential questioning, and a profound exploration of faith amidst great violence and depravity. Set against the backdrop of the rugged East Tennessee landscape, with its system of caves and mountains, these works delve into the depths of the human experience, and employ the symbolism associated with darkness, light, and objects of divinity. In this chapter, we embark upon a journey to unravel the intricate symbolism and thematic significance of these elements which are enmeshed within biblicality in McCarthy’s Appalachian novels.

In *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy’s first novel, we see Arthur Ownby (Uncle Ather) as symbolic of God as the overseer of the orchard with his staff and horn. In a dark and changing world, he tends the dead and shepherds the other two protagonists, tending the body of John Wesley Rattner’s father in a sewage pond near his orchard and telling stories of old to whomever he may come across. *Outer Dark* concentrates on the elements of biblical darkness after which it was named, yet also offers light and redemption in Rinthy Holme’s character as she wanders, looking for her abandoned child. *Child of God* conveys rage and hatred on a biblical scale, yet there is a grace purveyed within a handful of scenes which we will examine in this chapter, involving certain elements of his character, which are not usually present, and his being buoyed up by forces which are beyond his control. He is also called “A
child of god, much like” us “perhaps” (McCarthy 3) which requires a deeper exploration into what makes him so. *Suttree* focuses on existential action in an unsure world and examines agency in a world, which is critical of holy objects and present forms of Christianity and *The Road* imagines the existential goodness that is able to exist in a ruined and postapocalyptic landscape, imagining ethereal goodness and the co-protagonist, the boy, as a vessel for divinity.

In describing her lifelong struggle in being both a Catholic and a southerner, Flannery O’Connor says that “the writer must wrestle with it like Jacob with the angel until he has extracted a blessing” (O’Connor 198). This, in his own way, is what McCarthy is doing in using elements such as darkness, light, and objects of divinity, in conjunction with certain biblical passages, in his Appalachian work. He wrestles with these passages, uses them for his own stylistic means in eliciting a feeling having to do with the ancient and sublime within the rader, and susses them out in Southern Gothic stylistics by transporting them into contemporary, but no less mythical situations. These writings are Southern Gothic in that they are grotesque, Christ-haunted, and force us as readers to deal with and interpret meaning in light of these elements.

Within McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, darkness, light, and objects of divinity emerge as profound and recurring themes that shape the narrative fabric. Darkness represents moral decay, evil forces, existential dread, and uncertainties, along with
outright murder and divine judgement. Light, on the other hand, serves as a symbol of hope, redemption, and divine presence. Additionally, objects of divinity, whether religious artifacts, natural objects, or human-made creations, embody the sacred and offer glimpses into the transcendent realm, just as they do in biblical texts. They are at times carriers of fire and light, and at others, representations of darkness and carriers of the divine. These themes play a pivotal role in McCarthy’s exploration of the human condition, faith, and the search for meaning in a harsh and unforgiving world.

I. The Symbolism of Darkness

Within Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, darkness emerges as a recurrent motif laden with profound symbolic implications. This section delves into the multifaceted nature of darkness, exploring its thematic significance throughout McCarthy’s Appalachian works. By examining darkness as an expression of evil and moral decay, we delve into the depths of its symbolism, uncovering the sinister forces that pervade these narratives and landscape. Additionally, as we analyze darkness as a representation of the unknown and uncertain, we unveil the existential tensions and profound questions that arise within the character’s journeys. Moreover, we explore darkness as a metaphor for the human condition, illuminating the struggles and challenges inherent in the human experience as portrayed by McCarthy. Through this exploration, we gain insight into the rich and complex biblicality embedded
within McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, shedding light on the intricate interplay between darkness and the existential themes that permeate his works.

There is no clearer connection to darkness and biblicality than in McCarthy’s second novel, *Outer Dark*, which records the journeys of two siblings, Culla and Rinthy Holme, through a bleak and desolate Appalachian landscape. They have been abandoned by their parents and have a child together in a remote Tennessee homestead. Culla tells his sister Rinthy that their baby has died and that he buried it in the woods. In reality he has left it to die in a glade, where he is picked up by a Tinker, a travelling salesman of sorts. Then begins the twin odysseys, for Rinthy to find her lost child and Culla to fall into the hands of a dark fate at every turn. In the biblical sense, he is often fumbling in the dark and seemingly outside the grace of God.

Vereen Bell, in his seminal work *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1989), the first scholarly book on McCarthy, notes the biblical nature of the title, and Steven Frye’s comprehensive analysis in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (2009) provides invaluable insights into the text’s title and its biblical background. Frye illuminates the connection between the novel’s title and Matthew 8:10–12, where the text vividly depicts the parable of the “outer darkness,” symbolizing the expulsion of those who lack faith into a place of eternal separation from God’s presence. By drawing upon these scholarly interpretations, this section uncovers the profound
biblical resonances in *Outer Dark*, revealing how McCarthy skillfully weaves themes of sin, damnation, and divine absence into the narrative fabric. Frye says that,

McCarthy’s second novel takes its name from Matthew 8:10–12, when Christ speaks to a centurion who has come to ask for his servant to be healed. The centurion, a man outside the Hebraic “kingdom,” humbles himself, and Jesus takes the opportunity to admonish those who presume themselves chosen:

“Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Frye 29)

Both of these critics’ explanations are quite helpful, yet fail to include the fullness of biblical injunctions and meaning included within this darkness. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the concept of outer darkness within McCarthy’s oeuvre, it is imperative to explore additional verses and themes associated with this aspect of biblicality. Such an exploration will allow us to construct a coherent and comprehensive vision of the significance of outer darkness, enabling us to analyze the characters and scenes within McCarthy’s Appalachian novels. By delving into the layers of meaning within this biblical motif, we can uncover deeper insights into the narrative and thematic complexities present within this work.
Outer darkness, as depicted in biblical terms, refers to a space devoid of God’s presence and the accompanying blessings of being within that inner space, yet there is still hope in that nearness, though it be in dark. In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, God is often found within this darkness. It can be a place of stumbling, confusion, and testing for those whom God has favored. As scholars, we aim to move beyond the notion put forth by Vereen Bell that McCarthy’s work is steeped in nihilism and instead strive to develop a more nuanced understanding of outer darkness throughout McCarthy’s writings as there are several descriptive and variant modes within the biblical text. Firstly, it represents an intense darkness surrounding God’s presence. As Exodus 20:21 states, “the people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:21). Similarly, in the retelling of Moses given in the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy 4:11 describes this darkness as being on a mountain which is enveloped in darkness, cloud, and gloom.

Secondly, outer darkness signifies a place of confusion and separation from the life and blessings of God. Deuteronomy 28:29 portrays it as an inner state where people grope in darkness, saying, “And thou shalt grope at noonday, as the blind gropeth in darkness, and thou shalt not prosper in thy ways: and thou shalt be only oppressed and spoiled evermore, and no man shall save thee”. Proverbs 4:19 further emphasizes that the wicked stumble in deep darkness, ignorant of their own wrongdoing, saying “They way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what
they stumble.” This stumbling can be for a short period or a more profound darkness which leads to one being cast into that darkness and later fire for eternity as it develops in the New Testament.

Furthermore, there are verses, such as those highlighted by Steven Frye in Matthew 8 and elsewhere, which discuss being cast out into darkness after once being part of God’s presence. For instance, 1 Samuel 2 reveals that “the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail” (1 Sam 1:9). Similarly, Matthew 4 draws a connection between the Old and New Testaments, proclaiming that “the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned” (Matt 4:16). This highlights Jesus as an integral part of God, bridging the gap between the Old and New Testaments and ushering in a new way of living for all people. Just as McCarthy’s texts of this time period, especially The Road, are said not to allow for any hope or redemption.

Similarly, this passage shows us these possibilities. Ephesians 5:8 reinforces the idea of light and darkness as specific ways of living or modes of existence. It urges believers to “walk as children of light” (Eph 5:8), which emphasizes the transformation from darkness to light through faith in the hoped-for messiah they believe was embodied in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. The manner of Job as well is
important to McCarthy, as Job lived in darkness and despair for a time, but it was a trial that he would emerge from, better than when he began.

We see the darkness as a place of testing for God’s people, most notably in the book of Job, which serves as the central undergirding text for McCarthy’s work, *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*, and is mentioned in *Suttree* and is the backdrop for scenes such as the mother’s suicide in *The Road*, which we will discuss in chapter four. The biblical character Job was originally an exemplar of living in the way of light, but everything is upended when Satan appears before God with a quandary. God praises Job as blameless, but Satan questions Job’s motives, suggesting that his devotion is merely a response to God’s blessings and protection. Satan challenges God, saying, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face” (Job 1:10-11 ESV). Despite facing immense hardships and being covered in sores and near unto death, Job remains steadfast in his faith, expressing his willingness to descend to the “land of darkness and deep shadow” (Job 10:21 ESV). Job ultimately emerges from this darkness, with his fortunes restored by God, and he lives out his days in prosperity (Job 42:16-17 ESV).
In McCarthy’s second and final short story, published in UT Knoxville’s *The Phoenix* in 1960, he begins his use of this darkness. A black widow spider presides as an ominous portent within the narrative, which revolves around a mother dog left alone after her puppies are given away. The nameless boy, serving as the protagonist, stumbles upon dead puppies floating in the river and discovers a soggy bag containing a single black puppy. Initially consumed by anger, the boy’s emotions soon give way to numbness and “a great hollow feeling” (3) as he encounters other deceased dogs. In a state of confusion, he experiences a clash of thoughts in the recesses of his mind and places the putrid bag next to his baby sister’s crib. This sequence of events portrays the boy’s descent into a realm of moral darkness, despite being part of a seemingly caring family. There is also a second layer, which Nell Sullivan recently posited, which suggest the father may have drowned the puppies himself, which adds another level to this darkness.

McCarthy’s first novel, published five years after this short story, *The Orchard Keeper*, contains distinct scenes which contribute to a fuller understanding of the theme of outer darkness. One current of the novel focuses on John Wesley Rattner’s father, Kenneth as he roams around the Knoxville area looking for work. He is idolized by his wife as an upstanding, Christian man, yet in reality, he is nothing more than a drunk and a con artist. In an event referred to as “The incident at the Green Fly Inn”, the Green Fly Inn being the local speakeasy, which is set up on the
precipice of a mountain cliff. The elder Rattner, Kenneth, enters “through the door and onto the porch, circumspectly, nodding across them all with diffidence” (McCarthy 24). He leans “against the doorframe and lift[s] the bottle to his mouth, his eyes shifting among them... seeking again that being in the outer dark with whom only he held communion, smiling a little to himself, the onlooker, the stranger” (24), just before the incident takes place. This communion in darkness foreshadows a significant calamity as, “there was a long creaking sound like a nail being pulled and again the sharp detonation of strained wood giving way” (24). Due to the dilapidated state of the Green Fly Inn’s balcony, which had long been neglected in favor of merrymaking and drunken exploits, many would pay a hefty price on that night. Kenneth and many other patrons are literally cast into outer darkness, where they are disoriented, injured, and even robbed. They clamor in this dark, trying to find their way back to the top. This serves as an Appalachian retelling of Matthew 8 and in some ways speaks to the region economically and psychologically as many are forced to wander for work and are disconnected from the old ways of being.

Just before this incident, the peripatetic Rattner, “had been gone for a year this time” and finally came back and found shelter in an abandoned log house with his wife and son (23). His son, John Wesley, plays a crucial role in the intricate connections between his father’s death, his employer and mentor, and the man who
will be responsible for attending to his father’s body, which will float in a sewage pond for years, being quietly tended by Uncle Ather.

Later in the story when Kenneth Rattner’s final time comes, it is the result of his own dark actions and at the hands of Marion Sylder, the blockader or moonshine runner who eventually employs, John Wesley. Kenneth sneaks into the back seat of Sylder’s car, hoping for a ride, and this sets the stage for his tragic end. Employing biblicality involving the language of outer darkness at the incident at the Green Fly Inn, Sylder demands to know, “what in the goddamn hell you doing in my car?” and immediately feels the need to cleanse himself. He senses a “profound and unshakeable knowledge of the presence of evil” (McCarthy 33) emanating from Kenneth’s presence in his vehicle. When they stop to change a tire, Rattner attempts to kill Sylder with a tire iron, driven by the motive to murder and rob him. However, the tables turn, and despite being injured, Sylder manages to strangle Kenneth to death. As Sylder tightens his grip, Kenneth’s neck is described as a “mass of offal,” a vivid image frequently found in Old Testament texts associated with temple sacrifice. In his final moments, Kenneth pleads, “For Christ’s sake…Jesus Christ, just turn me loose” (39). Sylder, with his face close to Kenneth’s, responds in a low voice, “you better call on somebody closer than that” (40).

This type of morality play found within The Orchard Keeper is reminiscent of Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find”. Both stories evoke a sense of the
grotesque and evil emanating from characters who were once thought good. In O’Connor’s story, the family crashes their car while searching for a house which the grandmother has misremembered being nearby, and they encounter “The Misfit,” who represents a figure of traditional evil. The grandmother in the story attempts to use biblical language to appeal to “The Misfit”, ultimately revealing her desperation with the words, “Jesus! You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!” (O’Connor 24). However, her pleas are in vain, and after the Misfit murders her, he callously says, “She would have been a good woman... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (25). The same goes for Rattner in the previous story. He was thought to be an upstanding man and Sylder a bad one on the fringes of society, yet the roles reverse, showcasing what O’Connor speaks of in “Mystery and Manners” when she says that “when you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do...you can relax and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (O’Connor 11). McCarthy’s text illuminates the same phenomenon, yet does not assume that, as in O’Connor’s sense, that the South being Christ-haunted means that all true religious meaning has been drained from southern writings. He illustrates that the roles can sometimes be different than we had first imagined.
In “A Good Man is Hard to Find” this serves to illustrate that the grandmother’s faith had been all talk, just as it was with the Rattner parents who frequently used religious language as a means of asking for protection and seeking to impart guilt. For instance, when the father tells his wife about getting a job after drinking at the Green Fly Inn, she responds with “praise God,” not noticing his injuries. The next day, when a storekeeper relays the story of a local boy with similar injuries from the night at the Inn, Mildred responds, “when them as wallers in sin thinks they’s getting by with it... that’s when He strikes em in His holy wrath. He jest bides His time,” unaware that she is also condemning her own husband (McCarthy 27). She employs this language once more when she suggests that John Wesley should seek vengeance for his father’s death and says of Kenneth, “He was a provider all right, may the Lord God Jesus keep him,” while eyeing him doubtfully and adding, “you make half the man he was and you’ll be goin some” (73). In a final act exemplifying this irony, she has inscribed on her tombstone, “If thou afflict them in any wise, And they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry. Exod.” (245), which is about God’s people being held captive as slaves in Egypt. This further highlights the notion that they were seemingly good people with a dark legacy, even in her departure from this world and what McCarthy calls her “peace with eclipse, asteroid, dusty novae,” and so on, the language illustrating earthly and spatial darkness, along with the vastness and mystery of outer space (245).
Ironically, the boys in both O'Connor’s and McCarthy’s stories share the name John Wesley. In O'Connor’s story, he is an average boy, who harbors suspicions about his grandmother’s nature and authority, while JW Rattner, though distrusting both of his parents, finds mentorship in two men who hold a dark secret about his father’s death. Throughout the novel, we witness multiple scenes where Kenneth Rattner’s body is tended to by Uncle Ather, year after year, as it floats with its “green fleshless grin” (54). This passage thematically aligns with the purgatorial and limbo-like passages found in *Outer Dark* and other McCarthy novels, such as when Cornelius Suttree refers to life itself as the “Christian limbo of the Christless righteous” and a “terrestrial hell” (McCarthy 14). The passage also relates to another lingering death. When Cornelius Suttree was in the womb, he absorbed his twin, a concept rooted in Christian Gnosticism that plays a significant role in the narrative. Similarly to the body in the pond, Suttree bears a birthmark on his temple, which appears in various scenes. The tenuousness of life is conveyed throughout these scenes, along with the Southern Gothic trope of hidden familial secrets. Before *The Orchard Keeper* concludes, we know that John Wesley has been informed of the details of his father’s death. In this moment, he fully understands who his parents were, and instead of seeking vengeance as his mother instructed, he comes to value the friendship, mentorship, and baptism into the rural mountain community that will be integral in his life moving forward.
One of McCarthy’s known literary heroes, Herman Melville posits this same type of darkness, even using the specific words ‘outer dark’ in his masterpiece, *Moby Dick*. Here, we are able to see a similar exploration of morality that McCarthy employs in *Outer Dark*. An early dream sequence in Melville’s work bears a resemblance to the one experienced by Culla Holme early on in the novel, wherein he is the crowd in a dark and apocalyptic scene with a man akin to a false, biblical prophet. It reads:

For several hours I lay there broad awake, feeling a great deal worse than I have ever done since, even from the greatest subsequent misfortunes. At last I must have fallen into a troubled nightmare of a doze; and slowly waking from it—half steeped in dreams—I opened my eyes, and the before sun-lit room was now wrapped in outer darkness. Instantly I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken. I knew not how this consciousness at last glided away from me; but waking in the morning, I
shudderingly remembered it all, and for days and weeks and months

afterwards I lost myself in confounding attempts to explain the mystery. Nay,
to this very hour, I often puzzle myself with it.

(Melville 24)

In Melville’s correspondence with Nathaniel Hawthorne, he says to him

concerning the novel, that it was “broiled in hellfire” and confesses, “I have written a
wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb” (Melville 2). We see now how Melville
used his writing of *Moby Dick* to deal with issues he had concerning religious belief;
specifically involving the Calvinist churches which surrounded him at the time and
which he was previously involved in. So from McCarthy’s writings and interviews, it
is possible to surmise that is in fact like Jacob wrestling the angel in trying to work
out faith and doubt amidst the grotesque nature of earthly life.

Interestingly, this passage subtly deals with a taboo of the time, homosexuality, which
develops throughout *Moby Dick* and is present in some form, in the correspondences
of Melville and Hawthorne. At the beginning of chapter four in *Moby Dick*, from
which this passage was drawn, the text says, “Upon waking next morning about
daylight, I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate
manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife” (Melville 4). This, along with
others and the culminatory ‘sperm squeezing’ scene heavily allude to Melville
experimenting with the homosocial, homosexual, and different manners of comporting oneself as a man in his world.

*Outer Dark* itself deals with the taboo of incest as it mentions, “the bed he shared with her and the nameless weight in her belly” (McCarthy 5) and chronicles the journey of Culla Holme trying to leave the child he had with his sister for dead, and Rinthy journeying to find a tinker she has never seen. Rinthy, especially, is beholden to those who have kept her in darkness concerning the ways of the world, until she comes to distrust her brother Culla and journeys out on her own. This taboo is again repeated in *The Passenger*, in passages about another brother and sister from the Knoxville area and is wrapped up in the biblical imagery element of biblicality. One of the most profound incest stories in the Bible has to do with the character Lot, who after experiencing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which we will employ later, is made drunk and seduced by his two daughters, who become pregnant with his children. Darkness, the span of history, and the biblical, in McCarthy are not something relegated to ancient times, but something that is all around us.

Rinthy Holme of *Outer Dark* was near unto death after her child was born, wallowing in her own blood and unable to walk for weeks, and it was the longing to reunite with her displaced child that keeps her alive throughout the novel. By the middle of the novel, she comes to terms with this world, and endures, saying, “I don’t live nowhere’s no more. I never did much. I just go around huntin’ my chap. That’s
about all I do anymore” (113). Her entire world revolves around finding her baby and has given her life purpose. She embarks on a dim journey, neither knowing her destination or her home. In McCarthy studies, Rinthy has been thought of as somewhat of a marginal character. As in the quote in the introduction, when the early McCarthy scholar, Dianne Luce, approached McCarthy for an encyclopedia of Southern literature project, asking about the two protagonists of Outer Dark, McCarthy assured her that there was only one, Culla. Despite this coloring the way scholars have read McCarthy for decades, Luce and Nell Sullivan have pointed out how Rinthy Holme, possibly despite McCarthy’s intention, is his most resilient and powerful female character, illuminating for us the desire and loss associated with living in this confusing darkness.

As Slavoj Zizek says of desire and loss, “The void of this loss is filled out by the fantasy object” (Zizek 32), or the ‘object little a’, as he calls it. Rinthy’s desire for her missing child drives her to navigate a world in which she has never truly operated, in a direction unknown to her, in search of her child. She seeks the Tinker, whose name and face she does not know, to find her nameless child whom she has only seen once, right after his birth. Her body itself demands it. Her body starts longing for the child after giving birth. She soon notices milk stains on her dress in several scenes, which persist even after her visit with and instructions from the town doctor, over six months after the child’s birth.
“You still couldn’t have milk after six months,” he said.

“That means he ain’t dead, don’t it? That means he ain’t dead or I’d have gone dry. Ain’t it?”

“That could be what it means, yes,” he answers hesitantly.

“I knowed it all the time. I guess I knowed it right along” (McCarthy 156).

Furthering the outlines of desire, Jacques Lacan posits that it “is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being, properly speaking” (Lacan 672), and the biblical text echoes this sentiment, stating, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life” (Prov 13:12 ESV).

It is evident that in Outer Dark, whether manifest or pervasive, this desire guides Rinthy’s search, which unfortunately never bears fruit. As she approaches the site where her child has been killed, she observes “two buzzards who labored out of a dead tree in a field from which hung the bodies of three men” (McCarthy 146). This scene, reminiscent of Jesus’ crucifixion but veiled in darkness, precedes the darkest moment in Rinthy’s life when she moves “softly with her air of blooded ruin, her gaze fixated in a frail agony of grace, dragging her rags through dust and ashes, circling the dead fire, the charred billets and chalk bones, the little calcined ribcage” (237). Initially, “she did not know what to make of it,” but eventually, as the “wind stirred the ashes and the tinker in his tree turned slowly” (237), she comprehends the scene
and the words that the Tinker had spoken when she finally found him. Sadly, this marks the final mention of her, as she sits in a state of bewildered darkness. Little scholarly attention has been devoted to the longing and desire in *Outer Dark*, particularly from the perspective of Rinthy Holme. Despite McCarthy’s reluctance to present her as a protagonist, she emerges as a more complete and intricate character than Culla, who, much like *Child of God’s* Lester Ballard, has been stunted by trauma. Both characters have become reticent, and although they may try to act benevolently in the world, they remain burdened by a yoke of biblical darkness.

It is apparent that Culla Holme wishes for the child’s demise, but lacks the courage to end his life, while Rinthy will stop at nothing to find him, as the Tinker holds him captive for a considerable duration. In the end, the child becomes a sacrificial figure, offering a grim reimagining of the story of Abraham and Isaac and the torment this near sacrifice required, which was bound up in decades of hope and longing involving the promised child. Whether one perceives Culla as negligent for failing to confront the ‘grim triune’ or as the perpetrator himself, the child meets his fate as a consequence of his father’s transgressions—an outcome spared to Abraham. McCarthy alludes to biblical passages such as these as they are key stories within the Bible and conjure up the feeling and memory of importance in conjunction with the text that he is composing.
Dianne Luce notes that “we witness Rinthy’s experience as a separate life and yet one that the darkness of Culla’s dream impinges upon” (Luce 63). Culla’s life is shrouded in this darkness, and its implications, in turn, overshadow Rinthy for the majority of the novel. She does meet two families and several people with whom she fits in and who care for her, yet she is only out in this world because of Culla’s failed attempt at killing the child they birthed together. Essentially, nothing is mentioned of their parents lives nor their own upbringing, and we know that neither of them feels at home in the house they inherited upon their parents’ deaths.

There is an intense gothic longing on Rinthy’s part throughout the entirety of *Outer Dark*, and we see it being set up very early on as we observe the squalling baby, with Culla saying that it looks sickly and that he doesn’t expect it to live.

“It’s puny,” he says.

“Don’t sound puny.”

“I don’t look for it to live” (McCarthy 14).

This reads as an aborted version of the story of Moses, who was left to float down a river with some hope of being found and later became the most important prophet to the Israelites, leading them to safety through the Red Sea and delivering the Torah, the most significant early writing of Jews and Christians alike. Like the stunted Appalachian South, the nameless child of *Outer Dark*’s story is unknown as
we are only witness to his birth and death, themselves uneventful, tragic, and non-redemptive. The child himself, “howled execration upon the dim camarine world of its nativity, wail on wail, while he lay there gibbering with palsied jawhasps, his hands putting back the night like some witless paraclete beleaguered with all limbo’s clamor” (18) and was taken and laid to rest in a glade. He remains in a state of limbo for the majority of the novel. As the anti-Moses, he is left for dead, mistreated by the itinerant tinker, and ultimately found dead by his mother at the hands of the ‘unholy triumvirate’ who also terrorize his father. There is biblical darkness in the story of Moses, but it is ultimately redemptive, furthering the story of the great leader.

A scene nearing the end of this novel depicts Culla waiting to board a ferry at sunset, as the ferryman requires more passengers to justify the river crossing. The description of the river itself states that it “was dark and oily and tended away into nothing... so that they seemed to hang in some great depth of darkness like spiders in a well” (164). As the ferrying scene unfolds, chaos ensues when “there was a loud explosion and something passed above their head screaming and then there was silence” (165). This explosion, caused by the cable that guided the ferry, plunges the other two men into the depths of darkness while Culla is left on the barge with a crazed horse running amok. On the third attempt, “it yawned past him and crashed and screamed again and there was an enormous concussion of water and then nothing” (166). Although he is spared, Culla sits in the cold and darkness, silently
praying for an easy river crossing devoid of any godly intervention (167). In this passage, Holme’s experience resembles that of a doomed Huck Finn, an accursed traveler navigating a hellish landscape and enduring its wrath, often against his will.

Upon finally reaching the shore, Culla is immediately drawn to a campfire in the distance, where three men stand “with the fire behind them projecting their shapes outward into soaring darkness” (170). He enters into a sort of dark communion with them and is coerced into consuming “a pan of black and mummified meat” (171), which “had the consistency of whang, was dusted with ash, tasted of sulphur” (172). Afterward, the men rob him of his boots, the only valuable possession he owns that is above his station. Left alone in the darkness, Culla finds himself in a worse state than before, having acquired the boots from the wealthy Squire whom he had worked for briefly—a man who later becomes one of the early victims of the ‘grim triune’.

The dialogue towards the end of this meeting foreshadows Culla’s descent and stagnancy in the final portion of the novel. When the three men ask where Culla is headed, he responds, “Nowheres,” to which, unbeknownst to him, they prophesy, “you may get there yet” (181), signaling his constant inhabiting a space of darkness and confusion. One of the final epic stories near the end of the novel is a near mirror and Appalachian retelling of the biblical story of The Gadarenes or the two men who were possessed by a legion of demons. The text, which occurs towards the end of the same chapter from which scholars agree the title for *Outer Dark* comes, says that “the
demons begged him, saying ‘if you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs’...so they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters” (Matthew 8:31-32). In the version involving Culla, which lasts six pages, he wishes the ‘lecherous hog driver’s luck, after which the swine become stuck near a narrow pass by the river and begin falling, after which “the entire herd had begun to wheel wider and faster along the bluff and the outermost ranks swung centrifugally over the escarpment row on row wailing and squealing and above this the howls and curses of the drovers” and this “great retinue of hogs dropped from sight” (218). In the biblical version, “The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all of the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region” (Matthew 8:33-34). McCarthy uses these verses to situate these Appalachian people as wandering and possessed, being driven out of their land towards the darkness of which they do not want to be a part of. Additionally, they are people who carry within them the sin-tainted darkness that Matthew 8 speaks of as well.

As we delve into the exploration of darkness in McCarthy’s next novel Child of God, we notice, Lester Ballard’s transgressions increasingly transpire under the cloak of night or within the obscurity of subterranean caves. As his deeds become viler, he seeks to hide them as the Southern Gothic scholar, Susan Ketchin says,
drawing on O’Connor, that “historically, southern children were immersed in this intense tradition, hearing from the cradle onward ancient tales of bliss, sin, guilt, and redemption from the Old and New Testaments, with their many layers of historical and psychological meaning and rich use of symbolic archetype” (Ketchin xii). Ballard was culturally Christian, despite his descent into evil, and even then did not want the townspeople to know.

Stories from Ballard’s past involve Lester becoming “a part of the mythology of his region” (McCarthy 54), and these stories with their inchoate negativity is what differentiates Ballard as he eventually had “grown lean and bitter. Some say mad,” but the truth is that “A malign star kept him” (41). His family had been in the region for a considerable period, and according to a group of townspeople, “They wasn’t none of ‘em any account that I ever heard of” (80). Regarding his grandfather’s military service, it is said, “He’d of been hanged no matter where he lived” (81). As we discussed earlier, Ballard “never was right after his daddy killed hisself” (21), yet local gossipers go on to say, “he wasn’t a patch on Lester Ballard for crazy” (22). At one point, Lester contemplates his own death, but he is sustained by forces greater than himself. As a later passage explains, “Whatever voice spoke to him was no demon but some old, shed self that came from time to time in the name of sanity, a hand to gentle him back from the rim of his disastrous wrath” (158). It is this otherworldly intervention that temporarily keeps him from descending further into darker realms.
Vereen Bell, expressing a sense of disappointment in Ballard, asserts that “The course of Lester’s life in the first half of the novel is random and directionless, guided by no plan or principle of motivation” (Bell 53). Nevertheless, we can perceive it as the trajectory of his villainous tale—his dark inclinations gradually crystallize, molding him into the monstrous entity he becomes by the novel’s conclusion. Indeed, early on, the novel intimates that “Were there darker provinces of night, he would have found them” (McCarthy 23), and he eventually does.

Ballard’s descent into these darker realms begins when he encounters a couple who died of carbon monoxide poisoning while engaged in sexual activity inside a car. He decides to engage in intercourse with the deceased woman, and the text vividly describes his appearance as “A pair of white legs sprawled embracing a shade, a dark incubus that humped in a dream of slaverous lust” (20). The reference to an incubus alludes to male demons or fallen angels from folklore who engage in sexual encounters with sleeping women, symbolically contextualizing and suffusing Ballard’s disturbing actions within a dark biblicality. Although these acts tempt us to perceive him as a figure of pure evil, we must recall that from the outset, we are told that he is “A child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4). Moreover, there are additional textual elements that challenge this notion. Despite all of Ballard’s wrongdoing, we are told that he is not beyond redemption and furthermore, this grace is extended to the reader as we are made to grapple with all of his actions and their consequences.
Vereen Bell also grapples with the unsettling notion that “Throughout the novel McCarthy has sustained for us the odd illusion that Lester is somehow mysteriously forgiven. This is at once strange and not strange, for if Lester is in a state of grace—if such grace were in fact possible—this seems to be precisely and incomprehensibly what true grace would be like” (Bell 68). In this manner, McCarthy continues to weave stories that transpose biblical acts into contemporary settings, while simultaneously unsettling or provoking readers who attribute ultimate authority to the Bible. McCarthy achieves this effect through the portrayal of dead infants, among various other acts of heinous violence. He intends to elicit strong emotions, including outrage, from the reader. Chapter four will further explore the subject of suicide, highlighting certain topics that evoke powerful emotions such as anger, rage, and sadness, which demand our vocal response. McCarthy stands as the lone contemporary author who depicts dead infants in this manner and with such frequency. His purpose is to prompt outrage in readers and to draw connections between these occurrences and a benevolent God who is also depicted as the author of numerous deaths of women, infants, and children within the pages of the King James Bible. Though Ballard himself stays away from harming children, nearly every other Appalachian novel of McCarthy’s does involve this trope.

One unsettling thought concerning this is that it is crucial to remember that many biblical heroes themselves were guilty of rape, mass murder, and other
abhorrent acts, including the murder of infants and children, which is at one time even commanded by their God. King David, highly favored by God, orchestrated the murder of a man to claim his wife and led his armies in the annihilation of entire villages. The same can be said for numerous rulers in the Old Testament. In the case of Paul, the man who authored the majority of the New Testament, we encounter a man who, prior to his conversion, delighted in torturing and executing Christians. All these individuals, like Lester Ballard, shared in the enigmatic grace that Vereen Bell refers to. It is evident that Lester’s curses, both in their frequency and specificity, are directed toward the biblical God, further emphasizing this connection.

Moving on to discuss darkness that is both natural and existential, we understand that the prolonged period of darkness and flooding during the mussel-brailling episode in the novel *Suttree* was a result of the creation of Smokey Mountain National Park and the influence of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) during that time. The railroad and logging industries, which were dominated by northern interests in the southern mountains, had extensively clear-cut the old-growth forests, leading to increased runoff and rampant flooding. As Suttree was doing his usual checking of fishing spots, he spots a family who have anchored their houseboat in that part of the river. The father, Reese, sees that he is smitten by their eldest daughter, Wanda, and uses this to enlist Suttree in the difficult task of harvesting mussels far upriver. It ultimately leads to no financial gain and the loss of his pregnant
lover. This flooding not only displaced entire families from their ancestral lands downstream, as well, due to damming of the waters but also played a role in the death of Suttree’s lover, Wanda.

A massive slab of rock carries her and their unborn child away, plunging Suttree into a deep darkness that lasts for months. This scene reminds him of the circumstances surrounding his relationship with his first child, with whom he was estranged, and who died under mysterious circumstances. Suttree was barred from attending the funeral at gunpoint, and these events caused him profound existential anguish. Around the time of Wanda’s death, Suttree is referred to as a “Child of darkness and familiar of small dooms” (149), and life is described as the period “between the darkness and the darkness yet to come” (287). Alas, he finally breaks his depression after many months, in order to regain the light and the land of the living.

Archives indicate that McCarthy was a strict agnostic during this time, yet he was still using these various biblical tropes to explore the religion that he was rebelling against. Throughout Suttree, we observe numerous scenes that critique a particular type of religion and dogma, through the interplay of darkness and light, which, after a 25-year hiatus, resurfaces in his subsequent Appalachian novel, The Road.

McCarthy’s novel, The Road, delves into a realm of complete, desolate darkness. It encompasses critiques of religion and dogma while also presenting a form of minimalist theology that befits the dire world inhabited by the protagonists, the
man and the boy. By revisiting McCarthy’s early work, specifically the short story “Wake for Susan,” we can observe how *The Road* stands in stark contrast to the author’s ideal view of what light and peaceful living might entail. However, McCarthy, in the later stages of his career, seeks to portray darkness and ruin on an epic scale, influenced by changes in his own life and the state of the world. Far from being simply nihilism with no hope, the small residue of hope that we find is that much more precious in these scenarios. In *The Road*, McCarthy recognizes that humanity is responsible for the destruction of the earth, triggering a cataclysm of biblical proportions. Additionally, becoming a father again later in life has allowed him to see that despite the depths of darkness that may lie ahead, there is still a glimmer of hope for light in the world.

From one nameless protagonist’s desires to another, as depicted in his early works, the text reads:

In October, the first frost glazed this remote valley. The harvesting was done, and preparations were being made for winter. Abundant stores of food were being stored in earthy cellars and musty smokehouses. The rich scent of wood smoke hung in the valley, promising the peace and warmth of winter nights before a friendly fire. The savory aroma of cooking hog meat in large black outdoor kettles spoke of plentiful tables and festive gatherings in the cozy warmth of winter. It was a truly wonderful time of year (McCarthy 2).
This scene shares striking similarities with *The Road*, the first being, when the man and boy “find “a ham gambreled up in a high corner” in “an old batboard smokehouse” (McCarthy 15), which once would have been saved for the holidays by an Appalachian family is now simply hanging. The man in *The Road’s* ideal day involves a somewhat taciturn encounter with his uncle where they go out on a boat and enjoy the water and the trees. As that time has now been gone for years, they traverse a dark and desolate East Tennessee, where remnants of a bygone way of life can still be found, albeit most of the structures have been plundered. Discovering the ham should be cause for celebration, yet they are unable to retrieve it and it may no longer be edible.

One particularly noteworthy scene that parallels this idealized terrain and way of life occurs when the man and the boy “stumble upon a once grand house perched on a rise above the road” (McCarthy 105). They hope to find food inside, and indeed they do, but not in the manner in which they had anticipated. The scene’s potential for goodness is shrouded in opacity as they “stand in the doorway. Piled in a windrow in one corner of the room was a great heap of clothing. Clothes and shoes. Belts. Coats. Blankets and old sleeping bags. He would have ample time later to think about that” (90). As they explore the back of the house,

There was a brick walkway and the twisted and wiry shape of what once had been a row of boxwoods. In the yard was an old iron harrow propped up on
piers of stacked brick and someone had wedged between the rails of it a forty
gallon castiron cauldron of the kind once used for rendering hogs. Underneath
were the ashes of a fire and blackened billets of wood. Off to one side a small
wagon with rubber tires. All these things he saw and did not see (92)

In this scene, there is the smell of wood smoke in the valleys as many of the
forests have burned and are yet burning. There is food stored away, yet only where it
has been hidden especially well. There is no peace, and most avoid building fires to
avoid being taken by the cannibal hordes that roam the land. When the man and boy
pry open a locked hatch in a doorway of the home, they realize this house to be one
of their encampments as “He started down the rough wooden steps. He ducked and
flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering,”
revealing “naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with
their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of
them blackened and burnt” (McCarthy 110), etc. The man and boy barely escape with
their lives, hiding in the darkness for days, starving. There are several levels of moral
darkness to this scene. In one sense, the piles of clothing and belongings mirror scenes
from the most horrific event of the twentieth century, The Holocaust. The Nazi’s took
the Jews belongings as they sent them to concentration camps and put them into large
piles, which the world later found as they were liberated.
At another level, the narrative recalls images of American slavery and how this could occur again in a new form, as it says of the kitchen antecedent to the area where the human food was kept that, “chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drinks on silver trays” (McCarthy 79). As the earth has been destroyed and sent back into this primordial darkness, the worst parts of human depravity are shown in this one scene. There does seem to be hope left out, at least for the protagonists, as they eventually find a cellar full of canned goods, who they view as being owned by “the good guys” a title they bestow on themselves as well.

This darkness and ash through which they trod is featured in scenes of mourning, especially throughout the Old Testament, but it is always just for a time and some type of redemption generally comes afterward. This ashen darkness through which they traverse is part of “the extended metaphor of earthly life as a spiritual/spatial journey in outer dark or purgatory or hell (that) profoundly informs all of McCarthy’s novels from *Outer Dark* through *Blood Meridian* and recurs in *The Road*, although his deployment of imagery from Plato, Gnostics, and Dante (as well as the Bible and other classical mythology) differs in proportion and emphasis in each” (Luce 72). It is imagery which builds through the aforementioned novels, yet when we reach his final novels, there is a sense of hopefulness, despite its inherent tragedy as well.
The Road seems to be the most allusory of these works, but not necessarily the novel with the most emphasis on the outer darkness. This novel, specifically, relies on the biblical imagery of light and darkness and certainly uses Dante’s vision of the darkness of hell to its advantage. We see that in scholarship involving Suttree, that “Georg Guillemin has helpfully noted that the mysterious hunter and hounds that both open and close this novel likely recall Dante’s fifth circle of hell and the forest of suicides, where black hounds hunt the victims of this sin” (Potts 90). The Road employs this similarly when the boy says, “I wish I was with my mom” (McCarthy 46). We know that the mother has committed suicide, and both the man and boy understand the implications of this statement as they are being chased across this dark and dying landscape.

The trivialities of day-to-day life are done away with and they are enshrouded in dark ruin. As Matthew Potts and others discuss, there are those who see The Road as an irreligious book due to its lack of correct doctrine and its symbolic criticism. The scene referred to as the “catamite train” says, “behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites, ill-clothed against the cold and fitted in dog collars and yoked each to each” (McCarthy 78). This has been interpreted by Potts and others as a critique of the Roman Catholic Church. There are the women, who must supply the consort
with new bodies; new believers. There are the catamites, or boys kept for sexual favors yoked together as well. This alludes to the persistent problems with pedophilia that the church has historically encountered. Neither novel favors the structures that perpetuate religion, but rather the sort of simplistic faith that would spring up in such a dark situation, as dogma and the like are for those who have the luxury of contemplating the good and plenty that are around them in *The Road*. McCarthy may hold out the possibility for hope and goodness, but it is never without the critique of the belief system within which he lived.

As Lydia Cooper points out, “because the physical darkness of the nights in this ash-covered world is ‘sightless’ and ‘impenetrable’” (13), in speaking of *The Road*, “the father stumbles in a literal dark that lends itself to musings on the metaphorical darkness of vision. He expresses an agonized desire ‘to be able to see’ as he dies” (Cooper 233). Since he still has the physical capacity for sight, this yearning is clearly metaphorical, and this is the case with many of McCarthy’s characters. They live at the fringes of society in many cases and must reconcile this darkness concerning all facets of their lives. Additionally, this is what McCarthy seems to be doing with his curious scenes involving the blind. With the blind man whom Culla leads into a swamp in *Outer Dark*, and especially Ely in *The Road*, who “sees men as trees” (Mark 8:22 ESV) just as in the biblical passage. McCarthy’s meditation on darkness is
complicated and profound, and the visions of such are made manifest throughout these novels.

II. The Symbolism of Light

In the works of Cormac McCarthy, the symbolism of light emerges as prominent and multifaceted. This section delves into the contrasting relationship between light and darkness within McCarthy’s novels, examining how light serves as a symbolic force throughout his narratives. By exploring the symbolic significance of light, we uncover its transformative power and its ability to imbue the characters’ journeys with hope, enlightenment, and redemption. Additionally, we delve into light as a metaphor for truth, purity, and divine presence, illuminating the profound themes McCarthy explores through this powerful symbol. Furthermore, we investigate how light acts as a source of guidance and revelation, navigating the protagonists’ paths and shaping their transformative experiences. Through this exploration, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricate symbolism of light within McCarthy’s Appalachian literary landscape.

Far from playing into the nihilism that Bell and others have ascribed to McCarthy’s work, we see the ‘via negativa’ at work in his use of light-based imagery, revealing the mystery of what being a child of God entails. It also seems to elicit a dark inverse of the Calvinist or predestined vision of grace that Bunyan posits in Pilgrim’s Progress. McCarthy is using biblicality in the way that Melville and many
others did who were inverting this sort of religion. *Child of God’s*, Lester Ballard knows that he is here for a purpose greater than himself, and though he refuses, it insists, and his life persists. Lester Ballard is a participant in the deeper, yet mysterious workings of meaning in the world that often elude us, and this is what McCarthy would like us to grapple with intellectually, rather than assigning certain characters to the realm of pure insanity or nihilism and carrying the fire is perhaps the most important of his metaphors. We know from other articles on the subject by James Wood and Shelly Rambo,

> Carrying the fire’, (in *The Road* especially), serves as a vague sort of ‘metaphor for some kind of moral order and as such the guarantee of a future humanity that is clearly intended,’ a vague sign that nonetheless strains to be meaningful ‘outside the terms of the sacred idiom’ but in doing so these critics neglect the biblical and sacrificial background to the phrase, and thus they overlook the value McCarthy places upon finite, fleeting acts of goodness (Potts 218), which leads us back to his earlier work.

As Diane Luce argues in her influential work *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period, Outer Dark* “is a novel of outer dark; its very title posits an opposing realm of inner light,” highlighting the contrasting realms depicted in the novel (Luce 112). Scholars have recently explored the notion that the entire novel or certain parts of it may exist within the realm of dreams or even
hallucinations experienced by the protagonist, Culla. At a Cormac McCarthy
conference held at Berea University in 1994, an unnamed scholar proposed the idea
that the italicized sections, referred to as ‘outchapters,’ which propel the narrative,
vanish towards the end of the novel when Culla and the mysterious “grim triune” find
solace, just before the tragic death of the child. This interpretation suggests a Freudian
incorporation of the triune into Culla’s psyche, as they carry out acts that he lacks the
courage to execute (Sullivan).

As explored in the previous chapter, Rinthy Holme stands out as the character
in *Outer Dark* who truly seeks the light. She is explicitly associated with moths,
symbolizing her role as a bearer of light while being “moth-besieged” (Luce 64). From
the beginning, Rinthy yearns for light and clarity, as seen when she asks Culla to
clean the only window through which she can see from her sick bed. Culla Holme, in
his perpetually dismissive manner, refuses to tend to anything beyond her basic
needs, replying, “I ain’t washin no winders” (McCarthy 28). In contrast, Culla’s
behavior resembles that of an animal or insect, attracted to fire and lights but blindly
walking in darkness. The times when he does follow the fire seem to lead him
towards his dark fate.

Culla Holme represents darkness to the light of Rinthy in *Outer Dark*. Where
Culla treads, there is mostly darkness, but as we see in this scene where Rinthy visits
with a family on her journey to find the tinker that she is light. This Appalachian
family “watched her sit, holding the bundle up before her, the lamp just at her elbow
belabored by a moth whose dark shape cast upon her face appeared captive within the
delicate skull, the thin and roselit bone, like something kept in a china mask. Lord,
she said, I’ve not sat hardly today” (McCarthy 59). The moth, which is attracted to
light, is transposed upon her skull, which is the metaphorical home of the treasures of
WB Yeat’s Byzantium, which we will analyze later, along with goodness. This
symbolically portrays her as pure goodness and light. It is alleged that McCarthy,
when asked by the scholar Diane Luce about the two protagonists of *Outer Dark*,
replied “don’t you mean one?”, meaning that there was only one and that it was Culla
(Yarbrough 1). This is quite an odd thought, seeing as Rinthy, until Alicia Western in
his newest and final novels, was the only fully formed, truly strong, and redemptive,
Appalachian female character. Whether we classify it under his penchant for
misleading, à la his literary hero Faulkner, his distaste for talking about his own
writing, or just an extreme oversight on his part, Rinthy remains the true light to
Culla’s darkness in *Outer Dark* and leads us to believe that redemption is possible in
these novels.

Culla fits within the biblical vision of the moth, as he is drawn to the flame of
the desolate that insidiously destroys most everyone around him. He lacks the
courage that Rinthy has and even in the moment where he knows that his child will
be killed, says nothing to remedy the situation. In the final scene, “Holme came
limping out of the woods and crossed a small field toward the light, insects rising out of the dark and breaking on his face like rain” (231). This vision is akin to a biblical plague of insects in the book of Exodus. The Pharaoh who held the Jewish people captive, refused to heed the words of God. The prophets, Moses and his brother Aaron tell him, “This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: ‘How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields (Exod 10 NIV). This was the plague that finally broke Pharaoh’s will and precedes the scene where Culla’s is broken as well, as he unknowingly trudges towards fate. As he stood near the fire, he knew the child was his and still said, “maybe thisn’s some other chap. It ain’t nothin to me” (233) as he saw the scars and missing eye—as the triune threaten violence against him. Harmon then, takes “hold of the child and lifted it up. It was watching the fire. Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a long cat’s eye slant and malevolent and a dark smile erupted on the child’s throat and went all broken down the front of it. The child made no sound” and it is only then that Holme emotes, burying “his moaning face” into the dead child (236). By the time Rinthy arrives, he is gone and the fire has gone out, leaving the charred remains of their child behind. The text says that now, in “her shapeless sundrained cerements” she circles “the dead fire, the charred billets and chalk bones,
the little calcined ribcage...she did not know what to make of it. She waited, but no
one returned” (237) and all hope seems to be gone. We know, due to the end of *Outer
Dark*, that Culla is still living in darkness and though Rinthy has experienced the
depths of tragedy, her resilience would have taken her to lighter vistas.

Similarly, as we get to *Child of God*, we see Lester Ballard sift through the
ashes of the cabin he inhabited in the woods, trying to find the bones of the first
woman he entered into necrophilia with and began carrying around, in the time just
before he began his descent into murder. Like a prophet of old, mourning in sackcloth
and ashes, he spends “the better part of the morning stirring through the ruins until
he was black with woodash to the knees and his hands were black and his face
streaked with black where he’d scratched or puzzled. He found not so much as a
bone” (McCarthy 107), but the intense fire hid his crimes. In a later scene the
dumpkeeper asks for details about the house fire and wants to know what their friend
Waldrop thinks. When Ballard says that he neither knows nor cares, the dumpkeeper
replies that he would, “be proud you wasn’t like old man Parton up here got burned
down in his bed that time”(112). Ballard replies, “Did they ever find any of
him?”(112), signaling the hope and fear spring up within Ballard; that his dark deeds
may be soon uncovered.

This and the following section also symbolically represent Ballard’s search for
a true connection with any living being. It spans the entirety of the novel, reflecting
his inability to establish such a connection. Instead, he finds intimacy and connection among the dead, a growing number of whom he has ushered into the afterlife himself. This was not always the case. We know that he comes from a line of less than savory characters who have plagued Sevier County in various ways for decades and as O'Connor inverts the moral, so we see this in a number of scenes with Ballard.

One of the most grotesquely comical scenes depicting Ballard’s search for connection, forgiveness, and redemption with his fellow humans occurs when he decides to attend Sunday service at Six-Mile Church. The novel states, “when Ballard came in with his hat in his hand and shut the door and sat alone on the rear bench” (31). The congregation turned slowly to catch a glimpse of him, and “the preacher stopped. To justify the silence, he poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the pulpit and drank and set the glass back and wiped his mouth” (31). The sermon and announcements seemed nonsensical to Ballard, and to exacerbate the situation, “A woodpecker hammered at a drainpipe outside,” while “Ballard had a cold and snuffled loudly throughout the service” (32). The congregants likely thought, “nobody expected he would stop if God himself looked back askance,” (32) so none of them protested nor approached him. Their Christian charity and knowledge of Ballard were tested during his visit, and the text does not indicate if any of them spoke to him after the service. This scene reveals how Ballard exists outside the realm of society, while also provoking moral reflection, reminiscent of Flannery O’Connor’s works “A Good
Man is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People.” In this work, McCarthy forces us to question who exactly we consider a child of god and a vessel of light and goodness.

To further explore the motif of light and fire, we can examine the work of Russell M. Hillier, who “demonstrates how Child of God is a ‘subversive parody’ of Pilgrim’s Progress (Cooper 220). This proposition holds weight, considering McCarthy’s inclination to absorb and distill passages from classic literature with a biblical bent into his works. In Pilgrim’s Progress, the character Christian strives to escape the mire of sin and ascend to the city of light and virtue, reminiscent of a possible reference to Yeat’s Byzantium, or to a heaven-like realm. Conversely, Lester Ballard gradually descends deeper into the mire, being shunned by society. He begins with necrophilia involving the deceased woman in the abandoned car, and as predicted by the Sheriff upon his re-incarceration, “I guess murder is next on the list, ain’t it?” (McCarthy 56), which soon comes to fruition.

In Bunyan, a scene unfolds as follows: “Then I saw in my dream that the Interpreter took Christian by the hand and led him to a place where there was fire, burning against a wall, and one standing by it, always casting much water upon it to quench it, yet did the fire burn brighter and hotter” (Bunyan 80). The Interpreter explains that “this fire is the work of grace that is wrought in the heart” (81), while the figure attempting to extinguish it represents the Devil. We are informed that “despite what the Devil can do, the souls of his people remain gracious still” (82), and
amidst this, “it is difficult for the tempted to comprehend how this work of grace is sustained in the soul” (82). Just as we have been imagining this with McCarthy’s characters such as Lester Ballard, so Bunyan is doing the same. This same grace and its mysterious connection to God’s grace and goodness are being sorted out both then and now. This fire, both literal and metaphorical, is, in a different manner, illustrating what McCarthy is doing with imagery involving fire and light as well; showcasing human depravity and goodness and possibilities amidst scenarios which are fraught with evil.

Perhaps conversely, Lester Ballard is another type of the Devil. He is a precursor to Blood Meridian’s The Judge, who, as Michael Crews points out, “resonates with Milton’s Satan, Goethe’s Mephistopheles, Boehme’s Devil in Six Theosophic Points, the book from which McCarthy took one of his epigraph” (Crews 81). This aligns with the Biblical narrative as well, considering that before his fall, the Devil was a child of God himself, the leader of all music in heaven. Ballard, therefore, illustrates hell on earth, bringing curses and ruin upon all whom he encounters from a vast reserve of hate. There must be some connection, even among the most evil of creatures, a connection to grace, light, and redemption.

In Suttree, McCarthy’s most cosmopolitan early novel, the protagonist, Cornelius Suttree, descends into the caves underneath Knoxville carrying fire to rescue Gene Harrogate, trying to save him from his wayward actions and reintegrate
him back into the society above. Gene Harrogate, who has a variety of nicknames, including the ‘country mouse’ is a clueless, yet endearing young man, who is involved in a number of hairbrained schemes and meets Suttree in jail when he falls on hard times as well. Vereen Bell alleges that Harrogate “is a head injury away from Lester Ballard” (Bell 85), due to the ease with which he crosses criminal boundaries. Bell specifies that Harrogate’s desires are love, pleasure, and money, whereas Ballard is more akin to a blight upon the earth. However, upon closer examination of Ballard, we see that their motivations are quite different, and it is unlikely that they would ever end up remotely like one another. Harrogate’s personality involves making friends and looking out for them. When he does steal, it is often from governmental agencies and the like. Ballard, on the other hand, appears sinister from a young age, traumatized and taken advantage of by governmental agencies. It never seems to be about money for him, but rather about reclaiming his ancestral home or seeking revenge and engaging in various acts of meanness.

Harrogate, like Ballard, can also be found in the caves at times, carrying the fire below. However, Suttree, the fisher of men, descends into the darkness, bearing the light of goodness and recuperation. When Harrogate first attempts reconnaissance work to blow up a local bank vault, he descends into the cavernous underbelly of Knoxville, “rising by faults and ledges, the torch in his teeth,” and through a small hole in the roof, he catches a glimpse of the sky (McCarthy 261). He ultimately ends
up breaking into a sewage tank, covering himself in human excrement and is trapped underground for three days, disoriented and unsure if he is dead. In his hallucinatory state, surrounded by horrid darkness, he sees monstrous shapes and envisions “little girls in flowered frocks” moving towards darkness, symbolizing the fate of every soul (270). It is only when Suttree arrives, descending through the caves with his lantern, that Harrogate realizes he is alive. Suttree, dirty and disheveled, brings him back to the world above. Although Harrogate continues with his reckless schemes and brushes with the law, he is given a second chance at life and is restored for at least a time. The light finds him amidst the darkness of the caves, leading him back to life.

Suttree embodies the early archetype of the “good guy” or the one who carries the fire in these scenes with Harrogate and his group of ne’er-do-wells in Knoxville. Like the Apostles of Christ, he has forsaken money, family, and earthly gain to pursue his own interests. As we will explore later, Suttree, as a fisherman and fisher of men, holds deeper significance, as he does not like the taste of fish. The novel Suttree shares thematic similarities with The Road, which we will discuss shortly, as they both employ notions of goodness and fire. The Road can be seen as a more mature version of Suttree with different priorities, as the man of the former has grown older and now has a child of his own. As we transition into discussing the fully developed cultural and theological vision of The Road, we will draw from Suttree and its use of
morality and religious symbolism. However, before that, we will begin by examining the scene which prefigures *The Road*.

Significantly, *No Country for Old Men*, the immediate predecessor of *The Road*, concludes with a dream of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell. In the dream, his deceased father, who appears younger than him by two decades, is “carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do” (McCarthy 309). Sheriff Bell says that “in the dream, I knew that he was goin on ahead, and he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold, and I knew that whenever I got there, he would be there” (309). This dream provides a crucial framework for understanding the concept of “carrying the fire” as it appears in its final form throughout *The Road*. Sheriff Bell and his father venture into the mountains, carrying this fire, and as *The Road* begins, the father and son awaken in a cave in the mountains, surrounded by overwhelming darkness, both literal and metaphorical, facing life-threatening cold, which they seek to overcome and propagate this motif.

In the transition from *No Country for Old Men*, where fire is carried in horns into the mountains and darkness, to a metaphorical fire and moral code that brings light to a dark and dying world, we observe the interconnectedness of cultural memory and the inner world of individuals and the cultures they represent throughout McCarthy’s novels. In *The Orchard Keeper*, after John Wesley Rattner’s father is removed from the orchard swamp and cremated, John Wesley is called to the
police station to identify his remains. The text describes his discovery of “chalked sticks and shards of bone gray-white and brittle as ash themselves, and the skull, worm-riddled, vermiculate with the tracery of them...the carried teeth rattled in their sockets” (McCarthy 234). This connects to the postscript of *The Road*, which reminisces about the existence of brook trout in streams and describes them as having “vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived, all things were older than man, and they hummed of mystery” (McCarthy 241).

This reinforces the basic yet important code we find in *The Road* surrounding the “carrying the fire” metaphor or belief system when the boy says, “we’re the good guys,” and so on. *The Orchard Keeper* says of Uncle Ather that “he’s a pretty good old guy” (McCarthy 59) as he is the one who watches. We see this sentiment echoed between the man and boy as they are constantly on the lookout for those that would harm them and hoping to one day find others who are good like them. They are both filled with immense worry amidst this postapocalyptic stewardship of one another. In one scene, the father tells the boy that he is the one worrying about them, but it turns out that the boy has assumed this role as well due to the man’s ill health. McCarthy’s prose, especially descriptive parts, tend to be verbose, complicated, and difficult to parse at times, but many of the moral attitudes on the part of characters can be quite
simplistic. Even in his arguably most theological writing, *The Road*, we see the man and boy speaking in simplistic terms of good and bad, while the descriptive text is much more theologically dense.

Previous studies have defined “carrying the fire” as a vague and/or vapid moral system invented by the father and son of *The Road* to guide them amongst the post-apocalyptic wasteland, which they currently inhabit, one which is purely to hold them together and bears no importance beyond their circumstances. This chapter, however, argues that what we actually see is a vision throughout McCarthy’s Appalachian novels involving fire, knowledge, vessels, and their relation to religious and moral systems. This “carrying the fire” in its final form includes no fewer people within its scope despite its simplicity. As Lydia Cooper says, it is “a metaphor for the practice of civility and ethics” (Cooper 221) which “in the context of this ruination of meaning, the father takes upon himself the calling to orient the boy toward some meaningful appropriation of the past: he tells his son old stories of courage and justice, and he teaches him a new sacred idiom—‘carrying the fire’” (70, 234, 238) (Cooper 142), and it encompasses more than just that.

In the process of depicting instances of ‘carrying fire,’ these novels unveil a complex belief system that draws from a variety of religious and literary traditions, most notably, the King James Bible. They also explore a world in which there is no longer a need for anything but a very basic religious and philosophical system for
living, as everything around them is on the verge of ruin and destruction. As *The Road* commences, we encounter a scene in which the man envisions us learning about the world in its undoing. “Perhaps in the world’s destruction, it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydrotic and coldly secular. The silence” (McCarthy 231), the text says. The man and the author both long to see how the earth was made so that they might reverse-engineer it and know for certain who or what created it and why and they see it veering in the direction where light resides.

On one hand, it seems that “The man and the boy are caught in this double bind, and as they continue advancing down the road, the only justification they can give each other for every forward step is that they must keep trying, that they – in their own words – are ‘carrying the fire. But that’s all they can say, and privately they doubt whether any of it means anything at all” (Potts 207). We also see religious and sacramental language embedded in peculiar phrases such as, “there is no god and we are his prophets” (McCarthy 170). This is a phrase that has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Those such as Matthew Potts relate it to the disconnect between the reception of biblical texts and praxis, as well as how literature may be employed in the service of the theological. Others see it as an affirmation of Nietzsche’s maxim “God is dead” where characters like ‘the man’ serve as a type of humanity, who labor
under the illusion that there is a God and are actually sustained by biological processes and phenomena such as the Freudian drive to life, or else others who view life and the earth as a spiritual testing ground.

Lydia Cooper expounds upon the work of Barbara Bennett, saying, “carrying the fire” has a more colloquial and familial approach as it denotes “Celtic symbolism underlying the novel’s refrain of ‘carrying the fire’ as a succinct summary of the theme of inheritance. This phrase... she says, evokes the ‘transplanted hearth fires’ of Celtic culture, in which grown children would carry fire from their parents’ hearth with them when they founded their own homes” (Cooper 227). Or as McCarthy says himself, back in The Stonemason, “the foundation and the hearth are the soul of human society” (McCarthy 66) and when it is impossible to have a foundation, you must carry the hearth with you. Like Appalachian religion, these hearths and fire are passed down throughout generations. When carried in horns specifically, it can be for the purposes of communication and for those of violence and protection and when carried metaphorically, it can symbolize the possibility for goodness and action in worlds perpetrated by darkness. This belief system of McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic world is multi-faceted.

Sheriff Bell’s dream of ‘carrying the fire’ into the mountains is very much akin to the Abrahamic story wherein he carries fire as he ascends Mt. Moriah, while his son Isaac carries the kindling, unaware that he is the intended sacrifice. God tests
Abraham by ordering him to kill his son Isaac, who was not born until Abraham was 100, the promise that God would continue his lineage. Abraham obeys God, and as the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard says of the story, not only that he believes that it is the lynchpin with which all of human thought must struggle to make sense of, but also that, “The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is” (Kierkegaard 66). In this, he hints at the inchoate sacrifice of what being a father entails. To be a father is to be forced to deal with the potential sacrificing of your child to the world in ways that you did not expect or intend. And as we transition to the other side of the mountain, with a father and son carrying fire into the world in *The Road*, we see exactly this.

In one way, this view of the sacrifice of fatherhood, along with all the extensive dialogue about ‘being the good guys’ and ‘carrying the fire’, both cements the man and the boy as morally good main characters, but there is another sense in which it explores the moral ambiguity of the world. Firstly, we can see the father as a sort of reverse Abraham in one sense, as mixed with his thoughts about goodness are protective acts and comments such as, “I was appointed by God to do that. I will kill anyone that touches you” (McCarthy 65). We know that the man has convinced the boy that they are ‘the good guys’, yet we begin to see his paranoia about his
surroundings bleed through—so much so that by the end of the novel when the boy asks the father of his new family if they are “carrying the fire?” (238) The woman responds with “what?” and then, “you’re kind of weirded out, aren’t you?” (283).

Following aspects of biblicality, he and his son have their own language, which carries specific meaning that they have been indoctrinated into using, and though they could be understood by the new father, they create this ambiguity caused by the insularity of the original two.

McCarthy echoes the juxtaposition of the father’s deteriorating mental condition and paranoia and the boy’s being a chosen vessel in another passage while also referencing James Joyce when he says, “The boy’s shadow crossed over him. Carrying an armload of wood. He watched him stoke the flames. God’s own firedrake.

The sparks rushed upward and died in the starless dark. Not all dying words are true, and this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground” (McCarthy 75). This seems to round out McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic vantage point as well as using Joyce’s term “firedrake,” which appears in the ninth book of *Ulysses* and is said to have been a celestial marker for the birth of Shakespeare. This not only contains a conglomerate imagery of fire and light involving several of McCarthy’s own literary influences but furthers the fire and star portent imagery we see at the beginning of *Blood Meridian*.

There, it says the protagonist known as ‘the kid’ was born in 1833, under the sign of “the Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes
in the heavens. The dipper stove” (McCarthy 3). The Leonid meteor shower was an event that portended apocalypse for many as it looked like the entire night sky was being bombarded by shooting stars and blasts of light. McCarthy means to say that this apocalyptic, celestial event, like many other signs, is bound up in the life of the boy, who as the original title *The Grail* indicates, which we will examine in the next section, is a vessel for goodness or even God.

III. Vessels of Divinity

In Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, the presence of divinity is not only conveyed through abstract concepts but also embodied within specific objects or elements that assume profound symbolic significance. This section delves into the exploration of these objects of divinity, examining their unique roles and the symbolism they evoke throughout these literary works. By investigating the religious artifacts or symbols, such as horns and grails, we unravel their deeper connotations and the functions they serve in representing the divine within the narratives. Furthermore, we delve into the portrayal of natural elements, such as mountains, rivers, and celestial bodies, as tangible manifestations of the divine presence, symbolizing the transcendent and immutable forces that shape the characters’ lives. Moreover, we analyze the human-made creations, including churches, altars, horns, and grails, as channels through which spiritual experiences are carried and unfold, fostering a profound connection between the characters and the divine realm.
Through this exploration, we gain insight into the intricacies of biblicality within McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, uncovering the multifaceted ways in which objects of divinity enrich the narrative tapestry and contribute to the profound exploration of faith, transcendence, and the human quest for meaning.

In this section, I will explore McCarthy’s use of divine vessels in his novels set in and referencing East Tennessee and the greater Appalachian landscape. I will compare these vessels to biblical texts and modern literary works that explore themes relevant to McCarthy’s purpose. Several theorists, including Dianne Luce, Lydia Cooper, Matthew Potts, and Russell Hillier, will provide insights into the relationship between the land, religious meaning, and the text.

Additionally, Kierkegaard’s ideas from Fear and Trembling will be employed to analyze the Abrahamic sacrifice that McCarthy’s texts draw from, all the while intertwining colloquial accounts of these various objects. Horns then, serving as vessels that go beyond their material form, are frequently employed in McCarthy’s East Tennessee works. They emerge from the characters’ natural surroundings, are made and manipulated by humans, and carry various symbolic meanings. They involve fire for illumination and warmth at two levels and communication as well. Where fire is concerned, warmth in the bodily sense, and that of the cultural and moral realm are involved and their communicatory properties are similarly tiered.
In McCarthy’s first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, the patriarchal Uncle Ather assumes the role of the orchard keeper, symbolizing both his literal watchfulness over the orchard adjacent to his property and the Edenic quality of the surrounding land and Knoxville itself. Despite not being an untouched Eden, the orchard functions as a “decayed pastoral symbol,” (MacKethan 6) embodying a “center of value” and a “source of moral authority” (Ragan 17). Despite its lackluster qualities and the presence of death, the orchard satisfies the basic requirement of a pastoral space, offering “a vision of an understandable order” in a rapidly changing world (MacKethan 6). Uncle Ather and the people of East Tennessee, like Adam facing expulsion from the Garden, find themselves helpless in the face of their circumstances. The orchard keeper and his counterparts will be physically expelled from this place of “pastoral independence and pastoral permanence” (Simpson 17), mirroring the biblical dynamics of the fall of humankind. As McCarthy mourns the loss of these old ways in his early works, the use of horns as vessels for carrying things such as fire become intertwined with his religious and historical vision.

Imagery of the horn then emerges in *The Orchard Keeper*. Uncle Ather, whose real name is Arthur Ownby, observes the aftermath of Marion Sylder, a local moonshiner, dumping Kenneth Ratter’s body into a sewage pond on his property. These characters, as we know, form the tripartite action of the novel. Ather at his original homestead, “smoked his pipe down, knocked out the ashes on the log and
rose stiffly, fingering a chambered goat-horn slung from his neck by a thong...his call went out among the slopes echoing and re-echoing.’ (46) He blows the horn and calls in his hounds, Scout and Buster, back home after this ruckus alongside their treeing of a raccoon.

Throughout history, the blowing of animal horns, such as those from goats, rams, and cattle, has served various communicative purposes in warfare and animal husbandry, persisting to the present day. In Uncle Ather’s case, he employs the horn to summon his hounds, bridging the gap between man and animal in his pastoral environment. Powder horns and blowing horns feature prominently in McCarthy’s works, serving as vessels for fire, aids for navigation, and means of communication, aligning with the pastoral themes prevalent in his early novels. As McCarthy’s later works shift to Western settings, the symbolism of horns evolves, becoming intertwined with themes of war and violence, reflecting the more imperialistic religious vision of the expanding West.

Examining the biblical significance of staffs in relation to this passage offers a broader understanding and connects Ather to an ancient world that predates his own while maintaining a narrative link. The staff holds a significant place in the Old Testament, particularly in stories of shepherds, and continues into the New Testament, where Jesus is referred to as the “good shepherd” (John 10:11) meaning that he guides his people through both difficult times and circumstances. The staff in
this context intertwines with the message conveyed by the horn, signifying the presence of a watchful shepherd who will eventually fall victim to the progress of the region. Whereas swords are implements of war and bloodshed in ancient literatures such as the Bible, staffs are instruments of guidance and providence. In the Old Testament, the prophet Moses uses his staff to part the water of the Red Sea, which begins their journey to the promised land, draws water from barren rocks in the desert along the way, and alternates between staff and snake in the book of Numbers, both hurting some and healing those who believe, much like the ancient concept of Pharmakon.

In *The Orchard Keeper*, we observe the careful portrayal of Ather as a displaced and wandering elder, representing older ways of being with the Appalachian terrain and harboring deep distrust toward outsiders. This is evident in the scene where a government agent mentions Social Security and potential government assistance, which Ather views with suspicion, as demonstrated by his shooting at the government water tower while Marion Sylder, the bootlegger, hides in the nearby woods. Ather embodies resourcefulness and self-sufficiency, characteristics shared by the region’s inhabitants who face displacement due to the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and modernization. Little attention has been given to Ather’s role as the shepherd of Greater Knoxville or a wandering prophet carrying his horn. His way of life, goodwill, and shepherding demeanor harken back to the
older times and ways of life, evoked by the symbolism of the horn. His horn, along with the “pole of hickory” which he had hewn octagonal and, “graced the upper half with hex-carvings—nosed moons, stars, fish of strange and Pleistocene aspect” (McCarthy 46), enhances the symbolism of the shepherd. The fish, or Ichthus, carries early Christian connotations and symbolism. Ather assumes the role of an elder and guardian of the woods, serving as a mediator between John Wesley Rattner and Sylder and safeguarding the secret of the elder Rattner’s body until the appropriate time. He embodies the Appalachian tradition of preserving secrets and tending to the deceased, while being an outcast who largely roams the lands of East Tennessee.

The act of blowing the horn not only evokes the customary practice of hunting but also recalls powerful Old Testament imagery, such as the destruction of the city of Jericho. In this narrative, “seven priests...bear seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark” (Joshua 6:4). They march around the city once a day for seven days, and on the final day, the city walls crumble, granting them passage towards the land promised by God. The comparison between this story’s narrative arc and McCarthy’s southern novels is somewhat inverted, as his primary critique embedded within the text is that the people are being expelled from the promised land they already inhabit. The seductive allure of modernity has razed the mountains and readied the biblical flood, while leading humanity astray and expelling them from
Eden, yet Ather and his staff are an ever-present reminder of goodness, possibility, and healing.

The mention of the ark in the Joshua text is relevant to our study, as God instructs the priests to “make horns for it on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze” (Exodus 27:2). These “horns of the altar” are mentioned countless times throughout the Old Testament and in the book of Revelation, encompassing themes of sacrifice, penitence, and worship. The ark referred to here is commonly known as the Ark of the Covenant, a prominent element in medieval literature and more recently depicted in films such as *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which is fraught with paranormal and biblical danger at every turn. The actual Ark of the Covenant is described in detail in the book of Exodus and other biblical texts and is essentially a golden box that housed worship-related items for the deity YHWH and symbolized His presence in the temple once established in Jerusalem.

Background imagery concerning what McCarthy is doing with the ark imagery can be found in a quote from McCarthy’s unpublished screenplay "Whales and Men," which was completed around 1986 and is archived at TSU San Marcos. It states, “I believe that we are arks of the covenant and our true nature is not rage or deceit or terror or craft or even sorrow. It is longing” (McCarthy 54). This reference alludes to biblical stories concerning the ark, such as when the Philistines conquer
Israel and bring the ark through each of their cities. They soon realize it brings them misfortune, as it clashes with the false emptiness of their own gods. After seven months, the Philistines consult the priests and diviners, asking, “What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us how we should send it back to its place” and the response is, “If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means return Him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why His hand does not turn away from you” (1 Samuel 6:2-3). The Philistines send the ark back to Jerusalem accompanied by golden representations of rage, deceit, terror, as well as the plague they experienced, the five mice and five tumors.

The people of God themselves held a reverential fear of the ark, as it served as a vessel through which God communicated with the priest positioned atop the mercy seat, between the golden cherubim. Those who ventured beyond this point faced the threat of death. For instance, when a man named Uzzah attempted to steady the ark as it was being transported by mules, “God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God” (2 Samuel 6:7). God preferred the ark to fall upon the earth, which, unlike humanity, had not sinned against Him. King David, who led the procession, was angered and terrified by God’s actions, as he viewed himself as one of God’s holy and chosen leaders who would have done the same thing.
One interpretation of this can be as an homage to the man in *The Road*, who, though not necessarily old, experiences his body withering rapidly, and whose ways and memories are now fading, living only in the thoughts of the boy. When the man was alive, he remembers observing fish, particularly trout, “He stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam. Where once he’d watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stone below” (25) and “He’d stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the teacolored water except as they turned on their sides to feed” (35). In another scene, the boy asks, “Do you think there could be fish in the lake?” “No”, the man says, “There's nothing in the lake” which is an allusion to the times before, which are ruminated on at the end of *The Road* and tie into the theme of Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium.”

The fish on the staff, those in the brook, and the vermiculate skull of elder Rattner allude to certain ways and vessels of knowledge that are disappearing or no longer understood, mirroring the novel’s final scene. It also mirrors the Old Testament insight in the book of Hosea, which says, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hosea 4:6). Just as horns serve as carriers of fire, embodying various meanings and manners, the skull similarly represents a carrier of knowledge in these
texts and contexts. This also ties into a passage from the book of Job, which notably serves as the central background text of *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*, published not long after *The Road*. The passage states, “but ask the animals what they think—let them teach you...listen—the fish in the ocean will tell you their stories” (Job 12:8, MSG). The postscript of *The Road* echoes this sentiment, with an omniscient narrator attempting to elucidate the truths of the universe to us.

WB Yeats’ poem *Byzantium* portrays a land of immense culture and unending youth. The poem itself speaks of former times, with “those dying generations—at their song, the salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas, fish flesh or fowl, commend all summer long, whatever is begotten, born, dies” (Yeats 1). The abundance of living organisms, specifically fish, is crucial in connecting the material from Yeats’ poem to McCarthy’s vision involving vessels. This is the poem from which the novel *No Country for Old Men* gets its title, and so attention to the connection of theme must be examined. Old men, in the poem and the novels, with their antiquated ways and the allegedly simpler times from whence they came, are not fit to flourish in McCarthy’s Texas of 1980, and neither they nor animals themselves are able to live by the time we get to the postapocalyptic terrain of *The Road*. But whether it be arks or horns or humans, they all are all filled with divinity in his depictions. They do not want to forget the goodness of their culture, and they find it to be of immense meaning and importance. It is one of the central points of Byzantium.
Certain critics have also said that in *The Road*, McCarthy is finally realizing just how religious his writing has been for the entirety of his career and finally explores it to its ends. As far as the grail imagery is concerned, McCarthy switches and even combines holy vessels at this late stage. He has been concerned with horns and the ark of the covenant but is now relaying his message through the vessels of grails as well. The boy is this grail here, or the vessel of divinity and hope for the future.

In transitioning from *No Country for Old Men* to *The Road*, we see both horns as vessels of fire that will light a cultural and moral fire among the darkness they encounter. There is also the concept of bodies as vessels of fate, promise, and goodness in worlds that are filled with destruction and uncertainty. There has been a historical relationship between the ark and the grail as missing and important holy objects or relics that in some way house the presence or body of God. McCarthy seems to be employing and experimenting with imagery quite often, as we have seen with all the ark, host, and grail imagery throughout his East Tennessee novels. This culminates in *The Road*, which significantly was to be called *The Grail* before it was changed to its current title prior to publication. This was not McCarthy’s first foray into grail imagery. Another similarity between *Suttree* and *The Road* is that in the former novel, he begins experimenting with the grail and host imagery, in scenes such as the snowflake mentioned before. They are also combined when he “drunk negotiated
with a drunk’s meticulousness the wide stone steps of the Church of the Immaculate
Conception. The virtues of a stainless birth were not lost on him...the moon’s horn
rode in the dark hard by the steeple” and he stands, “before this tabernacle where the
wise high God himself lies sleeping in his golden cup. He eased himself into the
frontmost pew and sat” (McCarthy 253). In this world where there is still organized
religion, the young Suttree drunkenly explores his scruples involving his Catholic
upbringing and ruminates over the troubling aspects of belief, among these relics. His
vision grows as we reach *The Road* and there are no more priests and only the boy
remains as divine hope.

*The Road* explores the aftermath of the disappearance of history, tradition,
edifice, and formality. Within the novel, the man and the boy exhibit divergent needs
and priorities, particularly concerning basic necessities and religion. As McCarthy
puts it, “This statuary will pass. This kingdom of fear and ashes” (McCarthy 252),
precisely capturing the world depicted in *The Road*. The father’s thoughts echo this
sentiment, stating, “on this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone, and I am
left, and they have taken with them the world” (27). The ashen snowflake
metaphorically evolves into the embodiment of Christendom as it vanishes, while the
boy assumes the role of the grail, believed by the father and others to house divinity.
Pertinent to our discussion is the father’s reflection, “The boy didn’t stir. He sat beside
him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god” (64).
This notion is later echoed when they encounter an old man named Eli. Their conversation unfolds as follows:

What if I said that he’s a god? The old man shook his head. I’m past all that now. Have been for years. Where men can’t live, gods fare no better. You’ll see. It’s better to be alone. So, I hope that’s not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing, so I hope it’s not true. Things will be better when everybody’s gone (145).

While the man’s belief in the boy’s divinity might be seen as a delusion, it surpasses the proclamations of many religious individuals. Like them, it represents an act of faith for those involved, impossible to prove empirically. The omniscient narrator supports this notion by describing a scene where “They stood on the far shore of a river and called to him. Tattered gods slouching in their rags across the waste” (44), which aligns with the man’s earlier statement in the novel, “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke” (4).

McCarthy’s concern over the fading knowledge of the old ways is evident not only in The Road but also in his first four novels. However, each work is situated in vastly different scenarios. Although elements like dialogue may vary, The Road shares the topography and many ideals present in these early novels. In works like The Orchard Keeper, we witness the gradual disappearance of the old ways among the
East Tennessee mountain and country folk, making room for modernity and other conceptual shifts. These transformations are taken to their extreme in *The Road*. Within this ravaged landscape, the ways of humanity have been lost, and even the memory of past times is fading, prompting the man to remind himself to remember the things that have disappeared, saying, “The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember” (27).

The vessels we have discussed in this chapter encompass elements of dreams, memories, and morality in *The Road*, as the landscapes transition from a country unsuitable for the elderly to a country devoid of life, where the memories of religion and culture fade like melting snowflakes. In fact, the imagery in *The Road*, where the man and boy navigate the ashen landscape, begins with the line, “It’s snowing,” the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of Christendom” (McCarthy 13). This passage references both hosts and vessels, and it echoes a similar scene in the novel *Suttree*. In *Suttree*, as the protagonist walks through the woods and engages in conversation with a hunter who may or may not be a figment of his imagination. “It’s snowing,” he said, “A delicate host expired on his filthy cuff” (McCarthy 289). Despite this darkness and seeming expiration of divinity the characters never truly lose hope. Even when the sea is found to be dead upon their arrival and the man dies, the boy still finds the strength to go on with a new family. McCarthy then, from the
beginning until the end of his Appalachian period, has been using a number of objects, such as horns, grails, snowflakes, and humans as vessels of divinity, showcasing multiple elements of biblicality, and sussing out his evolving vision of what divinity and morality mean.

In Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, the interplay of darkness, light, and objects of divinity serves as a rich and complex tapestry that weaves together the thematic undercurrents of his narratives. McCarthy employs these themes in conjunction with one another to explore the profound depths of human nature, the struggle between good and evil, and the presence of transcendence amidst a harsh and unforgiving world. Through the juxtaposition of darkness and light, McCarthy creates a vivid contrast that heightens the emotional impact of his stories. Darkness often symbolizes the inherent violence and moral decay that permeate his characters’ lives, while light represents moments of hope, redemption, and spiritual illumination. Objects of divinity, such as religious artifacts and biblical allusions, add an additional layer of complexity to the narrative, suggesting the possibility of divine intervention and guiding the characters’ moral compasses.

The complex interactions and contrasts between darkness, light, and objects of divinity offer a nuanced exploration of the human condition through texts ancient and new. McCarthy's characters are often faced with moral dilemmas and existential
questions, and the interplay of these themes shapes their development and actions and leads them to question their beliefs and confront their own mortality.

In conclusion, this chapter has examined the interplay of darkness, light, and objects of divinity in Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, revealing their profound significance in shaping the thematic exploration, character development, and narrative structure of his works. We see him advancing some of the moral issues that Flannery O’Connor posed in the early days of Southern Gothic literature and using a variety of antiquarian and ancient texts as well. As we have explored the darkness associated with McCarthy’s characters, we will now examine another aspect of darkness: that of alienation or being an outsider in a world that values ingroups. McCarthy writes extensively about those on the margins of society; we will now examine those with an eye toward race, class, and religion.
Chapter 3: Outsiders: Race, Biblicality, and the Southern Gothic in Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian Novels

Race and biblicality are two key thematic elements of Southern Gothic literature. From its origins in depicting plantation life, of which slavery was a key component, its stories are filled with elements of the grotesque. Its more modern instantiations depict lynching and the segregated South, the subjugation of Black bodies that was for a long time a part of everyday life in southern culture. It was the grotesque made manifest before our very eyes on a regional and even national level. The Bible, our alleged national book, was often used against Black citizens to justify slavery, segregation, injunctions against interracial marriage and more throughout our history as a country. Though McCarthy has been targeted as being a racist writer by certain critics and a host of graduate school students and lay readers alike online, this chapter seeks to show that he is simply depicting specific regional instances of rural Black life with both its triumphs and injustices.

There has been a turn in recent times within McCarthy studies, which seeks to show what he is doing with race and gender, which is actually pertinent to these studies moving forward. McCarthy is portraying the way the world as it is at times: dark and evil, with racism and the neglect of women as a key element. Hearkening back to the tactics of Flannery O’Connor once again, McCarthy is elucidating the insidiousness of those such as ministers, the local police, and law-abiding citizens, who below the surface are actually corrupt and evil themselves.
Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian novels are teeming with outsiders and outcasts, or those who reside outside the boundaries of mainstream society. In fact, it is difficult to find characters who do not inhabit this ontological space within any of his novels. McCarthy’s remarkable ability to portray outliers, those typically neglected in mainstream literature, is praiseworthy in a landscape where many works of similar caliber strive for highbrow status. He consistently gives voice to those who would otherwise remain voiceless, urging us to consider not only their humanity, but also our shared existence in the religious and moral realm. McCarthy suggests that we are all equals in this realm, capable of embodying both good and evil qualities.

Countless analyses have been written about the three protagonists of *The Orchard Keeper*—Culla Holme and the ‘grim triune’ of *Outer Dark*—Lester Ballard, Cornelius Suttree, and the unnamed man and boy struggling to survive amidst the postapocalyptic darkness of *The Road*. However, there are also several other characters who warrant critical attention as well.

While McCarthy is renowned for his positive portrayal of outcasts, he has not always been lauded critically for his treatment of women and people of color; in fact, in some cases, the opposite is true. The most pointed criticism in his treatment of racial matters is that he uses the ‘n word’ while speaking as the third-person omniscient narrator and this, to some is equated with racism and insensitivity on McCarthy’s part. These instances within McCarthy are often in more rural areas,
where this language and mindset would have been more prevalent or else it is within scenes of intense hatred, such as those involving Lester Ballard, where the entire novel is filled with hate and vitriol against the world. Other white characters’ perceptions, biases, and interactions do come into play in a variety of ways within these texts, however. Some white characters in his oeuvre are maliciously racist and others, like Gene Harrogate in *Suttree*, seem to be clueless and simply racist because the culture calls for it. He talks badly about Blacks in Knoxville, yet Black families are the only ones who will take him in or help him at one point as he has thoroughly exhausted his own people, forcing him to come to a realization concerning his own narrow mindset.

Additionally, if we move beyond the fact that the omniscient, third person does not mean that it is the opinion of McCarthy and that he is not portraying his own racist ideals within the text, then we move into a new space, where his work can be seen as accurate and grotesque portrayals and an attempt to move past race, though history will not completely allow him to. There is a way in which McCarthy’s work attempts to transcend race, at times. His work levels the playing field, to a degree, in showing the dire situations that all people face and everyone working together, as in the case of Suttree and Ab Jones or WJ Whipper and Robert McEvoy. In accurately depicting reality, however, it is inevitable he does show the ill-treatment of Black citizens in the South and the imbalances of power between races in Knoxville. The
racial grotesque and how it intertwines with misinterpreted biblical injunctions, shines through.

Furthermore, there is a way of looking at the text, which shows that beyond portraying reality as such, McCarthy is concerned with race. In *Suttree*, he makes it a point to show the nuances of the lives of those such as Ab Jones and J-Bone, during the early part of the Civil Rights era. In *The Stonemason*, he showcases the triumphs and tragedies of an entire family, and in *The Gardener’s Son* he illustrates the newfound agency of Black citizens. Though it didn’t work out in his favor when it came to production, he took the time to show how a family of Black Stonemasons lived in rural Kentucky. He showed how the attorney, WJ Whipper was the only one who stuck up for the poor white McEvoy in *The Gardener’s Son*. He may be slightly tone deaf at times, according to our current ears, but I believe that he was showing the solidarity between race and class, while illustrating the treatment of all races during this time period.

McCarthy’s first four novels and *The Road* are Southern Gothic. They contain within them the Christ-haunted narrative that O’Connor spoke of, which describes the South as a land which Christianity, “specifically its religious and cultural manifestations, permeated the Southern landscape and consciousness. The history of the American South is deeply intertwined with Christianity, with a strong prevalence of Protestant denominations and evangelical fervor. The religious landscape of the
region has played a significant role in shaping its culture, values, and social
dynamics”, (Ketchin 9) which we see throughout these novels.

Race and gender are something that biblical scholars have consistently dealt
with and are constantly reevaluating as well. From the history of slavery in the Bible,
to its American instantiation, to its possible futures, all are tied into biblicality.
Biblical themes are often juxtaposed in relation to race, such as sin, redemption, and
divine providence. McCarthy is constantly giving pushback in these areas, by using
Christian symbolism, views on the periphery of Christianity, and dogma, to show
where ‘good people’ have gone wrong, historically, and systems of power have caused
undue oppression while using this Christ-haunted narrative.

Essential to “the Southern Gothic is the legacy of slavery in the United States,
and the tradition often rehearses the black-white racial binary that haunts the Deep
South and its history of institutionalized racial slavery. As Meredith Miller writes, the
Southern Gothic “makes it clear that racial categorization, specifically, the otherness
of black Americans, is necessary to the Gothic structure of this [southern] identity,”
(Kaus 8). Many other Southern Gothic writers have merely portrayed southern Blacks
as they have seen them, often in low esteem, yet there is a rich tradition of African
American writers who have been and are doing work in this area. Somewhere in
between is McCarthy, who is not Black, yet gives certain of his Black characters
agency.
McCarthy’s treatment of women is equally demure at times. Many of the female characters in his stories are mistreated, abandoned, used as objects of sex, obsessive love, or murder, and are often overlooked or cast aside, or have even killed themselves. The remarks of Leslie Feedler, writing five years before the publication of McCarthy’s first novel seem to ring true in conjunction with these remarks, as he says that,

Our great novelists, though experts on indignity and assault, on loneliness and terror, tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and a woman, which we expect at the center of the novel. Indeed, they rather shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality.” (Fiedler 24)

McCarthy phrases it slightly differently in his 2006 interview with Oprah Winfrey, when he says:

Oprah: People call you a man’s man writer. Is there a reason why women are not a big part of the plots?

McCarthy: Women are tough. You know. They’re tough. I don’t pretend to understand women. I think men don’t know much about women. They find them very mysterious. (Winfrey)
He continues this line of thought, in a slightly more helpful manner in a 2022 interview, when he says, “I was planning on writing about a woman for 50 years” and “I will never be competent enough to do so, but at some point, you have to try” (Alter 2). Like many men and writers of his generation, he may have a slightly warped and misunderstood view of women and femininity, yet his more recent words, along with his highly positive portrayal of a woman and a trans woman character in *The Passenger*, seem to indicate that he is self-consciously seeking to work through some of these issues in his writing.

More recent critical engagement with McCarthy acknowledges these shortcomings in depicting matters of race and gender, particularly his treatment of women and people of color. For many years, like other authors, the study of McCarthy’s works was primarily dominated by older white men, with minimal critical analysis where non-protagonists are concerned. However, in recent years, scholars such as Lydia Cooper and Nell Sullivan have championed a critical reading of McCarthy, particularly in the areas of race, gender, and sexuality. Dr. Sullivan has extensively explored the theme of homosociality throughout McCarthy’s oeuvre and has been an advocate for female characters, notably elevating Rinthy Holme from *Outer Dark* to the status of a co-protagonist.

Lydia Cooper, in several articles, has provided an honest assessment of McCarthy’s treatment of racial matters, offering a framework that allows us to
identify which of McCarthy’s characters have been marginalized and which serve as illustrations of specific periods in American history. Her analysis is invaluable in helping us understand McCarthy’s writings as a rich source for understanding the diverse inhabitants of the Appalachian South. Some critics and many readers have assumed a malevolence on McCarthy’s part throughout the history of McCarthy studies and his never having attempted to dispel this assumption has left readers curious as to his own views on these matters. McCarthy seldom speaks about his work however, preferring to let it speak for itself, even when it doesn’t resonate positively with readers. McCarthy’s previous attempts to write from the perspectives of races and genders other than his own have not helped this image either. His writing and attempt to put on the play, *The Stonemason*, being the quintessential example.

Taking a slight step back, which will help us clarify what is happening in McCarthy in regard to race, gender, and its inextricability from biblicality, we can briefly examine the framework which Dr. Cooper proposes that when studying the racial elements within McCarthy’s work. She suggests that we begin with a broader and more general question: does this text or author enhance our comprehension of race as a concept or the functioning of racial systems within a particular time or place? Subsequently, she suggests we inquire about the individuals who become victims or are marginalized by these systems, which fits in with the biblical conception of justice. Additionally, she asks us to inquire as to whether or not the
experiences of racial minorities represented in a manner that deepens or complicates our understanding of those experiences? Finally, she recommends exploring whether these issues are handled with sensitivity or insensitivity, which has become a hallmark of more contemporary scholarship involving biblicality. Both lay readers and scholars who engage with McCarthy’s writings often hold strong opinions regarding his treatment of race and gender, along with their underlying merits and shortfalls by exploring the lives of characters who have been historically stigmatized not solely based on their actions or those of their families, but also due to their race, gender, in a land that uses The Bible as its national book and the “self-evident truth that all men are created equal”. This exploration is crucial for both literary and biblical scholarship, as both fields strive to reconcile their often-unflattering pasts while engaging in robust and beneficial studies that involve new frameworks of thought and revisions of older paradigms.

These questions open up new possibilities for exploring regional dynamics within his work and shed light on why McCarthy, as an author, may choose to portray these scenes in the manner that he does. We are able to provide a tentative affirmative response to the first two questions, and we will delve into the reasons behind this in the subsequent pages. McCarthy’s writings, when it comes to race, can be categorized into two phases: the Southern phase and the Western phase. Since our
primary focus is on his early novels, we will examine the Southern period, in which McCarthy explores race in Appalachia during the mid-twentieth century.

Another significant aspect of this chapter involves the exploration of race in McCarthy’s work, which has often been problematic. As many Southern Gothic critics have highlighted, slavery and racism form the core of Southern Gothic literature and its depiction of the degraded pastoral landscape, among other themes. Toni Morrison’s work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, underscores the indispensability of the Black body to American literature. Although Morrison engages with Southern Gothic writers in general rather than McCarthy specifically, her insights are valuable for examining McCarthy as a Southern Gothic writer. McCarthy’s writings confirm Morrison’s argument and also expose the limitations of white patriarchal discourse in fostering individual and collective development.

By using his first screenplay, *The Gardener’s Son*, as a starting point, we can discern the workings of a system of racial injustice and recognize that McCarthy has actually portrayed more strong and sympathetic black characters than previously realized. When we shift to the Westerns, we primarily encounter themes of empire and imperialism set in an earlier era, where the depravity of all races is depicted. The Appalachian works clearly delineate the divisions between black and white citizens and center on issues of class as the region transitions from the plantation South to the
height of the industrial revolution. *The Gardener's Son*, chronologically McCarthy’s earliest Southern work, takes place during the Reconstruction period, just after slavery has ended. Although racial justice is not prevalent under the law during this time in the US, we encounter several black jurors and three black attorneys within its pages.

In, *The Gardener's Son*, WJ Whipper, the black defense attorney, is the sole advocate for Robert McEvoy, who stands accused of murdering the wealthy mill owner, James Gregg. While all the attorneys agree to exclude any incidents involving the mill’s female workers from the proceedings, Whipper defies this agreement. Rumors circulate, and when McEvoy is confronted by those he confided in about his mother’s passing, Pinky mentions that “the only way to get ahead down here is to get your wife knocked up by the boss” to “give ye a little leverage” (McCarthy 49). Additionally, it is rumored that Gregg ran over McEvoy’s leg with his carriage, resulting in amputation when we first encounter him. Although his family denies this, Whipper is willing to stand up for McEvoy during the court case when no one of his own race will.

Race in this work functions as a response concerning the transition from plantation to factory life. Poor Black and white citizens are clearly demarcated and pitted against one another in this system, which is overseen by the ruling classes, such as the likes of the factory owning Gregg family. The people inhabiting this social
stratum require an imbalance to shift the culture from agrarian to industrial, as many of the country’s poorest individuals are unwilling to relocate from their ancestral lands to unfamiliar and sterile cities for completely new ways of life. The screenplay and court case showcased in the play clearly do not reflect racial justice under the law, as the one supportive attorney is dismissed and the poor are discarded in favor of capital producers. In McCarthy’s Appalachian works, discussions of class are always intertwined with race. This particular work highlights a race-based ideology within the white working-class during Reconstruction in South Carolina.

Exploring Cooper’s final question regarding the treatment of racial matters brings to light some of the controversial aspects of McCarthy’s writing. Moments of love and kindness do exist within his novels, but they are scarce and usually overshadowed by tremendous and insurmountable obstacles involving violence. The first question, which delves into the deepening and complexifying of our understanding of the Appalachian novels, becomes intriguing when viewed in the context of power dynamics, particularly concerning the white masculine experience in America at that time. McCarthy’s portrayal of the real experiences of disenfranchised working-class white men appears insightful and historically accurate. Minority representation has never been a strong point in McCarthy’s works, but he seems to be honest about it, as evidenced in the limited correspondence addressing this matter. This tendency harkens back to his previous attempts to write characters
such as women and Black people, as he explained in a recent article around the release of his newest novels.

Cooper suggests that McCarthy might feel uncomfortable portraying the interiority of characters who differ from him in race and gender. However, this claim appears partially untrue when we consider *The Stonemason* and *The Sunset Limited* in conjunction with McCarthy’s interviews. As we mentioned previously, it has become evident that McCarthy has been striving for over five decades to accurately depict female characters. There seems to be a similar underlying ideology at play between the time of *The Stonemason’s* production and the writing and production of *The Sunset Limited*, which spans over twenty years, indicating McCarthy’s endeavor to address race as well. Aware of the failure of *The Stonemason’s* production and the relative success of *The Sunset Limited*, McCarthy has since refrained from such portrayals in his work, which shows that he has learned to some degree from his mistakes.

In McCarthy’s first major interview with *The New York Times*, he spontaneously brings up stonemasonry, stating, “Stacking up stone is the oldest trade there is. Not even prostitution can come close to its antiquity. It’s older than anything, older than fire. And in the last 50 years, with hydraulic cement, it’s vanishing. I find that rather interesting” (Woodward). This observation precisely aligns with what McCarthy highlights in the play, as he echoes this, saying, “And if it
is true that laying stone can teach you reverence of God and tolerance of your neighbor and love for your family, it is also true that this knowledge is instilled in you through the work and not through any contemplation of the work (McCarthy 65), which have to do with biblicality as it pertains to existential contemplation and outworking of the connection between vocation and the divine which has long been a point of introspection among theologians and lay-people alike.

Perhaps if McCarthy had written about a white family of stonemasons, it wouldn’t have been received as it was, but, fascinatingly, it remains perhaps the only fictional exploration of Black stonemasonry. For readers, particularly those familiar with McCarthy’s work, *The Stonemason* is a formidable piece, showcasing his lifelong interests in “skilled physical labor, justice, God, violence, and community” (Josyph 89). The elder patriarch, Big Ben has anchored his philosophy of life in the King James Version of the Bible and his wife, Mamaw, in its principles and works that relate in a roundabout way. Though this work does not abide by traditionally Southern Gothic tropes, per se, there are several, somewhat grotesque, deaths, along with the racial and biblical elements. Ben Telfair’s father commits suicide in an unknown manner and his younger brother dies by heroin overdose, alone in a hotel room, as he waits for the money that will allow him to get married. Violence and deceit are all around them in their stories of being shortchanged as Black Stonemasons and from here their sense of community, at least in part, emanates. They
have a tight-knit and almost insular sense of family and beyond that, the brotherhood of stonemasons, who look out for each other.

McCarthy’s work *The Stonemason: A Play in Five Acts* primarily revolves around Ben Telfair, a sixth-generation black stonemason, and his familial relationships. Throughout the play, Ben struggles between reviving the family craft of stonemasonry and pursuing higher education to escape rural Kentucky, with a clear preference for the former. This narrative aligns somewhat with historical accuracy, as there were indeed Black stonemasons attempting to establish formal guilds as early as the Revolutionary War, with informal ones existing even earlier. This theme also reflects one of McCarthy’s personal passions—his lifelong fascination with building and stonemasonry, which permeates his work. During the writing of his early novels, McCarthy went so far as to collect stone rubble from James Agee’s childhood home and construct his own cabin in Sevier County, Tennessee. McCarthy claims that the inspiration for this play came from a six-month stay with a Black family in Louisville, Kentucky in the 1960’s. However, this statement remains unverified and unchallenged. Recent scholarship has uncovered ten interviews from that period, revealing that McCarthy was indeed in the Louisville area, but primarily house-sitting for friends who were abroad in Europe on multiple occasions. McCarthy never mentions this other and seemingly influential stay. While the Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy only informs us that McCarthy “moves to Lexington, Kentucky
in the Fall” of 1979, a recent article by Dianne Luce and Zachary Turpin titled “Cormac McCarthy’s Interviews in Tennessee and Kentucky, 1968-1980” reveals at least two other stays in Kentucky, where he served as a house sitter for wealthy friends. It is possible that this stay in Louisville never occurred, but given McCarthy’s intensely private nature, there is also the possibility that he simply did not write or speak about it.

McCarthy’s play, *The Stonemason*, was attempted three times but never made it to the stage. Peter Josyph attributes its failure to being McCarthy’s “first published play” and suggests that “*The Stonemason* places him more securely in the tradition of great novelists. Although the art of the play is distinct from and, in some respects, opposed to that of the novel, rarely does a first-rate novelist resist the lure of the stage” (Josyph 113). However, in reality, it is likely the underlying racial concerns associated with producing the play that halted its performance. During the play’s second and most successful attempt, many involved in the production anticipated that the complexity of setting and acting would pose the greatest challenges. However, in the end, it was the issue of race that brought the production to a halt. Most of those involved assumed that McCarthy himself was Black, and after attending a rehearsal commented that, “several members of the Arena staff voiced objections to the play’s depictions of African Americans, saying they felt that *The Stonemason* relied on racial stereotypes rather than more authentic portrayals. They pointed to the violent
deaths of two of the play’s four male characters as well as the lesser roles the women play in the story” (Peebles 75). The lack of familiarity with McCarthy’s work and the fact that he was writing about a race that was not his own contributed to the play being halted before it ever reached the stage.

Claudia Tate poignantly suggests in her work, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* that historically there have been specific criteria for what constitutes a Black novel, and McCarthy’s play, as a work by a white writer seeking to portray the lifestyle, dialect, and humor of a rural Black family, challenges those rules. It is assumed on the part of theorists that the author must be Black, but might there be exceptions to that rule, if a writer of a different race makes an accurate portrayal? The violence in this work did not allow for this sort of discussion involving *The Stonemason*. Many staff members during the initial production were enthusiastic about the prospect of combining "narrative fiction, cinema, and stage" (Arnold 144). They believed that any concerns could be addressed during the production process. However, the Arena staff was not familiar with McCarthy’s work, and given the play’s subject matter, they assumed he was African American. “Based on the script, I assumed McCarthy was black. We all did,” said Larry Maslon of Arena (quoted in Arnold 144). They eventually discovered their mistake, but according to Wiley Hausam of ICM, it “was not a big deal. I don't think it occurred to anyone that it would be a problem” (Arnold 145). Maslon, one of the individuals involved in the
play’s production, recalls that McCarthy was polite in response to the objections but remained unmoved. “He was quite happy to work on it if there was a sense that it would be performed, but he would not make changes just to satisfy everyone” (Arnold 149). After the workshop concluded, there was radio silence between the author and the theater, until McCarthy’s agent, Amanda Urban, contacted officials and learned that the “Arena had cancelled the play and, in an unprecedented move, returned the grant money. The decision seemed ‘unusually political,’ according to a Kennedy Center administrator” (Arnold 149).

McCarthy’s friend and future bibliographer, Howard Woolmer, was surprised by the development and wrote to McCarthy in a letter, stating, “PC is such a foolish concept; would it be unacceptable for a black to write a play about whites? I only have one criticism. I seem to remember that Ben filled his thermos bottle with coffee at one point and then drank tea from it” (Woolmer to McCarthy, March 10, 1993). This, a statement to which McCarthy never replied, could have been indicative of his aversion to expounding upon his texts, but also due to Woolmer’s insensitivity to the complicated topic at hand.

In *The Stonemason*, McCarthy earnestly attempts to capture the lives of Black, working-class Kentuckians and Central Appalachians. The play depicts a clash between the old and the new, combining the ancient craft of stonemasonry with the contemporary issues of drugs and racism. Stonemasons find themselves marginalized
in their own industry as materials become more expensive and builders opt for cheaper alternatives. Furthermore, workers are confronted with new, potent drugs that discourage them from working or pursuing traditional trades. If we consider Cooper’s criteria, the play sheds light on a largely forgotten cultural phenomenon and its practitioners, while also highlighting the pervasive racism and judicial inequality in Kentucky at the time. Like the characters in *The Gardener’s Son*, these individuals are entangled in the racist and unjust political system of the era, albeit from a different perspective, characterized by their own grievances and suffering.

One productive revision for McCarthy involves orchestrating Ben’s co-opting of the Chautauqua format. This format belonged to a historical movement that welcomed diverse Protestant voices but excluded African American ones. McCarthy, through Ben, engages with the study of race and racism, disrupting the historical racialization of this religious practice. Ben’s delivery of a Judeo-Christian message challenges racism, disrupting “the historical racialization of this religious practice [and his] delivery of a Judeo-Christian message challenges that racism, especially the history of presenting black Christian practice infused with elements of folk culture as inferior to a presumed authentic white Christianity” (Peebles 45). Despite the challenges in interpreting the play, the fact that it was halted before production ultimately “reveals the limits of white patriarchal discourse for potential individual and collective development” (Tate 51). Recognizing these aspects of the story allows
Ben, one of the few remaining characters at the end, to avoid ending his narrative in the kind of devastation typically associated with tragedy, even though he loses his nephew, father, and grandfather. His spirit remains undeterred.

This play engages with “Freud’s central insight,” namely “that history, like trauma, is never solely an individual’s experience, but a way in which we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 24). The play celebrates Papaw’s 102nd birthday and Maven’s birth of a healthy baby, but these joyous events are followed by Papaw’s death and Big Ben’s sudden suicide. Ben is haunted by both losses and burdened by guilt related to his father. He wonders, “If I’d ransomed everything and given it all to him, would it have saved him? No. Was I obligated to do so? Yes. Why did you not?” (McCarthy 105). Similarly, Black is entwined with and sympathetic toward the mental and nearly physical suffering endured by White throughout the play.

In critiquing the biblical nature of McCarthy’s prose in this work, Peter Josyph says that he has “asked too much of Ben. He wants Ben to be a fundamentally good man and he wants us to feel for his imperfections. He also wants him to talk stone, mason, Bible, God, and he tries to superimpose an appreciation of lostness that does not make sense either in light of what he has told us (too much), or in light of what we have seen (too little). With regard to his family, Ben, for all his self-mortification, has not done a damn thing wrong” (Josyph 127) He poses rhetorically, that “if Ben is a
sourpuss, a blowhard and a bore, he is so, I believe, because he is fashioned to be the mouthpiece of McCarthy’s prose voice at its most misguided and misplaced. (119) Ben scorns hewn stone buildings as “priestridden stonecraft” requiring “nothing but time and slavery for their completion,” he praises the Semitic God as a God of the common man and the Old Testament as “a handbook for revolutionaries” because it will have no slavery, and he believes the thought of a laborer is likelier to be tempered with humanity and tolerance” (65). (120) It is more complicated than this, however, as we have spoken of the issue of race that is involved. *The Stonemason* would have been a more powerful mouthpiece for McCarthy’s ideas of stonework, religion, and history, had he gone his usual route of having a white cast, with various other, well-written characters of differing races and genders.

Finally, one intriguing aspect of the play’s production, which relates to unpacking those ‘fraught with meaning’ passages, is the use of dual actors portraying the main character, Ben. As Stacy Peebles notes, “The main character, Ben, is played by two actors, sometimes simultaneously—one who narrates portions of the play from a podium and another who plays out the scenes’ action with the other characters” (Peebles 32). This can be examined in light of DuBois’s concept of double consciousness, which refers to the internal “twoness” experienced by African Americans due to their racialized oppression and devaluation in a predominantly white society. This is another instance of the role of the twin, which has been pointed
out so often as it concerns Gnosticism within Suttree. Ben constantly sees himself through his own perspective and the perceived eyes of white citizens, particularly his clients in Louisville. His grandfather has shared stories of past discrimination with him, and Ben has personally experienced situations where the white client refused to pay after the stonework was completed. Ben’s self-perception is shaped by both his racial identity and historical awareness, and McCarthy’s portrayal of these concepts is intriguing. Both Ben’s are frozen and doing separate activities at different times according to stage instructions and this illustrates this awareness of double consciousness on McCarthy’s part, being intertwined with the duality of his characters. Theoretically, McCarthy represents this Black, Appalachian family well, besides a handful of awkward sections of dialogue. He was also criticized for the amount of death in this work, which has been a criticism for McCarthy since the beginning. If McCarthy had been Black, there would have likely been no issue, but the fact that he is a white man, brings up the history of oppression and questions of propriety in the critical imagination.

When we then begin to compare The Stonemason to his more recent play, The Sunset Limited, we hear many echoes to statements like “Black has a good deal of Papaw in him” and Ben has learned from him that “True stone masonry is not held together by cement but by gravity. That is to say, by the warp of the world. By the stuff of creation itself” (10). Black would have known that and he would have been
similar to Soldier as a kid. If his jailhouse stories are any indicator, he would have experienced that sadness of Big Ben and he has Ben’s urge to evangelize. “Ultimately, he’s most like Ben in that Ben feels that he, too, has lived the lives of his family, and he has the demanding, god-like example of his grandfather to live up to.” (141)

While *The Stonemason* was a critical failure, *The Sunset Limited* appears to have achieved success on multiple levels, enjoying a decent production run. It was staged at the Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago from May 18 to June 25, 2006, and was later adapted into a feature film starring Samuel L. Jackson and Tommy Lee Jones. In terms of its portrayal of race, one critic remarked, “bemoaning the fact that there aren’t a lot of plays that actually have white people and black people in conversation together about things beyond race.” When he encountered *The Sunset Limited*, he realized that this was that play. He marveled that “it enables the audience to see black and white people talking together . . . and the issue isn’t about oppression or empowerment—McCarthy strips away all of that. The issue is much bigger” (Peebles 86).

When examined side by side, Black from *The Sunset Limited* and Papaw from *The Stonemason* share many similarities. We know that Papaw solely read the King James Bible and strongly believed in its teachings. While Black also reads the Bible, he believes that salvation and spiritual experiences can occur without specifically reading the Bible, adhering to the concept of original sin, or interpreting Jesus as a
traditional savior. These may be considered heresies and Black believes that they make him “an outlaw,” but he also believes that a man “should be a questioner,” even “a man with a powerful belief” (67). Here McCarthy extols the virtues of being a critical thinker while also being a part of a faith, so as not to fall into some of the pitfalls that he addresses, especially in the colonialist narratives present within novels like *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*.

In writing about race, McCarthy does not allow us to remain innocent bystanders where issues of issues of racism and violence are concerned. He has never been praised for complex representation involving racial matters in the manner that we are used to with the reception of novels today. He does, however, paint complex and provocative portraits of historical racial matters. In his first four novels, he shows us the daily lives of Black citizens in Knoxville, a city whose racial makeup and treatment were quite different from other cities. Knoxville was not the slave-owning, plantation South. They were a part of the Appalachian South whose mountains housed various pockets of Black citizens, who were made to fight on both sides during the Civil War and who were quite tolerant of miscegenation. In *The Gardener’s Son*, McCarthy shows us the realities of Reconstruction-era South Carolina and in *The Stonemason*, he brings forth an ancient tradition of Black stonecraft, which guilds were trying to be formed as early as our country was and who see their origins in ancient Egypt. He illustrates the existence of Black cowboys in *Blood Meridian*, who
though portrayed as only white in older books and films, actually comprised up to a quarter of those living in the Wild West.

As we discussed briefly in the last chapter, there is a section in *The Road*, where McCarthy illustrates how in a post-apocalyptic world, an oppressive system, like the chattel slave system of old could emerge again. When the man and boy “come upon a once grand house sited on a rise above the road” (McCarthy 105). The man holds “the boy’s hand and they crossed the porch. Chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays” (106). Slaves had worked in the fields outside of this plantation house as well and had retrieved wine and other supplies. This is proved as they exit the rear of the house, looking for a tool for opening a locked passageway on the corner hallway floor and,

There was a brick walkway and the twisted and wiry shape of what once had been a row of boxwoods. In the yard was an old iron harrow propped up on piers of stacked brick and someone had wedged between the rails of it a forty-gallon castiron cauldron of the kind once used for rendering hogs. Underneath were the ashes of a fire and blackened billets of wood. Off to one side a small wagon with rubber tires. All these things he saw and did not see (120).

All the accoutrements of cooking and processing meat were present and had been used recently, but their hunger blinded them, causing them to misremember that there were no longer farm animals upon this earth.
This scene compels us to both examine and confront the South’s past, as we know the home was maintained by African slaves in times past. Additionally, it envisions a possible dystopian future, as humans continue to deplete the earth, and descend into cannibalism in order to keep their bodies alive at any cost. Charred trees, polluted streams, and inhospitable terrain greet us at every turn, and in this vein, it is Mark Helmsing’s opinion that *The Road* employs “a geological Gothicism” which exhumes the ghosts and brutality of the haunted past, along with their relation to this future. Through presenting this darker past, McCarthy aims to rewrite the Southern history with a counter-narrative which “include(s)...all aspects of our origins as a country” (Helmsing 59). His acknowledgement that this country was, at least in part, founded upon the principles of Christianity, yet still allowed slavery to persist, elucidates that the two edifices have often intertwined in the realm of nation building. McCarthy portrays the dark legacy of slavery alongside this hypothetical cannibalistic future as twin moral regressions upon which we must meditate.

Though there came to be injunctions against slavery in the Bible, Americans and specifically American Christians, who viewed themselves to be the arbiters of morality enslaved Africans, were often the worst towards slaves, and perpetrated a system which handicapped them societally for centuries. It is this insidiousness by the people who stake a claim to morality but are actually vile themselves which we see throughout McCarthy and is similar to what O’Connor was doing with morality play.
in her novels and stories. O'Connor didn’t quite get to the nuanced level of McCarthy concerning race, as her views on segregation suggest, but neither was she as violent and brutal as McCarthy. In any case, McCarthy portrays Black citizens, living in this dark world, as having agency, yet still receiving mistreatment at the hands of the police and the spreading capitalism entrenched within the industrial revolution and later the Civil Rights Era.

Towards the end of the court case, when the elder McEvoy speaks to their attorney, WJ Whipper, he reveals a poignant aspect of the class consciousness at the time, stating, “If my boy were a Gregg, he’d not even be tried.” (McCarthy 67) Whipper retorts, “If your son were Black, he’d not be tried” (67). This underscores the racial and legally inequality of the era, where being a Gregg (white and wealthy) would have allowed one to continue life undisturbed, while being Black would have resulted in a lynching.

In McCarthy’s subsequent novel, *Suttree*, which takes place chronologically, we encounter similar people working in fertilizer and other factories that supply “war and the machineries of war” (McCarthy 246). This racial system becomes more complex as we transition from rural South Carolina to East Tennessee. John Stanfield points out how:

racial inequality can be adequately considered only when pertinent economic, political, legal, and social factors are taken into account. White/black
inequality in Knoxville... can be understood only when we consider factors such as the impact of household and dirt-farming slave systems; the development of extractive and textile manufacturing, the personalization of race relations, and the stabilization and decrease of black populations (Stanfield 146).

Knoxville, like many other areas in the American South, has a history of slavery and segregation, but it possesses unique characteristics in how these dynamics have unfolded.

John Stanfield further explains that “Knoxville is historically portrayed as a very tolerant city when it comes to racial matters,” but he clarifies that this perception is due to “the realities of a passive native black population which is highly undereducated, economically underdeveloped, politically invisible, and intimately dependent on the state” (Stanfield 145). The people of Knoxville have been shaped in this way by those with wealth and power, reflecting the evolution of regional choices. While McCarthy primarily focuses on the struggles of poor whites in the region, he also highlights these dynamics in his early novels through various means. Black citizens have their own segregated part of town or reside in the woods in these narratives. They do not face the explicit racial hostility that we encounter in works from certain other regions of the South, where Black individuals are targeted solely because of their race. The only exception to this is the case of Ab Jones, who directly
challenges police authority and refuses to back down. While they are not portrayed positively in most of McCarthy’s early works, there is a sense of sympathy and even agency among several characters, as we will explore.

Flannery O’Connor, one of McCarthy’s influences, never portrays Black characters flatteringly in her work. In fact, as Melvin Williams states, they “are never portrayed as individuals who think, who change, or who need the grace of God” (Williams 130). Williams points out that many of O’Connor’s characters of color simply serve to strengthen white characters in their time of need or when they face lack. William Faulkner, another of McCarthy’s great influences, often explores the legacy of slavery and the trials of Black characters in his novels or the treatment and trials of mixed-race characters, such as Lucas Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses*. As Louis Palmer suggests, Faulkner seeks to “combine the family problematics developed in the earlier works with the question of race through the practice, or perhaps custom would be a better word, of black/white miscegenation” (Palmer 30). Knoxville does not carry the same stigma associated with this practice, nor was it a hub of chattel slavery, thereby highlighting different problems. However, Knoxville does have a history of police brutality stemming from the Southern slave apparatus. McCarthy notes that this disproportionately affects the poor and those who choose to rebel against family money, with Black characters like Jones being particularly targeted by the racist local police force. McCarthy, writing during a significant period of the Civil
Rights Era, portrays a character who has traversed various strata of the white experience stepping into Jones’s life and exhibiting compassion towards him, despite his numerous flaws. McCarthy invites the reader to consider this perspective as well.

**WOMEN**

Many of the women in McCarthy’s novels are mistreated, murdered, have committed suicide, or are missing from the outset. Others are absent in body and only accessible through disturbing memories. In a self-aware moment, as we mentioned previously, when asked about his forthcoming novels, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, McCarthy acknowledges, “I was planning on writing about a woman for 50 years” and “I will never be competent enough to do so, but at some point, you have to try” (Alter 2). While this discussion extends beyond the scope of this study, it leads us to wonder if McCarthy ultimately succeeds or if women will continue to suffer a fate similar to that of matriarch Bundren in Faulkner’s, *As I Lay Dying*, condemned to listen to the construction of her own casket from an open window. Will they continue to be sidelined, or are there ways in which we can extract more agency from female characters in McCarthy’s Appalachian works, with or without his endorsement? As we will soon see, there are several women in McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, which are used to illustrate specific viewpoints or point out unfortunate ways in the rural South.
Nell Sullivan highlights an exchange between McCarthy and Dianne Luce during an interview for a literary encyclopedia project in the 1980s. Luce mentioned both protagonists in *Outer Dark* to McCarthy, Rinthy and Culla Holme, to which McCarthy responded, “Don’t you mean the one?” This indicating that he viewed Culla, the brother, as the only main character. Despite his objections, Sullivan convincingly demonstrates that there are indeed two protagonists, and if there were to be only one, it would be Rinthy. Prior to McCarthy’s most recent novels, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, she stood as his most intriguing and proactive female character, despite the lack of critical attention devoted to her. Thankfully, Sullivan and a handful of other scholars have begun to do this work. McCarthy, to his own detriment, often appears dismissive of many of his female characters and is destructive towards others. In the rare instances of love and positivity, there seems to be a substantial amount of obsession until the woman’s demise, leaving the protagonist longing or else indifferent.

Regarding McCarthy’s use of biblical themes and the portrayal of womanhood, an intriguing character in *The Stonemason* is the grandmother. The text mentions that she could recite all hundred pages of Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake*, which is actually over three hundred pages long and quite a challenging read. The subject matter primarily focuses on the triumphs of King James V of Scotland, who was the father of the commissioner of the King James Version of the Bible. This also
melds with her husband’s staking his entire life and moral philosophy on the KJV as well. Perhaps the grandmother loved the fantastical nature of the poem or somehow identified with the world of lords and ladies in waiting. However, this detail also raises broader issues. The discrepancy in page numbers alludes to the heated debates over the inerrancy of scripture throughout history, and we see the King James Bible repeatedly referenced in McCarthy’s work, underscoring its significance to his literary style.

Another resilient female character, whom we will discuss for other reasons in Chapter Four, is the nameless mother in *The Road*. Although not explicitly portrayed as such, she assumes the role of the voice of reason in contrast to the father’s despairing and emotionally charged response to the apocalypse. In a Jobian vein, she suggests that he, “Curse God and die,” as she willingly succumbs to death on her own terms, citing the impending threats of rape, murder, and cannibalism. The novel attempts to depict her as frivolous, painful, and forgettable, when the narrator mentions that the father removed her photo from his wallet, leaving it on the road with a variety of other items. Nonetheless, there is a sense of agency in the mother’s actions. Ultimately, the father and son’s quest proves futile as the ocean they aspire to reach is ravaged, and the man eventually succumbs to his injuries just before starvation would have claimed him. There was no way for them to know this, yet in
the end, the thoughts and actions of the mother are vindicated, as we see darkness and death around every corner as they reach the southern coast.

Returning to *The Gardener’s Son*, in an earlier scene, a young Martha McEvoy, the protagonist’s sister, is approached by the younger Gregg, the future owner of the mill. He refers to her as ‘feisty’ and a ‘handful,’ which she denies and when his advances fail, he offers her a cigar and a ten-dollar gold coin. Upon seeing the coin, “the full implication of the money strikes her,” and “when he sees this, he almost reaches back to take the coin, almost rises from his chair, but she had turned and fled from the office” (McCarthy 28). Years later, Gregg uses this gold coin again as a bargaining chip when Robert McEvoy arrives at the Mill, not seeking trouble but aware that it may arise. When McEvoy refuses the coin as payment for what he has been through and knows about Gregg and his sister, Gregg asserts his class dominance, singling out McEvoy as a representative of the working class who serves him. McEvoy responds by asking, “What do you mean my kind?” (55). As tensions escalate, McEvoy shoots Gregg twice, the second shot proving fatal after Gregg reaches to reload his gun. Later, just before McEvoy is set to be hanged for his actions, he says to Martha, “I know he insulted you. The people in this town know what he was” (83). These grievances, among others, certainly weighed on his mind when he entered the mill that night.
Importantly, as Dianne Luce points out, the mother and the twin are dual concepts that hold a primary place within Gnosticism, an aspect she explores in relation to McCarthy’s Tennessee novels in her book Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period. The mother and the twin in Gnosticism relate to the concept of Sophia, the female spiritual half of Jesus, among other interpretations. This element is also present in the Bible in Genesis 1, which states, “And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... male and female created he them’” (Gen 1:26-27 KJV). However, this inclusive language quickly gives way to solely masculine pronouns and attributes throughout the rest of the Holy Bible. Within Roman Catholicism, the mother assumes an even more significant role as Mary, the mother of God/Jesus, holds a primary position in doctrine as the blessed one. McCarthy frequently portrays mothers in a degrading manner. For instance, there is a palpable distance between Suttree and his own mother in multiple scenes within the novel. In a conversation that upsets his uncle on the houseboat, Suttree speaks of his mother and their familial situation, stating, “when a man marries beneath him, his children are beneath him” (19), and “John, she’s a housekeeper. He has no real belief even in her goodness” (McCarthy 20). This infuriates his uncle, yet he doubles down, saying of his father that, “he probably believes that only his benevolent guidance kept her out of the whorehouse” (20). This line of reasoning goes directly against using the Bible for misogynistic purposes and highlights an off-kilter family dynamic.
In a related passage in his novel *The Passenger*, McCarthy further explores these same ideas, stating of the Western matriarch, “I have relatives in Rhode Island on my father’s side but I don’t really know them... They thought my father had married beneath himself. They thought we were all just a bunch of hicks” (McCarthy 31). These examples shed light on McCarthy’s own life and circumstances while also emphasizing the presence of the religious mother. These women serve as darker, East Tennessee versions of this concept, despite being degraded in McCarthy’s works. Notably, Mother She of *Suttree* appears to possess greater power than any other mothers depicted in McCarthy’s works.

This line of thought continues in an important scene in *Suttree* when his estranged mother visits the workhouse where he is imprisoned:

He made his way along the edge of the table. She had her purse in her lap and she was looking down. She was still wearing her hat from church. He sat down on the bench across the table from her and she looked up at him. She looked old, he could not remember her looking so. Her slack and pleated throat, the flesh beneath her jaws. Her eyes paler. Hello, Mother, he said.
Her lower chin began to dimple and quiver. Buddy, she said. Buddy . . . But the son she addressed was hardly there at all. Numbly he watched himself fold his hands on the table. He heard his voice, remote, adrift. Please don’t start crying, he said. See the hand that nursed the serpent . . . Here is the anguish of mortality. See the mother sorrowing. Suttree began to cry nor could he stop (McCarthy 61)

In this passage, we, as readers, follow Suttree’s weeping mother from a distance, mirroring his perspective. The narrative transitions from Suttree’s point of view to a third-person observation of ‘the son,’ and then further back into the imperative mood, suggesting Suttree’s role as an observer of the scene. The ambiguity surrounding the interiority of the narrator or character who prompts the reader to “see the hand that nursed the serpent” (60) underscores the point McCarthy seeks to make. While McCarthy does not negate interiority, he deliberately blurs its position, continually shifting perspectives and directing the reader’s attention outward. This tactic exposes the subversion of female characters in McCarthy’s Southern Gothic work and the literature as a whole.

WITCHCRAFT

Appalachian witchcraft possesses a complex history, shaped by a convergence of belief systems influenced by the diverse cultures within the region. Prior to
McCarthy’s Western novels (The Border Trilogy and *Blood Meridian*), there is minimal exploration of this aspect, except perhaps in the story of Michael, the lonely Native American man in *Suttree*. Indigenous spiritual practices play a significant role in witchcraft in the Americas, intertwining ideas of medicine and healing rituals derived from their profound connection to the natural world. While the scarcity of Native American characters in *Suttree* and the first three novels suggests their absence in the eastern portion of Tennessee, it is plausible that Mother She, residing in the deep woods, may have encountered them or at least inherited their beliefs and practices. Additionally, McCarthy’s use of Mother She as a prominent character in *Suttree* melds together race, class, gender, the grotesque, and the idea of witchcraft as being a permutation of Christian belief and practice all together.

Early Americans brought their superstitions, rituals, and a significant number of slaves from Africa, who, with beliefs akin to Native Americans, influenced Wiccan practices during the country’s formation. The Salem Witch Trials had a profound impact on American religious culture, instilling fear and repression as twenty individuals were executed as ‘witches.’ Despite this atmosphere, some Puritans paid certain slaves whom they believed possessed spiritual gifts to identify witches, seeking divine justice. Tituba, the first recipient of this practice, was one of the first persons to be accused of witchcraft in the new world, in 1692. The minister Samuel Parris brought her to Massachusetts from Barbados, and whether under coercion or not,
confessed to being a witch and was spared as she became a sort of witchcraft consultant during these trials.

There were also individuals who continued their spiritual practices unabated in these hills and forests. This atmosphere of fear persisted during the time McCarthy writes about in Appalachia, spanning from the 1920’s to the mid-1950’s. Hence, we observe the use of Mother She’s gift, characterized by disdain and secrecy. By this time, Witchcraft had evolved into an amalgamation of diverse native practices, Hoodoo, and rural mountain folklore, blending together for over two centuries.

In a scene where Suttree explores the old school building he attended as a child, he describes it as “This old bedroom in this old house where he'd been taught a sort of Christian witchcraft” (304). McCarthy’s statement can be interpreted in various ways. He might be alluding to the ritualistic objects, such as the Urim and Thummim, used in Old Testament stories or the different forms of divination mentioned in the Bible. He could also be referencing the incantations, prayers, and calls for protection found in the New Testament, particularly those associated with Roman Catholic priests and rectors, whose practices may appear complex when compared to the evangelical street preachers he describes as “wild street preachers haranguing a lost world with a vigor unknown to the sane. Suttree admired them with their hot eyes and dog-eared Bibles, God’s barkers gone forth into the world like the prophets of old. He’d often stood along the edges of the crowd for some stray
scrap of news from beyond the pale” (66). Additionally, McCarthy contemplates the extra-biblical traditions of the Catholic Church, such as the censer used in Mass, and the biblical interactions with witchcraft that occur multiple times, as we must remember that witchcraft is a biblical permutation and has always functioned with an alongside orthodox forms of the Christian religion.

We previously explored Matthew 8 in detail, which contains a passage that begins with “When they say to you, ‘Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter,’ should a people not consult their God?” (Matthew 8:19 KJV). However, biblical figures do not always adhere to this advice. In stories like 1 Samuel 28, God permits King Saul to consult a witch to conjure the deceased prophet Samuel. Despite previously banishing mediums and magicians from the land, Saul, before a crucial battle, seeks answers “not by dreams nor by Urim nor by the prophets” (28:6). Saul's servants summon the Witch of Endor, and Samuel returns, displeased at being disturbed, saying, “Why are you asking me, now that the Lord has turned away from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done exactly as I prophesied!” (28:16)

In exploring the theme of witchcraft, McCarthy remains within the tradition of American writing inspired by the King James Bible, extending from Melville to Faulkner. However, he also sheds light on a lesser-known belief system, namely Appalachian Witchcraft. Contrary to being a fringe belief, McCarthy reveals the lineage of rural witchcraft from biblical times to the present, tracing its connection to
passages in the Hebrew Bible and its integration into early America and American literature. McCarthy employs a biblical style of writing, highlighting the intrinsic connection between witchcraft and the Bible in an antithetical yet interdependent manner. While contemporary Bible versions may use terms such as “medium” and “necromancer,” McCarthy predominantly draws from the King James Version, which frequently employs the terms witch and witchcraft to refer to those practicing non-biblical rituals such as communing with the dead, casting spells, and interpreting dreams.

In doing so, McCarthy makes race a component of his biblical influences. That is, he maps race into biblical terms, and plants within it an inchoate agency and power. In McCarthy’s often bleak and harsh world, traditional notions of divine intervention and moral clarity are often absent and McCarthy’s use of witchcraft as biblical permutation and alternate belief system imparts agency on the beholder and fear and the necessity to request help from them in some cases. He often portrays racial matters in the face of a broad sense of moral decay and though his Black characters are often the recipients, as are many of his characters, of unjust penalties for simply living. This pushes back against this and turns the biblical text, which has historically been used against them, powerless in one way, and powerful in their hands in another. There is in this work a resilience of the human spirit based in a
religious sentiment and a concomitant search for redemption, in his work which can encompass and mediate the deep flaws of a racist, religious culture.

In invoking all of this material involving witchcraft, McCarthy is showing us several important things. Like the use of dead babies that we examined earlier, witchcraft as being a part of the Holy Bible is not a common thought in Christian churches or academia. McCarthy brings to light this tradition, which stretches from ancient times, across various cultures and made its way into early American traditions and all the way into the lives of rural, Bible-believing Mountain folk in Appalachian Tennessee.

McCarthy not only uses the biblical and African American traditions in his portrayal of the witch, Mother She, but medieval literature as well. Michael Crews, in sifting through The McCarthy Papers, found that McCarthy used the Malleus Maleficarum or “Witches Hammer,” a document created in 1487 after a papal bull by Pope Innocent VIII, which is a manual for questioning and persecuting witches. This shows us that “In *Suttree*, McCarthy’s love for the gothic finds expression in the frightening Mother She, the witch Suttree consults for insight into his own spiritual condition” (Crews 111). The “Witch’s Hammer” is a manual for persecution and power on the part of organized religion. McCarthy is showing us that there is agency in being an outsider like Mother She, as we see from his extensive notes on this character and her untold backstory that he thought very seriously about the matter.
This witch lore involving Mother She begins near the outset of *Outer Dark* where the female protagonist Rinthy Holme wants to consult the Geechee Witch who we come to know as Mother She. It happens when Culla Holme speaks to the man about snakes, and as well as when we get to know Mother She more thoroughly throughout the novel *Suttree*, especially with the intertwining stories of Suttree and Ab Jones. They are all outcasts trying to make their lives work as best they can and just as within the pages of the Bible, when what they are taught doesn’t work, they go outside the established parameters of the faith until they find a practice that works for them in the situation.

Mother She has often been treated minimally or often overlooked in scholarship, but her intersectionalities are multiplicitous and worthy of study. The fact that she is a woman who was born a slave at the intersection of two frequently intertwined belief systems gives us a wealth of background information to parse and work through. As Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh shows us in her book *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South*, “A history of the intersection of gender, religion, and slavery is not tangential to the historiography of African American religion and U.S. slavery. Rather, the gendered subject was a part of African American religious consciousness from its inception, and African-descended people made sense of their enslavement using religious forms even before their first appearance in the Americas” (Wells-Oghoghomeh 4)
Women like Mother She were property who were used to bear children whom slave masters used to perpetuate and populate their system of injustice. As Wells-Oghoghomeh elaborates once more, the “corporeally female experiences of enslavement affected the ways that women, men, and children oriented themselves in the world and demarcated sacred acts” (Wells-Oghoghomeh). In this period, McCarthy is exploring gender through a variety of lenses, all of which belong to outsiders. He explores, through the lens of Southern witchcraft, the Black experience in America, and through poor rural white women, showing how they are able to maintain some sort of agency despite societal obstacles in their path. As we learn from the lived experience of Mother She in her early life has become exponentially more valuable and important as in more recent historical advancement, we have witnessed, “Archaeological evidence (that) points to the endurance of a range of beliefs about magical practices and powers. Objects with possible ritual significance, including glass beads, amulets, and cowrie shells, found in excavations of slave quarters, might have been charms used for magical purposes” (Games 137). Mother She is the Appalachian exemplar of this, living mysteriously in the wilderness, with her many trinkets and only appearing in Knoxville when prayer and other biblical methods failed to work.

We are first introduced to the idea of witchcraft’s presence and modality in East Tennessee near the beginning of McCarthy’s first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*. Marion Sylder is driving, in the scene just antecedent to picking up Kenneth Rattner-
-the grim scene discussed in the previous chapter. The text reads that, “For miles on
miles the high country rolled lightless and uninhabited, the road ferruling through
dark forests of owl trees, bat caverns, witch covens” (McCarthy 31). These three
things are also symbolic motifs of importance throughout our novels, as well. It was a
hoot owl that had the people surrounding Uncle Ather living in fear; he reveals that
the sounds filling the air were, “One of them big’n screechin and a-hollerin on this
mountain of a summer evenin like any painter” (148). Painters being those mountain
cats, panthers, which once terrorized people like Ather, but were now disappearing,
due to urbanization. He then tells, in a subdued manner, the torment, both physical
and spiritual, that these painters had caused in his life, many years before.

The text waxes biblical, as Ather is storytelling at a local hitching post where,
“the sun lowered, casting his head in a silhouette and illuminating his white hair with
a prophetic translucence” (150). He tells of finding a stunned, young painter after
doing dynamiting when he worked on a road crew, expanding new roads through the
mountainous wilderness. “I reckon it was about two weeks we’d had him when one
evenin I heard one of the hogs squeal” he says, harkening back to the Matthew 8 story
and setting up Ather to later become the lore-laden figure he became. The hogs
disappear one by one. Ather works all day and stays up much of the night trying to
find the culprit, and in the meantime, his wife Ellen “went to the door to thow out a
pan of water and I heard her holler” and “grabbed onto (him) like she had seen a hant or something” (155).

Ellen’s decision to leave the farm and allegedly run off with a door-to-door Bible salesman springs from this and leads Ather to abandon his 20-acre farm, letting the remaining hogs to perish. Although Ather is a devoutly religious man, he also harbors beliefs in curses that fall within the syncretism of Christianity and Witchcraft, reflecting the superstitious ways of the region. Prior to his departure, he performs a ritual described as follows: “on the sixth day he nailed two boards of barnwood together in the form of a cross, wrote Ellen’s name on it, buried her clothes beneath it and left” (157). Despite the prevalence of lore and superstition surrounding this period in Ather’s life, it is eventually revealed that it was merely “the old she-painter, come after the little one.” Ather justifies the mystery, stating, “slowly, darkly, they’s painters and they’s painters. Some of ‘em is just that, and then others is right uncommon” (157). Although Witchcraft is briefly mentioned in *The Orchard Keeper*, its acts and effects permeate the narrative, forming a side subplot that engages with the region and the era.

Additionally, there is a thematic connection between magic, witchcraft, and superstition as an elderly Ather reminisces about his dreams involving these mountain cats, which leads to a recollection of an old former slave woman who settled near him in Tuckaleechee, Tennessee. This woman possessed a heightened
sense of perception and wore a sack of hellbore around her neck. The text says that “cats troubled the old man’s dreams” which in turn brings back the memory of the old, former slave woman who moved near him as a young man in Tuckaleechee, Tennessee, because she “felt movements and significations there” (59). It says that “she wore a sack of hellbore at her neck and once he had seen her on the road and hadn’t been afraid of her…so she put three drops of milfoil on the back of his tongue and chanted over him so that he would have vision” (59). She told him of the lore of painters which he would later think of as the basis for the undoing of his marriage and farm ashe now had “the vision you can read where common folks ain’t able” (60).

Following the departure of his wife and the merging of religious practices, Ather confides in his mother about these experiences. She “held the cross of Jesus against his forehead and prayed long and fervently” (60). This instance highlights the Knoxville area as a fertile ground for the syncretization of rural Christianity and witchcraft. Uncle Ather firmly believes that these myths and omens altered the course of his life and set him on a new trajectory, a theme that resonates throughout McCarthy’s Southern Gothic novels.

In the early pages of Outer Dark, during Rinthy Holme’s childbirth scene, she implores Culla to fetch a witch figure, who is most likely Mother She. Here we see McCarthy progressively constructing regional lore across his first four novels. Rinthy seeks Mother She’s assistance during her labor, as she asks,
You goin to fetch her?

He looked at her and looked away again.

No, he said.

You said you’d fetch her when it come time.

I never, he said. I said Maybe.

Fetch her, she said. Now you fetch her.

I cain’t. She’d tell.

Who is they to tell?

Anybody.

You could give her a dollar. Couldn’t you give her a dollar not to tell and she’d not tell?

No. Asides she ain’t nothin but a old Geechee nigger witch noway.

She’s been a midnight woman caught them babies lots of times. You said your own self.

She said it. I never. He could hear her crying…

I got anothern. Ain’t you goin to fetch her? No. (McCarthy 10)
In the subsequent Appalachian novels, particularly *Suttree*, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of Mother She as her presence is further developed. *The Orchard Keeper* mentions the existence of witch covens in the mountainous region surrounding Knoxville. Furthermore, we learn that among these covens is a Black witch who aids rural families lacking access to hospitals or traditional midwifery. She also aids those seeking to keep their secrets hidden from the prying eyes and judgment of the conventional Christian communities and church authorities they may encounter.

*Outer Dark* offers another instance where we witness Christians turning to witchcraft when biblical practices fail to yield the desired results. In a revealing passage later in the novel, we encounter a yet-to-be-named Mother She as Culla Holme engages in a conversation with an elderly, one-legged man who unsuccessfully attempted to sell him a snake rattle for his supposed banjo playing. The man initiates his story as they move to the porch, remarking, “You know snakes is supposed to be bad luck” (McCarthy 124). He then digresses to an important point by stating, “They must have some good in ‘em on account of them old geechee snake doctors uses ‘em all the time for medicine” (124). While McCarthy does not explicitly introduce snake doctors, we can infer that Mother She likely fulfills this role in the area where *Suttree* later resides. Significantly, the man anticipates Holme’s potential objection and
counters it by asking, “Unless ye was to say that kind of doctorin was the devil’s work. But the devil don’t do no doctorin, does he?” (124).

This passage highlights the tension between Christian beliefs and the alternative practices of witchcraft within the context of rural communities. It suggests that individuals may turn to witchcraft out of necessity or as an alternative to traditional Christian customs when seeking remedies or solutions, just as they did in Bible times. McCarthy’s exploration of these themes adds depth to his portrayal of the intricate relationship between Christianity and witchcraft in the region.

In saying this, he sets up the historical means for the historical intertwining of the biblical with witchcraft and even simultaneously juxtaposes and shows the weakness of biblical passages such as Mark 16, which says of Christians that, “They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover” (Mark 16:18 KJV). The old man who Culla encounters, living by himself in a remote cabin, addresses this phenomenon and its contemporary failure as he finishes by saying,

That's where a preacher cain’t answer ye. Cause even a preacher won’t say they cain’t help nor cure ye. I’ve knowed em to slip off in the swamp theirselves for a little fixin of somethin another when they wasn’t nothin else and them poorly. Ain’t you? (McCarthy 124).
The old man is speaking of a fringe group of Christians that were in the region during this time, known simply by outsiders as “snake-handling churches”. Though not explicitly associated with Witchcraft, they are a rare and somewhat mystical and enduring religious sect, which has been represented in recent books and media in the form of a Vice News mini documentary, and the movie *Them That Follow* (2019), a film where Walton Goggins pastors a Pentecostal, snake-handling church. Jim Gaffigan, the patriarch of a church family, upon finding out the wrongdoings of his daughter, forces her to endure a snake purification ritual. She is bitten and as she is on the verge of both death and losing her arm, Gaffigan makes the decision to leave the church and community to get help in a larger town nearby. This movie mirrors the actions of *Outer Dark’s* old man, as well as showing the historical reliance and relationship between faith and getting help and healing however one can. When faith fails in the Bible and biblical context, the people seek out and come to rely on witches and their magic—and the same occurs today. This is echoed in other novels by various Southern Gothic writers, including William Gay, who was an outspoken disciple of McCarthy.

In a scene in the novel that was found and compiled after his passing, *Little Sister Death*, the successful Chicago writer, David Binder, who moves to middle Tennessee to write, he speaks to a local about such things. It says that he,

Handled poisonous serpents with the spirit.
Of God on ye? Drank strychnine and lived to tell it?

Lord no. And don’t plan to.

Ever held you head in the fire and nary a hair was singed?

No.

They you ain’t baptized and never have been.

You ain’t never had the gift. The gift of salvation.

A similar dynamic is at play in both William Gay’s *Little Sister Death* and *Outer Dark*. In *Little Sister Death*, Gay focuses more on local faith practices, while McCarthy, by highlighting the workings of witchcraft, sheds light on a distinct group of individuals who were rarely the central focus of such literary portrayals. The healing acts performed by these individuals remained hidden due to their contradiction with the conventional and judgmental Christianity prevalent in the region.

In *Suttree*, the previously enigmatic gaps are filled in regarding the witch or witches mentioned, when we are introduced to “A black witch known as Mother She [who] was going along Front Street toward the store” (65). Numerous passages contrast her earthy rituals and herbal magic with both the Roman Catholicism in which Cornelius Suttree was educated and the itinerant and evangelical street
preaching he encounters as he roams the streets of Knoxville. Mother She stands apart even from the black churches and their preachers which Suttree describes, saying he:

Climbed the hill toward the edge of the city, past the open door of the negro meetinghouse. Softly lit within. A preacher that looked like a storybook blackbird in his suit and goldwire spectacles. Suttree coming up out of this hot and funky netherworld attended by gospel music. Dusky throats tilted and veined like the welted flanks of horses. He has watched them summer nights, a pale pagan sat on the curb without. (McCarthy 21),

which illustrates the differences between the Black church, black witches, white churches, and poor white residents in McAnally Flatts.

McCarthy combines his treatment of race and gender through the character of Mother She. However, there are instances where McCarthy’s portrayal of women appears tactless, with one notable example being his treatment of Mother She in certain passages of Suttree. Matthew Potts criticizes the alleged rape scene involving Cornelius Suttree for its description and racial dynamics. The scene unfolds as Suttree accompanies Ab Jones, a Black man with a troubled history with the law, to a meeting with Mother She to seek knowledge of his future and healing. However, Mother She becomes distracted and starts revealing details about Suttree’s own life, using objects like “bird bones, river stones, and dried snake hearts” (Potts) to convey messages from
beyond. Initially in denial, Suttree’s curiosity and desperation lead him to return for further insight.

During a subsequent visit to Mother She alone, Suttree ingests a poison that induces nausea and causes him to lose control of his faculties. As Suttree becomes immobilized on a cot, the text implies that Mother She sexually assaults him, as it states:

Dust fell from her, her eyes rolled wetly in the red glow from the fireplace. A dried black and hairless figure rose from her fallen rags, the black and shriveled leather teats like empty purses hanging, the thin and razorous plings of the ribs wherein hung a heart yet darker, parchment cloven to the bones, spindleshanked and bulbed of joint. Black faltress, portress of hellgate. None so ready as she. Her long flat nipples swung above him. Black and crepey skin of her neck, the plaguey mouth upon him . . . Dead reek of aged female flesh, a stale aridity. Dry wattled nether lips hung from out the side of her torn stained drawers. Her thighs spread with a sound of rending ligaments, dry bones sagging in their sockets. Her shriveled cunt puckered open like a mouth gawping. He flailed bonelessly in the grip of a ghast black succubus, he screamed a dry and soundless scream. (427)

Matthew Potts argues that this rape scene involving Mother She may not have actually occurred, but regardless, the portrayal of Mother She in the scene is
demeaning, reflecting both her blackness and femininity. He says that it symbolizes and “personifies the death Suttree so deeply fears and that the creature aims to consume Suttree through her womb in a sort of reverse birth towards death” (Potts 105). This thematic element adds to the broader exploration of mothers and twins in the novel.

The mention of Gnosticism, from which it arises, when Suttree visits his Aunt Martha and sees a photograph of a baby in a casket, which echoes his twin which was mostly absorbed in the womb, the death of his son, and foreshadows his dream vision of Mother She. Suttree poses the question, contemplating the flawed nature of the human body, "What deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of hydrophobia could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky wormbent tabernacle" (106). This passage also connects the theme of Mother She as an outsider and harbinger of death with the recurring imagery of bodies and worms in McCarthy’s works, such as The Orchard Keeper and The Road, which we have previously analyzed.

**AB JONES**

One integral character who intersects with the story of Mother She and represents a clearer exploration of historical justice within McCarthy’s oeuvre is Ab Jones. As a well-written black character, Ab occupies a space within the Civil Rights Era in McCarthy’s body of work. In recent years, Jones has garnered increased
scholarly attention through articles and podcasts, as scholars re-evaluate his portrayal in the context of the historical period and its associated social justice issues. When Suttree visits Jones after a beating by the local police, Ab instructs him, “Go see Miss Mother for me. Tell her I needs to see her” (227). Suttree suggests that his wife Doll could go on his behalf, to which Ab responds, “Doll don’t want me to have no truck with her” (227). Ab’s wife does not prohibit him from consulting with Mother She, but she herself refuses to engage with her, likely due to her Christian religious beliefs. “Don’t you bring that witch down here,” she warns (232).

Eventually, Suttree persuades Mother She to visit Ab, but Ab continues to challenge the unjust police force in Knoxville, despite her warnings that only death can come of it. Most of Ab’s negative interactions occur with one particular officer, Tarzan Quinn, who harbors a deep hatred for him, as Jones is never intimidated. Quinn always has a partner, as well, and the other officers are complicit in this system as they beat Ab and mistreat many impoverished black and white citizens of Knoxville alike. While much attention has been given to how Suttree and his friends are perceived as troublemakers and ne’er-do-wells, Matthew Potts highlights the distinction in this situation, pointing out that “Suttree’s friends are foul, drunk, and profane but never purposefully cruel like the police” (Potts 89).

The origins of Southern police forces can be traced back to slave patrollers, who were poor whites enlisted by plantation slave owners to maintain control over
slaves. Often patrolling on horseback, they sought to apprehend those attempting to escape and found joy and financial reward in returning them to their owners. In some regions, these patrollers were simply given badges after Emancipation, and they were organized with offices and designated areas to patrol not only black citizens but also poor citizens of all races. This fixation on race persisted, as many officers were also members of the Ku Klux Klan, a notorious racist group perpetually angered by the emancipation and integration of former slaves into society and the miscegenation of races. Though Knoxville was not the plantation South, they still had a legacy of slavery in a different form and the Klan who were not happy with free Blacks living among them.

In exploring this in conjunction with the theme of twins that keeps reappearing, which connects Suttree and Jones, Dianne Luce highlights that “Ab Jones is yet another double whose example contributes to teaching Suttree one of the lessons he must learn before deliverance from his purgatory” (Luce 93). This theme occasionally resonates with Ab Jones as well, as he and Suttree appear as twins in the realm of class consciousness. However, when viewed through the lens of race, the dynamics become uneven, favoring Suttree due to his race and family background. Although Suttree has abandoned that lifestyle, he still retains connections in town and has access to money in case of dire circumstances. Luce astutely observes that “Ab’s conflict with the police seems vaguely theological, as if he had displaced his
resentment toward an unapparent God onto His tangible and all too willing emissaries on earth” (Bell 82) and further notes that “Jones, like Suttree, is rebelling against a cruel sentence emanating from a vindictive god and a corrupt human society” (94). McCarthy consistently employs religious language and sentiments throughout Suttree to highlight injustices against humanity, evoking even stronger emotions as they are enshrouded in biblical prose.

In examining the imagery of the monster and Gnostic themes that intertwine throughout the novel, Dianne Luce argues that “the Frankenstein's monster imagery in which Suttree perceives Ab’s scarred and stitched body (201, 230, 443) establishes Ab as a comparable allegorical figure of humankind set in opposition to his or her flawed maker (perhaps the Gnostic artificer), a scapegoat for the unjust workings of the world” (251). We also witness Suttree and Ab as twin figures in suffering when they are both injured during the drunken incident in which Suttree is struck on the head with a floor buffer. The presence of twins in *Suttree* is already manifold, including Suttree’s deceased twin at birth and Vernon and Feron, twins whom we encounter towards the end who purport to have ESP. Considering Jones and Suttree as twins in terms of their shared experiences of suffering and societal class becomes relevant.

Ironically, initially Suttree seems to believe that Ab is responsible for the hellish state in which he finds himself, for a time. When an older man in their usual
bar remarks, “bein a nigger is an interestin life,” Suttree responds, “you make it that way” (203). Moreover, when a drunken Harvey suggests that Ab’s violent behavior will likely lead to his death, Suttree solemnly agrees. However, Suttree gradually overcomes these thoughts and eventually impulsively destroys a police cruiser in Ab’s honor. In that moment, he perceives a trace of kinship between himself and Ab, causing the spirit of his earlier remarks to fade. Suttree finally realizes that he, like Ab, is also targeted by the police due to his social status and frequent drunkenness. They share a common bond as individuals discarded and marginalized by society, although Jones ultimately bears the brunt of it. McCarthy, through Suttree, violently rejects many aspects of his upbringing. Throughout Suttree, there are deeply racist characters from Suttree’s early memories who belong to the working class. They have all bought into a system that perpetuates the oppression of the poor. Suttree is devastated when Jones eventually meets his fate at the hands of Tarzan Quinn of the Knoxville Police Department.

In connecting race to the biblical, supernatural, and Southern Gothic, we see Charles Waddell Chesnutt is a Black author writing within this tradition as early as his Conjure Tales (1899), a collection of stories about decaying and fallen plantation homes, cursed or ‘goopered’ crops, and spells and shape shifts made by Hoodoo practitioners and we see the influence of him in McCarthy, as the way they set up race and witchcraft are very similar. The interaction of rural blacks and whites alike
amongst the South as well as regional dialect play a great role in *Conjure Tales*, with the perspective of his fellow African Americans displayed prominently. Chesnutt’s story, “The Goophered Grapevine” sets the stage for the rest of the book, narrated by John, a white man, but focusing on Julius, a storyteller and guardian of a cursed vineyard, which a white family buys. The legacy of slavery in the South plays a large role in the story, as does the love story of two slaves, one of which must live as a tree for large portions of the year, so that he may not be discovered. The story begins by describing, “a thriving plantation,” (Chesnutt 1) that through, “shiftless cultivation had well-nigh exhausted the soil. There had been a vineyard of some extent on the place, but it had not been attended to since the war and had fallen into utter neglect.” (1) The history of the 19th century is wrapped up in this statement. The shiftlessness of the farmers shows the unavailability of steady farming due to the loss of a war and dissolution of plantations and the judgement of Northerners. After the end of the Civil War, northern citizens rushed in to tour the idyllic South they had read about as well as to judge the poverty and loss of rural blacks and whites alike. Chesnutt’s body of work is a rich cultural portrait of the post-bellum South, replete with triumph and tragedy, which intertwines with McCarthy’s quintessential Southern Gothic tropes and themes within biblicality as they seek to aid in the disentangling of racial matters and religion.
The ghosts of cultural haunting an element of witchcraft in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* occupies a similar area of spatiality in the genre, which involve instruction and ‘rememory’ as did those within Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Their characters are interspersed among a crumbling, rural farm inhabited by Leonie, along with her parents and children and are present among the journeys they take. Ward’s work has been called magical realism, but as the ghosts are a part of the family’s ancestral religion stretching back to pre-slavery African cultures, they can only be disproven or validated to the degree that religion can. Ward’s novels inhabit a stratum of Southern Gothic literature similar to that of McCarthy’s East Tennessee works and push the boundaries of convention as well, as he is averse to the label ‘magical realism’ yet explores similar conundrums to both Morrison and Ward.

In Ward’s novel, Leonie uses drugs and alcohol to make the spirits that haunt her go away, yet they never truly do. They are her ancestors, speaking to her and instructing her and will not be deterred, as Leonie will learn. The ghost of a 12-year-old boy, Ritchie, plays the key role of all the ghastly figures. He was imprisoned at the well-known Parchman work prison and tells of his time there where, “enslaved people (or inmates) working in the cotton fields all day, with white masters (or sergeants) watching them” (Khedhir 18). Ward uses this section, the only from a different century than the rest, to illustrate and instruct, via Ritchie’s ghost, the persistent problem of oppression in rural Mississippi. Slavery ended after the Civil
War, yet we see Ritchie in bondage, alongside those from Leonie’s present day. She, using spells and natural incantations, which she learned from the matriarchs of her family, employs a wide array of natural objects to accomplish tasks as well.

Ward has been called the contemporary heir to Faulkner, just as McCarthy was six decades before. She has updated rural fiction of southern Mississippi allowing it to take on modern issues of race, class, and sexuality, to a degree. Leonie and her children are instructed by the ghosts. They are faced with her old-fashioned (racist) in-laws as well as their own penchant for ending up in trouble or in jail. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a story of the rural south and is an exploration of African ancestry, religion, lineage, and the role of family. It runs contrary to Faulkner in that it examines deeply the struggles and victories of rural and African American life and is updated to include the nuance of modern-day issues, despite maintain this specific brand of realism and at times embodying the grotesque.

McCarthy’s literary works often delve into contemporary issues of race, class, and gender, even though they may not always appear overtly so, as he focuses on the complex and enigmatic lives of rural Appalachians, a predominantly white society during the 19th and 20th centuries. Through the language of the time, McCarthy addresses supremacist and patriarchal structures, which modern critics have begun to analyze and represent more comprehensively in their own artistic works. By examining McCarthy’s body of work, including the previous work we analyzed, we
can recognize the invaluable cultural contributions he has made in various fields, particularly in advancing scholarship, a trend which has gained momentum over the past two decades. Contrary to the perception of him as a racist, out-of-touch, and conventional, elderly white writer, McCarthy’s depiction of society and its unresolved racial issues and traumas offers valuable insights for the study of life and the arts. McCarthy fearlessly explores the most shocking aspects of humanity, and it is believed by some scholars that his reluctance to occupy public spaces stems from a desire to avoid constant challenges to his choice of words or the burden of interpreting his works on behalf of others.

Peter Josyph explains, “McCarthy is a writer who doesn’t explain his characters. They do what they do, and you can interpret that however you want. I think that’s part of the fascination of his stories. They’re not stories of moral judgment; they’re about people” (Josyph 150). By and large, McCarthy shows us the struggles of every stratum of humanity and how despite being in a world has often been beset by tragedy and oppression, there is an agency which his characters cling to, which comes from an interior faith in ideas which extend beyond themselves. Ab Jones believes that the Knoxville police are not the ultimate authority and that they will one day be accountable for their actions. Jones’ wife relies on biblical faith for the same and hopes that he will not come to a violent end. Mother She relies on her own spiritual practices, which involve aspects of traditional African religion, Hoodoo, and
biblical elements. We are able to uncover this possibility for some glimmer of
goodness in the lives of his characters throughout many locations within McCarthy’s
East Tennessee novels.

As we have seen, McCarthy’s treatment of race and gender tie into his vision
of the world being violent, dark, and disturbing, but having some redeeming value.
Far from simply being a traditional Southern writer, who ignores these issues,
McCarthy actually and often represents the situation of the Southern United States
during a variety of times periods, accurately. McCarthy gives agency and hope to
certain characters who lie at the fringe of his typical portrayal of outsiders. In these
works, he ties various uses of Southern Gothic stylings into his conception of
biblicality. Having explored the areas of race, class, and gender in a predominantly
biblical manner within McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, through the lens of the
Southern Gothic, we will now transition to another significant aspect of the
metaphysical darkness we discussed in Chapter Two--the experience of suicide. This
act, like the others we have examined, evokes profound emotions within the reader’s
life and comes with attached moral and biblical implications.
Chapter 4: Suicide

The concept of suicide is an early and enduring theme of Cormac McCarthy’s East Tennessee novels. It is first mentioned in his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, in a scene which we eventually find sets up his most meditative and interior novel, *Suttree*. It composes an ever-present and sublimated aspect of *Child of God*, which is brought out more explicitly in *The Road*. It is the central theme of *The Sunset Limited* and forms the lynchpin of McCarthy’s newest and final novels, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*. It composes an important part of many these early and regional novels and is returned to in other works as well and in this chapter, we will seek to parse all of its “manifestations and permutations” (Shelton 72). Concerning how biblicality is concerned with suicide, McCarthy,

takes great care in showing how various theologians throughout the centuries have found suicide a valid answer for some of life’s most difficult problems and ailments, that it has not always been seen as a mortal sin, as it is now viewed by the Catholic Church, whose beliefs were deeply ingrained in the lives of the McCarthys. This seems to be what Cormac is exploring in this and other works, which we are analyzing, having to do with suicide (Critchley 178).

In his book *Notes on Suicide*, Simon Critchley speaks of his studies of suicide and how he “became increasingly convinced that the moral and legal framing of the prohibition against suicide had its roots in the idea of suicide as a sin” which “can be
traced back to medieval Christian theology (Critchley 7). We find this to be the framework and backdrop from which McCarthy’s suicides and suicidality are argued within his East Tennessee novels and which he is able to move beyond.

Far from being seen as simply taking away what is not your own, what God has created, in exploring suicide in these Appalachian and Appalachian-adjacent novels, McCarthy shows us that in his dire and violent landscapes, it affords one a sense of agency, which has not always been thought a mortal sin by Christianity.

McCarthy, as well, is engaged in exploring the existential, specifically, Albert Camus’ statement that, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus 3). Even more simply put, and within the realm of the literary, he is seeking to answer Shakespeare via Hamlet’s question of whether we are “to be or not to be” (Shakespeare 40), and he is working out all of these ideas amidst the Appalachian terrain in which he lived the first forty years of his life.

Throughout the history of literature, there have been several, interrelated views on suicide, which have been influenced by particular philosophies and theologies. The first is associated with religious and moral condemnation, which McCarthy explores at length within his work. Next, there is a Stoic view of suicide, seeing it as an acceptable fate, understandable in certain situations, and even as a way
of expressing human agency, as seen within the work of Seneca, and several Christian theologians, a view which McCarthy ultimately seems to adopt. The tradition of the Romantic period of literature, from which McCarthy’s heroes emanate, tends to glorify suicide as a means to a tragic end. Goethe’s, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is the prime example of this literary phenomenon, as when Werther is denied the love of the peasant woman Charlotte, he shoots himself with a rifle and dies, and we see it valorized in the work of others as well.

Finally, and more recently, there is the view associated with the advent of modern Psychology and Psychiatry. Suicidality and the act of suicide itself are seen as symptoms of psychological distress and mental illness, rather than moral failings or ways to escape an undesirable life. More recent authors, such as David Foster Wallace, whose work intersects with McCarthy’s in more ways than previously thought, will be examined in conjunction with his work in this chapter, and related thoughts on suicide as well.

It is clear from McCarthy’s work and archives that he is familiar with various historical beliefs concerning the moral scope and act of suicide. In imparting his biblical style to the page, he invokes this concept, which is considered a mortal sin in the Roman Catholic church in which he was raised. McCarthy explores suicide in a variety of ways. From the more autobiographical musings of *Suttree*, and *The Passenger*, to the realizations of Lester Ballard that he is a blight upon the earth, to
the man and his now deceased wife in *The Road*. Finally, there is the life and death of Alicia Western. *The Passenger*, the first of his final two novels, begins with her death, yet the stories make a loop and are interchangeable. They are also his most scientific novels, and return to East Tennessee at various points, to create an interesting backdrop for pondering matters of life and death.

Frank Shelton, the first scholar to do a study of suicide in McCarthy’s novel *Suttree*, is correct, in a way, when he says that the characters of McCarthy’s “first three novels...are of such limited self-awareness, not to mention awareness of larger philosophical or religious issues, that whatever philosophical burden the stories bear is provided by the author and is deeply implicit in the novels themselves” (Shelton 71). This is no more relevant than in Culla Holme’s ending piece of dialogue after being told a story about the religious eating of pigs, inquires, “What’s a Jew?” (McCarthy 215), but as we examined in the second chapter as well, there are many characters, such as Rinthy Holme, the Rattners and Uncle Ather, as well as, to an extent, Lester Ballard that push back against this statement.

Like many biblical passages and their characters, whose scenes are ‘fraught with meaning’ to the point of seeming to obscure depth of thought and feeling which has been associated with McCarthy’s earlier protagonists. *Suttree* is McCarthy’s first cosmopolitan novel and indeed, the first which explores interior issues with such persistence, but it does not stand alone concerning its extended meditation on suicide.
In his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, we see a different version of the bridge jumper, which begins his novel *Suttree*, at work already. During his dissertation on mountain cats, Uncle Ather addresses an Appalachian boy in the general store, who doesn’t think he has any good options for earning a living. Ather assures him that there are many ways to make money, saying, “they’s even a bounty on findin dead bodies, man over to Knoxville does pretty good grapplehookin em when they jump off the bridge like they do there all the time” (McCarthy 228). This references the multitude of suicides due to rural peoples being taken off ancestral lands and moved to cities, the recent stock market crash, and a variety of other personal and societal ailments. The suicide at the beginning of *Suttree*, in the early 1950’s, is a well-off man, as he is wearing a seersucker suit, showing us that all strata of this society have been affected by the ennui brought on by the region’s rapid industrializing and so on.

The culture-wide perception shift from suicide being a somewhat acceptable practice, to being strictly forbidden and damnable during more recent times lies in the proliferation of certain types of Christian theology. Following the formulation by St. Augustine, the most prolific of early Roman Catholic theologians, which was later taken up by Thomas Aquinas, is that life is given by God and can therefore only be taken away by God or his timing; meaning that in the act of suicide we are seen to play God. McCarthy being an Irish Catholic, deeply affected by his upbringing, is never quite able to move beyond, or at least cease interacting with this view of
life/taking one’s own life/death. As Edwin Arnold concludes, “the mystery McCarthy propounds is that we are blind to the mystery that is the stuff of our very existence,” (Arnold 45) then we should at least entertain the possibility that McCarthy’s moral vision might be tangentially or problematically, if not essentially, religious.

The views on suicide in the Appalachian novels seem to be of a particular ilk. Gone, for example, are those views which contain a positive agency in the taking of one’s own life, such as those of Seneca, who viewed it as an individual’s choice and even a powerful taking of one’s fate into their own hands as he tells many stories of slaves and young boys, who when captured or forced to do acts that go against their morality an self-will, simply take their own lives and are no longer subject to their former oppression. He summarizes this by saying that “the foulest death is still preferable to the cleanest slavery” (Seneca 85). In a way, it does borrow from the more modern view that suicide can be “chosen as a free act, as an end in itself” (Critchley 10) but those characters are often seen as weak or morally deficient by critics, reviewing those works. There always seems to be a deep sadness or pleading with those characters not to do those acts, along with much religious dialogue and backdrop. For instance, Suttree thinks and speaks with the Ragman about the bridge jumper for a good portion of the novel.

In *Child of God*, the suicide of Lester Ballard’s father is the earliest and most formative event in his life, which compounded with other denials of humanity and an
improper upbringing contribute to his sense of loneliness and alienation. It is addressed as being a key component in his downward descent into necrophilia and murder. In the text, the narrator-- representative of the townspeople of the time says,

I don’t know. They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself. They was just the boy. The mother had run off...Me and Cecil Edwards was the ones cut him down. We went up there and walked in the barn and I seen his feet hangin. We just cut him down, let his feet fall in the floor. Just like cutting down meat. He stood there and watched, never said nothin. He was about nine or ten year old at the time. The old man’s eyes was run out on stems like a crawfish and his tongue blacker’n a chow dog’s. I wisht if a man wanted to hang hisself he’d do it with poison or something so folks wouldn’t have to see such a thing as that. (McCarthy 21)

This forms a bipartite bond with another major event, his head injury, just after his ancestral land is being auctioned off at the beginning of the novel. The text says that “Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that. It must of thowed his neck out someway or another. I didn’t see Buster hit him but I seen him layin on the ground...He just laid there and he was bleedin at the ears, while Buster stood above him, axe in hand (9). These, along with his family’s reputation in town, his constant rejection by women, and his inability to hold employment, send him listless and wandering across the East Tennessee terrain, where by the end of the novel, he
has murdered and defiled a host of people, lining the walls of a cave with the women. He wanders throughout the hills and caverns, shotgun in tow, with his head cocked, in women’s clothing, looking for what mischief he can find next, as the text says, “he is sustained by his fellow men like you” (156).

There is one brief instance in which Ballard meditates upon his own life ending. In the scene that we examined in our chapter two, where Ballard narrowly escapes into water after killing a couple. As he floats down the creek, he ponders dying for a moment, but doubts that it is even possible, as “He could not swim, but how would you drown him?” as “his wrath seems to buoy him up” says the text (156). It follows with, “how then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him?” (156) for which we are only given quasi-supernatural reason throughout the text, such as that, “a malign star kept him” (41), which is a sort of inverse of the Star of Bethlehem that indicated the birth of Jesus and led the wise men in his direction. Ballard has an inordinate amount of hate within him, as the book reads as a curse against all of life and society, and we know that at least a part of this has come from a prolonged meditation upon how his father was the only parent that he had, and he left him to see his own lifeless body hanging from the rafters.

Georg Guillemin has noted that the mysterious hunter and hound imagery that both opens and closes Suttree are highly reminiscent of Dante’s fifth circle of hell in Inferno and the forest of suicides, where black hounds hunt those who have
succumbed to this ‘sin’. Dante’s *Inferno*, which has been more influential than biblical texts, in both the cultural imagination involving what hell looks like, and its reinforcement of certain teachings within the church, is of great importance as these images of suicide bookend McCarthy’s novel. In Dante, the bodies of those who have taken their own lives lie entombed in oak trees, of which mythical harpies feast on their branches. They not only inhabit the “seventh circle of Hell, where the violent are punished alongside murderers, tyrants, blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers” (Fowlie 90). What’s worse is that during the resurrection, the suicides will be the only group of these sinners who are not allowed to inhabit their resurrected bodies, but instead will hang from the branches of the trees in which they were imprisoned. The theological notions that suicide was not only the murder of self, but the taking of the gift of God that was so graciously bestowed upon us was of great influence on Roman Catholic and Protestant theology alike and certainly influenced McCarthy as he is working out this problem of mortality and whether life is worth bearing through Cornelius Suttree and his neer-do-well friends in mid-50’s Knoxville.

McCarthy’s earliest critic, Vereen Bell, in one of his many monologues on the perceived plotlessness of McCarthy’s novels, stumbles onto a profound insight, that, “One can trace in the last fifty or so pages of the novel a resolution to some of Suttree’s dilemmas, particularly his problem of suicide” (Bell 79). Exploring thoughts related to existentialism and suicide must be the lens through which we examine
Suttree, as the novel begins with a suicide and the aftermath of the jumping of a wealthy Knoxville man to his death from a river bridge. It is a moment of ponderance for Suttree, who gets close enough to the man to notice that his watch is still ticking.

Peter Josyph, picking up the watch and the theme of the ponderance of life and death in his book, Adventures in Reading Cormac McCarthy reminds us that, “the world is woven of riddles too and, for all we know, the watch was as temperamental as Suttree himself, or the man who died wearing it…even if, like its wearer, it was not waterproof” (Josyph 9). He also points out that, “As a watch in 1951, you would more or less need to be a Rolex to leap off a bridge with even a prayer of survival. Was it a Rolex man who plunged in yellow socks off the Gay Street Bridge?” (McCarthy 8). And furthermore, did Cornelius Suttree, sit pondering this man in his seersucker suit, wearing a watch worth more than he would make in several years, and think that if he couldn’t find happiness in this world, how would he himself ever? Or conversely, did it conjure up images of his father, glad that he would not be like this man? In any case, he is forced to confront the thoughts of death and self-destruction.

He continues to establish this theme, as at the end of this first section, “Suttree stands looking down into the water from the same spot on the bridge from which the man jumped, thinking, ‘to fall through dark to darkness. Struggle in those opaque and fecal depths, which way is up? Till the lungs suck brown sewage and funny lights go
down corridors of the brain, small watchmen to see that all is quiet for the advent of
eternal light.’(29)” (Shelton 72). Violence and death are integral parts of all of
McCarthy’s novels, yet *Suttree* is the first to dwell in that space of contemplation
which involves the Roman Catholicism of his raising, the evangelicalism of the
region, and his own irreligion of this time in his life, composed of thoughts of his own
and those of contemporary philosophers. Although Suttree is a “lapsed Catholic…he
still finds an intense religious yearning” (74), of which one aspect is suicidality.

The text of the first scene says of the man who has jumped from the bridge,
“He was very stiff and he looked like a window dummy save for his face. The face
seemed bloated and wore a grappling hook in the side of it and a crazed grin” (9), and
thus the novel *Suttree* opens with a suicide and never strays far from examining the
possibilities of both life and death. Like Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, whose
central concern lies within the statement, “There is but one truly serious
philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth
living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus 3), so is
Suttree questioning “the meaning of life and the possibility of suicide” (Shelton 71)
throughout a number of scenes and conversations within the novel. The man in the
river begins this conversation, as Suttree notices that his watch is still running when
they find him, causing him to ruminate on what it might mean.
Peter Josyph points out that the only watch capable of this at the time, would have been a Rolex, saying that you would need one, “to leap off a bridge with even a prayer of survival” (Josyph 7) in 1951. Does this remind Suttree of the wealthy lifestyle which he left and the father that he rebelled against, his thieving friends, or some combination of both? Beyond this, there are thoughts that no matter what we do in this life, or even if we author the day of our own death, that time keeps moving along without a thought about us, a theme which McCarthy mentions in multiple works. He begins being introspective about this lack of an afterlife in this novel, saying, “How surely are the dead beyond death. Death is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of a bitter memory. But the dead do not remember and nothingness is not a curse. Far from it” (153).

McCarthy establishes this potentiality for suicide, among other things, in an early conversation with the Ragpicker, an old man who lives under a river bridge, whom Suttree checks on and brings food from time to time. An early dialogue with him begins,

You didn’t see that man jump, did you? Suttree said.

He shook his head. An old ragpicker, his thin chops wobbling. I seen em draggin, he said. Did they find him?

Yes.
What did he jump for?

I don’t guess he said.

I wouldn’t do it. Would you?

I hope not. (McCarthy 12)

In a later conversation trying to both lift his spirits and prepare him for what he has learned about the world by this old age says,

“They say death comes like a thief in the night, where is he? I’ll hug his neck.

They’s worse weather to come, said the ragpicker. Hard weather. Be foretold” (12).

In the Knoxville of this time period there are those who are literal fishers of men, collecting bounties from the bridge suicides. Suttree is a fisherman by trade, like the Biblical apostles, who, curiously, doesn’t eat fish. He alludes to this biblical imagery surrounding his situation at one point, saying, “The sign of faith. Twelfth house of the heavens. Ushering in the western church. St Peter patron of fishmongers. St Fiacre that of piles. Suttree placed one arm across his eyes. He said that he might have been a fisher of men in another time but these fish now seemed task enough for him” (14). This means that had his life not taken its current trajectory, he could have more willingly been a part of the Christian church. Which events, then, have made him who he is today? The text of Suttree shows that “There
are hints in the novel that his father is an aristocratic snob who looks down on his mother and anyone related to her, even including their own son” (Josyph 73). This theme which we analyzed in an earlier chapter, which is picked up in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*.

Cornelius Suttree is a creative type, possibly a writer as some critics have posited, and the stodgy and set nature of his upbringing could have caused a great deal of this inner turmoil and realization of the limits of his capacity for belief. *Suttree* suggests that its protagonist began pondering death deeply at an early age as “when he visits the ancient, ruined plantation house in which he probably once dwelt as a child, he recalls that even then he ‘had already begun to sicken at the slow seeping of life’ (136)” (75). The dwelling on the twin imagery (dead twin, Anti-Suttree, grappling wound, etc.) “suggests a radical incompleteness” (75). bears “a like mark on his own left temple,” a “gauche carbon” (14). The birthmarks and the shreds of flesh link Suttree and his twin to the suicide, who also bears a blemish on the side of his head after the hook, “trailing a stringy piece of blanched flesh” (9), is forcibly removed.

Others say that Suttree’s insistence on living in one of the poor areas of Knoxville, McAnally Flats, among the outcast and derelicts of that society, is the cause of his ennui. Whatever the cause and combination may be, we know that he fits Camus’ model which comes from the dictum, “The absurd is born of this
confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). Suttree has lived among all strata of society and for much of the novel takes Christian theology as far as it will go. For him, there is still this yawning void of silence, which he is determined to come to terms with. One way in which he tries to deal with it, which ultimately fails, as he traipses through town and woods and church alike is through drinking. It does take his mind off of this void for a time, but ultimately fails as a salve. This ties into McCarthy’s own life, as years later, he says to Richard Woodward of the New York Times, “the only friends I still have, are those that quit drinking. If there is an occupational hazard to writing, it’s drinking” (Woodward 9).

Michael Crews surmises that Suttree is “the first novel he ever worked on” as “much of the early excised fragments housed at Texas State reveal an amateurish quality that is not present in the already mature craftsmanship” (Crews 99) of his first published novel, *The Orchard Keeper*. This, at very least, means that at the same time McCarthy was writing and publishing his early texts that were completely fraught with biblical and existential meaning, he was fleshing out what would become his most interior and self-contemplatory work, *Suttree*.

One of Camus’ central interests in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, revolves around exploring the thoughts that if there is no God, then we must create a view of suicide or the taking of one’s own life that is free from the religious dogma that it has been
caught up in for centuries. This is quite different from the mainstream Christian view (yet not so different from older modalities), which can be summed up in Dostoyevsky’s quote from *The Brothers Karamazov*, “If it were not for Christ’s Church, indeed there would be no restraint on the criminal and his evildoing...It is Christ’s law alone which manifests itself in the acknowledgement of one’s own conscience” (Dostoyevsky 87).

McCarthy, during the writing of *Suttree*, was in an interesting place religiously as well as philosophically, as we can see from the text and from newly found interviews, which were conducted during this timeframe. Camus’ influence is also found in an early draft of *Outer Dark*, and if it was important enough to write in the margins of this novel, it would have also influenced his writing of *Suttree*, which encompassed the entirety of the writing of the first three novels as well.

To return to analyzing imagery, *Suttree* is called, “The fisherman” (9) for the first time just after the bridge suicide and converses with a local, who asks,

Are you still fishin?

Yeah.

What made you take that up?

It seemed like a good idea at the time” (10),
which places him as an Appalachian player in the Camusian world of absurdist thought where in trying to move beyond the constraints of religion, at times, you aren’t sure why you are involved in certain activities and ways of life. It is an admixture of the wayward Appalachian life of the time, mixed with his struggle with belief, and the long history of biblical and theological doctrine and tomes.

McCarthy was certainly familiar with Dostoevsky’s, *The Possessed* as well, which says, “All man did was to invent God so as to live without killing himself” (Dostoevsky 89), Suttree is forced to find some agency, despite having forsaken the rules of the Catholicism of his upbringing and the radical literalism and fervor of evangelical street preachers.

We see that “The world remains as chaotic, meaningless, and absurd as ever, but Suttree, in terms strikingly similar to those of Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, finds a way to live in it. (79). In a letter to the critic Jay Ellis, Peter Josyph asks, “Is Suttree, like Augustine practicing vice so that he won’t be accused of virtue (e.g., being his father)? To which Jay Ellis replies, “I haven’t read much Augustine…but Suttree is surely the big sinner sinning his skin off so he can slither into a new and cleaner life” (Josyph 15).

Living in the Knoxville of the time, which saw incredible growth, modernization, etc., “just as the decay of religious authority…made life seem absurd by depriving it of any ultimate coherence, so the growth of modern technology has
made death itself absurd by reducing it to a random happening totally unconnected with the inner rhythms and logic of the lives destroyed” (Alvarez 245).

In the midst of a deep depression after the death of his lover Wanda, Suttree comes to take on suicidal ideations as he echoes one of David Hume’s most famous passages from his book, *On Suicide*. Hume says, “Just as God permits us to divert water from rivers for the purpose of irrigation, so too he ought to permit us to divert the blood from our veins…where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channel?” (Hume 6). This is a sentiment McCarthy mirrors in *Suttree*, as he says that, “He was seized with a thing he’d never known, a sudden understanding of the mathematical certainty of death. He felt his heart pumping down there under the palm of his hand. Who tells it so? Could a whole man not author his own death with a thought? Shut down the ventricle like the closing of an eye?” (295).

Suttree has lost the will to live and sees no point in life during this time and likewise and for most of the novel until he suddenly reconciles with fate and with the series of almost supernatural events at the end is consigned to life. McCarthy here, then, is using Suttree to investigate life and death as well, through a host of literary, philosophical, and theological sources.

In “Death and the Wastrel: Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree*”, David Cowart says that in *Suttree*, McCarthy rewrites James Agee’s “Knoxville, Summer of 1915” which
is itself a prologue or prelude to Knoxville’s quintessential and most celebrated novel, *A Death in the Family* (1957). Rick Wallach makes this connection as well, noting that “Agee peoples his narrative with the respectable middle class, McCarthy with the nether reaches of the social spectrum. In the years in which he worked on Suttree, in fact, McCarthy built himself a fireplace out of bricks from Agee’s boyhood home, demolished to accommodate “urban renewal” (Wallach 109). *Suttree* has not rewritten Agee’s text, but seemingly inverted it, as Agee says, “All my people are larger bodies, quiet, with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds…One is my mother who is good to me…One is my father who is good to me…May god bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh remember them kindly” (Agee 2) and so on, highlighting life’s many goodesses despite the death of the family patriarch.

*Suttree* on the other hand, subverts Agee’s loving view of family, which is complicated by both the lives of those involved and the death of the father in Agee’s work. McCarthy faced vehement criticism for his portrayal of Knoxville from a variety of sources, after the publication of *Suttree*. *The Memphis Flyer* and other publications wrote that they believed McCarthy had tarnished the name of the city and undone what good work Agee had done. Agee, however, was one of McCarthy’s literary heroes. McCarthy renovated a barn in the Knoxville area with bricks taken from the rubble of Agee’s childhood home and critics eventually came to take notice
of such things. While both works are sentimental towards family and Knoxville, McCarthy’s is “darker, the reflections of a melancholy flaneur writing in the register of Charles Baudelaire” (Crews 51).

In advocating for the textual and geographic integration of McCarthy and Agee, Rick Wallach points out that, “A Death in the Family’s long meditation on death and the crisis of the absent father, and the supportive if sometimes conflicted response of a family and community, shadows every step” (Wallach 51) which Suttree spreads across his other relationships. While Agee’s work is more sentimental, McCarthy’s work focuses on the absence of the father in another more metaphysical way, allowing us to meditate upon the depressive states where such phenomena as being out of place in one’s family may take us, even fostering the contemplation of whether this life is even worth living at times. David Cowart mentions that in the novel, “A physician, noting that Suttree is a “dextro-cardiac” (the organ that pumps his blood is not on left side of his chest), puns on a familiar bromide: “Your heart’s in the right place” (Cowart 13). This type of phrase normally excuses someone’s dubious gesture or action—“her gift was in bad taste, but she meant well, her heart’s in the right place” (13) which highlights Suttree’s almost doomed nature.

From Michael Crews’ research at the Cormac McCarthy Archives at Texas State University, he has exhumed commentary that backs up scholars such as Frank Shelton and Dianne Luce’s theories that Suttree especially, and McCarthy’s work in
general has been influenced by the philosophy of Albert Camus. In speaking of this, he says that it, “verifies the intuition of many McCarthy critics that French existentialism is one of the earliest and most profound influences on McCarthy’s art and life” (Crews 25). This helps us to make more sense of some of McCarthy’s writings as it explains the alleged flatness of some of his earlier characters as they are a part of a greater working in the cosmos, or the “immutable deformation of evolving fate” (Box 8, Folder 2).

These, combined with various forms of Christianity, including Gnosticism, seem to inform McCarthy’s outlook, simultaneous sense of pessimism and responsibility, and his ponderance of possible acts such as suicide, as he intertwines them with works such as The Myth of Sisyphus, especially. In other words, the notes in McCarthy’s early works make “plain the critical tendency to link discussions of Camus with McCarthy’s spiritual and metaphysical predilections” (Crews 28).

In a final conversation with the Ragpicker, he admits that he is ready for death, but not in the same way as Suttree has previously admitted. He is an old man who has lived a hard life. Suttree’s perspective seems to have changed as he says, “No one wants to die” (McCarthy 258). “Shit” he replies, “Here’s one that’s sick of livin” (258). After this they speak of God and the afterlife as Suttree asks what happens after death. The Ragpicker responds,

“Don’t nothin happen. You’re dead” (258).
You told me once you believed in God. The old man waved his hand. Maybe, he said. I got no reason to think that he believes in me. Oh, I’d like to see him for a minute if I could.

What would you say to him?

Well, I think I’d just tell him. I’d say: Wait a minute. Wait just one minute before you start in on me. Before you say anything, there’s just one thing I’d like to know. And he’ll say: What’s that? And then I’m goin to ast him: What did you have me in that crapgame down there for anyway? I couldn’t put any part of it together.

Suttree smiled. What do you think he’ll say?

The ragpicker spat and wiped his mouth. I don’t believe he can answer it, he said. I don’t believe there is a answer (258).

This sentiment builds up to a later passage in which Suttree says, “I mean, if you’re dead and all why I expect you got to be pretty religious” (370). This is a peculiar statement, which says to readers that perhaps his religious vision has evolved and suicidal wishes have decreased and that after we leave this earth, the truth of religion, etc., will be revealed to us, perhaps.

Ab Jones, who we spoke of in the last chapter’s, death transforms, in part, Suttree’s preoccupation with death. This is backed up by William Prather and
Shelton, et al’s, “assessment of McCarthy’s philosophical stance, arguing that Suttree rejects both suicidal despair and religion as authentic responses to the absurd in favor of the commitment to action recommended by Camus” (Crews 28). This is not entirely true, as we see more of a contemplative laying aside of certain elements of religion, which he comes back to and fills in during later novels alongside a genuine contemplation of suicidal despair, so that he is able to move beyond it into some type of spiritual action. At the conclusion of the novel, he sees the meaning in community and is “warmed by the human contact of the boy who unbidden, gives him a drink of water, and the man who, unbidden, offers him a ride away from Knoxville” (McCarthy 461) Prepared to get away and forge meaning by human will and action? He resolves these thoughts as he says, “I learned that there is one Suttree and one Suttree only” (461).

In a brief foray into McCarthy’s three published screenplays, we will note similar themes and ideas at work as in his Appalachian novels. In McCarthy’s first published screenplay, The Gardener’s Son, which appeared briefly on television as a part of PBS’s “Visions” series, in 1977, amidst the writing of Suttree, shows a healthy and telling meditation upon death as well. In one story the character Cleitus tells the protagonist McEvoy that he was previously laying “dead drunk in his own vomit like a dog” and it got him to give up lying and drinking. What did it get ye? Just that. “It ain’t what it got me. It’s what it got me from” Cleitus: Death. I seen his face. I know
where he uses. How he loves the unready. McEvoy: He loves us all (McCarthy 44).

This builds upon the explorations of the meaning of life, suicide, and their relationship to drinking that we have seen in McCarthy’s early novels—especially *Suttree*.

McCarthy’s play, *The Stonemason*, which we examined in the last chapter, is largely a meditation on regional treatment of race and death. Pertaining to our purposes in this work, Ben Telfair’s father, Big Ben is the only character to commit suicide, and it is presumably over issues of money. Ben has lent him money previously and earlier in the play, he tells him that he needs $6,000 or they will lose the family homestead. He is broke and frustrated, at one point saying, “don’t make no difference what I want. I ain’t goin to get it. Not even in my own house. Under my own roof” (McCarthy 79). He emphasizes his dominion, yet he resides in a place that is not his own, spending money that is not his, and presumably exits the world for those reasons. In attempting to assert an impotent male dominance that is without the work and order to back it up, he is backed into a corner. Like David Foster Wallace, he faces his own set of demons and feels the pressures of this world and must escape. *The Sunset Limited*, though tackling similar topics, is the only piece of McCarthy’s work where no one dies, yet there are a variety of deaths for which as we know, McCarthy was criticized in *The Stonemason*. It is an extended meditation on suicide which ties into thoughts and meditations within *The Road*. 
*The Sunset Limited* is not a part of the Appalachian writings, geographically, but like several of McCarthy’s works, the exact locale never seems to be the primary point. It has been called both a “gloss” and “fitting hand and glove” (Yarbrough) with *The Road*. It is an extended meditation on the meaning of life and death and whether the view that taking your own life is destroy the gift that God has given is the correct view. It is a work which deals extensively with mortality, Christianity, and Atheism, and being Black and white in the America and while dealing with stark binaries on the exterior. It contains philosophical, literary, and theological complexities within and is a continuation of *The Stonemason* in its themes of race, religion, and suicide.

When we reach *The Sunset Limited*, suicide is the primary theme. Certain critics say that it should be read as in some way connected to *The Road*. *The Sunset Limited* was published the same year as *The Road* and set in New York. The character White echoes the quote from the mother of *The Road*, which we mentioned earlier and will soon examine, when he says, “Now there is only the hope of nothingness” and “I cling to that hope” (McCarthy 141). This is after the co-protagonist, Black, thinks he has convinced him otherwise and it is doubly troubling to him that he has worked so hard to introduce him to the Bible and distract him from suicide and he still sees his exit in such a rational way. Black tells him that he doesn’t have to bear the burden of the world on his shoulders, but White replies, “That’s what an education is. It makes everything personal” (26). Brian Giemza says of this time in
McCarthy’s literary career, that despite his perceived nihilism that, “It’s almost as if he discovered later on that he had been writing about god the whole time” (Yarbrough), which is becoming more and more evident from our textual analysis. It’s almost as if this screenplay or novel in dramatic form is an internal dialogue involving both the self and society, which wants to believe that Black is right but “it really depends on the day” (Oprah) like McCarthy says to Oprah in their interview when confronted with the question of religious belief.

*The Road* contains various historical and philosophical views on suicide throughout its pages. The mother of *The Road* is like a more analytical Seneca. It shows her views and the man’s as two options of responding to trauma and disaster; two metaphysical roads that one may take depending upon their belief systems. Suicide can seem a highly selfish act, causing grief to those we love for a variety of reasons, but also illustrates that, “we have to allow for the precariousness of human freedom. Otherwise, God’s love collapses into tyranny” (Critchley 43).

The protagonist, the man is no evangelist, himself, but his views and the text are clearly religious in some way. It contains within it the evolution of theological views that we examined with Simon Critchley’s work on suicide, or that putting off of death to the bitter end in hope of the attainment of eternal life. *The Road* is Dantesque like *Suttree* as well as it opens in a terrain similar to the running ground of the hounds in the forest of suicides. The wakes alone in the dark with fear in his heart,
just as Dante’s character finds that he is “in the middle of a darksome wood” where there is a sign saying, “abandon all hope, ye who enter here” (Dante 1). The man, like Dante awakens in the darkened hellscape, barely clinging to hope and staving off starvation and thoughts of suicide. Like many scenes within The Inferno, there is an inchoate darkness that permeates the entirety of this novel’s scenery and mindscape. One scene which adequately sums up the grim sadness of this world says,

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it” (McCarthy 110).

The Road is Inferno, where we are unsure there is a God and even where our next meal might come from, and whether we will have to take our own and our son’s life that day.

The suicide of the mother in The Road is the most significant death in the novel. She leaves an indelible mark on the man and boy’s memory and even though the text says, “She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift” (McCarthy 49). The man keeps her photo in his wallet for most of the novel, and the dialogue of the boy indicates that he misses her deeply as well and understands her early departure
from this ruined world that they inhabit. There were multiple, compelling reasons for
the mother to have taken her own life and she bade the man and boy to follow her
into the darkness. The mother kills herself out of heartbreak and anguish and tells the
man that, “her heart was ripped out of her the night the boy was born” (McCarthy
48), as she knew the fate that awaited him.

Lydia Cooper says that she and the wandering prophet Eli, whom we
encounter on the road, suffers from a disease whose symptoms are “catastrophic loss
of faith in the human endeavor” and that “loss of mental and emotional commitment
to other results in dissociative behavior” just like “the mother’s rejection of her own
son” (Cooper 167). He does inhabit a realm somewhere in between that of the man
and his late wife, but this estimation is not that simple as these are the first humans to
have to dwell deeply on such matters or deal with such devastation, of which they
know not the reaches. The text says that:

She would do it with a flake of obsidian. He’d taught her himself. Sharper than
steel. The edge an atom thick. And she was right. There was no argument. The
hundred nights they’d sat up arguing the pros and cons of self-destruction
with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall. In the
morning the boy said nothing at all and when they were packed and ready to
set out upon the road he turned and looked back at their campsite and he said:
She’s gone isn’t she? And he said: Yes, she is (McCarthy 49)
In his book *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Andrew Solomon very helpfully maps out four categories of thought involving the act and process of suicide. The first involves “A manic, dire, impulsive, and sudden act,” and the second “revenge, or self-obliteration as a payback for a felt wound” or sleight. The third category involves suicides, “which are planned with complex and often lengthy notes” and the fourth and final category, under which the wife and mother of *The Road* falls, are “those planned through a reasonable logic, because of physical illness, mental instability, or some catastrophic change in life’s circumstances” (Solomon 38). He elaborates that those included under the umbrella of the fourth category, “might be mistaken in their view, in particular the consequences that their action might have on their nearest and dearest, but we cannot say that they are deluded” (49).

Many readers and critics have caricatured “the woman’s suicidal position as simply nihilistic, but she comes to this impulse rationally and with protective instincts of her own” (Potts 493). It is much more complex than that. She has clearly planned this act out, based on a logic that takes into account not only a catastrophic change in her own life, but a ruination of the entire earth, along with a proliferation of cannibal blood cults that make bases in old houses and roam the earth looking for human labor and sustenance.

Critics and lay readers alike seem perplexed by the mother’s actions, as it involves the leaving of a formerly loving family for the uncertainty of what the
afterlife might hold. Echoing a line in *The Sunset Limited*, which was published the same year, she says that her “only hope is for eternal nothingness and she hopes for it with all her heart” (McCarthy 49).

In his book *Notes on Suicide*, Simon Critchley meditates at length on the history of and possible reasons for employing suicide and at one point poses the question, “what if suicide is not the unasked-for consequences of a psychopathological condition with a possibly organic basis, but is chosen as a free act, as an end in itself?” (Critchley 9). Where religion is concerned, he takes great care in showing how various theologians throughout the centuries have found suicide a valid answer for some of life’s most difficult problems and ailments, that it has not always been seen as a mortal sin, as it is now viewed by the Catholic Church, whose beliefs were deeply ingrained in the lives of the McCarthys. This seems to be what McCarthy is exploring in this and other works, which we are analyzing, having to do with suicide.

The remembrance of the mother is a constant worry for both the man and the boy for similar reasons. The man has not completely forsaken suicide as an option but views it rather as a contingency plan. In one passage, he says, “But he knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death” (McCarthy 25). The other situation in which he would consider it is if they are under attack by the roving cannibal hordes.
He asks himself, after meeting a group of them, “Can you do it? When the
time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God
and die. What if it doesn’t fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn’t fire? Could you crush
that beloved skull with a rock” (96) which is a combination of the tale of Job, with the
rock section being taken directly from the Psalms where God told his people to do
this. Psalm 137:9 says, “Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them
against the rock!” and there are countless other Old Testament stories where God
commands his people’s armies to kill the children, rape the women, and destroy the
cities. This highlights the “peculiar terror(s) of this novel: not only the man’s
terrifying dilemma” of whether to “remain alive when all around is death and a
violent death seems certain” but the “ethically terrifying additional dilemma” of
whether or not he should “kill his son and spare the boy the violence that indubitably
awaits him” (Potts 493).

The man’s “vacuous belief” and “ambiguous spiritual sense” (494), this
combination of the religious injunction against suicide and his ‘life drive’ are what
deters him from coming to terms with the desolate scene surrounding him and
propels him to keep living at whatever cost necessary. Matthew Potts points out that
“locating the sacred in, with, and under the mundane and profane is precisely what
incarnation is all about” (495). McCarthy is doing something deeper with the text,
religiously, however. Matthew Potts, in responding to a critic points out that “A stale
heel of bread or a tortured Jewish man doesn’t look anything like God is precisely the point” (496). As Norris continues this line of thought saying that we “are asked to make our most serious and intimate commitments with very little idea how long they will last, and what will be required of us” and the work we may be called to do is often “deemed worthless by the standards of the world” (84-85) but his is how life is, regardless of our religious belief system. The boy looks nothing like a grail, the vessel of God.

The boy, as young as he knows the dire nature of his situation and in one scene finally says:

I wish I was with my mom.

He (the man) didn’t answer. He sat beside the small figure wrapped in the quilts and blankets. After a while he said: You mean you wish that you were dead. Yes. You mustn’t say that.

But I do.

Don’t say it. It’s a bad thing to say.

I can’t help it.

I know. But you have to. How do I do it?

I don’t know (McCarthy 46).

This conversation triggers a final memory of the mother, where the man told her:
We’re survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.

Survivors? she said.

Yes.

What in God’s name are you talking about? We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film. We used to talk about death, she said. We don’t anymore. Why is that?

I don’t know.

It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about.

I wouldn’t leave you.

I don’t care. It's meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like.

I’ve taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot.

Death is not a lover.

Oh yes, he is.

Please don’t do this.

I'm sorry (McCarthy 48).

The mother combines the views of Seneca, Nietzsche, David Foster Wallace, and is a completion of the absurdist waiting to die that Emil Cioran speaks of. The man echoes this view as well, as he says,
He’d had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally, the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (78),

but he is still held back by his own worries about the afterlife and keeping the boy alive in case the world becomes inhabitable again.

A fascinating article entitled, “Books are Made out of Books” by Lucas Thompson shows us just how deeply David Foster Wallace read and thought about the work and person of Cormac McCarthy and how their thoughts crossed paths as well. He argues, in fact, that McCarthy “exerted a powerful and tangible influence on Wallace’s fiction across multiple phases” of his career (Thompson 4). In Wallace’s earlier work, his influence can be detected in scenes containing the pastoral and later in his career, he begins to interrogate “the limits of McCarthy’s representational strategies, constructing abstruse parodies of the older writers distinctive prose style in an attempt to distance himself from what had threatened to become an overpowering influence” (6). Foster Wallace mentions admiring McCarthy’s work, especially Suttree and Blood Meridian, in a host of interviews and correspondences, and once admits to writing a “fawningly obsequious fan letter to McCarthy” (Thompson 8), which
McCarthy claims not to have received. He even, while writing *The Pale King*,
“inserted a parenthetical aside, exhorting himself to ‘try harder, to avoid writing a bad
McCarthy rip-off’” (16). Wallace’s comments on McCarthy echo and supplement my
own sentiments that his work is written in “an English very remote from our own”
which is “like the King James Bible on acid” (Garner 60) and one major literary and
religious point that is across both of their œuvres is that of suicide.

Foster Wallace was obsessed with substance abuse and recovery, whereas not a
focal point in McCarthy, is evident, especially in the highly autobiographical *Suttree*,
especially in reference to all of the drunken carousing going on. The other major
theme that the two have in common is their explorations of suicide. In *Infinite Jest*,
we can make an outline of Wallace’s views with the quote, “The person in whom its
invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable agony will kill herself the same way a
trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make
no mistake about people who jump from burning windows. Their terror of falling
from a great height” is the same for the rest of us (Wallace 195).

This is taken up again in his address, “This is Water”, where he says that, “The
capital- T Truth is about life before death. It is about making it to 30, or maybe 50,
without wanting to shoot yourself in the head” (Wallace 11). Ultimately, he could not
fend off these thoughts, taking his own life in 2008. This sort of deep sadness has been
written about, but eschewed in the life of McCarthy, as he says during the NPR
Science Friday podcast with Laurence Krauss and Werner Herzog, that some of his friends would say that “making him pessimistic would be a difficult chore indeed.” He says, “I’m pessimistic about a lot of things, but as Laurence is fond of quoting me saying, ‘It’s no reason to be miserable about it.” (Glass 1) He points out how bad humans are at prognostication and says that the “fact that he takes a dreary view is cheering” because “chances are that I’m wrong.”

Similarly, in his only interview on major television with Oprah, as they speak about *The Road* and its relevance in the post-911 world, and fatherhood, he says that some important things he has gleaned are, “To care about things and people and know that life is pretty damn good. You should be thankful for what you have” (Oprah). Foster Wallace did eventually meet McCarthy and was disappointed, saying that his speaking voice did not match the grandeur of his voice on the page and their views of pessimism certainly clashed as well.

Friedrich Nietzsche, whose view of suicide as respite from the trials of this world are absent from McCarthy’s earlier works. He says, “The thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it, one gets through many a dark night” (Nietzsche 103). Nietzsche could easily be called the philosopher of McCarthy’s Western period, as we see that *Blood Meridian* contains long, winding rants that could be attributed directly to Nietzsche if we did not know otherwise. Interestingly, there are no suicides in McCarthy’s Western oeuvre, which is deeply philosophical and whose
religion is starkly Roman Catholic and colonialist in nature. When one reads Nietzsche and keeps going, they inevitably come to Emil Cioran, whose views on suicide are much more nihilistic and absurd, yet somehow life-affirming. He is mentioned by name in *The Passenger*, a fact that we will soon explore. We see that “there is more to Nietzsche than non-foundationalism” (Potts 65), just as there is more to McCarthy than nihilism. Nietzsche did not want to be called a nihilist, just as McCarthy wouldn’t, which some scholars are wont to do. As he says in the Werner Herzog interview, “life is bad, but there’s not use getting all sour about it” (Glass 1).

If we stand in the affirmative with Nietzsche’s statement in “supposing that truth is a woman—what then?”, and that “there is ground for suspecting that all philosophers, in so far as they have been dogmatists, have failed to misunderstand women” (Nietzsche 1). Is there some truth and benefit in believing in, if not the agency of suicide, then at least the possibility for believing that woman in *The Road’s* views on the matter are acceptable, no matter what feelings and religiosity they stir within us. We know that it is impossible to “really resolve the question of how love might be a force that can both pull us beyond any desire for self-slaughter, but also drive us into the depths of hatred and despair” (12), but McCarthy’s works have shown us the many forms and facets of the suicidal and how they might be approached.
The shape of McCarthy’s most recent thoughts on suicide form somewhat amorphously in the first of his newest novels, *The Passenger*. When Bobby and Alicia Western were younger and hanging out in bars around Knoxville, they met John Sheddan, a character from McCarthy’s own life. Interestingly, there is a comment about Sheddan in his correspondence with Jean Woolmer, McCarthy’s bibliographer, which says, “John Sheddan tells me that Cormac’s father died in Florida on Wednesday, 15 February 1995. He’ll be buried in Washington D.C., on Monday, 20 February… I called Cormac who was rather amused at Sheddan’s antics”, he said. “He’s almost sixty years old Howard. Anyone else that age would either be dead, have got religion, or be in jail” (Woolmer 4).

Sheddan says of Bobby in the novel, that “Somebody at our table invited him over and we got to talking. I quoted Cioran to him and he quoted back Plato on the same subject” (McCarthy 30). Anyone familiar with McCarthy’s newer work and those philosophers would assume that when Western quotes back Plato as a retort, that it would somehow involve the mathematical. Mathematical Platonism, which sections of *The Passenger* deal with extensively and which forms a through line among the pages of *Stella Maris* has little (but not nothing) to do with the thought of the ancient Greek philosopher. It does borrow its foundational premise, however, from Plato’s epistemology surrounding what he calls Forms, which come in both the abstract and eternal variety. It applies to mathematics in that those such as Gödel and
Frege, who are mentioned in the novels often, proposed and worked from the standpoint that mathematic objects and formulae are something to be discovered and not invented. They are, in a way, eternal, and beyond any human faculty. In this way the novels carry within them a Platonic undercurrent that expresses itself both mathematically and philosophically.

The works of Cioran and Plato share few similarities, but ones that they both dwell upon are issues of life and death. Cioran, especially, spent a great deal of his career pondering suicide and this must be the theme of the quotes that Sheddan and Western shared. This also fits cohesively with the thematic elements of McCarthy’s companion novel, as *The Passenger* begins with a suicide and *Stella Maris* is the working out of Alicia’s rationale concerning taking her own life. It blurs the boundaries between reality, dreams, and the afterlife while highlighting the remembrance of the dead and the thing that unites them all are somewhat curious and unorthodox views on suicide. It is fitting that Bobby is the one quoting Plato, as he comes from a line and school of mathematical Platonists. His sister, his father and all that surrounded them ascribed to this school of thought.

What then were these two philosophers’ views on suicide? It is known that “Plato considered suicide a disgrace”, yet “he permitted notable exceptions, one of which allowed for self-killing, by judicial order, as was the case with his teacher, Socrates (Critchley 29). The fact that Plato’s mentor, Socrates was forced to commit
suicide by drinking hemlock, was a formative event in his life, as well as in his writing. Through this, Plato learned that, “The philosopher’s whole life is a preparation for death” and “he should therefore welcome death when it comes” (Miles 255) It could be said that Plato’s view is that “if death by one’s own hand is always morally wrong, then, given Socrates’ moral theory, it follows that death by suicide is never to anyone’s advantage, never good” (253) but “to philosophize is to learn how to die”, Socrates says in the Phaedo (Plato 29). The central themes of Phaedo, being death and immortality come to the fore near the middle, and happily for our case is preceded by a puzzling exchange on the subject of suicide. The advice that Socrates via Plato gives to Evenus, the philosopher is “to die soon if possible, but not to take his own life” (Miles 244).

Emil Cioran, the French-Romanian philosopher on the other hand, was a near-Nihilist and Anti-natalist at times. He was muchdemurer than even Nietzsche’s detractors accused him of being, proposing thoughts such as, “It is not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill yourself too late” (Cioran 18) and that “Only optimists commit suicide, optimists who no longer succeed at being optimists. The others, having no reason to live, why would they have any to die?” (Cioran 49). The former quote brings to mind the interiority of characters such as White, Cornelius Suttree, or the Westerns, where the latter mentality fits with McCarthy’s earlier protagonists like Culla Holme and Lester Ballard.
The pointed exchange then, in the bar, likely involved Sheddan saying something to the effect of, “If I were to be totally sincere, I would say that I do not know why I live and why I do not stop living. The answer probably lies in the irrational character of life which maintains itself without reason” (Cioran 33), with Western’s response being, “Don’t kill yourself, but come when you can”. This makes sense in his context as Bobby goes to race Formula Two cars directly after this and it ties into a critical connection involving McCarthy’s work and the Southern Gothic show True Detective when the two detectives finally decide to get to know each other. Detective Marty Hart, after having enough of Detective Cohle’s, Cioran-inspired rants, asks, “So…what’s the point of getting out of bed in the morning?” to which he replies, “I tell myself I bear witness, but the real answer is that’s it’s obviously my programming. And I lack the constitution for suicide” (Pizzolatto).

The entirety of *Stella Maris* revolves around the dialogue of Alicia Western, whose body we find at the beginning of *The Passenger*, and her dialogue with her psychiatrist, Dr. Cohen. They form the most cohesive outline of the type of suicidality that McCarthy is exploring in his latest works and occur while her brother Bobby is in a coma in Italy after his wreck. One quote, in fact, seems to be a synthesis of what we have been exploring is where Alicia says, “But the best way to die is to live well. To die for another would give your death meaning. Ignoring for the time being the fact that the other is going to die anyway” (McCarthy 25). This reads as a sort of
admixture of the thoughts of Plato and Cioran that were previously explored, harmonizing into a sort of Platonic nihilism.

Alicia answers Dr. Cohen’s questions in the vein of the suicidal, early on in the novel. He begins by asking, “What would you change if you could change anything?” to which she replies,

Anything.

Yes.

I’d elect not to be here.

In this consultation.

On this planet.

You’ve been placed on suicide watch before. How serious an issue is that?

How serious an issue is suicide? (McCarthy 29)

This reinforces our links to McCarthy’s work with Camus’ foundational question, but branches into new metaphysical territory as well, as Alicia soon tells of the figures that have been visiting her since she was a child. He asks if they are, “like a figure in your dreams” to which Alicia replies, “No. He’s like a figure in your room” (16), and

Alicia: As opposed to what? Out of somewhere?” (21)

Subsequent to these appearances, Alicia’s mother dies, and she not attending the funeral, says, “Yes. Of course. I was twelve. I was going through a religious crisis. I did not want to sit through a High Mass featuring my mother’s coffin in the center aisle of the church. I couldn’t” (33), figuring concepts which we have been speaking of in conjunction with McCarthy all along, which are life, death, and religion.

In a longer and more foundational passage concerning the theory of taking of one’s own life, Dr. Cohen asks Alicia, “When did you first think that suicide might be an option for you? Think seriously? Think seriously” (105).

Her reply is:

When I was younger—ten, eleven—I had a sort of waking dream that was frightening to me. And then I realized that it was neither waking nor a dream. And I had no reason to believe that what I saw did not exist and that if that realm was unknown to us that didn’t make it less threatening but more” it was “A Judas hole into this world where there were sentinels standing at a gate and I knew that beyond the gate was something terrible and that it had power over me” and it was “A being. A presence. And that the search for shelter and for a
covenant among us was simply to elude this baleful thing of which we were in endless fear and yet of which we had no knowledge” (105).

She continues with other stories, saying of her brother’s wreck, “I told him that I would rather be dead with him than alive without him” (54). She then tells a lengthy story of how she planned to kill herself by drowning in lake Tahoe, describing in detail what would have happened to her body, and that this changed her mind. Is this a way of tying up McCarthy’s previous thoughts on God, which have been tempered by science for the past four decades?

The final connection seems to be made when she says that “Women enjoy a different history of madness. From witchcraft to hysteria, we’re just bad news” We have barely contemplated “who were stoned to death for being bright” (137), which is a new iteration for McCarthy which is far different from his earlier Foucauldian notions presented at times in *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*.

Alicia concludes on a tender note at the end and alludes to the beginning of The Passenger when she says:

Hold my hand.

Hold your hand?

Yes. I want you to.

All right. Why.
Because that’s what people do when they’re waiting for the end of something”

(190)

As we have seen, throughout McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, he is exploring life and death, or the question of the validity of suicide as a means to an end. He uses a variety of influences, including those from ancient and more contemporary theology, philosophy, psychology, and the literary. He has slightly different mindsets as the novels progress, but his general consensus is to forsake more recent theology, which sees suicide as the taking away, unrightfully, of the gift of life, which God has given and the viewpoint which posits it as a mortal sin, worthy of sending the perpetrator to hell.

He sees this form of biblicality as showcasing a set of beliefs which are extrabiblical and not practical for those living in dire circumstances. Rather, he sides with ancient theology and philosophy, which views suicide as acceptable in some cases and even a means of agency when one has nothing else. McCarthy’s thoughts on suicide are complex and multifaceted and provide a wealth of information to ponder for scholars and lay-readers alike.
Conclusion

As we have seen, Cormac McCarthy, known for his masterful storytelling and evocative prose, has left an indelible mark on Southern and Appalachian Gothic literature. Though the works of McCarthy’s Appalachian period, besides *The Road*, have received much less critical attention than his Westerns, they reveal a profound exploration of religious themes and imagery within the context of the region. This dissertation has explored the realm of "biblicality" as it pertains to McCarthy’s Appalachian works, in an attempt to bring light to the depth of meaning contained in these early works. In unraveling layers of religious expression, moral dilemmas, and existential contemplation embedded within these narratives, we have uncovered what McCarthy is doing with biblicality in these works.

As we have seen, the key aspects of biblicality are, the use of religious imagery, the employment of biblical language, the interplay between religious and secular elements, the profound impact of Appalachian landscapes, and the thematic exploration of faith, morality, and the human condition. Having analyzed McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, which showcases biblicality through the King James Bible, filtered through notable authors of the genre, and their interplay with his inspirations from antiquity. This research illuminates how Southern and Appalachian Gothic literature engages with the biblical tradition, shapes our understanding of the region’s
history and culture, and invites readers to grapple with timeless questions of faith, morality, social justice, and the complexities of the human experience.

Chapter Two illustrates McCarthy’s uses of darkness, light, and objects of divinity, such as staffs, horns, and children amidst the backdrop of a darkened, postapocalyptic nightmare, as elements of biblicality. McCarthy’s interplay with various biblical texts and his mapping onto Appalachian protagonists’ elements of the same stories, shows us how he imbues such characters with great meaning and allows for ways of agency in lands of great trial and darkness.

Chapter Three shows how the portrayal of outsiders and outliers is crucial to McCarthy’s Appalachian works. It analyzes those who are othered, due to their race and gender and highlights how despite certain critical tendencies to label McCarthy a racist, he is showing us the plight of racism, and even the achievement of Black citizens during trying times. Additionally, he displays witchcraft as a biblical permutation which has always worked with and alongside Orthodox Christianity in the lives of biblical characters, Black witches, and Appalachian citizens of all types.

Chapter Four shows us that, as Frank Shelton aptly points out in relation to this period of work, “Violence, sometimes of the most gruesome kind, runs through all McCarthy’s novels, but *Suttree* is the only one to explore deeply the potential for violence against self” (73). Moreover, this serves as an entry point to seeing just how McCarthy’s previous novels delve into the depths of human depravity and life in a
cruel world and Suttree brings us face-to-face with the existential struggle against suicide.

McCarthy offer no concrete answers to religious questions, but he does, throughout this period, explore life among the direst of circumstances via fascinating and troubled characters, while revealing pinpoints of light amidst the darkness of the heavens. McCarthy mirrors the gruesome violence that we encounter in many biblical texts, their interpreters, and those who are writing with the Southern and Appalachian Gothic genres throughout the centuries. Despite this violence, which reaches biblical proportions, he is also content with mystery, and the questions that life, literature, and theory are unable to answer.

Finally, to conclude my thoughts on the various ways in which Cormac McCarthy employs the aspects of biblicality, I will cite a passage which occurs at the very end of his oeuvre. In Stella Maris, Alicia Western tells a story that metaphorically encompasses and bookends McCarthy’s literary career and his use of religious imagery. She says, speaking of the end of her life. “I’d hike into the mountains”, because “There are bears and wolves up there” (McCarthy 190). Returned is the bear, who was so brutally murdered in Blood Meridian and there are the wolves, which were such a huge part of the Border Trilogy. The she-wolf dies there and wolves are gone in No Country for Old Men, as we see from the scene with Moss at the shootout. “There ain’t no lobos” (McCarthy 15), Llewellyn Moss says to the
fearful and injured man in the truck, who asks for water. Alicia Western says that
“Sometimes at night the animals would come to the edge of the fire and move about
and their shadows would move among the trees and I would understand that when
the last fire was ashes they would come and carry me away and I would be their
eucharist” (190). This is a conclusion of the imagery of Sheriff Bell’s father carrying
fire into the mountains and the fire and ash of *The Road*, the religious symbolism
with the witch who roams the mountain paths. In the final moments of McCarthy’s
last published work, Alicia is carrying the fire once again, into the darkness and the
cold of the mountains and becoming the biblical food for all those who inhabit the
earth.
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