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ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy’s fiction has been widely studied through the lens of Ecocriticism, probably because nature plays a prominent role in his novels in which the setting is often a decisive narrative element. The most relevant environmental analyses concern *The Trilogy Border* novels, *Blood Meridian* and, of course, *The Road*, a post-apocalyptic novel fundamentally centered on the environment issue. This study investigates McCarthy’s *Child of God*, his shortest novel, from an ecocritical point of view, despite the apparent absence of environmental characters in the book. *Child of God* could be considered McCarthy’s early concern with the Twentieth-century industrial development’s impact on the environment: the early dissolution of the protagonist’s family farm, taken away by the State, for instance, coincides with the start of the human dissolution of the protagonist, a psychopath murderer. Here, McCarthy’s defiance of the environmentally reckless present is equated with the mental illness of the protagonist, Lester Ballard. By investigating one of McCarthy’s most significant early novels through an ecocritical approach, it will be possible to better understand the author’s environmental turning point in his late novels as well.

KEYWORDS: Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God*, Ecocriticism, Violence, Anthropocentrism.

1. Cormac McCarthy and Ecocriticism

Many of Cormac McCarthy’s novels have been analyzed through the ecocritical lens (e.g. Bell 1998). This is probably because his prose features frequent and extended descriptions of landscapes and natural processes, and setting is often a fundamental issue. In McCarthy’s novels, nature is not really restricted to landscape images. On the contrary, the writer highlights the complexity and dynamics between the environment and its inhabitants. Both

living and non-living components belong to it, as well as the relations between them and processes which could be invisible to the observer. Here the concept of nature needs to be clarified. Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* gives a short and clear definition of nature: “[nature is] the material world, sometimes but not invariably including human beings” (2005, 143). Another fundamental definition, crucial to understand the complexity of *Child of God*, is that of Timothy Morton: “Nature is...animals, trees, the weather... the bioregion, the ecosystem. It is both the set and the contents of the set. It is the world and the entities in that world” (2007, 18).

Two of the most significant studies focused on environmental aspects in Cormac McCarthy’s novels are Georg Guillemin’s *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004) and Dianne C. Luce’s *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period* (2009). Later, other critics such as Andrew Keller Estes investigated several aspects of McCarthy’s natural imagery and the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds and contributed to the discussion on McCarthy’s natural environment and its meanings in the novels. *Blood Meridian* in particular, arguably his masterpiece, and the 2007 Pulitzer Prize-winner *The Road*, definitely an environmental novel, have received great attention from ecocritical scholars¹. This essay provides an ecocritical reading of *Child of God*, one of the McCarthy’s early novels, rarely studied through an environmental approach.

2. Child of God

According to Stephanie Sarver, the author of *Agriculture and Nature in American Writing*, due to the diversity of ecocritical practice such a critical approach should focus not only on trees and rivers inhabiting texts but also on the “nature inherent in humans and in settings in which human beings figure prominently: in dooryards, in cities, and in farms” (1999, 76). Defined as such, ecocriticism is appropriate for Cormac McCarthy’s novels not only because of the overwhelming presence of non-human nature throughout his work, but also

¹ There are many articles on ecocritical readings of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. It is possible to find a partial list of them at: www.cormacmccarthy.com/wp-content/uploads/McCarthyEnglishBib_20111026.pdf (12/09/2021).

because of non-human nature’s important influence on the ideas and actions of his human characters. The novel narrates the bitter and sordid story of Lester Ballard’s dispossession and alienation in rural Sevier County, Tennessee, during the 1960s. The novel is based on a real murder case, which occurred in the same state the decade before. As opposed to writing a standard murder mystery revolving around the killer, McCarthy creates a devastating yet remarkable tale of the lost and morally confused Lester Ballard, the novel’s main protagonist. Although Ballard commits several acts of brutal crimes, McCarthy manages to portray him as more than merely despicable: he is a monster, yet a human monster. Lester’s mythical exile takes the narrative form of his eviction from the family farm in the opening of the novel:

In the pines the voices chanted a lost litany. Then they stopped. A murmur went through the crowd. The auctioneer had handed over the microphone to another man. The other man said: Holler at the sheriff yonder, C B.
The auctioneer waved his hand at him and bent to the man standing in front of him. Small man, ill-shaven, now holding a rifle.
What do you want, Lester?
I don’t told ye. I want you to get your goddamn ass off my property. And take these fools with ye.
Watch your mouth, Lester. They’s ladies present. I don’t give a fuck who’s present. It ain’t your property.
The hell it ain’t.
You done been locked up once over this. I guess you want to go again. The high sheriff is standin right over yonder. (McCarthy 1993, 6-7)

From this point on, Ballard lives in a series of ever more miserable dwellings, like rented shacks, jail cells, or caves in the bowels of the earth, and ends up in an asylum for the criminally insane. His crimes conversely rise to an increasing horror, from voyeurism and petty theft, to arson, murder, mutilation, and necrophilia.

This ecological reading of Lester Ballard is based on Vereen Bell’s statement that Ballard’s “whole state of being is one of loss [...] of isolation from the ecological coherence of his environment, both human and unhuman” (1988, 64). Ballard’s loss of being is the result of two interrelated conditions: his inability to connect with either human society or nature, and society’s failure to recognize his emotional and intellectual disability.

Child of God is divided into three parts with a few polyphonic narrative voices. The omniscient narrator maintains an impartial position throughout,

leading us through Lester's miserable existence, inviting us to appraise judgment on him, although the narrative consciousness itself never does. In the first part of the novel there is a group of unidentified narrators from Sevierville retrospectively telling Ballard's story and framing it within that community's mythology and historical awareness. The second and third parts of the novel increasingly leave culture and community behind as Lester goes from squatter to cave-dweller to serial killer, showing the increasing influence of the typical McCarthy's 'wilderness aesthetic', as Ballard becomes increasingly connected with pre-modern phenomena.

3. Ballard and anthropocentrism

This examination of the novel explores how the characters' perspectives on nature reflect and inform their actions. McCarthy's third novel chronicles Ballard's downward spiral because of his conflict with the anthropocentrism of the Sevier County community and the institutional functionaries serving that citizenry.

The first scene is highly symbolical. During the eviction of his lands, Lester is clubbed unconscious with the result that he "never could hold his head right after that" (McCarthy 1993, 9). This episode reveals how acts of violence are sanctioned by the normative community instigating, mythologizing, and perhaps even seeking a figure such as Lester within their own historical memory. This violent act leaves Lester bleeding from the ears, and it brutally confirms his dispossession, serving as a catalyst for his later acts in which he attempts to replicate the world he has been evicted from:

He was layin flat on the ground lookin up at everybody with his eyes crossed and this awful pumpknot on his head. He just laid there and he was bleedin at the ears. Buster was still standin there hold in the axe. They took him on in the county car and C B went on with the auction like nothing had ever happen but he did say that he caused some folks not to bid that otherwise would of, which may have been what Lester set outat, I don't know. (ibid.)

Shortly thereafter Lester starts a conflict with the inhabitants of Sevier as well as with nature, despite making initial efforts to integrate socially and commercially in the society of Sevier County. In each case, the citizens fail to integrate the various stories surrounding him as well as describing a person

incapable of functioning within their society as an independent adult. So, the main question that the novel tries to answer is possibly this one: what are the consequences for Southern communities when they abandon their traditional attachments? In *Child of God* we see the Southern pastoral myth dissolving into history that is well represented by Agrarianism, as Christopher J Walsh suggests (2009).

Although Ballard is intellectually and emotionally handicapped, he is capable of absorbing society's view of nature and the way society views the relationship between the sexes. Perceiving social values through what Bell calls his “ambiguous innocence”, Lester Ballard mimics the actions of those around him in an anthropocentric society. As such, he represents a dark parody of conventional social thinking that helps explain the narrator's direct address to the reader that Ballard is “a child of God much like yourself perhaps” (McCarthy 1993, 4).

The effect of industry's arrival and subsequent departure is also evident in the “human structures on the land that hint at the decline of subsistence agriculture” (Berry 2008, 70). Ballard's shabby farm, Waldrop's ruined shack, and Ruebel's junkyard all point towards the decline in small-scale farming during the Great Depression. While Lester loses the Ballard family farm to the county government, Kirby is destroyed by his self-produced whisky while his fields sprout bushes and honeysuckle, and Ruebel watches his family disintegrate as he peddles the parts of wrecked cars and industrial trash from his dump.

In its quest for order and conformity, in its belief in perpetual economic growth and endless technological advancement, anthropocentric society ignores the ecological consequences of its actions and “displays a disposition toward violence against anything impeding its notion of progress” (Bell 1988, 55). In this perspective Lester Ballard symbolizes the man either refusing or failing to conform to the conventional society values and standards, and yet he reflects them at the same time². This is most subtly portrayed by the community narrators who speak of Ballard's treatment of animals. In these instances, their stories of Ballard's mistreatment of animals lead to their own stories of animal

² For a more in-depth analysis of this topic, please see Bartlett (2000).

abuse. In all these cases, Ballard's stories lead to those of more conventional citizens. This connection confirms Bell's assertion that the difference between Ballard and conventional society "is one of degree, not kind" (1988, 62), thus revealing the philosophical foundation that is responsible for that decline.

Many scenes in the novel represent the mistreating of animals made by both Ballard and Sevier County citizens, but one has a specific symbolic role. When Ballard goes to Ralph's house and, while waiting for him, gives his son a living robin:

He went on up the porch steps and entered the house. He spoke with the woman but his eye was on the daughter. She moved ill at ease about the house, all tits and plump young haunch and naked legs. Cold enough for ye? said Ballard.

What about this weather, said the woman.

I brung him a playpretty, Ballard said, nodding to the thing in the floor.

The woman turned her shallow dish-shaped face upon him. Done what? she said.

Brung him a playpretty. Looky here.

He hauled forth the half froze robin from his shirt and held it out. It turned its head. Its eye flicked.

Looky here, Billy, said the woman.

It didn't look. A huge headed bald and slobbering primate that inhabited the lower reaches of the house,

familiar of the warped floorboards and the holes tacked up with food tins hammered flat, a consort of roaches and great hairy spiders in their season, perennially benastied and afflicted with a nameless crud.

Here's ye a playpretty.

The robin started across the floor, its wings awobble like lateen sails. It spied the... what? child? child,

and veered off toward a corner. The child's dull eyes followed. It stirred into sluggish motion.

Ballard caught the bird and handed it down. The child took it in fat gray hands.

He'll kill it, the girl said. (McCarthy 1993, 73)

In this scene, apparently marginal in the novel, the little son is described like a monster: he is a slobbering primate living in the basement among spiders and roaches. On closer inspection, the child looks like Ballard himself (in the final section of the novel Ballard will be forced to live in the underground caves). The violence of the child on the robin metaphorically represents the violence of Ballard against the population of Sevier. Both characters are violent outcasts, but, clearly, they are also products of the society in which they live. In this perspective, it is not surprising that the reader, despite the heinous and brutal crimes committed by Ballard, in the end struggles to condemn him.

If McCarthy is to be considered an environmentalist writer, what is the significance of the fact that his most Thoreauvean character is a necrophiliac? Precisely because Ballard functions outside conventional society and prevents the smooth functioning of the institutions by supporting the economic status quo, Anthropocentric society finds it necessary to confine him. Resistance to the environmentally irresponsible status quo, the novel suggests, is equated with mental illness. Sevier County’s anthropocentrism is responsible for dooming Ballard. He simply cannot coexist with conventional societal expectations. In this perspective, *Child of God* deals with a fundamental topic of McCarthy’s fiction: the attempt to undermine anthropocentric exploitation and miscomprehension of nature.

Nature has a central role in McCarthy’s poetics. In his novels, nature is at the same time dark and beautiful, welcoming and dangerous. The story of Ballard could be seen as a return to nature that dismantles the myth of the return to nature as a naive reconstitution of a lost unity. Finally, the novel wants to reveal that, in reality, nature itself, and above all human nature, has a murky dimension with which we must deal.

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