

Spring 5-13-2016

## Overcoming Sin: Comparing Dante's Inferno and the New Testament to Cormac McCarthy's Outer Dark and Child of God

Tammy S. Hanson  
*University of New Orleans*, [tshanson@uno.edu](mailto:tshanson@uno.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hanson, Tammy S., "Overcoming Sin: Comparing Dante's Inferno and the New Testament to Cormac McCarthy's Outer Dark and Child of God" (2016). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 2157.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2157>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

Overcoming Sin: Comparing Dante's *Inferno* the New Testament to Cormac McCarthy's *Outer  
Dark* and *Child of God*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
English  
With a concentration in American Literature

By  
Tammy Sue Hanson

B.S. University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point, 2014  
M.A. University of New Orleans, 2016

May, 2016

## Table of Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Abstract .....  | iii |
| Chapter 1: Introduction .....   | 1   |
| Chapter 2: Comparisons Between Dante's <i>Inferno</i> and <i>Outer Dark</i> ..... | 4   |
| Chapter 3: Comparisons Between the New Testament and <i>Child of God</i> .....    | 28  |
| Chapter 4: Conclusion.....  | 39  |
| Bibliography .....  | 42  |
| Vita.....   | 44  |

## Abstract

There are many textual and thematic similarities between Dante's *Inferno* and Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*. There are also significant textual similarities between the New Testament and McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*. Juxtaposing *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* to *Inferno* and the New Testament, respectively, suggests a common trope that redemption requires characters' name and repent of sin.

Keywords: McCarthy, Cormac; Dante; Outer Dark; Inferno; Child of God; Redemption; Sin

## INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy's first three novels, *Suttree*, *Outer Dark*, and *Child of God* are often referred to as his Tennessee Period. Set in the Appalachian Mountains these early novels mainly deal with "outcasts and misfits and dropouts" (Evenson 62) that live on the fringes of modern society. McCarthy lived in Sevier County, Tennessee for many years and considered this "rugged cast of woodsmen and moonshiners and rocker-bound Sevier County old-timers . . . the real salt of the earth, the *real* people of Tennessee" (Luce 153). Perhaps this is why he chose these social outsiders as apt demonstrations of "the nature of selfhood and subjectivity, the relation of self to other, the nature and possibility of evil, the place and use of ethics in a seemingly chaotic and malignant world, and the relation of violence to ontology" (Evenson 54).

In these early novels, McCarthy isn't interested in advocating one particular philosophy even though he was profoundly interested in many philosophical traditions such as Platonism, Neo-Platonism, absurdism, and existential humanism (54); rather, McCarthy challenges his readers to ponder and, perhaps reconsider traditional Western philosophy and religion by emphasizing humankind's tendency toward evil. McCarthy once said that "There is no such thing as life without bloodshed"; "of his predecessors, he has said that he considers great only those writers who directly 'deal with issues of life and death'" (Hage 4).

McCarthy's second and third novels, *Outer Dark* published in 1968 and *Child of God* published in 1973, depict violence as a normal facet of modern society. It may seem as if the social landscapes in these texts are devoid of morality even though most of the secondary characters claim to hold Christian values as a grounding force in their daily lives. One of McCarthy's favorite books is Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, which "emphasizes the personal relationship each individual must establish with God . . . a relationship

governed by choice rather than social conventions or rituals” (Frye 9). Thus, McCarthy’s texts often exemplify the behaviors that transcend the laws of man and focus on the laws of God. Many characters in McCarthy’s texts claim that Christianity is a grounding force in their lives but fail to put their Christian values into practice. The Book of Matthew warns:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. (23:27-28)

Even though many characters in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* often reference their biblical convictions, they fail to recognize their own inner evil and instead condemn others in their community. This irony sometimes compels McCarthy’s readers to gauge their own indiscretions as good or evil.

Because McCarthy has an intense curiosity about Western and non-Western philosophical and theological traditions (Frye 5), scholars who analyze his work have difficulty pinpointing the overall intention of his narratives, and many of these scholars maintain varying opinions about precise influences on McCarthy. James R. Giles asserts that McCarthy’s novels stem from the nineteenth-century American Romanticism and are strongly influenced by Herman Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allen Poe. Giles’ scholarship focuses on *Outer Dark* as a gothic romance while Steven Frey places this novel in the tradition of the Southern Gothic, with strong influences from William Faulkner. Diane Luce, on the other hand, argues that his early novels derive from McCarthy’s engagement with Gnosticism based on the writings of Plato, “whose philosophy fed into ancient Christianity and

Gnosticism in interesting ways, sometimes involving a reversal or repudiation” (viii). In contrast, the readings of Vereen Bell consider McCarthy’s novels as overtly nihilistic, “devoid of conventional plot, theme or moral reference” (43). However, the grim world depicted in both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* is not necessarily a nihilistic world. Edwin Arnold argues against Bell’s interpretation, explaining: “the narratives are driven by distinct thematic concerns and move at least in the direction of some sort of resolution; and there is in each novel a moral gauge by which we, the readers, are able to judge the failure or limited success of McCarthy’s characters” (46).

Regardless of McCarthy’s intentions, all of these scholars agree to some degree that McCarthy’s narratives, either directly or metaphorically, reference Dante and the Old and New Testaments to form a sometimes cynical view of religion in its relation to modern experience. Perhaps the most prominent acknowledgement of Dante’s influence on McCarthy’s literature is Emily Lane’s “Hell on Earth: A Modern Day Inferno in McCarthy’s Road.” In her textual comparison, Lane points out indisputable correlations between McCarthy’s *The Road* and Dante’s *Inferno*. Similar to *The Road*, *Outer Dark* “borrows from the *Inferno* . . . an ‘everyman protagonist, a guidance relationship, a desolate setting, and encounters with sin and suffering” (Lane 6). Luce notes: “All of McCarthy’s novels from *Outer Dark* through *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* use the extended metaphor of earthly life as a spiritual spatial journey in outer dark or purgatory or hell, through the deployment of imagery from Plato, Gnostics, and Dante (as well as the Bible and other classical mythology) although each differs in its emphasis” (70-71).

These scholars’ noted comparisons between his novels to theological literature leaves little doubt that McCarthy’s Catholic upbringing profoundly influenced his writing. His novels are often imbued with thematic religious undertones that explore the origins of human evil and

its place within a Christian world. McCarthy once said: “I don’t think you have to have a clear idea who or what God is in order to pray” (Hage 87), which suggests that even if evil is a tendency within all human beings, so is the instinct to relieve one’s suffering through acknowledging a higher spiritual entity. McCarthy’s novel *Outer Dark*, with its striking similarities to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, shows the possibility of redemption and grace through the recognition of and repentance for sin. Comparing the characters in *Outer Dark* to the sinners in some levels of Dante’s *Inferno* as well as the metaphorical elements to the soul of the novel’s protagonist, Culla, and his surroundings reveals a message that salvation requires that he admit and repent of his sin. McCarthy’s following novel, *Child of God*, explores God’s love and forgiveness and the limitations to human charity of those who deem themselves Christians. Even though its protagonist, Lester Ballard, is a necrophiliac and murderer, by the end of the novel Ballard sees his place as one of God’s creations. In *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, McCarthy’s message about salvation remains the same: the possibility of salvation lies within each baptized soul regardless of his or her past sins and it is only through an act of contrition that salvation can be reached.

#### COMPARISONS BETWEEN DANTE’S *INFERNO* AND MCCARTHY’S *OUTER DARK*

*Outer Dark* is a tale of a brother and sister, Culla and Rinthy Holme, who are orphaned and living in a one-room shack in the backwoods of an unnamed place. As the story begins, we learn that Rinthy is pregnant with Culla’s baby. She awakens him from a dream to tell him that she is in labor. Culla refuses Rinthy’s pleas for a midwife, reasoning that “she’d tell” (*Outer Dark* 10). This is the first of many instances in which Culla fears an outsider will discover his and Rinthy’s incestuous union. Once the baby is born, Culla, in an attempt to cover up their incestuous sin, takes the baby out to a wooded glade to die: “He entered a stand of cottonwoods



where the ground held moss of a fiery nitric green and which he prodded with his foot for a moment and then laid the child upon . . . then rose to his feet and lumbered away through the brush without looking back” (16). He then tells Rinthy the child died naturally while she was sleeping. Wanting to place flowers on her dead child’s grave, Rinthy implores Culla to tell her where the child is buried and he reluctantly leads her to the glade: “Some willingness to disbelief must have made her see and reflect . . . then she began to scoop away the dirt with her hands” (32). Shortly after Rinthy finds the grave empty, she sets out on a journey to find her infant. Culla then sets out to find Rinthy, fearing that she might reveal their secret incest. Both Rinthy’s and Culla’s journeys lead them to encounter other characters who may represent different circles and terraces of a hell and/or purgatory that are in some ways akin to Dante’s hell and purgatory.

The first of these characters is the tinker. This man is much like an anti-Virgil because he, in finding and taking the infant, is the catalyst for both Culla’s and Rinthy’s journeys. This is similar to Virgil who is responsible for guiding Dante on his journey through the levels of inferno; however, the Tinker is not virtuous like Virgil and instead of delivering Culla away from sin, the tinker tempts Culla to partake in sin. When we are first introduced to the tinker he attempts to interest Culla in pornographic photos: “It’s got pitchers. Here. [Culla] reached the book from the man and taking a confiding stance at his side flipped the book open to a sorry drawing of a grotesquely coital couple” (8). While Virgil is able to show Dante the fate of his soul should he continue down his current path of excessive lustfulness, the tinker as a kind of anti-Virgil motivates Culla to partake in sin, specifically lust. Rinthy is fully aware that the tinker has claimed her child and Culla, and in an attempt to prevent his sister from disclosing the origin of the child through incest, attempts to track her.

Rinthy is the only one of the siblings to re-encounter the tinker after he takes her infant. When she is questioned by the tinker, she openly confesses to him that Culla is the father of her child: “The tinker stopped and stared at her. . . . It ain’t hisn, he said.” “It ain’t nothing to you,” Rinthy responds. “It ain’t, he said. Is it? Yes,” Rinthy admits (193). The tinker tells Rinthy, “you ain’t fit to have him. . . . I’ve done judged” (192). Ironically, McCarthy places the tinker in a position to judge Rinthy, even though he is a deplorable thief, liar, and pornography peddler, and she, as a young woman who is motivated by love and compassion, is in a better position to judge others. The tinker is also the one character who speaks of Culla’s sin when Culla does not.

During Culla’s final meeting with the three evil strangers at the end of *Outer Dark* he is reunited with both the tinker and his son. Culla does not acknowledge the child as his when he asks the men: “Whose youngern?” Culla, seeing the infant is also missing an eye, asks what happened to it. Harmon responds: “I reckon that tinker might know what happened to it” (232) as he points with his rifle to a dead man hanging in a tree. From this point, it becomes obvious that the tinker has told the men Rinthy’s and Culla’s secret: “The bearded one raked a gobbet of clay from his stick and cast it into the fire. You know what I figure? he said . . . I figure you got this thing here in her belly your own self and then laid it off on that tinker” (233). The fact that these evil men kill the tinker and let Culla live shows that the tinker’s purpose may be to lead Culla to them and to his final destiny.

After their initial encounter with the tinker, both Culla and Rinthy meet several characters that have the same characteristics as many sinners in Dante’s hell and purgatory. The first of these characters is Squire Salter, a pompous ranch owner who hires Culla as a temporary farm hand. The Squire is not portrayed as a kind employer. As Luce notes, the Squire “claims that he has ‘never knowed nothing but hard work’ and that ‘what I got I earned’; yet he sits paralyzed,

raging and fumbling with his harness, waiting for the servant to hitch his horse to the buggy rather than do this task himself” (100). The “colored man” who also works on his ranch is more a slave than an employee and it is apparent that the Squire mistreats him. When Culla is introduced to and greets his new co-worker, the black man “had yet to speak” and “went past with a great display of effort, one hand to his kidney, shuffling” (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 43). It appears that “the negro” employee is injured and perhaps has been repeatedly beaten by the Squire. It is also obvious through the Squire’s conversation with Culla that he has built his wealth through his frugality and from the labor of others, expecting them to use second-hand equipment to perform their tasks: “[The negro] came forth with the axe from the clutter of tools in a broken barrel. The man watched him take it up with endless patience out of a shapeless bloom of staves skewed all awry as if this container had been uncoopered violently in some old explosion” (43). Handing him a worn, rusty axe, the Squire instructs Culla to sharpen it, telling him “ever man to grind his own axe” (42), thereby allowing Culla the opportunity to begin his repentance through his hard labor similar to the sinners in Dante’s *Inferno* whom are condemned to suffer for their transgressions while alive. However, once Culla realizes the Squire is not planning to pay him more than fifty cents for laboring all day, he sneaks out early the following morning, stealing a brand new pair of boots as he leaves. Culla is not only refusing to work out his sin, but he also commits the transgression of theft. This encounter with Squire Salter is also the first of many times that Culla is made to consider his path. The Squire asks Culla suspiciously: “What is it you’ve done? Where are you running from? Heh?” (46). Here we see Culla appears unmoved by his transgressions and has no qualms about denying his wrongdoings.

The description of the Squire may make readers think of Dante’s fourth level of *Inferno*, reserved for the avaricious and the prodigal who, during their lives, hoarded or squandered their

money. The environmental aspects of the scene are comparable to Dante's second round of the seventh level of *Inferno* that is inhabited by the suicides who are entombed inside gnarled and knotted trees and forever tortured by the harpies who tear their leaves and limbs off as they fly about. The tree Culla is hired to chop into firewood is a "hackle of ribboned wood [and] looked like it had been chewed off by some mammoth browsing creature" (44) much like the suicides in *Inferno* whose "imprisoned spirit . . . is bound in . . . knots," their branches torn off by squanderers who are "ravenous and swift like hounds" who "set their teeth . . . then carried off these suffering members" (*Inferno* 2). Because Culla labors to chop the tree limbs off one by one with the axe, he resembles the squanderers [harpies] who are at once being punished and acting as agents to punish others' sin.

Continuing his journey, Culla meets a beehiver at the side of the road who "bore a faint reek of whiskey" (McCarthy 79). This drunkard has no objective and wanders from place to place gambling to make enough money to support his drinking habit. The third circle of Dante's *Inferno* is reserved for the gluttons, those who overindulge in food and drink. The beehiver is introduced: He "turned his head as if to see were anyone looking . . . and brought forth a bottle blown from purple glass, holding it up in his two hands and shaking it. He looked at Holme. Care for a little drink?" (79). Even though the beehiver tells Culla that that his "old shoes . . . is about give out," he admits that he "won that whiskey on a bet" (80), revealing that his priorities lie in the surrender to sin that leads to solitary self-indulgence. Like Squire Salter, the beehiver questions Culla about where he is going: "where ye going? he said. Just up the road. That's right? That's where I'm a-goin . . . Just up the road, he said again" (78-79). After the two have traveled for a while, the beehiver speaks to Culla again: "do ye not know where it is you're a-goin?" I don't know, Holme said. Why are ye going then?" (81). The final encounter with the

beehiver is one of many instances in which Culla is forced to consider the path he is on and where that path will end. This is similar to Dante's *Inferno* where Virgil leads Dante through the levels of hell so he can witness his own fate if he decides to continue his lustful behavior.

Culla's journey then leads him to cross paths with the snake charmer. Snakes occupy Dante's eighth level of hell where the thieves chase after naked sinners and bind their hands and feet. The snake charmer tells Culla: "They's lots of meanness in these parts and I ain't the least of it" (119), thereby admitting his place in the world's evil. He then tells Culla a story about a minktrapper who was snakebit and "when they found him he was kneelin down like somebody fixin to pray" (120). The snake charmer then admits that he suspected the minktrapper of poisoning two of his dogs, which would indicate that he most likely had a hand in the minktrapper's death. Upon meeting the snake charmer, Culla asks him for a drink of water, to which he replies, "I wouldn't turn Satan away for a drink," implying that he not only maintains a benevolent attitude towards evil but openly welcomes evil into his life. The snake charmer goes on to explain how snakes "must have some good in em on account of them old geechee snake doctors uses em all the time for medicines . . . unless ye was to say that kind of doctorin was the devil's work" (124). The snake charmer then asks Culla what he is running from and, again, gives him an opportunity to renounce his sin asking, "what is it needs looked after if it's any of my business," (125) thereby giving Culla a chance to tell him why Rinthy ran away and why he is following her. Instead of admitting to the truth that he fathered and then attempted to kill the infant his sister bore, Culla continues to lie and cover up his wrongdoing.

Directly after his encounter with the snake charmer, Culla encounters thievery of the worst kind. As Culla is trying to find work at a local corner store, a wagon with three wooden coffins drives by him: "He turned to the clerk. Them old boxes has been in the ground, he

said . . . grave thieves, another whispered” (86-87). The scene inside one coffin is grotesque. As Culla stands on his toes to get a better look he notices there are two men buried in this coffin: “Across the desiccated chest lay a black arm . . . he could see that the old man shared his resting place with a negro sexton [gravedigger] whose head had been cut half off and who clasped him in an embrace of Lazarous depravity” (88). This scene is similar to that of the sinners Ugolino and Ruggieri who are frozen in ice in the ninth level of Dante’s *Inferno*, bound together for eternity: “the head of one made headgear for the other; and, as in hunger people will gnaw bread, so the one on top fixed his teeth in the lower one, just where the brain joins to the nape of the neck” (*Inferno* 32). Like these two sinners, the men who inhabit the “wooden . . . wormbored” (McCarthy 86) coffin are united in an eternal death embrace.

Ironically, the grave robbers are the notorious three evil strangers Culla meets later on, but because Culla is a stranger to the townspeople, they immediately suspect him of being the thief. Culla wears a badge of guilt wherever he goes. It is as if his sins are evident to others and make him suspect in every transgression that the evil triune commit so he is often forced by angry mobs onward to the next level of his journey. However, unlike Dante who is guided through hell by Virgil, Culla is provoked to soldier on with no spiritual guidance.

As Culla nears the end of his journey, he encounters the hog drovers and the false prophet; false prophets are punished in the fourth round of the eighth circle of *Inferno*. This meeting begins innocuously as Culla makes conversation with one of the men, who tells him that the hogs do not have split hooves like normal hogs. Instead, they look like mule hooves, which “seem like they don’t agree with the bible.” He states: “I heard it preached in a sermon one time. Said the devil had a foot like a hog’s” (215). While Culla is watching the hog drover, the hogs become panicked, stampede, and drive Vernon, the man Culla is conversing with, off a cliff to

his death. The other hog drovers, including Vernon's brother, see Culla is entirely unmoved by the scene and they accuse him of setting "them hogs . . . running crazy" (220). These men are about to avenge Vernon's death when "a parson or what looked like one was laboring over the crest of the hill and coming toward them with one hand raised in blessing, greeting, fending flies" (221). This false preacher seems to appear out of nowhere to advocate Culla's innocence at the hands of these lynchmen: "The preacher looked like a charred bird. He was peering at the ground and pounding his cane there. Don't hang him boys, the preacher cried out. No good'll ever come of it" (222). This statement suggests that the preacher is an omnipresent entity who is aware that Culla's death will not atone for his sins and also that the preacher has already foreseen Culla's damnation and knows that killing Culla will only interfere with the remainder of Culla's journey. The reverend asks Culla if he has been baptized, to which Culla replies, "why don't you go on and walk somewheres else?" (225). Culla's response shows that even when he is facing death, he refuses to receive salvation from a deity, thereby reaffirming his despair. To escape these men's judgement Culla reacts quickly: "he stepped past the preacher and the drover next him and jumped . . . He came up with a mouthful of muddy water and spat and turned. They were aligned along the bluff watching him" (226-27). This scene is similar to Dante's and Virgil's escape from the Malebranche in the fifth round of the eighth circle of hell where Virgil takes Dante in his arms and "down the ridges of the hard bank he slid full length down the hanging rock . . . hardly had his feet reached the bed of the depth below, when they were on the ridge just up above us; but there was nothing to fear" (*Inferno* 23). Since this is the level of *Inferno* where the Barrators and Hypocrites (corrupt politicians and deceivers) are punished, it is likely that McCarthy is showing us his version of these fraudulent characters through the Reverend and hogdrover.

The insincerity of the “reverend” and his lack of commitment to saving Culla’s soul can be seen in the way he both argues against and advocates for Culla’s lynching. In one breath he tells the men that avenging Vernon’s death “t’aint Christian,” while in the next breath he deems Culla unworthy of salvation: “Don’t flang him off the bluff, boys . . . I believe ye’d be better to hang him as that” (223). He quickly changes his focus from saving Culla’s soul to promoting his own pompous vanity and uses this opportunity to give a vain, self-righteous sermon, announcing: “I saved a blind feller once wanted to curse God for his affliction. You all want to hear that’n?” (226). He goes on with little provocation: “I believe a blind man ort to be better sighted than most. I believe it’s got a good deal to recommend it. The grace of God don’t rest easy on a man. It can blind him easy as not. It can bend him and make him crooked. And who did Jesus love, friends? The lame the halt and the blind, that’s who” (226). The preacher’s statement is not entirely in line with Christian teaching. According to scripture, God’s love extends to all his children and not only the lame, halt and blind. Furthermore, God’s grace should not blind his followers but empower them. The false preacher’s sermon promotes the teachings of an unjust and biased God that is eerily similar to the prophet in Culla’s dream at the beginning of *Outer Dark*. In his dream Culla is not one of those obviously afflicted souls, and he does not feel worthy of salvation, a suggestion that if he does not acknowledge his inner affliction, Culla will never be saved. In *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, Edwin Arnold points out that the false preacher’s words echo those of Jesus in Revelation:

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich and have white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve



to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me (53).

What Arnold does not mention in this passage is its previous sentence: “So because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:16). The passage in its entirety gives every man two choices: believe in God or accept eternity in hell. Therefore, the false preacher takes his sermon out of context of Jesus’ true meaning in the previous passage that defines forgiveness: faith in God must be absolute. The followers of the false prophet in Culla’s dream are spiritually blind, especially Culla, but the prophet is telling them that staying this way will bring them closer to their savior. Unfortunately, it will get them closer to hell. As Psalm 146:8 in the New Testament affirms: “The Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous.” Staying blind to the lord is an affliction that Culla must overcome if he is to prevail over his despair.

Similar to Dante’s and Virgil’s crossing of the river Acheron into the hell, Culla and a horseman are taken across the river by a ferryman. The journey across the river begins tranquilly but soon the water is “beginning to boil against the hull” and the “dark and oily [river] tended away into nothing” (164). Within minutes the surf runs out of control, snapping the ferry’s cable, and both men and the horse are killed, leaving Culla as the lone survivor. Culla is soon pulled to the shore by three evil men McCarthy describes as an evil triune:

One was holding a rifle loosely in one hand and picking his teeth. The other stood with long arms dangling at his sides, slightly stooped his jaw hanging and mouth agape in a slavering smile . . . the third one . . . was dressed in a dark and

shapeless suit that could not have buttoned across his chest and he wore a shirt with some kerchief or rag knotted at the neck. His face scowled redly out of a great black beard. (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 170-71)

Before we are introduced to these characters, their exploits become notoriously intertwined with Culla's fate: "these figures intersect with Culla, leaving behind them atrocious deeds for which Culla is inevitably blamed" (Arnold 49). Before these ominous men find a weary Culla in the broken barge on the banks of the river, they kill both Squire Salter and the snake charmer, the latter of which believes the leader of the triune is a minister. Why this trio does not kill Culla as they do every other person they encounter can only be explained by Culla's need either to repent and find God or to stay on his current path. For whatever reason, Culla still may be worthy of salvation.

Upon pulling Culla from the broken barge, Harmon, the leader of the triune, tells Culla that they have been waiting all day for him to arrive as if they are already aware of his sins and have been called upon to help him confront his guilt. Harmon tells the other members of the triune: "He's the one set the skiff adrift this morning . . . even if it just drifted off he still done it. I knowed they's a reason. We waiting all day and half the night. I kept up a good fire. You seen it didn't ye?" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 178). Similar to Dante, who attempts to climb to the light of the sun after losing his way, Culla is drawn to the light of the triune's fire. It is as if these evil men have a God-given purpose to serve as judge and jury regarding Culla's sin. The triune leads Culla to their campsite and forces him to partake in an ominous feast of flesh to seal their communion of evil sin: "Culla reached gingerly and took a piece of the blackened meat from the pan and bit into it. It had the consistency of whang, was dusted with ash, tasted of sulphur. Culla "began chewing, his jaws working in a hopeless circular motion" (172). The fact that it is dusted

with ash is a possible reference to Ash Wednesday, suggesting that Culla is forever breaking his Catholic communion with God in favor of the bitter taste of the flesh. The fact that his jaws are working in a “hopeless circular motion” may remind readers of sinners in *Inferno* who travel endlessly in their punishment and who are beyond the realm of salvation, especially the circular chewing of Satan’s three mouths (*Inferno* 34).

The triune is also keenly aware of Culla’s sin and questions him about what he is running away from. One of the men ask Culla, “How come ye to run your sister off?” to which Culla responds, “I never.” But the man continues, “How come her to run off?” Culla responds, “I don’t know. She just run off” (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 178). Thus faced with absolving himself in the face of true evil, Culla chooses to deny his lustful affliction. This evil triune, with its three faces, can be seen as a blasphemous travesty of the Holy Trinity. Virgil describes the sinners in the three mouths of Satan to the pilgrim Dante: “That soul up there has the greatest punishment . . . who has his head inside and plies his legs without [Judas]. Of the other two who have their heads below, the one that hangs from the black muzzle is Brutus—see how he writhes and utters not a word—and the other Cassius, who looks so stalwart” (*Inferno* 23). Similarly, one of the evil triune is mute like Judas and the leader, Harmon, in his unwavering condemnation of Culla, is a Cassius-like figure.

When Culla crosses paths with this trio for the final time, they have killed the tinker and taken possession of Culla and Rinthy’s infant. One final time, they give Culla an opportunity to own his child and redeem his sin: “when he saw what figures warmed there . . . it was too late. He looked at the child. It had a healed burn all down one side of it and the skin was papery and wrinkled like an old man’s. . . . it was naked and half coated with dust” (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 231). This would indicate that, as when Culla consumed the blackened flesh with the ominous

trune, this child has been half spared, perhaps by Rinthy's devout faith that her child is alive. By devouring the infant which may be symbolic of Culla's lost soul, the evil triune becomes an instrument to bring Culla to judgment by consuming the child:

[The bearded member of the triune] took 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. It hung there with its one eye glazing over like a wet stone and the black blood pumping down its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. . . . The man handed him the child and he seized it up, looked once at Holme with witless eyes, and buried his moaning face in its throat. (236)

This scene bears similarities to Dante's vision of Lucifer in the ninth circle of *Inferno*: "With six eyes he was weeping and over three chins dripped tears and bloody foam. In each mouth he crushed a sinner with his teeth as with a heckle and thus he kept three of them in pain; to him in front the biting was nothing to the clawing, for sometimes the back was left all stripped of skin" (*Inferno* 23). Dante's description of the way Lucifer orally consumes the souls of the damned resembles the way the triune orally consumes the infant.

Just as the sins intensify as Dante descends into hell, sins intensify as Culla moves through McCarthy's hell. Both of these journeys begin with the protagonist awakening from a dream. Dante finds himself wandering alone in a dark forest, having lost his way on the "true path" (*Inferno* 1). He says that he does not remember how he lost his way, but he has wandered into a fearful place, a dark and tangled valley. He sees a great hill above him that seems to offer protection from the shadowed glen. The sun shines down from this hilltop, and Dante attempts to

climb toward the light. As he climbs, however, he encounters three angry beasts in succession—a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf—which force him to turn back. *Outer Dark* begins with Culla's dream:

There was a prophet standing in the square with arms upheld in exhortation to the beggared multitude gathered there. A delegation of human ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores. The sun hung on the cusp of the eclipse and the prophet spoke to them . . . And the dreamer himself was caught up among the supplicants and when they had been blessed and the sun begun to blacken he did push forward and hold up his hand and call out. Me, he cried. Can I be cured? The prophet looked down as if surprised to see him there amidst such pariahs. The sun paused. He said: Yes, I think perhaps you will be cured. (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 5)

Culla is definitely not cured by the end of his journey so McCarthy's novel's premise is that a world without hope is steeped in complete darkness and despair. This message of Christian salvation is a theme in *Outer Dark* that is reflected in the title which comes directly from the eighth chapter of Matthew:

Jesus comments on the faith shown by the centurion at Capernaum, who has said, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. Truly, I say to you not even in Israel have I found such faith,' Jesus responds. 'I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom of heaven will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Arnold 46)

Thus, man has two options: the potential kingdom of heaven through purgatory or the permanent darkness of hell depicted by Dante. Culla feels that he is outside of God's protection because he has no faith that God will forgive him for fathering a child through incest, and this plants a seed of darkness in his soul that grows with each opportunity he has to confess but does not.

Culla and Rinthy Holme's differing ways of internalizing and externalizing their sin explain their diverging paths throughout *Outer Dark*. Though we are led to believe that Culla and Rinthy's journeys occur in the same geographical area, they never cross paths or converge, suggesting they are traveling in different metaphysical planes. Culla and Rinthy wander endless circular paths just like the sinners in *Inferno*. McCarthy emphasizes this circular motion throughout the novel. Rinthy, setting out on her journey, "pirouetted slowly in the center of the room like a doll unwinding" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 53). The two itinerant millhands who are found hanging in a tree "spun slowly in turn from left to right and back again" (95). Jaws move in a "hopeless circular motion" (172). When Rinthy finds the charred bones of her child, she "trailed her rags through dust and ashes, circling the dead fire" (237).

Further suggesting Culla's and Rinthy's divergent journeys are the ways in which each is treated by the other characters they meet. James Giles notes: "Throughout the novel, Rinthy receives much less condemnation than Culla. . . . whatever the circumstances of his incestuous act with Rinthy, Culla's abandoning the child in the forest is a deliberate action, not a result of passion or of a cowardly fear of discovery" (96-97). Therefore, Culla has an added sin to bear beyond his and Rinthy's initial act of incest. Culla is also guilty of attempted murder.

Even if Culla is unwilling to admit to his transgressions, Rinthy does so unabashedly, attempting to make reparations for their combined act of wanton lust. When Rinthy is confronted by a doctor who wants to know why she is still lactating if she has never nursed or

seen her infant, she tells him: “I never meant for him to do that. I wasn’t ashamed. He said it died but I knowed that for a lie. He lied all the time” (156). In her statement, Rinthy acknowledges Culla’s shame as well as her lack of it. Because *Outer Dark* begins long after Culla and Rinthy have intercourse, we cannot do not see enough of the siblings’ relationship to know if Rinthy was raped or coerced into sex by Culla or if she was a willing participant in the act and feels no shame because she genuinely loves her brother. Rinthy may not understand that incest goes against both man’s and God’s law. Rinthy does understand that her child’s life is more valuable than denying her and Culla’s incest, something Culla continually denies. This is why Culla’s and Rinthy’s journeys diverge. Culla’s continual denial of his own sin leads to his descent into hell while Rinthy is given the chance of redemption because she can admit her transgressions.

This may be why in several instances through her journey Rinthy is met with seemingly unlimited charity. The first people Rinthy meets are a family that welcomes her in to take dinner with them and offer her a bath and a place to sleep for the night. When Rinthy is set to leave, the woman implores her to stay with them: “Your welcome to take dinner with us, the woman said.” Rinthy refuses their offer: “I thank ye . . . but I reckon I’ll be going on.” The family then extends a future invitation: “Do you ever pass this way again just stay with us” (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 72). When Rinthy meets a husband and wife further on, the man tells her: “Honey . . . I think you better get in out of the sun. Go on to the house and tell my old woman I said you was to take dinner with us” (102). When the husband and wife begin to quarrel, Rinthy runs from the home and immediately comes across an old woman carrying a hoe who tells her: “I’ve not been a-hoein. This here is just to kill snakes with . . . I don’t hold with breakin the sabbath and don’t care to associate with them that does” (109). Obviously a God-fearing woman, the old woman

questions whether Rinthy has been saved and is therefore a Christian, she offers to feed Rinthy: “I got fresh cornbread from yesterday evenin and a pot of greens and fatmeat if you’re hungry a-tall. Give you a glass of cool buttermilk anyway” (111). Seeing that Rinthy is in pain, the old woman even offers to give Rinthy medical attention: “You best grease them paps . . . I got some I’ll give ye” (114). The doctor Rinthy seeks out also offers her charitable medical attention: “Look, let me give you this salve . . . I want you to put this on good and heavy and keep it on all the time. If it wears off put more . . . come back in a couple of days and tell me how you’re doing” (155).

Luce also observes the obvious differences between the environments traversed by Culla and Rinthy: “Culla travels in a soundless void [but] Rinthy moves in an amnion of light that seems frail and circumscribed but just enough to shield her from outer dark. This light suggests her potential escape from darkness” (80-81). While Culla wanders in a constant state of fear, meeting characters who pass judgment or threaten him, Rinthy is always met with kindness and concern. Arnold notes that Culla’s and Rinthy’s journeys are circular, yet, with the exception of the tinker, they never encounter the same characters. Rinthy’s journey both begins and ends in the glade where she initially discovered the empty grave of her infant. Similarly, Culla crosses paths twice with the evil triune and continually crosses paths with the blind man, suggesting that McCarthy intentionally structured *Outer Dark* to reflect the circular patterns of Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatory*. Luce also notes “the differing experiences of Culla and Rinthy as they travel the ‘same’ surreal world.” She adds that the “‘dream roads’ in *Outer Dark*, like Dante’s visions of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, are metaphors for states of spirit whether it be the frail and grief-stricken grace of Rinthy or the hounded guilt and denial of Culla” (63). Thus, *Outer*



*Dark* in its surreal dream environment becomes a metaphor for man's lost wandering should he not achieve contrition.

Luce further states that the surrealistic imagery of *Outer Dark* frequently suggests not only that the novel occurs in a dreamscape but that the 'real' characters Culla confronts are also figures who wander in a metaphysical dream (62), much like Dante's dreamer/narrator. The hope of redemption is the main theme of the novel, not a thematic nihilism that some scholars perceive. As Arnold observes, Culla becomes lost "in the dark wood on the edge of hell after abandoning his child" (54). It is this unforgivable act of violence that becomes the cause of Culla's damnation. Arnold also points out that in McCarthy's "highly moralistic world, sins must be named and owned before they can be forgiven" (65). After Culla partakes in communion with the triune they question him about his name and he answers: "You've set there and dried and warmed and et but you've not said your name. Holme, Holme said. Holme, the man repeated. The word seemed to feel bad in his mouth. He jerked his head vaguely toward the one with the rifle. That'n ain't got a name, he said" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 174). Arnold's statement becomes particularly profound with the realization that the infant does not have a name. A member of the triune asks Culla: "What's his name?" Culla responds: "He ain't got nary'n" (236). The infant is the literal embodiment of Culla's sin but the child and Culla's sin are neither named nor owned by Culla. Even though Culla is given ample opportunity to consider his path via those he meets, he does not: Squire Salter, the beehiver, the snake charmer and the evil triune all ask Culla where he is going or where he has just been. Directions are an important aspect in Dante's *Divine Comedy* as well. Virgil often asks for directions in *Inferno* and at every level of *Purgatorio*, sometimes using the sun as a compass. However, this is not an option for Culla, who through most of the novel is enveloped in darkness.

The dreamlike journeys of Culla and Rinthy Holme are void of any concrete time frame. Time transcends months and even seasons between the chapters of *Outer Dark*. However, Culla's and Rinthy's encounters with the tinker may provide a timeline for their arrival at each level of McCarthy's hell and purgatory. Even though the chapters of *Outer Dark* alternate between Culla's and Rinthy's experiences, this structure is not necessarily coterminous. In the early chapters of *Outer Dark*, Culla meets a snake charmer who hunts snakes for a living and "wouldn't turn Satan away for a drink" (117). In later chapters Rinthy meets an old crone who despises snakes and "don't hold with breakin the Sabbath and don't care to associate with them that does" (109). Furthermore, early in the novel Rinthy meets a family that raises hogs and announces to her that they "eat what they have a mind to" and "ain't never had nothing but don't care to get just whatever to eat" (60). Dante's gluttons are compared to hogs (*Inferno* 6), but Rinthy encounters the gluttonous much earlier than Culla meets the gluttonous hog drovers who crave unwarranted revenge.

In Dante's dream of sin and penitence we find that punishment is eternal and that it fits the particular sin on each level of *Inferno*. Likewise, in *Outer Dark*, Culla is punished in many different respects throughout his journey. When Culla seeks out shelter in a seemingly abandoned cabin, he is found and detained by the owner's son without trial. He is then sentenced to hard labor without pay on a local constable's farm as a reparation for his trespass. As Luce states, "this scene extends the novel's exploration of guilt, false and true judgment, and expiation" (128). Even though the punishment for Culla's literal trespass is to work out his fine on the constable's farm for ten days at fifty cents a day plus room and board, his immoral sexual transgression still needs to be acknowledged. After the ten days of slaving on the constable's farm, Culla nearly pleads with him to let Culla continue working for him; however, the constable

refuses his offer. Culla is much like the sinners in Dante's *Inferno* who are eager to board the ferry to hell. In Canto 3 of Dante's *Inferno*, Virgil explains to Dante: "And ready are they to pass o'er the river, because celestial Justice spurs them on, so that their fear is turned into desire." Thus, we can view Culla's eagerness to accept his fate at the hands of judgment as his refusal of grace and redemption as well as his acceptance of damnation.

Even if she tries to conceal the incest she was party to, Rinthy's constantly lactating breasts are testament to her involvement in the act of incest. Rinthy never denies her child's existence when asked why she is on her journey and always responds unapologetically, admitting: "He was took from me. A chap. I'm a-huntin him" (113). In *Inferno*, "the lustful's offence is not at all the natural impulse of sex, but that they 'subject reason to desire'" (*Inferno* 2). The sinners in the second circle of *Inferno* are compared to birds, as is Rinthy, whom "butterflies attended . . . birds dusting the road did not fly up when she passed" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 98). Because Rinthy may be ignorant that she has sinned at all, she would be worthy of redemption according to Paul the Apostle in I Corinthians: "if any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of the world is folly with God" (3:18-19). Rinthy admits that "she wasn't ashamed" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 156) at giving birth to an unwanted child, and her unwavering love and hope of finding him is always met with kindness and compassion from the characters she discovers on her journey. When Rinthy sees a doctor to relieve her breasts that "smart a good bit" (153), the doctor is impressed by Rinthy's love for a baby she has never seen. The doctor tells Rinthy that it is impossible that after six months she still bears milk for a dead baby she has never nursed. Rinthy responds excitedly and then he answers: "If he was dead. That's what you said wasn't it? . . . That means he ain't dead or I'd of gone dry. Ain't it? Well, the doctor said. But something

half wild in her look stopped him. Yes, he said. That could be what it means. Yes” (154-55).

Even though she is humiliated and in pain at the loss of her child, Rinthy’s love for him compels her never to give up hope that he is alive. Paul the Apostle states: “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things . . . so faith, hope, love abide these three; but the greatest of these is love” (13:7). Similarly, the structure of Dante’s *Purgatorio* is based on love: “the first three terraces relate to perverted love, the fourth terrace relates to deficient love, and the last three relate to excessive or disordered love of good things” (Sayers 65).

Obviously, Culla’s journey is not based in love, even love for his sister. Readers can also interpret Culla’s sexual deviance as deliberate, shameless, and illegal by man’s laws. Liley notes: “One odd—and suggestive—thing about the novel is that Culla, who responds so vehemently to the birth of his and his sister Rinthy’s baby, has not seemed to mind committing incest in the first place” (128). Even Luce argues that Culla’s lascivious behavior later in the novel makes it probable that his and Rinthy’s sexual deviance was not consensual and that Culla has sexually assaulted his sister: “When Culla finds Rinthy digging up the false grave of their child, and ‘his long shadow overrode her’—[this] passage reflects his original sin of sexual assault against her” (77). In a scene in which Culla is painting a barn roof, it seems that his deep lust is reactivated as he watches a young girl hanging her laundry:

Through the haze of the heat rising from the roof he watched the girl come and go from the house . . . the shape of her breasts pulling against the cloth. Paint seeped from the uplifted handle down his poised wrist. He scraped it away with one finger and slapped the paint out of the butt of the brush. He watched her go in again. (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 92)

It is obvious that Culla has not learned from the consequences of his previous act of lust and cannot control his wanton desire. Culla's awareness of his sin and continual attempts to deny it and cover it up by leaving the newborn in a wooded glade to die makes Culla similar to those who commit violence against others. In Dante's *Inferno*, Virgil hesitates when he is making reference to the effect of the thrill of "love" on the material order of the universe," indicating "the incapacity of reason for coping with the redemptive operation of grace" (*Inferno* 9). Culla was clearly affected by the thrill of love for Rinthy, but he is also clearly ignorant about how to achieve redemptive grace. Culla's deviant love for his sister overtakes and replaces his love of God. Culla remains entirely focused on covering up the evidence of his lustful sin instead of repenting for it and looking to the Lord for guidance and absolution. Culla is the embodiment of spiritual blindness and despair which is the one unredeemable sin. James Liley states: "So extreme was Culla's despair that it is as if he has suffered not a change of heart but a change of ontological status between his incestuous coupling and his son's birth" (129). Because *Outer Dark* begins with the birth of Culla's and Rinthy's child, we cannot be certain that Culla was not always an unremorseful sinner.

Culla's constant refusal to admit his mortal sin renders his redemption futile. At the end of *Outer Dark*, Culla is standing at the edge of a swamp at the head of a dead-end road: "Before him stretched into a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in the landscape of the damned" (McCarthy 142). This description of the environment that surrounds Culla is similar to Dante's depiction of Cocytus, where "every traitor is consumed eternally" (Canto 34) at the ninth lowest circle of *Inferno*. Every sinner at this lowest level of hell is surrounded by the damned frozen in ice: "There were the shades that were covered completely, and showed up like straws in glass. Some lying flat,

and some of them upright, one on his head, another on his feet; Another like a bow, bent foot to face” (*Inferno* 34), much like the hominoid-like figures McCarthy describes in his hell. At this point there is no hope for Culla’s soul or any chance of redemption. Rinthy’s hope of recovering her child is a redemptive force, but Culla’s despair leads him to eternal damnation in hell.

Their infant is also a symbolic embodiment of Culla’s soul. When the tinker finds the abandoned infant in the glade it is half dead and is in dire need of nutrition. The tinker takes the child to a “nurse woman” who asks him where the child came from. He responds, “I found it in the woods. . . . It’d been thrown away and I found it.” The nurse woman tells him, “this poor thing needs fed” (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 22). The child becomes a metaphor for the state of Culla’s and Rinthy’s souls. When Culla finds the infant, it has been captured by the evil triune. Half of the child is scarred, burned and blind while the other half is well and whole, indicating the bifurcated state of Culla’s lost soul that has abandoned morality in favor of lust and denial to Rinthy’s enlightened and forgiven soul.

Even though there are obvious Dantean overtones in *Outer Dark* that reveal an overt Christian message, Luce acknowledges that there is a debate about the metaphysical grounding of McCarthy’s pivotal novel. Some scholars, such as Luce, claim that *Outer Dark*, like most of McCarthy’s Tennessee novels, are imbued in Gnosticism; other scholars, such as Vereen Bell contend that these novels, especially *Outer Dark*, are thematically nihilistic. Gnostic thought is based upon the idea that human souls are trapped within a physical world and that the only way to exist outside of this world is through gnosis, the experience or knowledge of God which some scholars suggest Culla and Rinthy lack. However, Arnold suggests that Rinthy’s name is a shortened version of Corinthians from the Bible, which would indicate that she and Culla’s parents had some knowledge or awareness of religious doctrine (48), and that this was passed

down, in some, part to their children. There are also indications that Culla is fully aware of his sin against Christianity. When Culla is threatened with the hogs' stampede, he "rushed to higher ground like one threatened with flood" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 218), as if he feels the threat of pending doom, much like the deluge in the Bible with which God intended to return the earth to its pre-Creation state and cleanse the humanity he created.

Even though Vereen Bell argues that *Outer Dark* is nihilistic because it is "devoid of conventional plot, theme or moral reference" (43), many biblical references and religious metaphors throughout McCarthy's novel suggest otherwise. Nihilism rejects all religious and moral principles in favor of the thought that life is meaningless and mankind is wandering hopelessly for meaning in his existence. Bell argues that Culla is "demoralized and displaced by his own guilt, is without hope, feeling, motive, or direction" (35). Culla's soul is definitely lost at the end of *Outer Dark* due to his inability to admit his sin which results in the loss of his son's life. The novel is much like a modern version of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Through the characters of Rinthy and Culla Holme and the characters they encounter, readers see that everyone has the opportunity to seek redemption in acknowledging and repenting for their sins. A typical reader of *Outer Dark* may consider Culla or Rinthy's sin(s) mitigated by their circumstances. After all, they are extremely poor and barely able to feed and sustain themselves in the harsh world in which they live. Having a newborn infant to care for would be difficult at best. Also, Culla does not physically murder his infant; he abandons him. Comparing these transgressions to those of Lester Ballard, the protagonist in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*, one might not fully comprehend why Culla would be condemned to hell while a serial killer and necrophiliac could find a place in paradise. However, in the latter novel, McCarthy shows how a repentant man can be forgiven his sins no matter how severe they are.

## COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND *CHILD OF GOD*

McCarthy's placement of Lester Ballard in a position of Biblical martyrdom suggests that as long as his sins are acknowledged and redeemed he can be forgiven for his past wrongs: sexually exploiting a corpse, arson, and murder. McCarthy's placement of Lester Ballard in such an intimate position with respect to God is absurd but the irony compels readers to contemplate their own perception of spirituality and may beg the question of whether God exists at all, especially considering Lester's ability to reconcile his horrific actions and achieve full contrition. Furthermore, some readers may not agree with McCarthy's placement of such a vile character in such close juxtaposition to anything holy, let alone God's only son. Some might say that a just God would demand a harsher end to Lester Ballard than the novel offers. The fact that Lester is free to live out the remainder of his life in relative harmony at a mental institution while his victims and their families remain unavenged might lead some to conclude McCarthy is denying the existence of a divine deity altogether.

A close analysis of McCarthy's text demonstrates that even the most horrific transgressions can be overcome to gain a place in heaven with a forgiving God. McCarthy's ability to elicit compassion and sympathy for Lester Ballard through Ballard's consistent attempts to be a functioning part of his community, and despite his constant rejection by others, reminds us to be open-hearted and compassionate with those whom we may initially deem unworthy.

After Lester is forcibly removed from his family home, he moves into an abandoned cabin just outside of the town of Sevier County. On an abandoned road near this cabin he encounters two teenagers, a young man and woman, who are parked on a deserted road. The dead bodies are victims of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning while fornicating. This first



body Lester acquires is practically given to him by accident, or possibly, by fate. To say Lester “rapes” the girl he finds in the car misinterprets Lester’s own needs for companionship. Even though Lester violates the dead girl’s corpse, Lester is not acting out of a need to be violent but rather a need for companionship (Arnold 55). Lester’s decision to take advantage of the situation by having intercourse with the girl is initially to fulfill his unmet sexual needs. He does not defile the corpse of the dead girl, and one might even argue that Lester, in his compromised psychological state, loved her: “He poured into that waxen ear everything he’d ever thought of saying to a woman” (McCarthy, *Child of God* 88). Lester does with the decaying corpse what he imagines love to be: “He sat and brushed her hair . . . he undid the top of the lipstick and screwed it out and began to paint her lips. He would arrange her in different positions and go out and peer in the window at her. After a while he just sat holding her” (102-03).

Lester’s necrophilic experience is consistent with the patriarchal dominating conduct of others in Lester’s community as when Lester witnesses the dump keeper raping his daughter. Lester happens to see the girl and an unnamed boy having intercourse in the woods when her father, the dump keeper, catches them. The angry dump keeper beats his daughter with a stick, loses his balance and falls on top of her: “they sprawled together in the leaves . . . next thing he knew his overalls were about his knees. He pulled it out and gripped it and squirted his jissom on her thigh. Goddamn you, he said” (27-28). Deviant sexual behavior seems normal to Lester, who on at least two separate occasions catches young couples copulating in a car parked on a road. Lester’s necrophilic exploit with the dead girl is tender and, perhaps, more acceptable than the behaviors of those Lester discovers in Sevier County. He too has lustful impulses but sex, alone, is not the basis for his actions. Lester demonstrates that he has the capacity to care deeply

even when his feelings are not returned. He uses the little money he has to purchase a new dress for the corpse he brings home even though the girl has no ability to actively return his affection.

Thus, McCarthy represents a tender side to Lester Ballard through his attempts to create meaningful relationships. When Lester comes across a woman sleeping under a tree wearing nothing but a nightgown, his first reaction is not to take advantage of her compromised state and humiliate or hurt her as would someone acting out of pure lust and patriarchal dominance. Instead he inquires, “ain’t you cold? Where are your clothes at?” (42), essentially giving her the empathy he is lacking. Lester is not aware that he is violating social norms when he walks up to and scares the half-naked woman. Thus, the woman responds angrily and hits Lester with a rock. Beyond slapping the woman after she tries to harm him, Lester does not touch the woman, yet she falsely accuses him of raping her, which lands him in jail. It is ironic that wherever Lester goes his empathy is never returned but is met with hostility and humiliation by members of the community; therefore, he is essentially antagonized until he eventually loses this empathy for others and becomes a cold-blooded murderer.

According to Erik Hage, McCarthy’s intention is to establish Lester as an innocuous character through these chance happenings in which he ends up the victim: “Lester is seeking the sensual world from which he is locked out, and readers may find it troubling that he is not represented as a psychotic at this stage but simply as a hopeless outcast and weirdo” (57). Lester becomes a bystander in a community where he is not welcome. He makes several attempts to create his own group on a small scale, even using his exceptional shooting ability at the Sevier County Fair to build a small community: “When he had won two bears and a tiger and a small audience the pitchman took the rifle away from him. That’s it for you, buddy, he said” (McCarthy, *Child of God* 64). As Lester makes his way through the crowd with his stuffed

plunder, a woman exclaims: “They lord look at what all he’s won” (65). This is one of the few moments Lester receives positive attention from the townspeople and it stirs emotions within Lester that he has never experienced: pride and companionship.

However, these moments of acceptance are rare and when Lester tries to socialize and become an active part of the religious community by attending church services, he is made to feel unwelcome: “Ballard came in with his hat in his hand and sat alone on the rear bench . . . a windy ruffle of whispers went among them. Ballard had a cold and snuffled loudly through the service but nobody expected he would stop if God himself looked back askance so no one looked” (31-32). Lester’s behavior in a place of worship is comical but not necessarily immoral. Yet, the people in the congregation vilify his informality as a basis for withholding communion. Sevier’s religious charity stops short with Lester and, ironically, Lester is ostracized in the one place that is specifically intended for spiritual guidance and acceptance.

Ashley Lancaster’s *From Frankenstein's Monster to Lester Ballard: The Evolving Gothic Monster* concludes that “although God may have created Lester, the townspeople create the main version of Lester that the reader encounters” (140). Most of the novel is narrated by the townspeople of Sevier and it is through their recollections that Lester’s grisly history is constructed. Their gossip establishes the young Lester as a tormentor of his schoolmates, a behavior that continues through to his rebellious adulthood. As one of Sevier’s townspeople states, “he never was right after his daddy killed hisself” (21). Thus, Lester is classified as an “other” at a very early age. Because Lester’s story is recounted in a retrospective testimony much like the gospels of the Bible, the townspeople piece together a version of Lester that “makes him seem like a creature of disorder and displacement” (140), and not the “child of God” McCarthy leads us to envision. In an odd sense, the people of Sevier look at Lester’s horrific history as a

way to justify their own sins which, by comparison, are fairly benign. Since the community members can “trace him back to Adam,” Lester’s past is very much intertwined with their own and his haunting saga makes the otherwise unknown town legendary. It is paradoxical that the man the townspeople disowned while he was alive becomes a local celebrity after his death.

Perhaps the need to see Lester as a lost and misunderstood soul is a function of the position McCarthy places him in as a modern-day martyr, much like Jesus Christ. McCarthy meticulously draws parallels between Lester’s journey at the end of the novel and Jesus Christ’s judgment and crucifixion in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John in the New Testament. This creates a perception that whatever transgressions were committed by Lester Ballard can be forgiven as long as contrition and redemption are achieved. As Arnold observes, “McCarthy’s characters are clearly motivated by those emotions we all share—love, loneliness, guilt, shame, hope, despair” (46), and these emotions are the basis for many lessons in both Dante’s *Inferno* and the New Testament. Therefore, characters such as Ballard and Culla and Rinthy Holme need to resolve these inner emotions and many times the only recourse is through an acknowledgement of a divine power. Steven Frye expands on this theory, stating, “in McCarthy’s novels . . . the world is rendered as a kind of purgatory, in which human beings struggle for a time but do so with the overwhelming sense that material existence shrouds a transcendent mystery” (7). The characters undergo a process of self-discovery and become aware that they are a small but significant piece of a divine plan.

At the beginning of *Child of God*, Lester has little awareness of how he fits in with his community. Events occur that leave him in various states of turmoil, such as his being forced from his lifelong home, the fire that leaves him homeless and consumes his corpse girlfriend, and the false accusations that lead to his incarceration. By the end of the novel, Lester has begun to

take a more active role in deciding his fate and in doing so becomes capable of understanding his role as one of God's children. Even though Lester does not actually kill the young couple he finds on the deserted road, this chance occurrence initiates the series of events that lead to his atonement. He discovers through his "relationship" with the asphyxiated young lady that he has the ability to create his own community by amassing corpses, but he eventually realizes that these actions run counter to social norms. Even though Lester Ballard and Culla Holme are guilty of sins of the flesh, Lester's sin is grounded in his need for companionship while Culla's sin is based solely on a narcissistic need of self-fulfillment. Even the tinker refers to Culla's lust as a disease. He tells Rinthy: "Cause I knowed. Sickness. He's got a sickness" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 193). Lester's desires begin to take on a physical manifestation and, at the height of his madness, he dresses up as a female in "frightwig and skirts," the wig "fashioned whole from a dried human scalp" (McCarthy, *Child of God* 172-73), attempts to kill Greer, the man who purchased his home, and gets his arm blown off. Lester is deemed mentally unsound and taken to the Sevier County Mental Facility, where a nurse asks him whether he feels remorse for his actions: "What about the man you shot? Don't you even want to know if he's dead or alive?" Lester answers, "Yes I do. . . . I wish the son of a bitch was dead" (175). Unlike Culla, Lester makes no attempt to cover up his guilt, and even though he is indifferent, self-absorbed and bitter, this is the first instance in which he appears empowered enough to take charge of his own fate and reclaim his status as a member of his community. But, in the following chapters of *Child of God*, as Lester faces judgment from the people in his community for the crimes he has committed, he again becomes a helpless victim of circumstance.

Several situations in *Child of God* reference, either literally or metaphorically, the Old and New Testament and symbolically place Lester in the role of Jesus Christ. The most profound

instance is at the end of *Child of God* after Lester is taken from the Sevier County Mental Hospital by a vigilante group who want to bring him to justice for the sin of murder: “They raised him up and pushed him toward the door and closed ranks behind him” (178). Dressed in a hospital gown, Lester is led to the Tennessee caves so he can lead the men to the bodies he is accused of killing. Lester is forced to change out of his clothes and into “a pair of overalls and an army shirt” (179), just as Jesus was led to Golgotha (which means place of the skull) by soldiers who “took his garments and divided them into four parts” (John 19:23). Thus begins Lester’s judgment in the eyes of God.

In The Gospel of Luke, which details Christ’s crucifixion, Christ is offered vinegar mixed with gall (a liquid that is supposed to ease his pain as he is nailed to the cross), which he does not drink (Matthew 27:34). Similarly, one of Lester’s captors utters: “they ain’t got him doped up have they . . . I’d hate for him not to know what was happening to him” (McCarthy, *Child of God* 183). For Lester’s atonement to occur, he also has to feel the full weight of his sins. At one point “Ballard slipped once and was caught up and helped on” (183), just as Jesus is caught when he slips carrying his cross through the mountainous terrain (Matthew 26:39). The similarities between Lester’s moment of judgment and that of Jesus are not accidental and serve as a moral compass for the reader. Identifying Lester Ballard with the compassionate figure of Jesus Christ evokes sympathy for this character.

After Lester eludes his captors in the mountain’s labyrinth of underground caves, he gets stuck between rocks of the underground cavern and, like Jesus Christ who also spent three days in hell before his resurrection on Easter Sunday (Acts 1:9-12), remains trapped like a prisoner of his own making: “For three days Ballard explored the cave . . . in an attempt to find another exit” (McCarthy, *Child of God* 187). The cave system that Lester inhabits and the river that runs

through it is symbolic of the underworld Hades and the River Styx, but it also resembles Lester's lost, blind, and constricted soul because he does not know which direction will lead him to stop suffering. McCarthy describes the cave's stalactites as "dripping limestone teeth"; its wet walls "with the soft-looking convolutions, slavered over as they were with wet and blood-red mud, had an organic look to them, like the innards of some great beast" (134-35). Confined to the underground, Lester is much like Jonah in the belly of Leviathan, unable without the assistance of "some brute midwife" (189) to deliver himself from his physical and spiritual captivity. Lester's three-day imprisonment in the cave, ending with a cathartic earthly resurrection, is an ironic reflection of Christ's prophecy that "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). As such, *Child of God* suggests that Lester has the potential for receiving a merciful resurrection of spirit, but the imagery of Jonah and the whale suggests Lester must overcome his spiritual oblivion as well (Luce 156-57). The lesson to be drawn from Jonah's story is that true repentance brings deliverance. Jonah proves worthy because he "does not weep and wail for direct deliverance" (Melville 9). Jonah feels that his punishment is just and leaves all his deliverance to God much as Lester does when he returns to the mental facility, admitting, "I'm supposed to be here" (McCarthy, *Child of God* 192). It is here that Lester acknowledges that there is something wrong with him and that he needs to be confined where he cannot hurt any more people. Perhaps this resignation is what leads to his redemption.

Both Jesus and Lester are allegorical figures who, through their experiences, attempt to teach important lessons. Steven Frye states: "in the Orthodox Christian tradition, Jesus is the divine everyman who unites in his person all spiritual virtues and all human attributes to demonstrate a pattern for righteous behavior to other humans" (58). Alternatively, Lester may be

viewed as an evil everyman who embodies all of our fears about human nature. Therefore, *Child of God* suggests that there can be no salvation from evil because evil is part of our innate human nature, but that we also have the ability to repent of our blindness to evil, whether it is in the external world or staring at us in the mirror.

God is often an abstract idea in McCarthy's works, as if he wants the reader to see the entity of God as an enigma, an existential force mankind needs to cling to in order to make sense out of and give purpose to life. By putting Lester in the role of Jesus, McCarthy confirms that none of us are beyond redemption, even the most "evil" human being. Perhaps because of McCarthy's skill in portraying Lester as a religious martyr readers adopt a Christian perception of him, much like Plainfield Methodist minister Kenneth Engelman who gives Ed Gein spiritual counseling after his incarceration for killing two women in his hometown of Plainfield, Wisconsin and fashioning trophies from the bones of corpses Gein stole from a local graveyard. When Reverend Engelman visits Gein in the Wautoma County jail, he enters his cell and comments on how difficult the situation is for Mr. Gein. Hearing this, Gein begins to cry. Later Reverend Engelman explains to the press that he went to see Gein because he felt "Gein was in need of spiritual counsel," adding: "I'm a Christian minister and Mr. Gein is a child of God. . . . God may be nearer to Mr. Gein than the rest of us because God comes closer to people in dealings with life and death. Mr. Gein is closer to such things than the rest of us" (Luce 146). This compassion for a man whose behavior seems beyond all human understanding is echoed in the novel's title and McCarthy's treatment of the perverse Lester Ballard as no more or less than God's damaged child and disturbingly lost soul in need of spiritual guidance (146).

It takes Lester much of his life to find his place among God's children, and because of McCarthy's penchant to meditate upon and problematize the normative boundaries of



Christianity in his texts, he has often been labeled as Gnostic, one who understands God through experience and understanding. Frye explains Gnostic teaching as follows:

Human souls are imprisoned in a material realm dominated by archons, lesser and malevolent deities who created man to trap elements of the divine with the physical world. These archons owe their origin to a larger force of evil known as the demiurge. Apprehension of the immaterial cause of the universe, the divine good, which exists outside the material, is achieved only through Gnosis, the experience of knowledge of God. Evil, then, is a dominant force in the world. (5)

This perspective is obvious in *Outer Dark* as Culla becomes consumed by a material world in which he remains blind. Because the townspeople of Sevier County neither recognize Lester's potential as a child of God nor acknowledge their kinship with him, he is by all accounts a lost soul in a community that is missing the Gnostic's compassion for humankind's tragic position within the world that is alienated from God (168).

After three days of rain and floodwaters force Lester to ascend into the Tennessee mountains, he begins to feel his disenfranchisement from society: "He left the old wagonroad where it went through the gap and took a path that he himself kept, going across the face of the mountain to review the country that he'd once inhabited" (169). Lester overlooks the valley observing "the diminutive progress of all things . . . fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow, green occlusion that the trees were spreading" (170). At this point Lester begins to cry, "consumed by his newfound awareness that his life is moving against the grain of all thriving, living things" (Hage 41). Lester's awareness that he is no longer part of his former community sparks a malevolent bitterness for revenge. Arnold observes that it is only after Lester loses "everything else that he begins to lose himself" (55). He then attempts to take the

life of John Greer, the man who purchased Lester's family home and incited the events that lead to Lester's being completely ostracized by the community members of his home town.

After Lester escapes from his captors, physically descends into the underground caverns, and spends three days trapped inside of the earth, he emerges from the caves a changed man. We witness a deep soulfulness arising out of him that is not present in the anti-social hillbilly at the beginning of the novel. Until he spent three days in the caves in reflection, Lester is a lost soul unworthy of God's forgiveness (Arnold 54). As Lester finds a narrow passage to the upper world, the image of birth is appropriate, for the Lester who emerges above ground is changed and reborn: "He'd cause to wish and he did wish for some brute midwife to spald him from his rocky keep. . . . He cast about among the stars for some kind of guidance" (McCarthy, *Child of God* 189-90).

Lester has reached a full sense of contrition. He has been judged and determined by God to be worthy of forgiveness and can begin his journey of soulful peace. After Lester emerges from the caves a new man, a church bus passes in the night, and he shares a moment with a young boy looking out the window: "There was nothing there to see but [the boy] was looking anyway. As he went by he looked at Ballard and Ballard looked back" (91). Ballard finally sees himself through the eyes of another person and recognizes how lost he is; Lester finally repents. A lost and forsaken wanderer, much like any human, Lester has finally taken possession of and acknowledged his sins of necrophilia and murder. Arnold notes: "In *Child of God*, Lester Ballard arguably faces his guilt with a courage not shown by Culla Holme. He identifies himself as Culla can never do" (57). Perhaps this is because by the end of *Child of God*, Lester is no longer leading a passive life in which his community largely determines his self-worth. Even though

Lester's later activity is steeped in violence, he is taking an active role in determining his future which leads to his later epiphany. Culla, by comparison, remains passive and full of despair.

Although McCarthy considers philosophical perspectives from a number of religious traditions, his strict Catholic upbringing emphasizes, through biblical typology, a domain where people and communities undergo a spiritual test. Much like Christ who is tempted by Satan for forty days, McCarthy's characters often find themselves in a wilderness of spiritual trial and transformation (Frye 8). The final scenes of *Child of God*, which show Lester's catharsis, give closure: justice has been carried out with Lester's acknowledgement of his own evil actions. He at once knows he belongs in a mental facility where he can be of no harm to those around him. Lester's knowledge of right and wrong is not only apparent when he tells the nurse that "he belongs here" when he returns to the mental hospital, but it is also apparent when he acknowledges the abnormality of a fellow patient's cannibalism: "Ballard saw him from time to time as they were taken out for airing but he had nothing to say to a crazy man and the crazy man had long since gone mute with the enormity of his crimes" (McCarthy, *Child of God* 193).

## CONCLUSION

*Child of God* places all readers in Lester Ballard's shoes and, for a moment, gives them a sense of what it would feel like to be a social outcast, a deviant, and a martyr. By putting Lester in the role of a biblical martyr, McCarthy provokes a powerful image of undue and unrestrained judgment, which the self-righteous people of Sevier County invoke upon Lester, who in all respects is a consequence of their abandonment. But by placing such a deviant character in the role of Jesus Christ, scholars like Vereen Bell think that McCarthy is insinuating that a content life is possible without religion and that there is no spiritual rationalization for our suffering. Considered together, the main protagonists in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* contribute to a larger

concept of redemption that is closely tied to traditional Christian faith even if not to a specific deity. In a larger sense, McCarthy teaches us that humans are just sophisticated animals and are prone to animalistic urges that go against man's laws. Asked if he thinks "people was meaner than they are now" Sheriff Fate responds: "No, he said. I don't. I think people are the same from the day God first made one" (McCarthy, *Child of God* 168). Sheriff Fate then tells his deputy a story of a hermit who dressed in leaves and because of his strangeness was constantly taunted by members of the town. Sheriff Fate's story about the hermit could have very well been Lester's story because he has been alienated by his community as well. Even though Culla and Rinthy are not necessarily targets of their community they raise suspicions and are questioned about where they are going and why. For the most part, they are equally outcast in their world much like Lester Ballard. Near the beginning of *Outer Dark* Rinthy laments: "They ain't a soul in this world but what is a stranger to me" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 29). Like Lester, the Holmes have been denied the needed companionship and human interaction with the outside world.

McCarthy's initial statement that Lester is "a child of God, much like yourself perhaps," reminds readers that according to religious doctrine humans are all created in God's image. This statement leaves readers with the unsettling acknowledgment that we are spiritually connected to all the rapists, murderers, and necrophiles of the world. Humans are all fallible, born into a position of survival amid seemingly unsurmountable obstacles. Humankind is capable of as much love and compassion as it is capable of hatred and evil. Despite these difficult obstacles, the underlying messages from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the Old and New Testaments are in both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* but in a subverted and reconstructed manner: that no matter one's condition or inner affliction, there is always hope if one is not blind to it. Much like Dostoevsky, who emphasizes "the notion that God should not be seen primarily as an

otherworldly being who exists separate from his creation” (Frye 9), McCarthy’s texts remind readers of the importance of remembering that no matter their faults, they are all God’s children and the connections to their fellow humans are just as important as they are to God.

## Bibliography

- Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. Ed. John D. Sinclair. New York: Oxford UP, 1961. Print.
- Arnold, Edwin. "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness." *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Edwin Arnold and Diane Luce. U of Mississippi P, 1999: 45-69. Print.
- Evenson, Brian. "McCarthy and the use of Philosophy in the Tennessee Novels." *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Steven Frye. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013: 54-64. Print.
- Frye, Steven. "Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the art of Philosophy." *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013: 3-11. Print.
- Hage, Erik. *Cormac McCarthy: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. Print.
- Lancaster, Ashley Craig. "From Frankenstein's Monster to Lester Ballard: The Evolving Gothic Monster." *Midwest Quarterly* 49.2 (2008): 132-148. Academic Search Premier. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.
- Lane, Emily. "Hell on Earth: A Modern Day Inferno in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" (2010). *University of New Orleans Thesis and Dissertations*. Paper 1127.
- Luce, Dianne C. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2009. Print.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*. New York: Vintage, 1993. Print.
- . *Outer Dark*. New York: Vintage, 1993. Print.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick; or, the Whale*. Bybliotech, Web. August 2013.  
<http://books.google.com/books>

Sayers, Dorothy L. *The Divine Comedy 2: Purgatory*. New York: Penguin, 1955: 65–67. Print.

*The English Standard Version Bible*. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

## Vita

Tammy Sue Hanson is a native of Hancock, Wisconsin. She received her B.S. degree from the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point majoring in English and International Studies and minoring in Political Science and History. She currently resides in New Orleans, Louisiana.