

ANALYSIS

Outer Dark (1968)

Cormac McCarthy

(1933-)

“In 1968 Random House published *Outer Dark*, again to generally strong reviews. Thomas Lask, in the *New York Times*, wrote, ‘Cormac McCarthy’s second novel, *Outer Dark*, combines the mythic and the actual in a perfectly executed work of the imagination. He has made the fabulous real, the ordinary mysterious. It is as if Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *The Time of Man*, with its earthbound folkways and inarticulate people, had been mated with one of Isak Dineson’s gothic tales.’ Guy Davenport, in his *New York Times Book Review* article, also drew the connection to Dineson, adding, ‘Nor does Mr. McCarthy waste a single word on his characters’ thoughts. With total objectivity he describes what they do and records their speech. Such discipline comes not only from mastery over words but from an understanding wise enough and compassionate enough to dare to tell so abysmally dark a story.’

Walter Sullivan, another early supporter but also a consistently demanding critic of McCarthy, noted in *Sewanee Review*, ‘There is no way to overstate the power, the absolute literary virtuosity, with which McCarthy draws his scenes. He writes about the finite world with an accuracy so absolute that his characters give the impression of a universality which they have no right to claim.... It is the way of the good writer to find the universal in the particular, for finally it is the universal that he seeks. McCarthy, on the other hand, seems to love the singular for its own sake: he appears to seek out those devices and people and situations that will engage us by their very strangeness.’ He concluded, ‘There is no way to avoid grappling with the intractable reality that surrounds us. Even someone as extraordinarily gifted as McCarthy must pay the full price that his art demands.’ Other critics faulted McCarthy for his increasingly dense style and sometimes arcane vocabulary, which many of them continued to see as a bad imitation of Faulkner.”

Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, eds.
Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy
(U Mississippi 1993) 6

“According to [Vereen] Bell, *Outer Dark* (1968), McCarthy’s second novel, is ‘as brutally nihilistic as any serious novel written in this century in this un-nihilistic country.’ The world it represents is ‘an incoherent and unrationalized gestalt of mass and process, without design or purpose, unless it is that some demented and unapproachable God invisibly presides.’ Yet, as William J. Schafer first noted, the book’s title comes from the eighth chapter of Matthew, in which 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 with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’ Thus, there are two possibilities: the kingdom of heaven as well as the ‘outer darkness’ of hell....

Bell and others argue that, like most McCarthy characters, Culla has ‘virtually no thoughts’.... The extent of Culla’s guilt, and the impossibility of evading that guilt, is made clear after the child is born. Culla takes it into the ‘swampy forest’ near their cabin and leaves it to die in a glade of cottonwood trees’.... The idea of the ‘dark other self’ is more fully explored in McCarthy’s fourth novel, *Suttree*, but there the sense of some dreaded doppelgänger, the embodiment of secret horror, is carefully planted in our minds. Culla’s act is reprehensible, but his need to deny the child is understandable. It is not simply a cruel, mindless deed, and he is haunted by it. Thus, he creates a lie, telling Rinthy the child died after birth, that he has given it a proper burial.... He shows her a false grave to allay her suspicions, but later she digs into it to see the actual body and discovers his lie. When she looks to him, he turns *his* guilt onto *her*: ‘Now you really went and done it,’ he cries....

Surely the passages collected here reveal a tormented and divided soul, so weighed by his own sin and his need to conceal that sin that he interprets his sister's 'wonder' for 'accusation' and malicious 'invective'.... Once Rinthy finds her child is not dead, she goes off in search of it.... The story alternates between Culla's and Rinthy's travels and encounters. Rinthy, whose sole purpose is to find her child (for whom she continues to lactate even months after its disappearance) is constantly described in terms of innocence and even a kind of virginal purity.... She is at peace with nature, and it with her....

Rinthy's name is possibly a shortened version of 'Corinthians.' If so, it would indicate that her and Culla's parents had some knowledge or awareness of the Bible which the children seem to have lost. There are, moreover, numerous images in Paul's first letter to Corinthians which are appropriate to McCarthy's dolorous mater. 'But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men,' Paul writes, 'but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready, for you are still of the flesh' (I Cor. 3:1-3).

Rinthy is often described (unfairly, I think) as simple-minded, but, according to Paul, '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 this world is folly with God' (3:18-19). [This is a major theme in Melville's *Pierre*, 1852.] Finally, in this book is Paul's magnificent personification of love: '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.' Such is Rinthy, whose gentleness is generally met with equal kindness. She feels no guilt at having had the child—'I wasn't ashamed,' she says quietly. Nor does she seem to blame Culla for fathering the baby; rather it is his denial of it that she holds against him....

The figures that most constantly dog Culla's flight are, of course, the mysterious dark trio whose violent and horrifying exploits are recounted in the italicized inter-passages of the book. Just as Culla (inadvertently) crosses Rinthy's path, so these figures intersect with Culla, leaving behind them atrocious deeds for which Culla is inevitably blamed. It is as if his own guilt—or his denial of his own guilt—has called these figures forth.... As is so often the case in McCarthy, even the portrayal of certain evil is given a theological twist: these creatures are malevolent destroyers, but they are also agents of retribution and thus figures of judgment, another of the major themes found in I Corinthians....

In Revelations, John writes to the church in Laodicea these words of Jesus, 'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth' (3:15-16). These are the same cast of sinners, the 'neutrals' Dante encounters in the vestibule of Hell. 'The heavens drove them forth, not to be less fair, and the depth of Hell does not receive them lest the wicked have some glory over them,' Virgil explains. 'They have no hope of death, and so abject is their blind life that they are envious of every other lot. The world suffers no report of them to live. Pity and justice despise them. Let us not talk of them; but look thou and pass' (Canto III, 40-42, 46-51). These are the same souls Eliot alludes to in 'The Waste Land.' According to Dante, having committed themselves neither to God nor to the Devil, these nameless sinners now exist in 'nowhere,' in a state of nothingness. Dante recognizes one 'who from cowardice made the great refusal' (III 60), a description thoroughly applicable to Culla himself.

The ending of the book is often cited as proof of its nihilistic intent, and admittedly it is a bleak conclusion. Rinthy has found a man who loves her, but she leaves him to continue her search.... [The] 'Reverend,' who loudly proclaims Culla's guilt, tells the story of a blind man he once led to Christ.... The preacher's words echo those of Jesus in Revelations.... As in Melville's *The Confidence Man*, a work worth further comparison to this one, the possibility of multiple identities abound in *Outer Dark*. Moreover, the preacher's 'sermon' also recalls Culla's dream: perhaps he is also the 'prophet' Culla cried to for mercy. This idea is now reinforced by the blind man, who constantly speaks in terms of sight.... The blind man recounts the moment of his salvation, which is an obvious version of Culla's dream (and the passages from Revelations)....

Just as Rinthy circles back to the secluded glade, so might Culla be returning to the 'swampy forest,' the 'dark wood' on the edge of hell, in which he first became lost after abandoning his child. His sin still unspoken, his guilt yet unnamed, the blind man's message of salvation turned aside, Culla, wandering in

his state of nothingness, seems fated to return again and again to the site of his sin.... In McCarthy's highly moralistic world, sins must be named and owned before they can be forgiven; and those characters who most insist on the 'nothingness' of existence, who attempt to remain 'neutral,' are those most in need of grave. In none of McCarthy's novels is the division between good and evil easily distinguished nor are the agents easily identified and cast. It is, however, the state of the soul that is being examined and narrated. Culla Holme is a thinking, tortured, conflicted character just as Arthur Dimmesdale or Hazel Motes, men striving against the frightening prospect of God's grace and mercy, which can blind and scar even as it heals."

Edwin T. Arnold
"Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables"
Perspectives (1993) 44-47, 49-52

"Here the pastoral flight from history and its consequences are suggested quite vividly in an early scene, a description of the band of murderers who harry the community in which the main action occurs.... These menacing riders, armed with farming tools, are of course figures of *time*, reapers who move through the novel, leaving a trail of violent death behind them; the farm tools they carry will indeed become weapons as their spree commences. Thus they embody the deadly threat which history poses to the pastoral realm. And yet they are themselves pastoral figures, or at least parodic versions of such figures, bearing spades and brush hooks through a barnyard, frightening the stock. Whatever threat they represent, that is, emerges in some sense *from* the pastoral realm they scourge; they are that community's nightmare, the seed of destruction which lurks within the pastoral dream.

[The] main action concerns a brother and sister, Culla and Rinthy Holme, their incestuous relationship and the surrealistically horrible consequences of this crime. Culla abandons the baby they produce in the woods; the baby is then taken by a mad tinker; Rinthy goes aimlessly in search of it; Culla goes in pursuit of Rinthy, finds himself continually accused of crimes large and small, pursued by lawmen and lynch mobs, often obliged to flee for his life, and at last, disturbingly, welcomed as a brother by the band of murderers: 'Well, I see yet didn't have no trouble findin us,' one says as Culla stumbles into their camp.

The landscape through which they wander is full of robbed graves, mangled corpses, hanged men and a herd of Gadarene swine, transplanted directly from the New Testament. *Outer Dark*, like much of McCarthy's work, seems positively turgid with moral import, and yet it is difficult to say just what the moral issues involved might be. 'It is almost as if these two poor souls, the brother and sister both, had let loose all the demons in the world by the fact of their fornication,' says John Ditsky. Just so; yet why should this be? How is it that incest calls forth such dire retribution? And whence, in McCarthy's *apparently godless* universe, does this retribution come? [Emphasis added: this critic has missed the God in McCarthy.]

In answering these questions we might begin by taking account of an oddity which many readers of the novel have noticed, the vagueness of its temporal setting: sometime before the advent of the internal combustion engine, one gathers; beyond that it is difficult to say. The vagueness is appropriate, for *Outer Dark* concerns a pastoral community which has taken its retreat from history to pathological and eventually criminal lengths. It is a community outside of time; thus its citizens continually seem lost in time. At one point Culla travels to town, trying to purchase groceries, and needs to be told by the irate storekeeper that it is Sunday; somehow his isolated existence has not been subject to the calendar. 'We still christians here,' this same merchant growls, claiming membership in an apparently endangered remnant, left behind by history. A bit later, a family which has helped Rinthy are likened to 'stone figures quarried from the architecture of an older time.' In fact the book's temporal setting is not only vague but contradictory: the band of marauders seem a kind of Murrell gang, figures from the antebellum days of frontier settlement; how can they coexist with a world equipped with coolboxes for 'dope,' store-bought meat and bread, and so on? The temporal setting is strange and surreal, emphasizing the novel's general sense of displacement in time.

Some have taken the book's temporal vagueness to suggest that specific historical references are insignificant, that the tale is in some sense timeless and universal. I think nearly the opposite is true; *Outer Dark* refers not to a vaguely defined moment but a fairly specific one—a Machiavellian moment...the

moment when a community organized as a refuge from history is forced to confront it. And it is, therefore, about that confrontation, about time's revenge on a community which has attempted to deny its power: retribution, in this novel obsessed with retribution, comes not from God but from history.... [This is a reductive Marxist interpretation.]

Rinthy is a dark and hopeless version of Lena, just as *Outer Dark*—the very title suggest it—is a dark and hopeless version of *Light in August*. In Faulkner's work Lena's untouchable will to life balances Joe Christmas's death wish; but in this doomed pastoral community the death wish is nearly universal, and Rinthy's sad effort to redeem it is manifestly futile. Here the avengers, apparently summoned up by the community's, and particularly Culla and Rinthy's sins, end by killing their child and, perhaps more heartlessly, sparing the incestuous parents. The novel is a kind of *Paradise Lost*, but it ends with the sinful pair wandering hopelessly and separately through the ruins of their fallen garden—with all the world before them, perhaps, but not the faintest hint of providential guidance."

John M. Grammer
"A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail:
Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy's South"
Perspectives (1993) 33-36

"In the two novels that followed *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy dipped even further into southern society to bring out of the shadowy recesses of East Tennessee life a presumably authentic conglomeration of people, predominantly white, who make Faulkner's Snopeses seem civilized. Many southern commentators expressed shock and resentment, and some were prompted to consult their critical lexicons for such terms as indecent, naturalistic, antipastoral, gnostic, and nihilistic. The first of the new novels, *Outer Dark* (1968), presents the story of a simpleminded Culla Holme and his sister Rinthy whose casual coupling produces a child. Culla gives the baby to an itinerant tinker and tells his sister that it has died, but Rinthy, suspecting the truth, begins a rambling search for her 'chap' that ends many pages later after a band of marauders has hanged the tinker, slit the child's throat, and left its body to burn in the fire along with remnants of the tinker's equipment. There she discovers the charred rib cage and other bones but makes nothing at all of what she sees. A sympathetic reader may possibly find elements of the pitiable here and elsewhere in *Outer Dark* but will be hard-pressed to find anything at all of the sort in *Child of God* (1974)."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 221

"No text so thoroughly deconstructs the myth of a heroic American West as *Blood Meridian*, with its constantly accelerating body count; it demonstrates that Anglo domination of the North American continent was made possible by illiterate and violent men acting outside any established legal system [like the Apaches and Comanches]. Thus the subtitle with its implication of a frontier that, even while vanishing, leaves behind its blood-soaked legacy.

The Border trilogy—especially the first two volumes, *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*—represents a much more lyrical and forgiving modernist evocation of the frontier myth.... In sharp contrast to the fiction of William Faulkner, a writer with whom McCarthy is often compared, McCarthy's novels, and especially *Outer Dark*, seem almost untouched by nineteenth-century southern history, specifically by 'the antebellum South, the Confederacy, and Reconstruction.... Slavery was never profitable in eastern Tennessee...the plantation system never flourished there. In addition, Appalachia has historically existed in political isolation from the rest of the South....

McCarthy's complex aesthetic in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* projects landscapes or spaces that fuse the 'actual,' the 'metaphorical,' and the 'psychological'.... More than any other McCarthy novel—*Outer Dark* seems to take place in some ambiguous physical-social space devoid of history.... [thus transcending history] Ultimately, nothing is transcended in McCarthy; no one is given the opportunity to explore spiritually affirming 'borders' of existence.... The characters who inhabit the world of *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* are either exiles from the realm of work and reason or nomadic wanderers who have never

even known it.... McCarthy's ability to dramatize the violent confrontations of nomads with settled spaces is 'precisely the appeal of McCarthy's greatest fictions'....

Lester [*Child of God*]...is transformed from a communal outcast to a mysterious nomadic presence that periodically assaults the settlement. In an early scene, he is falsely accused of rape and, while being interrogated in the sheriff's office, pronounces what amounts to his judgment on the community: 'you sons of bitches.... Goddamn all of ye'.... On one metaphoric level, Culla and Rinthy [*Outer Dark*] are re-creations of Adam and Eve, doomed to commit anew the unpardonable sin that threatens to exile them from human or divine mercy, to make them wanderers through a grotesquely fallen world. Thus their last name [Holme] is cruelly ironic—they have never really known anything approximating 'home' or even a safe space.... They discover that the infant has been taken, either alive or dead, by a tinker who had intruded upon their isolation and tried to sell Culla a book of amateurish pornographic drawings. One remembers folkloric associations of tinkers with Satan.... Now Culla has been transformed into something closer to a Cain than an Adam figure....

Like Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown, Culla undertakes a journey in which physical space, psychological guilt, and spiritual despair merge so completely as to become indistinguishable.... God seems not so much absent as harsh and vindictive, as if looking down from an elevated space upon a desperately flawed humanity. Still, the most severe judgment on Culla comes from within; he believes that he has so violated established rules of human behavior as to stand in judgment outside the possibility of forgiveness. Most of all, it is Culla who withholds forgiveness from Culla....

After the doomed squire, the next 'judge' Culla encounters is an old man from whom he begs a drink of water. Twice, the old man tells Culla that he 'wouldn't turn Satan away for a drink.' Like the squire, the old man appears to possess some mysterious knowledge of the primal nature of Culla's sins. Moreover, he turns out to be a snake hunter given to telling grotesque stories about victims of snakebite, and inside his cabin he has the skin of a monstrous rattlesnake tacked above the fireplace: 'He was eight foot seven inches and had seventeen rattles'.... The scene recalls traditional associations of serpents with death and evil ranging from Genesis to Satan's magical staff in 'Young Goodman Brown'; on a Freudian level, the phallic overtones of the monstrous snake recall Culla's intercourse with Rinthy.... Like that of Oedipus, Culla's incest seems to have let loose a plague on the countryside. One also recalls Camus's division in *The Plague* of human beings into the categories of plague carriers and plague fighters....

Given the brutish behavior of most of the characters in the landscape through which Culla travels, McCarthy seems to be saying that, should anyone somehow manage to receive 'his reward,' he will do so in the company of a herd of hoggish human beings.... In the biblical text that McCarthy is intentionally '(mis)reading' (Mark 5:1-17), a man with an 'unclean spirit' whose 'name is Legion; for we are many' asks Christ to save him. In response, Christ sends the legion of 'demons' out of the man and into a herd of two thousand swine, who then rush off 'a steep place into the sea' and drown. Frightened by such power, those who have witnessed the miracle promptly beg Christ to leave the region....

The rampaging river that swallows up everyone on the ferry but Culla is no bad substitute for the river Styx. It is not then surprising that Culla, after crossing the river of death, encounters the three outlaws.... They are grotesque parodies of the naturalistic figures created by Thomas Hart Benton in his American murals. Now as re-created by McCarthy, they threaten violent assault on an agrarian economic system that exploits and objectifies the small farmers of Appalachia, and thus their cold murder of the squire constitutes, on one level, retaliation against an exploitive social order.... On another level, they can also be understood as 'psychic avengers,' projections of Culla's guilt over his sins of incest and child abandonment.... In part, they personify...Culla's self-condemnation.... Their unnamed leader...insists three times that Culla is now the drowned ferryman, thereby forcing the young man to deny three times that he is metaphorically the ferryman to hell. While Culla may not correspond to Charon, he did set the progress of his secular damnation in motion through his sinful actions involving the lost child and thus transports himself into an earthly hell.... Reinforcing his satanic role, the leader comments, 'I like to keep the fire up'.... He is thus identifying himself as the guardian of the fires of hell, as the enforcer of eternal punishment, perpetually on the lookout for sinners like Culla....

Perhaps not fully human themselves, the three have dehumanized the child, transforming it into something monstrous.... Obviously, the infant, the very product of Culla's sin, is not an arbitrarily chosen victim with no connection to the original violation of taboo. It could, though, hardly be more powerless, since it has been abandoned and remains nameless. The leader slits its throat only after Culla again denies responsibility for it. In the several brutal murders they commit, the triune seem to be agents of retributive vengeance, punishers of unnamed crimes, devoted above all to putting the communal order at risk.... The child, however monstrous it has become in the hands of the three, remains an innocent, and the mute's act of drinking its blood is a parody of the Christian communion. Any doubt the reader might have that the strange meat which Culla was forced to eat in his earlier encounter with the trio was human flesh is now removed. Unwilling to confront his guilt, he has nevertheless been forced to partake of 'the body' and, fully unrepentant, he can hardly chew it.... Nevertheless, as the largely benevolent experiences of Rinthy, who is searching for her lost child and trying to negate Culla's sin, indicate, god's grace has not vanished from the world."

James R. Giles

"Discovering Fourthspace in Appalachia:
Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*"
Cormac McCarthy: New Edition, ed. Harold Bloom
(Infobase Publishing/Bloom's Literary Criticism 2009) 107-21

"Deformity is even more pervasive in *Outer Dark* (1968), exemplified by the mutilated, incest-begotten child at the heart of the 'twisted nativity' story. In one of the most emblematic scenes in this dark tale, Culla Holme, having abandoned his just-born son in the woods, stands with 'shadow pooled at his feet,' a 'dark stain' all around him. Dianne C. Luce suggests that the shadow represents 'that archetypal dark side of the self deriving from the collective unconscious that complements yet is not acknowledged by the ego.' This novel, then, is about the 'shadow' aspects of human life, the urges and instincts that the ego cannot acknowledge. Expressed primarily through the incest taboo, the child becomes the manifestation of this Jungian concept of the psychic 'shadow.'

Culla first attempts to bury the child, metaphorically hiding it from others and from his consciousness in the womblike moist and moss-covered ground, but he fails to effectively bury the child. He then flees through anthropomorphized woods while a lightning storm 'bequeath[s] him...an embryonic bird's first fissured vision of the world.' The image of the world cracking to life like an eggshell splitting suggests Culla's attempt at a psychological rebirth from his incest-stained past. But the unburied child is rescued by a tinker, and Culla must chase the duo through the mountains to find his child, a search not motivated by desire but by Culla's need to cathartically acknowledge and then deny, through repression or rejection, the commission of a psychological prohibition.

At the end of the novel, a 'grim triune' of wild men succeed in finding and killing the child, but the child's death functions antithetically to catharsis. The leader of the and vocalizes the crime—in the face of Culla's denials, the bearded man insists that Culla 'got this thing here in [his sister's] belly [his] own self.' He then has one of his men slice the child's throat, and the third, mute member of the band drinks the child's blood. Culla protests but does nothing, his failure to act foreshadowed by his dreams of failed healings that commence the novel. Thus, Culla is made to face his own taboo act, incest, but because he witnesses the child's murder and cannibalism without acting, he becomes complicit in the commission of the most heinous taboo in human communities. Afterward, Culla is even more eclipsed by darkness; even at noon he is haunted by his shadow, a 'dark parody of his progress,' and he wanders incessantly as though 'they wasn't a home nowhere' for him. The three wild men, then, do not punish Culla for his crime, nor do they permit him to escape the eternal haunt of his act. Rather than acting as judges and juries, they act merely as intensifiers of evil.

Not every character in the novel, however, participates allegorically in the exemplification and perpetuation of evil. Rinthy, doll-like and wraithlike, is an almost-insubstantial character, yet she provides the sole source of light, metaphorically and literally, in the novel. On a literal level, Rinthy is 'more associated with light than is Culla,' often being shown haloed, spot-lit, or generally illuminated by a direct light source. Her search for her son suggests why the light follows her, out of all the characters in the novel. Seeking the taboo-child out of love, Rinthy's desire transforms the incest-begotten child from an

allegorical symbol of abjection into a little boy, his mother's lost 'chap.' And her constantly leaking breasts suggest that she is a manifestation of nurture in a world deprived of any other consolation. Rinthy ultimately provides the only possible antidote to abjection in the novel. If Culla's inarticulate failures provide any lesson at all, it is the impossibility of fending off the human stain. In the world of the novel, all living creatures are made grotesque, exiled from the warmth of human companionship that would be a 'home' to them. But Rinthy, through her brief yet compassionate encounters with the strangers along her journey, experiences a 'frail agony of grace' in this damned, dark world."

Lydia R. Cooper
"McCarthy, Tennessee, and the Southern Gothic"
The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy
(Cambridge U 2013) 45-46

Michael Hollister (2014)