

ANALYSIS

The Orchard Keeper (1965)

Cormac McCarthy

(1933-)

“*The Orchard Keeper* won the William Faulkner Foundation Award for the best first novel by an American and received a number of positive, though sometimes cautious, reviews in the national media. Most included, perhaps inevitably, a comparison with Faulkner. Thus Orville Prescott wrote of McCarthy, ‘In his *The Orchard Keeper* he has his own story to tell; but he tells it with so many of Faulkner’s literary devices and mannerisms that he half submerges his own talents beneath a flood of imitation.... All of these factors insure that *The Orchard Keeper* is an exasperating book. But the wonder is that in spite of them it is also an impressive book’.... Others, however, saw it as illustrating a new approach to writing about the South. James G. Murray noted in *America*, ‘This is an interesting first novel by a young Southerner: interesting in part because it does not seem to be autobiographical, and in part because it almost (but not entirely) rejects the influence, more bad than good, of the Southern *mystique*.... [I]t is quite exceptional for young writers to be so objective.’ Granville Hicks concluded in *Saturday Review*, ‘Although the novel as a whole develops erratically, particular episodes have narrative power. With his gift for vivid description and his strength in creating characters, McCarthy is another man to watch’.”

Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, eds.
Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy
(U Mississippi 1993) 4-5

“It is a commonplace that anti-pastoral writing is a version of the pastoral, usually issuing from some disappointed or embittered engagement with the old pastoral dream. *The Orchard Keeper* is a more or less straightforward, elegiac celebration of a vanishing pastoral realm; the book is in the tradition of Virgil’s *Eclogues*, Goldsmith’s *Deserted Village* and the Agrarians’ *I’ll Take My Stand*. Unlike most of McCarthy’s work in this vein, the novel offers a positive image of pastoral order, an image which we may employ as a kind of touchstone when reading McCarthy’s later and bleaker examinations of the pastoral impulse. Like many works in this tradition, *The Orchard Keeper* centers upon the fortunes not of a single protagonist but of a community—here, of a primitive community clinging tenaciously to existence in the mountains east of Knoxville, Tennessee.”

John M. Grammer
“Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy’s South”
Perspectives (1993) 30

“The crucial challenge in approaching Cormac McCarthy’s demanding first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, lies in the reader’s locating a center of value, a source of moral authority. The novel’s wandering structure, its shifting points of view, its refusal to invest any characters with either greater reliability or more acute perceptions all intensify the challenge and in part derive from it.... McCarthy depicts a world in which traditional embodiments of value—religion, community relationships, agrarian connections with the earth—have deteriorated as a result of the increasing pressure of urban culture, commercial interests and governmental intrusions upon the lives of the novel’s essentially rural characters. This deterioration is a central issue in all of McCarthy’s novels with Appalachian mountain settings, but it seems particularly prominent in *The Orchard Keeper*.”

The dislocation resulting from McCarthy’s reluctance to provide an overt system of values in the novel has led some readers to misinterpret it, to decry an absence of any real values at all. Thomas Daniel Young, for example, draws the conclusion that *The Orchard Keeper* presents ‘too much sin without redemption, too much horror that has no function but to furnish the reader a gratuitous emotional response.’ Such a reading ignores those areas of meaningful connection characters cultivate among themselves and in nature, and as a result the larger significance of many of the novel’s seemingly random incidents

evaporates. When disintegrating cultural values are understood as informing not only McCarthy's themes but his narrative method, however, the episodes reveal a fully controlled, deliberately structured examination of the intrinsic human need to order, or at least to interpret, the world of nature and to understand the motivations of men.

That these motivations are so frequently cryptic underlies the novel's structural method: the reader must piece together a serviceable apprehension of shifting cultural norms through the calculated juxtaposition of characters and incidents. McCarthy orders his material into four numbered sections which present standards of personal conduct in three generations of characters: Arthur Ownby, the old man whose traditional lifestyle enables an almost mystical connection to the cycles of nature; Marion Sylder and Kenneth Rattner, representatives of contrasting responses to the new social order; and the boy John Wesley Rattner, who attempts unsuccessfully to find a compromise between the old dispensation and the new. The sections introduce, develop and, finally, overtly define the standards by which the actions of individual characters are to be judged. Social disruption occurs, at least in part, because dialogue proves an inadequate means of asserting cultural values and instilling them in younger generations. As societal institutions begin to reflect this breakdown, they become indifferent, misguided and, finally, destructive....

Frequently a character's integrity is manifested by the extent to which his motivations are uncorrupted by selfishness or personal delusions. John Wesley's mother, Mildred, for instance, is patently incorrect about the character and resources of her husband, Kenneth, whom Sylder has killed in self-defense. She attempts to instill in her son a sense of vindictive rage, urging him to 'find the man that took away your daddy.' In contrast, Sylder later attempts to protect John Wesley, whom he has befriended, by offering him a simplistic interpretation of sin and retribution as practiced by the local law enforcement officials, though the boy is rightfully suspicious of this neat package. McCarthy indicates that the two characters serve diametrically opposing ends in these two scenes in which the youth receives 'moral' instruction: Sylder's interests are altruistic, fatherly, protective; Mildred's are selfish, vindictive, serving no needs but her own....

His two older mentors: ...the old man who had earlier served the boy wine is Ownby, Uncle Ather, the orchard keeper of the title, who has told him stories and shared the wisdom distilled from his long experience in the wilderness. These are the men whose values he has embraced as an adult, whose view of the world determines the direction the young man must take at the close of the book. John Wesley heads west, away from the scenes of his youth to which he has briefly returned for a visit noticeably lacking in nostalgia. By leaving, he rejects the locale, though not the sensibilities he has learned in the hill country of eastern Tennessee. Ironically, these very sensibilities contribute to his alienation from his contemporary surroundings.... The values he has inherited from them have become arcane, outmoded, impractical....

John Wesley's visit to his boyhood home is the final such instance in this novel of homecomings and departures, and comparison of this one with earlier examples is instructive of McCarthy's indirect method of signifying meaning. Typically [he] develops structural and thematic connections through parallels, contrasts and elaborations, rather than through more conventional devices.

Section I contrasts the return to the Red Branch community of both John Wesley's father, Kenneth, and the man who will become his father surrogate, Sylder.... Uncle Ather is briefly glimpsed in section I as a solitary watcher of the night who notices Marion's car the evening of one of his sexual escapades and again the night he disposes of Rattner's body. Ownby assumes his role as the primary avatar of traditional mountain values only in part II, in which John Wesley begins to acquire the skills of woodcraft which the old man has mastered. Both Ownby and the boy are solitary largely because of their interests in the woods, the changing seasons, wild animals. Trapping as a livelihood identifies them with earlier generations of woodsmen, those present before large stretches of land were cleared for farming and while game was plentiful.... The overbearing constable Gifford, the ludicrous humane officer Legwater and the nameless men who tend the mysterious government tank on a mountaintop represent the intrusion of the institutional and bureaucratic authority upon age-old lifestyles. The values these figures project are faceless, exploitive and aligned with powers accountable to neither individual responsibility nor community standards....

The second section offers the response of the independent mountain people to this new order: Uncle Ather rejects it categorically by shooting his crude X on the government tank. Both Sylder and John Wesley attempt to adapt the new ways to their own needs: Sylder by picking up his loads of whiskey from the compound near the tank, John Wesley by claiming a hawk bounty. But all three are compromised by the imposition of the world beyond the mountains.... Largely...section III represents a diminishment in the forward progress of the novel, incorporating a paean to the values, sensibilities and passage of the older order.... The effects of section III are calculated and potent: they offer the novel's most attractive account of the patterns of the former age, though these lifestyles are not romanticized: they were harsh, violent and uncompromising....

Uncle Ather provides the novel's clearest moral example: he lives alone, but his isolation is not the result of alienation from regional standards (as is Rattner's) or an attempt to circumvent the authority of the new order (such as Sylder's). Ownby accepts his obligations to the community, though he places a high premium on independence.... He recognizes an obligation to others in need.... But Uncle Ather relies as well on his ability to read visionary signs. He seems generally associated with pre-Christian religious traditions, a figure recalling Merlin and Prospero as well as the aging Leatherstocking. He carves a sort of wand, covered with cryptic symbols, and he is ostensibly a savant, identifying the exact day of the week on which the social worker had been born. His mystical knowledge bridges the gap between the areas in which Uncle Ather grounds his understanding of life's purpose and meaning—the web of human life and the mountain wilderness—and provides the rationale for his most significant actions: 'keeping' the remains of Kenneth Rattner in the orchard and assaulting the government tank....

Little wonder that Uncle Ather has difficulty understanding the new order, or that his behavior is viewed as insane to its deputies. Indeed, his motivations must strike the reader as at least bizarre, if not crazy. But the values which he passes on to the boy are clear and uncompromising: personal responsibility and self-sacrifice. He finally requests that the boy keep an eye out for his dog, old and unable to fend for himself—a responsibility Uncle Ather is forced to abrogate when he is arrested. John Wesley promises to take care of the animal and to visit again. Both pledges affirm his acceptance of the old man's code, an acceptance underlined by his immediate return of the dollar hawk bounty....

John Wesley is...clearly identified as an avatar of earlier values and ways of life. Gifford expresses to Mr. Eller his desire to have 'a nice little talk' with him, an expression which had earlier served as a euphemism for his cowardly beating of Sylder in jail. But the boy leaves the region before the presence of the charred skeleton in the pit is revealed to the authorities, and before the death of his mother, who is convinced that he is obeying her injunction to avenge his father. When he returns to Red Branch as an adult, distinct legacies of the two older men whose examples he has followed reveal the quality of the man John Wesley has become. As he visits his old house, the close attention he pays to the details of building and landscape recalls Uncle Ather's careful observations of the world throughout the episodes devoted to him. And the young man's removal of his shoes to check his socks for dampness parallels a characteristic gesture of Sylder's. Both his mentors are gone now, 'Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone,' and nothing remains for him but to depart as well.

The Orchard Keeper closes with John Wesley pictured against a sunset, 'as if the very air had gone to wine'...but McCarthy is no sentimentalist. John Wesley is the man his past has made him, and that past condemns him to isolation in the modern world. The mention of the elm tree through which, according to the workmen, the iron fence surrounding the cemetery has 'grown' reminds the reader that John Wesley must adapt himself, like a living tree, to the iron will of the expanding new order. To the community in which he grew up he is a stranger, like his father had been before him. He wanders off into a realm presided over by brutish constables, inept humane officers and governmental employees who follow nihilistic and futile policies they don't attempt to understand, like the social worker who explains to Ownby that 'we would like to have a record of your case for our, our, records, you see.' These figures reflect a world in which meaning is reduced to sterile formulas and the prevailing values are exploitative and self-serving. McCarthy's final and most chilling irony is that this is the world which the reader too must recognize as his own."

Daniel Paul Ragan
"Values and Structure in *The Orchard Keeper*"

“A novel displaying remarkable narrative skills but with such unconventional plotting and absence of authorial control that critics grown accustomed to formalism in southern fiction were at a loss how to deal with it. Nevertheless, it was in such denials of formal order as these that McCarthy revealed his basic assumptions and gave notice of things to come. Actually, the plotting of *The Orchard Keeper* was unconventional principally in its lack of resolution. One reviewer suggested a number of ways in which another author might have developed the intrigue, but here McCarthy, as he has even more strikingly in the rest of his work, chose to portray characters at the unstructured base of society, people unaware, or barely aware, of the history and traditions of the rest of the South and thus unencumbered by its customs or moral conventions. For most of these people life is nothing more than the inconclusive succession of days that animals know, a sequence without comprehensive pattern or meaning; and their story, in a straightforward telling, can approach an undistorted reflection of the flux that involves everybody, an acknowledgment of which sometimes makes even the most hopeful human beings uneasy.

The central figure in the story is a young boy, John Wesley Rattner, who receives such positive direction as he gets during his growing up from two social misfits. The first of these is a bootlegger, Marion Sylder, who unknown to the boy has also been the unwitting murderer of his father. The second is the boy's mother, Mildred Rattner, who correctly suspects that her husband has met with foul play and sternly lays upon John Wesley the obligation of a revenge he actually has little interest in seeking. In addition there is a mountain hermit, Uncle Ather Ownby, who in a number of casual encounters contributes more to the boy's maturation than either of the others but who serves with them as a reminder of the mores of a simpler age when game abounded, government was minimal, and the Tennessee mountains were still frontier. In the end, all of John Wesley's elders are shown to be stranded victims of changing times, and to avoid a similar entrapment John Wesley heads west.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
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“*The Orchard Keeper* depicts the conflict between encroaching industrialization and a rural community whose yearly patterns of hunting and trapping provide subsistence without the postindustrial urban world's commitment to material gain. The young protagonist, John Wesley Rattner, learns his ethical orientation from the ‘heroes’ of his rural community, antigovernment moonshine runner Marion Sylder and the eponymous antidevelopment orchard keeper, Arthur Ownby. At the end of the novel, the boy departs his eastern Tennessee community and enters the ‘world of American at war, the era of the atomic bomb...when the progressive order of modern America is exposed as a monstrous will to thrive at any expense to humanity and nature.’ Not simply an elegy to the lost Scots-Irish mountain folk driven out of their haunts by logging and the land development instigated by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the 1920s-30s, this novel obsessively examines physical and metaphysical evil.

Evil in this novel is first given concrete form in the person of Kenneth Rattner, foreshadowing such later avatars of darkness as Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* (2005), but that form becomes increasingly insubstantial as the narrative progresses. Rattner is murdered near the beginning of the novel, his execution ‘like squeezing a boil.’ His body is buried in a chemical pit, then burned, and when it is finally dug up, only a powdery ash is found.’ But Rattner's disappearing body seems to have infected the local community with ‘lesser’ forms of cruelty, like Constable Gifford's assistant Legwater with his fixation on killing dogs. *The Orchard Keeper*, in other words, is not a novel about the erosion of morals or civilized behavior with the onslaught of civilization, but a novel that illuminates how the patina of social laws (embodied, perhaps, by the law-abiding yet fundamentally evil Legwater and Constable Gifford) cover over the more insidious forms of evil that infect everything from individuals to the ecological balance of the natural world.

The novel opens with a short scene that provides a visual example of the main narrative's assertion about the nature of evil. This italicized prologue describes an old tree being cut down. The loggers stop their sawing when they realize that a ‘*mangled fragment of fence*’ is embedded through the tree's very flesh, the tree having grown around the iron. A graphic image of the infection of industrialization in the

natural world, this scene also suggests the permeation of corruption rampant in humans as well as the natural world. The corroded metal in the heart of the tree becomes emblematic of the fundamental horror in *The Orchard Keeper*: the destructive forces of evil represented by human civilization. So, when John Wesley goes to Knoxville to get bounty money for killing a hawk, he sees the glass and steel city, undergoing boom development in the early 1940s, as ‘gargoyled’ and grotesque, a city that has been, not built, but ‘perpetrated’ on its natural environs. The evil embodied earlier in the novel by Rattner, a man who is violent and egocentric and who acts without any of the normal constraints on behavior imposed through social conventions or personal conscience, symbolically fuses with the matter of human civilization, pictured as rampant urban construction that devours the natural world and legal systems that perpetuate acts of cruelty in the name of civic order.

While the grotesque in McCarthy’s fiction provides visual, external evidence of internal corruption, it often simultaneously reveals characters’ otherwise hidden moral inclinations, inclinations which rarely go so far as to become actions. For example, in an image of decay at the end of the novel that mirrors the decay in the novel’s prologue, John Wesley sits in a cemetery reflecting on the dead who are ‘sheathed in the earth’s crust.’ He imagines ancient kings and heroes, Tut and Agamemnon, who have disintegrated and become disembodied ideals that are now no more than ‘myth.’ There are glimpses of heroic behavior throughout the novel—such as when John Wesley leaps into a river to rescue his hound dog and when he attempts to repay the bounty he earned for killing a hawk—but they are few and relatively insignificant in comparison to the larger narrative events. It is only in this image of decay that their substantive presence throughout the novel is felt; the capacity for courage and moral behavior, like evil, infuses living humans through the particulate matter of these decayed heroes.

Because both good and evil are human potentialities, the novel suggests that a sensitive conscience is necessary in order for an individual to recognize evil and counteract it with acts that defend the dignity and autonomy of the natural world and other humans. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the idea of ‘conscience’ is represented by circumcision. The biblical practice of circumcision is a grotesque act that represents the individual’s spiritual sensitivity to moral behaviors. At one point Arthur Ownby marks an illegal moonshine still in the woods by shooting an ‘X’ into the side of the barrel with twelve ‘circumcised’ shotgun shells. The term used to describe Ownby’s scoring of the shells is significant because it illuminates the scene’s importance within the larger narrative. Ownby’s ‘X’ draws attention to the still and, more importantly, to the murdered corpse. In so doing he precipitates the boy’s collision with a father figure (Sylder) and with himself, both of whom will act as the shapers of the boy’s emergent moral center. The ‘circumcised’ shotgun shells, in other words, symbolically spark a series of events that awaken the characters’ as well as readers’ reception of the novel’s ethical arguments.

The link between conscience and a grotesque biblical image of mutilation reflects a common characteristic of the southern grotesque, where physical deformity externalizes emotional distress or moral ambivalence. In this novel, that which is deformed is more sensitive, and so deformity suggests the need for a sharp conscience in a morally corrupt world. For example, Sylder has a deformed toe and that appendage is ‘particularly sensitive.’ And in what is perhaps the novel’s most poignant depiction of deformity, Ownby’s decrepit three-legged hound dog, Scout, becomes a mutilated symbol representing the contrast between ethical and unethical behavior. When Ownby is arrested, the police leave the dog behind. Ownby, being driven away in the squad car, looks back at the dog ‘standing there like some atavistic symbol or brute herald of all questions ever pressed upon humanity and beyond understanding.’ This sudden imaginative flight, from the image of the dog to an examination of a collective subconscious recognition of evil and ethics, underscores the connection between imagination and conscience.

In his interview with Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy suggests that he believes in a Jungian universal ‘subconscious’ which existed ‘before language.’ This mystical prelinguistic knowledge is linked in the novels to a sort of universal ethics, in which the ability to parse acts that are ‘right’ from those that are ‘wrong’ is a common human potentiality and obligation. Thus, in this scene in *The Orchard Keeper*, the insubstantial idea of ‘conscience’ is made into a physical image, a deformed hound dog whose presence marks the stark difference between those behaviors motivated by a care for the human and nonhuman other (personified in Ownby) and those which are not (personified by the police). The grotesque image startles

readers into a greater sensitivity to that image's deeper significance and so acts as a literary circumcision, sensitizing the conscience and creating the possibility for ethical choice.”

Lydia R. Cooper
“McCarthy, Tennessee, and the Southern Gothic”
The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy
ed. Steven Frye
(Cambridge U 2013) 42-45

Michael Hollister (2015)