Sinnin' and Grinnin': Deviant Sexuality in the Contemporary Southern Novels of McCarthy, Gay, and Crews

Cameron Williams
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

SINNIN’ AND GRINNIN’:
DEVIAN'T SEXUALITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN
NOVELS OF MCCARTHY, GAY, AND CREWS

By
CAMERON WILLIAMS

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______________________________

Timothy Parrish
Professor Directing Thesis

______________________________

Christopher Shinn
Committee Member

______________________________

Leigh Edwards
Committee Member

Approved:

______________________________

S.E. Gontarski, Chair, English Department

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
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ABSTRACT

To study Southern literature is to inevitably study the search for Southern identity. Challenged by issues of gender, race, and class, the Southern literary tradition is immersed in the search for a static, definitive concept of Southern identity. Southern writers attempt to define this identity through an understanding of the past. But the South is a region with a particularly troubled history, marred by the ghost of slavery; as such, the South has essentially become the nation’s “other,” what Teresa Goddu calls “the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself.” In spite of its dubious reputation, Southern writers seemingly take pride in the region’s status as “other,” reflecting on human experience through the lens of the “outsider.” Canonical Southern works, most notably the novels of Faulkner – such as *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August*, or *Sanctuary* – typically present issues of racial or gender othering, using the other to question conventional codes and explain experience. In this study, I examine four contemporary novels – Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1973), William Gay’s *Twilight* (2006), and Harry Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes* (1976) – and suggest that these authors no longer focus on the racial or gendered other, but instead consider the other, the outsider, as the sexual deviant. I argue that these authors, in an attempt to decode Southern experience through their respective treatments of incest, necrophilia, and bestiality, reveal and question the cultural and ideological contradictions of Southern convention, ultimately as an indictment of Southern social values. In doing so, this study will posit that McCarthy, Gay, and Crews recontextualize the concept of the “other” as an attempt to also recontextualize existing definitions of Southern identity.
INTRODUCTION

The Southern literary tradition is one immersed in the search for a static, definitive concept of Southern identity. Challenged by issues of gender, sexuality, class, and race, contemporary Southern writers continue to negotiate the problematic notion of “the South” and the specific features that constitute “Southern” writing. Louis D. Rubin observes that “[t]he bane of so much Southern literary scholarship has been cultural oversimplification. The South has been *this*, or *that*, and no other” (qtd Gwin 585). The terms used to characterize Southern literature have always been extraordinarily narrow, limited by a coding of certain themes as “Southern” – such as the importance of community, an obsession with history and the past, and a distinct religious sensibility – and concerns of regional identity, creating much critical debate on what actually makes Southern literature *Southern* (584). Michael Kreyling calls Southern literature “an amalgam of literary history, interpretive traditions, and a canon…a cultural product or ‘artefact,’ to be understood just as Benedict Anderson understands the ‘nations’ that fill up the history of the modern era” (ix). Southern literature, he explains, “is not invented by our discussions of it but rather is revealed by a constant southern identity.” He writes: “It is not so much southern literature that changes in collision with history but history that is subtly changed in collision with southern literature” (ix).

The relationship between history and Southern identity is marked most explicitly by writers of the New South who, as Lewis P. Simpson notes in *The Fable of the Southern Writer*, “were inclined to see the life of the individual southerner as always in a dramatic tension with history. […]Accepting such a vision of the past – out of the fear, it may be said, of the alienation of memory by history – the southerner was, as [Robert Penn] Warren observed, truly ‘trapped in history’” (77). Warren, along with other notable writers of the Southern Renascence such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Donald Davidson, searches for Southern identity through an understanding of history. In *The History of Southern Literature*, Louis Rubin cites C. Vann Woodward’s illuminating assessment of this dynamic:

The South’s distinctiveness is rooted in its having had a different historical experience from the nation at large: where America has known only success and affluence, the South has known failure, defeat, and poverty; where the nation has thrived on its myth of innocence, the South has experienced, in the awful burden
of slavery, the reality of evil and a sense of guilt; where the country as a whole has been optimistic and secure in its progressivist creed, the South’s historical experience has generated pessimism in Southerners, an awareness of the limitations of the human condition, and a realization that everything one wants to do cannot be accomplished. (425)

As a region with a troubled history, Woodward recognizes the South’s position as an “outsider” region, one that places an enormous amount of importance on forging an alternate community. But this history has furthermore contributed to the South’s association with what Teresa Goddu refers to as “gothic doom and gloom.” As she explains in *Gothic America*, the South, as the nation’s “other,” has essentially become “the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself” (3). Yet despite this, Southern writers seemingly take pride in knowing that “the Southern historical experience has been closer to the experience of humanity at large than has the national experience” (Rubin 425). Though the South is a region that continues to struggle to define itself, it embraces its status as “an other” region, separate and distinct from the rest of the nation.

This “otherness” is reflected in a variety of canonical Southern texts, namely those novels of William Faulkner, who more or less defined the Southern voice. As “the most notable twentieth-century descendent of that American tradition of darkness, of sin and guilt and the heart in conflict with itself” (Hobson 436), Faulkner most generally presents issues of racial othering, as can most notably been seen in a character such as Joe Christmas, the *Light in August* (1932) protagonist unaware of his racial background but seen (and thereby shunned) as black. Faulkner also typically ascribes women with the role of “other,” associating their sexuality with “evil.” *Sanctuary’s* (1931) Temple Drake, for instance, is during a particular sexual encounter described as “hurling herself upon [Red], her mouth gaped and ugly like that of a dying fish as she writhed her loins against him” (Faulkner 252). Deborah Clarke, in *Robbing the Mother: Women in Faulkner*, notes Faulkner’s treatment of Temple’s sexuality as animalistic, “horrific rather than passionate” (63). Women, in Faulkner’s novels, “constitute and embody the world outside the Self […] they represent the alien and unknown…call[ing] into question established codes, habitual methods of mediating, organizing, and explaining experience” (Gray 189). As Clarke also writes: “[T]he bloody functioning of female sexual organs reveals the reality behind the ideal […] Without ‘filth’, there would be no creation, as the womb both nourishes and
threatens life, reminding men of their origins and their dependence on women’s bodies for their very existences” (5). Faulkner’s criticism of female sexuality as “other” is not only an attempt to understand the self, but is furthermore a method through which to explain experience.

It is important to discuss Faulkner’s treatment of sexuality because of the ways in which his writing informs both the style and content of contemporary writers, for the Faulknerian view of outsider sexuality, otherness, and its association with “evil” has certainly found its way into contemporary Southern literature. Because contemporary Southern writers “live in a postmodern world of uncertainty, discontinuity, and profound anxiety,” much of their work engages sensitive subject matter in an attempt to decode certain signs and symbols of Southern experience (Gwin 585). Cormac McCarthy’s novel *Child of God* (1973), for example, one of the novels I examine in this thesis, focuses not on women as the sexual other, but instead considers the other, the outsider, as one who participates in sexual behavior that occurs outside the bounds of conventionality: the sexual deviant. In a graphic, disturbing examination of necrophilia, *Child of God* “chronicle[s] men’s capacity for mindless violence and perversity and trace[s] the rippling effects of individual acts of violence on the human community” (591). His other novels are similarly, as Minrose C. Gwin writes, “apocalyptic and macabre, featuring scenes of surreal horror and carrying with them an overpowering insistence on the inexplicable presence of evil in the world” (591). By lacing grotesque scenes of necrophilia and violence with the Southern emphasis on community, McCarthy calls into question the very notion of Southern experience.

This thesis argues that in an attempt to decode Southern experience through an examination of deviant sexuality, contemporary fiction – namely, Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1973), William Gay’s *Twilight* (2006), and Harry Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes* (1976) – reveals and questions certain cultural and ideological contradictions of Southern social conventions. By relying on elements of the Southern gothic tradition, a form which “articulates abjection [and] serves as a primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature” (Goddu 3), McCarthy, Gay, and Crews establish the grotesque nature of their characters – Joe Lon Mackey, for instance, is notably grotesque in the way Crews portrays through him combined characteristics of the comic and the tragic – as a way of indicting regional social hypocrisy. These authors furthermore sculpt the landscape of the South as a place of violence and essential lawlessness, writing against traditional visions of the South as a place of pastoral harmony; in this respect, the South becomes a sort of abject, psychological space, a
space McCarthy, Gay, and Crews deem the perfect backdrop for subverting conventional behavior through figures of perverse sexuality.

According to Suzanne Frayser, “although it is difficult to construct a definition of sexual deviance satisfactory to everyone … two factors seem to determine deviant sexual behavior: societal reaction to a particular act and the ‘social visibility’ of the act” (Frayser 360). Frayser’s definition of sexual deviance emphasizes society and societal reaction, much in the same way that the South, as a region, too emphasizes the importance of societal conventions. In The History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault discusses the emergence of “unnatural” deviant sexual practices – such as rape, incest, sodomy, sadism, and necrophilia – as a reaction to such conventions in the “discursive explosion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Foucault 39). He states: “It was time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make difficult confession of what they were. […] Whence the setting apart of the ‘unnatural’ as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality” (39). I believe that the prevalence of perverse sexuality in Southern literature, beginning with Faulkner, is a similar reaction to the strict social and repressive religious convictions of Southern society. Because the South is a region that places an enormous amount of importance on maintaining Christian values, a region that so concerns itself with adhering to societal conventions, themes of sexual deviation are unsurprisingly and pervasively prevalent in the Southern literary tradition. For as Flannery O’Connor also writes: “To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological” (O’Connor 44).

While Faulkner does not ignore themes of deviant sexuality – Quentin Compson’s incestuous desire for his sister Caddy, Emily Grierson’s necrophilic relationship with Homer Barron, Ike Snopes’s bestial affair with a cow, to name but a few instances of such – McCarthy, Gay, and Crews deal uniquely with sexual deviance, treating it as the subject of their works and linking it to the “unnatural otherness” associated with Southern identity. It is interesting then to examine this “setting apart” of sexual activity in conjunction with the South’s desire to set itself apart from other regions, and furthermore, to examine it in conjunction with themes that are inherently Southern, most specifically the importance of family, an attachment to place and community, and the value of religion. Though this othering is not necessarily an endemic part of the Southern literary tradition, I believe the sexual deviant plays an equally as significant role in
defining Southern identity as the gendered or racial other, considering especially the fact that many of these contemporary writers, while they never glorify this deviant sexual behavior, never explicitly condemn it, either.

I begin my exploration of deviant sexuality in contemporary Southern literature with a look at Cormac McCarthy. Arguing against traditional scholarly readings of the novel (most notably from literary critic Edwin T. Arnold), the first chapter, “All in the Family: Cormac McCarthy, Incest, and the Importance of Family” analyzes the incestuous relationship between brother and sister in McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* (1968). Using Freud’s theory of the “incest taboo,” which assumes that “incest indicate[s] a more primitive state of nature” (Frayser 402), in juxtaposition with Michel Foucault’s theories from *The History of Sexuality* of the family as a system of sexual alliance, I argue that McCarthy’s examination of incest promotes the importance of family while criticizing the Southern moral code that exploits religion as a means of advocating ritual violence. This chapter further relies on Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* to explore the relationship between Culla and Rinthy as a representation of the abject. I suggest that McCarthy creates a conflict between Culla and Rinthy’s religious morality and commitment to family in order to make a larger statement about the South as a whole, as a region that “disturbs system, order,” and what furthermore “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4).

The examination of McCarthy continues in Chapter Two, “Post-Mortem Bliss: Necrophilia and the Search for Community in Cormac McCarthy and William Gay,” which explores the theme of necrophilia in both McCarthy’s *Child of God* (1973) and William Gay’s *Twilight* (2006). Through Georges Bataille’s theories from *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, this chapter analyzes the connection between death and sex, particularly Bataille’s notion that “[t]he sight or thought of murder can give rise to a desire for sexual enjoyment” (Bataille 11). I argue here for a sympathetic reading of Lester Ballard and Fenton Breece, suggesting that both McCarthy’s and Gay’s treatment of necrophilia actually questions the Southern notion of community, calling attention to the hypocrisy of Southern values and religious convictions. This chapter will further the discussion of the ways in which these authors use a figure of perverse sexuality as a form of social commentary.

Chapter Three, “What a Snake Can Do for Love: Harry Crews, the Grotesque Body, and Bestiality,” relies heavily on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque and the carnivalesque to analyze the unconventional sexual politics and themes of bestiality present within Harry Crews’s
novel *A Feast of Snakes* (1976). I relate Crews’s depiction of the annual Rattlesnake Roundup in *A Feast of Snakes* to Bakhtin’s definition of the carnival as “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. […] [Where] people were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations” (Bakhtin 10). This chapter further analyzes the characters in Crews’s novel – paying careful attention to those female characters, namely Elfie and Berenice – in connection with Bakhtin’s concept of the “grotesque body,” a body that eats, drinks, sweats, “is never finished, never completed” (317), positing that the way Crews presents the grotesque body in an animalistic sort of way, oftentimes dehumanizing both male and female characters by frequently applying bestial qualities to the human body, not only implies a form of bestiality but furthermore, particularly as seen through the novel’s apocalyptic ending, indicts Southern religious convictions and man’s search for meaning in a world of violence.

The epilogue will synthesize the discoveries made in the previous chapters regarding the ways these authors explore sexual deviancy as a means by which to reveal the contradictions prevalent within Southern society. The epilogue will reaffirm the assessments made in the previous chapters, as well as expand upon the ways these authors associate sexual deviancy with the “unnatural otherness” of the South. In doing so, this chapter will engage Foucault’s theories from *The History of Sexuality* to analyze why perverse sexuality seems to be so prevalent in the Southern literary tradition.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to demonstrate the ways in which these three authors, through their respective treatments of incest, necrophilia, and bestiality in conjunction with themes that are inherently Southern – such as the importance of family, attachment to place and community, and the value of religion – subvert conventional sexual behavior in order to reveal the hypocrisy of Southern social values. By treating deviant sexuality as the subject of their works, McCarthy, Gay, and Crews recontextualize the “other” not only as a means of decoding Southern experience, but furthermore as an examination of the human condition, an examination that speaks volumes about emerging definitions of Southern identity.
CHAPTER 1
ALL IN THE FAMILY:
CORMAC MCCARTHY, INCEST, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

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.

Matthew 8:11-12

Cormac McCarthy has been hailed as one of the most challenging and important writers of the twentieth century, and yet for someone revered so highly, surprisingly little critical attention has been given to his work. Of this existing criticism, a vast amount has been focused, as Edwin Arnold notes in his essay “Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness: McCarthy’s Moral Parables,” on thematic analyses of the postmodern nihilism in McCarthy’s novels.\(^1\) While Arnold recognizes “the postmodern celebration of McCarthy’s exuberant violence, his astonishing approximation of chaos, his grand evocation of the mystery of the world,” he argues: “[T]here is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious” (46). To an extent, I agree with Arnold’s assertion; however, I find it difficult to read \textit{Outer Dark} solely as a moralizing parable, a label that is reductive and, ultimately, dismissive. McCarthy’s second novel published in 1968 and set somewhere in rural, turn-of-the-century Appalachia, \textit{Outer Dark} is part of the Southern Gothic tradition, a genre that typically includes “the presence of something perverse, rotten, and nightmarish in a world allegedly governed by strict piety, family values, and a proud past” (Thomson 315). But few critics seem to recognize McCarthy’s early novels – \textit{The Orchard Keeper} (1965), \textit{Outer Dark} (1968), \textit{Child of God} (1973),\(^2\) and \textit{Suttree} (1979), his four novels published before his works dramatically shifted in setting from the South to the West – as \textit{Southern}. Arnold is no exception, ignoring the ways in which McCarthy incorporates into this “religious conviction” themes that are inherently Southern – namely, in \textit{Outer Dark}, the importance of family, that physical, hereditary force that serves as a present connection to the past.

The Southern Gothic is also closely correlated with Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The

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\(^1\) Arnold’s essay is written in response to Vereen M. Bell’s assessment of the novel in \textit{The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy}.

\(^2\) The Southern implications of \textit{Child of God} will be explored further in Chapter Two.
in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). For this reason, *Outer Dark* does not, as Arnold argues, advocate a religious conviction quite as much as I believe it actually criticizes the Southern need for a moral code based on piety and the repentance of guilt. I am therefore particularly interested in McCarthy’s depiction of the incestuous relationship between siblings Culla and Rinthy Holme. Using Freud’s theory of the “incest taboo” and Michel Foucault’s theory of the family as a system of sexual alliance, I want to explore the intrafamilial relationship between Culla and Rinthy as a representation of the abject, “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). I want to suggest that McCarthy creates a conflict between Culla and Rinthy’s religious morality and commitment to family in order to make a larger statement about the South as a whole, as a region that “disturbs system, order,” and what furthermore “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). I offer a reading of the novel different than Arnold’s, arguing that *Outer Dark* promotes the importance of family through its examination of incest as an amplified, perverse mode of sexuality in order to criticize the Southern moral code that exploits religion as a means of justifying the standards of conventional behavior, behavior that seemingly advocates atrocity – most specifically, the apocalyptic denouement in which the trio of mysterious men sacrificially slaughter Culla and Rinthy’s child.

Arnold bases his argument that *Outer Dark* is a moral parable on the numerous Biblical and theological allusions that occur throughout the novel. He writes:

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 grace. 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…[a man] striving against the frightening prospect of God’s grace and mercy, which can blind and scar even as it heals. (54)

Culla is, indeed, a character “tortured” and “conflicted” by the fact that he has impregnated his own sister; the novel, in fact, begins with Culla awaking from the following 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 eclipse and the prophet spoke to them. This hour the sun would 
darken and all these souls would be cured of their afflictions before it appeared 
again. 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? (5)

Culla’s dream is an obvious Biblical allusion, referencing the New Testament account of Jesus 
healing the leprous and the blind. In Arnold’s perception, Culla’s dream evidences his argument 
that the entire novel is centered on “the extent of Culla’s guilt and the impossibility of evading 
that guilt,” interpreting Culla’s actions as “reveal[ing] a tormented and divided soul, so weighed 
by his own sin and his need to conceal that sin” (48). Arnold views *Outer Dark* as a moral 
parable by focusing his attention on Culla, suggesting that Culla spends the majority of the novel 
trying to come to grips with his sin, and that until he does so, he will not be forgiven.

But there is a specific Southern significance in this and other Biblical references that 
occur throughout the novel, one that Arnold ignores. According to Biblical interpretation, Culla 
has done wrong by committing incest; the book of Leviticus very clearly states: “If there is a 
man who takes his sister, his father’s daughter or his mother’s daughter, so that he sees her 
nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the 
sons of their people. He has uncovered his sister’s nakedness; he bears his guilt” (20:17). 
However, the book of Genesis tells the story of Lot, who impregnated both of his daughters; 
incest is, in this manner, a means of preserving the family line (19:32-36). These two opposing 
instances of Biblical incest present a conflict between committing sin and valuing family, a 
conflict McCarthy seemingly tries to negotiate; the squire Culla meets on the road tells him: “I 
hope you’ve not got a family. It’s a sacred thing, a family. A sacred obligation. Afore God” 
(47). It is this emphasis on the importance of family that is an inherently Southern literary 
theme, one that McCarthy does not overlook. Historically, Southern literature’s insistence on the 
importance of family “was part of a general nineteenth-century struggle to come to terms with 
the apparent disintegration of what Americans called ‘the Home’. Yet the pervasive anxiety over 
the changing role of the family and its immediate members has particular resonance in the South, 
where the mere suggestion of domestic instability was perceived as a threat to slavery” (Moss 
32). I believe, however, that the importance of domestic stability extends beyond slavery, for the 
disintegration of the family also brings with it a loss of a connection to the past. The past, Louis
Rubin explains, is always alive in the present; the present must therefore be understood as an extension of the past, and further as “a necessary means for understanding and coming to terms with our disordered present and our perilous future” (341). In *Outer Dark*, family is especially significant in this context; Culla, in a religious sense, betrays God by impregnating his sister Rinthy, but he also betrays his family not only by lying to Rinthy about the baby’s death, but by abandoning his child and thereby severing the baby’s link to the past.

According to Foucault, the family is a system of alliance for the interchange of sexuality; “it conveys the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance” (108). He writes:

[S]ince the eighteenth century the family has become an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love; that sexuality has its privileged point of development in the family; that for this reason sexuality is ‘incestuous’ from the start. It may be that in societies where the mechanisms of alliance predominate, prohibition of incest is a functionally indispensable rule. But in a society such as ours, where the family is the most active site of sexuality, and where it is doubtless the exigencies of the latter which maintain and prolong its existence, incest – for different reasons altogether and in a completely different way – occupies a central place; it is constantly being solicited and refused; it is an object of obsession and attraction, a dreadful secret and an indispensable pivot. It is manifested as a thing that is strictly forbidden in the family insofar as the latter functions as a deployment of alliance; but it is also a thing that is continuously demanded in order for the family to be a hotbed of constant sexual incitement. (109)

The family, as “a locus of affects,” is where we first learn about sexuality. In this manner, sexuality is “incestuous from the start,” but these incestuous desires are something we are supposed to suppress and grow past. Incest between brother and sister violates one of the “most powerful and prevalent prohibitions of humankind”: the incest taboo (Gold 149). Cultural theorists, most specifically Lévi-Strauss, contribute the establishment of the incest taboo to the development of early kinship systems, in which “the prohibition of incestuous relations forced the family in primitive societies to give up its females to another family. This served as the basis

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3 As Faulkner writes: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”
for social organization in tribal societies” (Slipp 25). The motive behind this was exogamic, an attempt to expand one family by breeding with another. The incest taboo was established in order to keep the family sacred, but prohibiting incest and identifying it as taboo thus brings “into being a set of sexualized relations and the construction of a perverse sexuality – the very sexuality [the incest taboo] was designed to eliminate” (Mills 37). Incest is, according to Foucault, an unconscious human desire, one that is at once prohibited and necessary for the development of sexuality as a discourse.

In contemporary psychoanalysis, incest has its roots in Freud’s conception of the Oedipus complex. Incest is, for Freud, the foundation of his early theories on sexuality. *Totem and Taboo*, in which he discusses the emergence of social taboos such as those regarding incest, “reveals how social taboos add to the explosiveness of the Oedipal triangle” (Yaeger 156).

According to Patricia Yaeger:

> Among the primary objectives of taboo are ‘the guarding [of] chief acts of life – birth, initiation, marriage and sexual functions, and the like, against interference’ and the ‘securing of unborn infants and young children…who stand in a specially sympathetic relation with one or both parents, from the consequences of certain actions’. Violation of a taboo results in the ‘taboo itself [taking] vengeance’.

(156)

The incest taboo “constitute[s] the beginning of human morality”; it would thereby seem that those who break this taboo either have no regard for morality or no concept of morality (Abel 93). Freud’s early theories on sexuality – those having to do with the Oedipus complex – suggest that the desire to kill the father and have sex with the mother is a pre-coded, unconscious, basic human desire.

The relationship between Culla and Rinthy certainly is (at least for Culla) a “dreadful secret,” but given the circumstances it is one that almost makes sense. As a number of prevailing theorists – including Freud and Lévi-Strauss – have suggested, “incest indicate[s] a more primitive state of nature” (Frayser 402). Culla and Rinthy’s parents are presumably dead, Culla is unmarried, and Rinthy is a widow; they live together in a home isolated from the rest of their community, a home in which they share the same bed. Culla and Rinthy live in a time and place where “[t]hey’s lots of meanness,” journeying through a countryside that is virtually lawless (119). This “meanness” is personified by the three mysterious men following Culla’s path across
the countryside, killing any innocent people they might come across. Shortly after the squire (the man who graciously hired Culla to fix his roof) discovers that Culla has stolen his shoes, he sets off to recover them. Barely a mile down the road he is met by the three men: “[T]he [squire] rising in remonstration from the wagon box so that when the next one came up behind him sideways in a sort of dance and swung the brush-hook it missed his neck and took him in the small of the back severing his spine and when he fell he fell unhinged sideways and without a cry” (51). Similarly, the old man with the hounds who “wouldn’t turn Satan away for a drink” is also killed: “Light went in a long bright wink upon the knifeblade as it sank with a faint breath of gas into his belly…Minister? he said. Minister? He looked down at the man’s fist cupped against his stomach. The fist rose in an eruption of severed viscera until the blade seized in the junction of his breastbone and he stood disemboweled” (129). Interestingly, the old man in this scene believes the leader of the mysterious trio to look like a minister. Arnold believes that these three men bring about salvation through their destruction, that “[t]hese creatures are malevolent destroyers, but they are also agents of retribution and thus figures of judgment” (49). Rather, most explicitly through these characters McCarthy seems to be criticizing the Southern moral code that emphasizes piety and the repentance of guilt, yet seemingly advocates this sort of “meanness” as a form of redemption. William C. Spencer refers to this trio as “an unholy trinity,” observing the ways in which McCarthy constructs these characters as hypocrites. Because the trio is frequently associated with fire – when Culla first meets them, the leader “seemed to be seated in the fire itself, cradling the flames to his body as if there were something there beyond all warming” (179) – and the shoes of the leader are described as “cracked and weatherblackened and one was cleft from tongue to toe like a hoof” (176), Spencer views them as a reflection of “Biblical and Miltonic stories [that] characterize Satan as the supreme hypocrite, a creature that maintains a polite demeanor while secretly delighting in destroying humankind” (84).

McCarthy creates the physical landscape as a reflection of this meanness as well, at one point describing:

Before [Culla] stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned. A faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth’s curve. He tried his foot in the mire before him and it rose in a vulvate welt claggy
and sucking. He stepped back. A stale wind blew from this desolation and the
marsh reeds and black ferns among which he clashed softly like things chained.
He wondered why a road should come to such a place. (242)

McCarthy perverts the language, applying descriptors such as “vulvate” and “hominoid,” to
sculpt his landscape, creating a setting that is highly primitive, a space of abjection in which
man’s primitive instinct supercedes his morality. This landscape, filled with “filth, detritus…the
slime of life” is, I believe, created in such a way as to reflect the primitiveness of human nature,
or more specifically, the primitiveness of life in the rural South (Canfield 665). For it is “[i]n
this bleak landscape [that] life forms often take on a sickly air” (Geddes). As Dan Geddes also
notes in his essay “Existentialist Darkness as Mood: McCarthy’s Outer Dark”: “Culla’s opening
dream—which introduces almost every theme discussed herein—depicts a ‘delegation of human
ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores.’ ‘Can I
be cured?’ he asks. Although the prophet thinks so, Culla is instead singled out for persecution in
his dream. He fares little better in life” (Geddes). According to Kristeva’s Powers of Horror:
Religion, Morality, Law. Obviously always arbitrary, more or less; unfailingly
oppressive, rather more than less; laboriously prevailing, more and more so.
Contemporary literature does not take their place. Rather, it seems to be written
out of the untenable aspects of perverse or superego positions. It acknowledges
the impossibility of Religion, Morality, and Law – their power play, their
necessary and absurd seeming. Like perversion, it takes advantage of them, gets
round them, and makes sport of them. Nevertheless, it maintains a distance where
the abject is concerned. The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic,
projects himself into it,introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language –
style and content. […] One might thus say that with such a literature there takes
place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure,
Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality. (16)

We see in Outer Dark such a crossing over of pure/impure, prohibition/sin, and
morality/immorality, namely in the way McCarthy clearly constructs the incestuous relationship
between Culla and Rinthy to reflect the conflict between religious morality and the importance of
family. The abject, that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders,
positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite,” is used in Outer Dark to make
a larger comment about the South as a whole (4). Within the realm of *Outer Dark*, the South itself becomes a region that “disturbs system, order,” and what furthermore “does not respect borders, positions, rules,” a lawless, timeless sort of land that simultaneously promotes religious values –the anonymous voice that calls out from the window of the general store reminds Culla, “We still Christians here” (26) – and gratuitous violence.

McCarthy is furthermore careful to never make explicit the time period in which the novel takes place, though it is more than likely around the turn of the twentieth century. This “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” (Grammer 36). In doing so, McCarthy creates the illusion of the South as a timeless sort of place, one that will always be lawless and rural. McCarthy is also careful to never reveal the conditions surrounding Culla and Rinthy’s sexual relationship. Is it forced, or is it consensual? An answer to this question is almost irrelevant; what matters most is recognizing incest as a primal urge, for regardless of whether or not Rinthy gave her consent (though we are led to believe she did not; the storekeeper tells her Culla came in to sell his old shotgun, saying: “Maybe I ought not to of told you that.” Rinthy replies: “I’d hate for you to know what all else he done” (6).), Culla is still the one who is unable to control his primal urges, and he is the one most wracked with guilt.

Also according to Freud’s conception of the incest taboo: “If individuals subsequently fail to overcome their earlier adherence to the incest taboo in adolescence, their experience of eroticism and their capacity for aim-inhibited (de-eroticized) affection may remain split off from each other and reappear in the form of a neurosis: the inability to feel both affection and sexual attraction for the same person” (Thompson 47). There are, almost inarguably, discernible echoes of this dynamic in the relationship between Culla and Rinthy, or moreover, in the way Culla behaves toward Rinthy. The most noticeable instance of such occurs when Rinthy is in labor, asking Culla: “You reckon we could have us a fire tonight?” He tells her: “It ain’t cold.” Rinthy replies: “It turned cold last night. You said your own self it was cold” (9). Similarly, when Rinthy asks Culla to call for the midwife, he tells her no. Rinthy says: “You said you’d fetch her when it come time,” to which he replies: “I never. I said Maybe.” Despite her demands, Culla is unwavering, refusing to bring her aid. “I cain’t,” he says. “She’d tell” (10). Culla’s unwillingness to accommodate his sister not only reflects his own shame, but further reflects his
inability to feel affection for her. Culla, furthermore, selfishly discards the newborn baby in the woods, telling Rinthy that it died of natural causes. But when Rinthy discovers his lie, “he turns his guilt onto her” (Arnold 47). Though it is his transgression, he blames her for it, telling her, “Now you really went and done it” (33). She is his sister, his own flesh and blood, and yet Culla is unable to bring himself to offer her any sort of affection, abandoning her when she needs him most.

Culla also seems to view Rinthy’s sexuality as evil. As Kristeva writes:

*Totem and Taboo* begins with an evocation of the ‘dread of incest’, and Freud discusses it at length in connection with taboo, totemism, and more specifically with food and sex prohibitions. The woman – or mother-image haunts a large part of that books and keeps shaping its background even when, relying on the testimony of obsessional neurotics, Freud slips from dread…to the inclusion of dread symptom in obsessional neurosis. (57)

Culla seemingly demonstrates what Kristeva refers to as a “fear of the maternal,” which results from the “dread of incest.” Culla views Rinthy as tainted; she is pregnant with his child and therefore her sexuality is evil, a “sickness.” When Culla unknowingly meets the three mysterious men who have been scourging the countryside, he tells them:

I was huntin my sister. She run off and I been huntin her. I think she might of run off with this here tinker. Little old scrawnylookin kind of a feller. Herself she’s just young. I been huntin her since early in the spring and I cain’t have no luck about findin her. She ain’t got nobody but me to see about her. They ain’t no telling what kind of mess she’s got into. She was sick anyways. She never was a real stout person. (177)

Similarly, at the beginning of the novel, Culla tells the tinker: “Sickness here. Got sickness” (6). Kristeva further states:

What we designate as ‘feminine’, far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an ‘other’ without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity. Assuming that any Other is appended to the triangulating function of the paternal prohibition…beyond and through the paternal function, is a coming face to face with an unnamable otherness (59).
Culla tries to “other” his sister, but because the other has to be something outside the self, Culla’s attempts to see his sister as different fail. He wants to see her as “the other” because she is guilty of incest, and bore evidence of that incest; but he shares an equal, if not greater part in that guilt. Culla, in attempting at othering Rinthy, succeeds in only further incriminating and isolating himself.

Aside from his internal battle with his guilt of breaking this social taboo, Culla must also battle the judgment passed on him by other people, as his incestuous relationship with his sister – although he never explicitly divulges his secret shame – ostracizes him from the communities through which he passes. As Arnold notes:

Culla…is always met with suspicion. Even when he is offered hospitality, as by the snakeman who gives him water – ‘Wouldn’t turn Satan away for a drink,’ the snakeman says to Culla – Culla becomes fearful, and perhaps with good reason, for everywhere he goes he finds proof of evil in the world. The figures that most constantly do Culla’s flight are, of course, the mysterious dark trio whose violent and horrifying exploits are recounted in the italicizes 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 guilt – has called these figures forth. (49)

Arnold argues that this “suspicion” is a manifestation of Culla’s guilt, and that he becomes “fearful” of the evil in the world because of his inability to recognize his own sin. Culla is in this sense an outsider, passing through each new town, each time being introduced to a new set of social customs. However, the incest taboo is universal, and as Culla is continuously reminded in each new town, “We still Christians here” (26). But Culla is more than just an outsider; McCarthy constructs Culla as one who participates in unnatural sexual practices – a sexual deviant. In this sense, Culla is constructed as “the other”; his committing incest “call[s] into question established codes, habitual methods of mediating, organizing, and explaining experience” (Gray 189). While Culla grapples with his guilt, Rinthy does not, although both have committed incest; this is the conflict that McCarthy creates. Culla is rightfully met with suspicion on his journey, not only because he has impregnated his sister, but because Culla, by and large, is almost completely untrustworthy. He lies – Rinthy tells the doctor: “He lied all the
time” (156) – steals the squire’s boots (48), and watches as Vernon is herded off a cliff by a stampede of hogs (219). His religious morality is extraordinarily skewed, most notably in the way he condemns Rinthy for bearing his child, a sin of which he is equally guilty. As Spencer also observes, *Outer Dark* makes it especially evident that “the unholy trinity” and Culla share a number of similarities. He writes: “Throughout much of the novel the evil threesome travels a path just behind or just ahead of him. […] These four characters twice end up sharing the same campfire – three of them ruthless murderers and Culla an attempted murderer, three of them violators of the taboo against cannibalism and Culla a violator of the taboos against incest and infanticide” (86). For this reason, Culla too can be read as an embodiment of the Southern moral hypocrisy of which McCarthy seems to be so critical.

Rinthy, on the other hand, despite the fact that she not only too participates in “unnatural” sexual practices, but also wanders the countryside alone while lactating, is portrayed throughout *Outer Dark* in terms of innocence and “even a kind of virginal purity” (Arnold 48). As Arnold observes:

She sets out on her journey ‘humming softly to herself and so into the sunshine that washed fitfully with the spring wind over the glade, turning her face up to the sky and bestowing upon it a smile all bland and burdenless as a child’s.’ She is at peace with nature, and it with her: “Butterflies attended her and birds dusting in the road did not fly up when she passed.” (48).

Unlike Culla, Rinthy is typically greeted with kindness and is constantly offered hospitality, despite the fact that a number of people are able to recognize Rinthy’s condition as a single woman traveling the countryside alone, a “slackbellied doe to go about in the woods with them big eyes” (191). The old woman in overalls that Rinthy comes across notices that Rinthy has recently given birth. She asks Rinthy: “Where’s your youngern?” Although Rinthy replies: “I’ve not got nary,” the old woman knows she is lying. The old woman assumes Rinthy, out of shame, must have killed the child herself: “Bagged for the river trade I’d judge. Yon sow there might make ye a travelin mate that’s downed her hoggets save one.” When Rinthy tells her that it is her brother responsible for the missing baby, the old woman says: “Your brother? You’ve not lawed him?” (112,13). The old woman seems almost to sympathize with Rinthy, as does the doctor who gives her a salve put on her bleeding breasts (155). Rather than see her as a tainted

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4 Spencer cites Bell’s “identification of Culla with the three ghouls” in *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. 
woman, the doctor and the old woman seem to view Rinthy as a young girl who has been taken advantage of.

This is especially interesting, considering the ways in which gender othering is so prevalent in Southern literature, most notably in the Faulknerian sense of female sexuality as “evil.” Faulkner’s influence on this particular novel is decidedly hard to ignore, as Rinthy’s travels to locate her stolen baby are most strongly reminiscent of Light in August’s Lena Grove, a rare Faulknerian emblem of innocence, who similarly scours the countryside in search of her unborn baby’s father. Like Lena, Rinthy has about her a certain purity, which the characters she encounters are quick to recognize. Arnold states also: “Rinthy is often (unfairly, I think) described as simple-minded” (48). I agree with this unfairness, and for a reason that Arnold’s essay does not consider. It is not a simple-mindedness that governs Rinthy’s character; rather, she is guided by her maternal instincts and commitment to her family. When the doctor asks: “You’re not married are you? And what happened? Was the baby given away?” she replies: “Yes. I never meant for him to do that. I wasn’t ashamed. He said it died but I knewed that for a lie. He lied all the time…My brother” (156). Unlike Culla, Rinthy is more concerned with the well being of her child than with the shame of having committed incest. When the old woman asks her why she’d not “lawed him,” Rinthy replies: “Well, he’s family” (113). Those who see Rinthy as simple-minded would undoubtedly see her lack of shame as a consequence of her inability to comprehend the nature of her sin. However, I believe Rinthy’s compassion demonstrates an unyielding commitment to her family, and that she refuses to focus on her feelings of shame because she is unselfishly more concerned with finding her missing child. To Rinthy, her guilt is far less important than her family and child. While Culla bears the burden of his guilt, Rinthy risks her life to search the countryside for her child. She wants this baby, regardless of the social stigma surrounding it. Arnold points out that Rinthy’s name is “possibly a shortened version of ‘Corinthians’, ” the book that contains Paul’s “magnificent personification of love: ‘[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’ (13:7)” (49), but he severely undervalues her importance. It is Rinthy, then, who seems to honor her family above all else. She “feels no guilt at having had the child…Nor does she seem to blame Culla for fathering the baby; rather, it is his denial of it that she holds against him” (49).

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5 Joanna Burden, Temple Drake, Caddy Compson, to name but a few, are some of Faulkner’s women whose “sexuality seems horrific rather than passionate” (Clarke 64).
But Culla and Rinthy’s child is presented in an almost sinister manner. McCarthy first describes the baby, right after Rinthy has given birth to him, as a “scrawny body trailing the cord in anneloid writhing down the bloodslimed covers, a beetcolored creature that looked to [Culla] like a skinned squirrel (14). When Culla takes the baby into the woods, he describes it as “a shapeless white plasm struggling upon the rich and incunabular moss like a lank swamp hare” (17). When Culla discovers the baby at the end of the novel, in the company of the mysterious trio of men, “[i]t 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 so that it seemed lightly furred and when it looked up at him he saw one eyeless and angry red socket like a stokehole to a brain in flames” (232, 33). This baby is obviously an abomination, which is why I can’t help but agree with Arnold that McCarthy’s work most definitely has about it a certain religious conviction; this repulsive creature is the physical manifestation of their sin, “the taboo itself [taking] vengeance” (Yaeger 156). And yet despite this, Rinthy still wants this baby. At the end of the novel, as the mysterious trio of men prepares to kill the child, Culla tells them: “My sister would take him. That chap. We could find her and she’d take him” (236). Even though their baby, the product of an incestuous relationship, is described in grotesque, even animalistic terms, Culla seems here to display some affection toward Rinthy. He knows how badly she wants to find her child, and although he claims “He ain’t nothing to me,” Culla still cannot bear to watch his child be slaughtered. In the end, Culla seems to recognize the value of family.

However, the trio of men is unsympathetic to Culla’s request, and instead of giving Culla his own child, they – in a disturbingly sacrificial sort of manner – slit the baby’s throat:

[H]e bent forward and picked up the child. It made no gesture at all. It dangled from his hands like a dressed rabbit, a gross eldritch doll with ricketsprung legs and one eye opening and closing softly like a naked owl’s. He rose with it and circled the fire and held it out toward the man. The man looked at it a moment and then took it with one hand by its upper arm and placed it between his feet. […] The man 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. (236)
This is, almost inarguably, the most pivotal point in the novel, and McCarthy emphasizes this importance by creating this scene in such a dark, caustic, and disturbing manner. In this scene, the South becomes an abject, psychological space, a place of ritual violence. The novel’s apocalyptic ending seems to draw attention to the hypocrisy of the moral code that governs this particular area of the South. The South of *Outer Dark* is a place which breeds violence but claims to still be a god fearing land, a place where its people are “still Christian here” (26).

As Edwin Arnold does suggest, Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* has about it a distinct religious conviction, demonstrating a “profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious” (46). While I agree that *Outer Dark* is, to an extent, a moralizing parable, I think it is important also to consider McCarthy’s use of Southern themes in examining these Biblical allusions, for McCarthy’s early novels, including *Outer Dark*, are written as part of the Southern Gothic tradition and should be read as *Southern* novels. The most extraordinary facet of McCarthy’s *Outer Dark*, however, are the ways in which he incorporates the distinctly Southern theme of the importance of family, linking it to the incestuous relationship between Culla and Rinthy. Though McCarthy is carefully ambiguous, not only in appropriating the time and place of the novel, but also in explicitly stating any sort of moral, his use of language and examination of incest and the family as “the interchange of sexuality and alliance” illustrate the primitive nature of the South and of the human condition. Like Culla, we are thinking, tortured, and conflicted, but above all, we are all *human*. McCarthy explores a similar primitiveness in *Child of God* (1973). Yet while incest is used in *Outer Dark* to promote the Southern theme of the importance of family, *Child of God*, through its investigation of necrophilia, takes a more critical approach to the examination of Southern community, as we will see in Chapter Two.
Secrecy is, alas, only too easy, and there is not a libertine some little way gone in vice who does not know what a hold murder has on the senses…

Marquis de Sade

Child of God, McCarthy’s third novel published in 1973, has, according to Edwin Arnold, “elicited the most thoughtful considerations of McCarthy thus far in his career” (5). The narrative charts the gradual decline of Lester Ballard, a man dispossessed and forced to take residence in the mountains of Sevier County, Tennessee, into violence and depravity. Shunned by his community, Lester becomes a hermit and soon resorts to murdering women for his own necrophilic pleasures. Like Outer Dark, Child of God, through its examination of perverse sexuality, emphasizes the primitiveness of human nature and the contradictions prevalent within Southern society. Whereas Outer Dark explores the importance of family through Culla and Rinthy’s incestuous relationship, Child of God’s representation of necrophilia raises questions concerning the notion of Southern community. What little scholarship exists on Child of God, the most prominent critical voice belonging not only to Edwin Arnold, but also to Vereen M. Bell, offers a very narrow read of McCarthy’s treatment of necrophilia, shying away from exploring it in any great depth.

Arnold’s essay “Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness: McCarthy’s Moral Parables” not only discusses the ways in which Outer Dark is an effectively religious text, but argues further that Child of God is similarly a moralizing parable, that there are in Child of God “distinct thematic concerns […] a moral gauge by which we, the readers, are able to judge the failure or limited success of McCarthy’s characters” (46). Arnold’s essay examines Child of God from an especially theological perspective in response to Bell’s reading of the novel as nihilistic. In The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy, Bell argues that McCarthy’s narrative is aimless and essentially plotless, and that “McCarthy causes the status of humanness itself to seem intolerably ambiguous and frail – nugatory, even, in the unimplicated, insentient otherness of the world” (68). But for Bell to claim Child of God as nihilistic is all too reductive, for as Arnold points out there is a religious subtext to this particular novel, as the title would suggest. I find, though, both
of these arguments to be principally problematic in that they again each overlook the distinct Southerness – McCarthy’s use of Southern themes, in this case the attachment to place and community, as well as his reliance on elements of the Southern Gothic tradition – that governs McCarthy’s early works.

Maxime LaChaud, on the other hand, interprets *Child of God* through Mikhail Bahktin’s theories of the carnivalesque, an interpretation that illuminates Lester Ballard’s necrophilia in a crucial way. She explains in her essay “Carnivalesque Rituals and the Theological Grotesque in the Southern novels of Harry Crews and Cormac McCarthy” the ways in which Lester’s violent actions are an attempt to create order and meaning in his life, that “[t]hrough these rituals, [McCarthy] show[s] the reader that the quest for meaning in the chaotic and brutalized New South is inevitably a quest for order” (68). Unlike Arnold and Bell, LaChaud touches on the Southern implications of McCarthy’s novel, but only just. While the presence of the carnivalesque in *Child of God* is almost undeniable – LaChaud mentions the way the novel opens with the carnivalesque image of “a caravan of carnival folk” (64) – I believe Lester’s violent, necrophilic actions to be less of a quest for order and meaning and more of a search for community. In *Child of God*, McCarthy once again treats a form of sexual perversity – this time, necrophilia – as the subject of his work, probing the relationship between death and sexuality and directly linking this relationship to Southern experience.

It is through Lester’s necrophilia that McCarthy addresses the prominent and essential Southern literary theme of the individual versus community. McCarthy, however, is not the only Southern writer to explore these themes; William Gay’s 2006 novel *Twilight* tells the story of Kenneth Tyler, a teenage boy out to seek revenge on Fenton Breeze, the town undertaker who shares with Lester Ballard a similar affinity for romancing dead bodies. As Georges Bataille explains in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, there is a distinct, sacred connection between death and sexual excitement. He writes:

> The sight or thought of murder can give rise to a desire for sexual enjoyment. […] This truth extends far beyond the confines of vice; I believe that it may even be the basis of our images of life and death. I believe, in fact, that we cannot reflect on existence without reference to this truth. As often as not, it seems to be assumed that man has his being independently of his passions. I affirm, on the
other hand, that we must never imagine existence except in terms of these passions. (11,12)

Through Bataille’s theory, I argue here that both McCarthy’s and Gay’s portrayal of isolation and individual corruption is neither nihilistic nor moralistic; rather, I’d like to offer a more humanist reading, suggesting that Lester Ballard’s and Fenton Breece’s slow foray into violence and degradation, much like the portrayal of Culla’s incestuous desire for Rinthy, reflects a certain primitiveness. Unlike Culla, however, both Lester and Fenton are constructed in a surprisingly sympathetic manner, at times described in terms of innocence, as childlike. While McCarthy and Gay succeed in othering Lester and Fenton, they simultaneously depict these characters as sharing with their respective communities specific emotions, such as loneliness and a “programmed infatuation with death” (Bell 55). Both McCarthy’s and Gay’s treatment of necrophilia, emphasis on the importance of communal memory, and the continual rejection of both Lester and Fenton by their respective communities evidence the ways in which I believe *Child of God* and *Twilight* actually question the Southern notion of community, calling attention to the hypocrisy of Southern values and religious convictions.

As a literary theme, the Southern sense of community has been defined as not only an extension of Southern conservative culture, but furthermore as a reaction to some of the major moments in the South’s troubled history, such as the Civil War, Reconstruction, slavery and the South’s ensuing feelings of racial guilt. But in order to examine the importance of community in a contemporary novel such as *Child of God,* it is necessary to first examine the ways in which community figures in the work of Faulkner, who “define[d] the limits of the southern community as a possibility for fiction” (Romine 197). While it is seemingly banal to point out Faulkner’s obvious influence on McCarthy’s Southern writing style – Arnold cites Jonathan Yardley’s assessment of the “stark, mythic quality” of McCarthy’s writing, referring to him as “perhaps the closest we have to a genuine heir to the Faulkner tradition” (5) – it is at the same time nearly impossible to discuss any major Southern literary theme without making reference to how Faulkner’s writing informs that of contemporary authors. In *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community,* Scott Romine observes:

Faulkner’s community remains self-evident in the limited sense that social roles based on race and class remain operative. [...] A novel including such types today would, almost by default, devolve into a novel ‘about’ the aristocrat, the poor
white, the plain white, or the Negro – that is, these types would likely devolve into stereotypes. […] Faulkner is able to exploit the collective meaning of these social types in a way that is unavailable to the contemporary novelist, whose knowledge of type is, almost by definition, focal rather than tacit. […] In turning his narrative eye upon the tacit dimension, Faulkner defined the reflexive limit at which collective meaning becomes collective fiction and at which, moreover, ‘collective’ itself becomes a fiction. In doing so, he defined the limits of community. (197)

Romine acknowledges Faulkner’s influence on writers of the New South, arguing that the importance of community, though it still exists, no longer prominently figures in contemporary Southern fiction due mainly to the economic and social changes that “spawned strip malls and suburbs, and eroded communities conceived in a traditional sense” (203). His argument stems from the notion that a sense of place is a necessary element of community, a sense of place that seems lacking in the New South. Because Southern literature tends to identify place with ideology, he argues that community serves in “an ideologically diluted form,” whereas historically “it has tended to absorb and negate, as a concrete icon, many anxieties associated with the hegemonic order” (204).

As a contemporary Southern writer whose novels are composed in a noticeably Faulknerian style, McCarthy recognizes the importance of community and place in Child of God. Race and class do remain operative – most notably race: Lester, on more than one occasion, uses racist terminology to refer to black people; while being held in jail on a false account of rape, his cellmate refers to himself as “Nigger John” (53) – but in a much less obvious sense, for issues of race and class are not the focal point of this novel. McCarthy is not so much concerned with these categorical qualifiers as he is, I believe, with the Southern notion of community, a notion he seems to find problematic. In the first part of Child of God, McCarthy establishes Lester’s place in the community as an outcast. Lester isn’t ostracized from his community for any racial or class related reasons; Lester is an outcast because his community views his (pre-necrophilic) behavior as bizarre. Orphaned and homeless, Lester is first introduced as “small, unclean, unshaven,” as moving “among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. […] A child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4). When the novel opens, Lester is, in effect, being expelled by his community as he watches his childhood home be auctioned off. Angry,
Lester tells the auctioneer: “I done told ye. I want you to get your goddamn ass off my property. And take these fools with ye.” The auctioneer replies: “You done been locked up once over this. […] Lester, you don’t get a grip on yourself they goin to put you in a rubber room” (7). Later in the novel, an anonymous townsperson recounts:

They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself. They was just the one boy. The mother had run off, I don’t know where to nor who with. Me and Cecil Edwards was the ones cut him down. He come in the store and told it like you’d tell it was rainin out. We went up there and walked in the barn and I seen his feet hangin. […] [Lester] stood there and watched, never said nothin. (21)

The omniscient narration in the first part of the novel is punctuated by such similar first-person accounts of various townsfolk’s encounters with Lester, an especially effective narrative device in that it serves to reinforce McCarthy’s examination of community. The townsperson continues to tell the story of old man Gresham, who at his wife’s funeral stood up and “sung the chickenshit blues,” finally ending his anecdote by remarking: “But [Gresham] wasn’t a patch on Lester Ballard for crazy” (21). Lester’s harsh upbringing – his mother’s abandonment and his father’s suicide – have, as the omniscient narrator describes, caused Lester to grow “lean and bitter. Some said mad” (41). Another nameless townsperson recounts the peculiar story of a high school aged Lester beating up a younger boy for not complying with Lester’s demands to retrieve a lost softball: “Lester told him one more time, said: You don’t get off down there and get me that ball I’m goin to bust you in the mouth. […] He just stood there a minute and then he punched him in the face. […] I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that. He never done nothin to me” (17,18). In the minds of his fellow townspeople, Lester is simply weird. He is dispossessed and unpredictably violent, and even those who Lester has never personally offended find reason to dislike him. Despite this, Lester longs to be a part of the community that shuns him. When in prison after being falsely accused of rape, Lester’s cellmate tells him: “White pussy is nothin but trouble.” Lester “agreed that it was. He guessed he’d thought so.” He then tells his cellmate: “All the trouble I ever was in…was caused by whiskey or women or both” (53). But this observation is for Lester no truism; rather, it is something he says because “[h]e’d often heard men say as much” (53) and “would like to pretend a kinship with them” (Arnold 55).
As Bell notes, these anecdotes about Lester, these shared, collective memories, are being recounted after the later events in the novel have occurred. Through this, it is evident “that Lester has become a part of the mythology of his region and has thereby achieved, ironically, a place in the community that has eluded him otherwise” (Bell 54). Bell’s assessment inadvertently draws attention to the hypocrisy of the Sevier County community; though the citizens ostracize him, Lester is a crucial figure in their society. Towards the end of the novel, as Lester flees from a group of townspeople who are trying to capture him, he nearly drowns in the river. The omniscient narrator interrupts the narrative to make the following observations: “You could say that he’s sustained by his fellow men, like you. […] A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it” (156).

According to René Girard’s theory of sacred violence, “the community is both attracted and repelled by its own origins. It feels the constant need to reexperience them, albeit in veiled and transfigured form. By means of rites the community manages to cajole and somewhat subdue the forces of destruction. But the true nature and real function of these forces will always elude its grasp, precisely because the source of evil is the community itself” (Girard 99). In Girard’s theory, human beings are instinctually mimetic creatures and are thus in constant conflict with one another over our shared objects of desire. Because this conflict, Girard claims, creates a threat of violence, communities unite against a scapegoat figure. Arnold observes Lester’s position within the community as scapegoat, that Lester “embodies [his community’s] weird alienation and stoked violence but also their terrible sadness, their potential nothingness” (57).

Furthermore, as Bell also notes, the first-person narratives interspersed throughout the first part of the novel – such as the story about the fair that “had a old boy come through would shoot live pigeons with ye […] loadin the old pigeons up the ass with them little firecrackers” (58) or about the man who was nearly killed while attempting to box an ape at the local carnival (59) – express a “conventional disposition toward violence, ritualized in hunting and fighting, and a preoccupation with death and with the dead; [the community’s] very atmosphere seems charged with sexual energy,” although the community itself he calls “normal” and “placid” (55). In this regard, Bell sees Lester as both a norm and an aberration, displaying what is by his society conventional behavior and simultaneously taking that behavior to an extreme. But Bell

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6 Gary M. Ciuba acknowledges René Girard’s theories of the scapegoat and sacrificial violence in *Desire, Violence, & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction.*
does not address the fact that in the first part of the novel, these townspeople are actually hypocritically condemning Lester for exhibiting behavior that has been instilled in him through the social values of his community. The community thrives on hunting, shooting birds and boxing apes, but when Lester, as one townsperson recounts, “had this old cow to balk on him, couldn’t get her to do nothin” and so attempts to get the cow to move by tying her to a tractor, consequently breaking her neck and “kill[ing] her where she stood” (37), he is viewed as violent. Through this dynamic, McCarthy highlights the ways in which this particular Southern community, though it isn’t necessarily responsible for Lester’s actions, engenders this etiquette in its citizens and thusly punishes Lester for his adherence.

Arnold’s moralistic interpretation claims that McCarthy spends the first part of the novel establishing the motives for Lester’s behavior, suggesting that he thus constructs in *Child of God* a world of cause and effect, that “Lester is both pushed and pulled into this monstrous life” (55). From a humanistic reading, however, I believe the first part of the novel instead serves to establish Lester as a sympathetic character. As Bell explains: “In certain rural areas of the South, the phrase *child of God* refers to children who are mysteriously ‘not right in the head’,” but this seems to me an especially reductive characterization (68). By referring to him as a child of God “much like yourself perhaps,” McCarthy encourages readers to identify with Lester and see within him “fundamental aspect[s] of ourselves – of our fear, of time, our programmed infatuation with death, our loneliness, our threatening appetites, our narcissistic isolation from the world and the reality of other people” (Bell 55). Furthermore, this description draws attention to the childlike nature of Lester’s character. One of the most unexpectedly endearing descriptions of Lester occurs when he visits the shooting gallery at the fair. Entranced by the stuffed animals, Lester plays three rounds, winning two stuffed bears and a tiger and causing the pitchman to take the rifle away from him and reactively declare: “Three big grand prizes per person is the house limit” (64). Lester proudly carries his prizes through the fair crowd. He passes a woman who notices his prizes, exclaiming: “They lord look what all he’s won” (65). As the omniscient narrator also describes: “Young girls’ faces floated past, bland and smooth as cream. Some eyed his toys. The crowd was moving toward the edge of the field and assembling there, a sea of country people watching into the dark for some midnight contest to begin” (65). For a fleeting moment Lester experiences what it is like to be a part of the community, until he spots “a young girl with candyapple on her lips and her wide eyes. Her pale hair smelled of
soap, womanchild from beyond her years, rapt below the sulphur glow and pitchlight of some medieval fun fair. A lean skylong candle skewered the black pools in her eyes” (65). Through the fireworks, she notices “the man with the bears watching her and she edged closer to the girl by her side and brushed her hair with two fingers quickly” (65). Lester’s staring clearly makes this young girl uncomfortable, and at the sight of her moving closer to her friend, Lester is reminded of his position as outcast. Once home, he makes himself a meal of cornbread while “[t]he two bears and the tiger watch from the wall, their plastic eyes shining in the firelight and their red flannel tongues out” (67). These stuffed animals become Lester’s companions as he, later in the novel, like a child, totes them across the countryside and into the mountains.

Granted, Lester takes his search for community to a grisly extreme. In portraying him as childlike, McCarthy only accentuates the essential primitiveness of Lester’s later actions. As Bell writes, “we are nearly halfway through the novel before the shocking main theme of the story – Lester’s necrophilia – is securely underway” (53). In the second and third parts of *Child of God*, Lester reverts back to a primitive, violent manner of conduct, now associating sexual pleasure with violence and death. His first sexual encounter in the second part of the novel is with the female counterpart of a dead, copulating couple he finds in an abandoned car. After feeling her breast, Lester rolls the dead man off of her, “kicked his feet out of the way and picked up the girl’s panties up from the floor and sniffed at them and put them in his pocket. […] Kneeling there between the girl’s legs he undid his buckle and lowered his trousers” (88). But during this encounter, Lester “poured into that waxen ear everything he’d ever thought of saying to a woman” (88). Lester brings her back to his home, later buying her new clothes, dressing her up and keeping company with her as if she’s alive. When Lester’s house burns down (and she with it), he seeks refuge in a mountain cave. It is at this point in the novel – when Lester has been so far removed from his community as to seclude himself in a cave – that a distinct shift in Lester’s personality becomes discernible. He now resorts to killing women himself, collecting their bodies and dragging their “rancid mold-crept corpse[s] through the wall of the sinkhole and down the dark and dripping corridor” in which he resides (158).

Bataille observes that “it seems to be assumed that man has his being independently of his passions…[affirming], on the other hand, that we must never imagine existence except in terms of these passions” (12). According to his theories of eroticism, associating death with sex is a fundamental human instinct. He states:
For us, discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, [sex] is intimately linked with death. [...] The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastiness of our discontinuous being. [...] Only violence can bring everything to a state of flux in this way, only violence and the nameless disquiet bound up with it. (13,17)

McCarthy seemingly treats Lester’s necrophilia as an example of such primitive behavior, but there seems also to be a religious aspect to it as well; this search for continuity, Bataille tells us, “pursued beyond the immediate world signifies an essentially religious intention” (16). In their arguments, neither Arnold, Bell, nor LaChaud7 explores the transcendent aspect of Lester’s necrophilia, but I believe Bataille is the key to reading McCarthy’s novel. Gary M. Ciuba considers Bataille’s theory in “McCarthy’s Enfant Terrible: Incarnating Sacred Violence in Child of God,” claiming that Lester “exploits the intimacy between what convulses the body in ecstasy and in agony so that their conjunction becomes the basis for his divinization” (173). Ciuba also suggests that Lester “feels free to violate primal taboos against murder and eroticism because he wants to leave behind the numbingly ordinary world of Sevier County and live in the forbidden zone of the violence that is called sacred” (173). While I appreciate Ciuba’s consideration of Bataille, I find his argument flawed in that it overlooks what I believe to be the most fundamental aspect of Bataille’s theory: “The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastiness of our discontinuous being” (17). Lester doesn’t want to leave behind the “ordinary world,” he wants to belong to it. For Lester, necrophilia is a search for companionship and community – during his first encounter with a dead woman, Lester whispers in her ear “everything he’d ever thought of saying to a woman” (88) – and herein lies the transcendence. By being intimate with death, Lester, the community outcast, is reminded of his own continuity and is thus provided with a sense of belonging.

Relating death with sexuality is, as Bataille tells us, a basic, primal human instinct, one that Lester embraces. LaChaud reads his necrophilia and violent actions as an attempt to create order and meaning in his chaotic life. Child of God, she writes, is “the story of the quest for

7 LaChaud argues that because Lester “has been rejected by the community and particularly the religious community,” he seeks religious transcendence through the power of nature (65).
meaning of a man rejected by his community, the community of Sevier County, and who tries to impose a certain order on his life in creating an artificial family made of toys and corpses” (64, 65). Rather, violence for Lester is an instinctual, primal urge. The townspeople’s anecdotes are evidence of his disposition towards violence; he punches the Finney boy in the face (18) and kills a cow when he tries to get it to move by tying it to a tractor (35). One of the most compelling examples of how Lester feels about violence occurs when he catches a robin and gives it to the “idiot child.” In what Arnold notices as the “one scene in which Lester laughs or shows joy,” Lester chases a group of robins through the snow (55). Lester is again described as childlike, as he “fell and rose and ran laughing. He caught and held one warm and feathered in his palm with the heart of it beating there just so” (76). When he gives the robin to the child, one of the dumpkeeper’s daughters warns Lester that the child might kill it. Lester, seemingly unconcerned, replies, “It’s hisn to kill if he wants to” (77). This scene depicts an act of violence in its most natural form: a small child, the “idiot child,” chews the legs off a small bird not out of meanness or spite, but simply because he doesn’t know any better. In this instance, Lester seems to view violence as completely natural, for neither child nor bird understands the concept of violence; death and violence are just a natural part of life.

Violence, for Lester – who is, as Arnold writes, “not about violence but about companionship” (55) – is furthermore and most importantly a means by which to create his own community. Lester is completely non-fazed to see the idiot child sitting on the floor, its mouth “stained with blood and it was chewing,” and in fact seems to understand the child’s motives for chewing off the robin’s legs (79). “He wanted it to where it couldn’t run off,” he tells the dumpkeeper’s daughter (79). LaChaud explains that violence is a means for Lester to reduce his solitude, that Lester develops a relationship with others by inflicting pain on them: “The ephemeral act of murder gives [him] access to human contact” (66). But her argument falls short; LaChaud just touches on this idea, but does not expound upon Lester’s search for community through violence, instead focusing on the ways in which Lester tries to bring order to his chaotic life. Not only does Lester in this scene apparently identify with the idiot child, he is also sympathetic to the child’s need for kinship. This scene anticipates Lester’s later behavior, as he reverts back to this sort of primitive, instinctual behavior. Eventually, Lester begins wearing the clothes and scalps of his victims, which Arnold believes to be a symptom of Lester’s “growing madness.” Lester, he explains, “has no hold on his own identity” (55). While Lester
may very well be (and almost inarguably is) going crazy towards the end of the novel, his fondness for wearing the clothes of his female victims is more so symptomatic of his desire to fit in with his new community (which is comprised entirely of females), for Lester’s necrophilia is, above all, an attempt to ease his loneliness, to create a community that will accept him. McCarthy, through the use of a psychosexual drama, again comments on the pitfalls of Southern social conventions. By addressing this issue of sexual deviance as he does – through Lester’s disturbing creation of his own community – and treating it as the subject of his novel, McCarthy mockingly subverts the notion of Southern community.

That Lester views violence and death as a natural part of life if further made apparent at the end of the novel, when Lester contracts pneumonia and thus dies of natural causes. Unlike Outer Dark, with its reputed apocalyptic ending, Child of God ends somewhat peaceably. Lester’s body is shipped to a medical school in Memphis where he is later “laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected” (194). The omniscient narrator describes:

His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. At the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service. (194).

After his death, Lester’s body is completely deconstructed and taken apart. In death, Lester is reduced to body parts and is no longer stigmatized by his necrophilic behavior. Lester’s natural death also invokes the Biblical passage: “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19). In life, Lester was a violator of corpses; now, he is the one being violated, picked apart by medical students. Violence is again depicted as a natural part of life, as McCarthy very circuitously describes Lester’s life and death. Bell writes that Lester is offered a sort of grace at the end of the novel, that “McCarthy has sustained for us the odd illusion that Lester is somehow mysteriously forgiven” (68), but I disagree. In Child of God, death and violence are not only an inherent part of this particular Southern community but are additionally a natural part of life. McCarthy’s message at the end of the novel is neither religious nor moral; it instead reminds us of our primitive nature, that we share with Lester “fundamental aspect[s] of
ourselves – of our fear, of time, our programmed infatuation with death, our loneliness, our threatening appetites, our narcissistic isolation from the world and the reality of other people” (Bell 55).

*Child of God* is a noticeable influence on Gay’s gothic novel *Twilight*, both stylistically and thematically. In a 2007 interview, Gay remarked: “I can’t really argue when people say my writing is influenced by [McCarthy], because it obviously was. There was a period when I read so much of his stuff, there was a time when I was actually thinking like the characters in *Suttree*” (“Monday Interview”). The epithet at the beginning of the second part of Gay’s novel is one such instance of McCarthy’s influence; the line from *Suttree* – “The rest indeed is silence” – alludes to Hamlet’s dying words in Shakespeare’s tragedy, conjuring images of death and aligning these images with Southern experience. While the scholarship on McCarthy is minimal, it is practically non-existent on Gay. Written over thirty years after the publication of *Child of God*, *Twilight* similarly, through its exploration of necrophilia, reveals the limitations of Southern community. Instead of lacing his novel with religious symbolism, as McCarthy does, Gay incorporates into the world of *Twilight* an emphasis on dreams and fairytale imagery. As Art Taylor indicates in a Washington Post book review, by mixing “menace and levity, Gay suggests some crucial revelation – or perhaps dark divination” not only about “the pervasive nature of evil,” but also about the myth of the South (“Shallow Grave”).

Gay’s novel, like McCarthy’s, examines a community in which race and class again remain operative, but whereas *Child of God* simply acknowledges the fact that these issues exist, not focusing on them in any extensive way, class plays a much heavier role in *Twilight*. Fenton Breece, though he shares with Lester certain necrophilic tendencies, is most notably different from Lester in that he is both extremely wealthy and not the main character of Gay’s narrative. *Twilight* follows Kenneth Tyler, a young teenager who, suspecting that his father has been misburied, discovers a number of desecrated gravesites in which the bodies have been horribly mutilated: “An old man in a shirt and tie and a gray suitcoat and no more. He was buried a eunuch though he’d not been one in life. A woman who had been buried with these missing or other similar genitals between her thighs. […] An old woman shared her resting place with a
young man who’d had his throat straightrazored, and he lay humped athwart her thighs as they lay arm in arm in eternal debauchery” (12). Tyler steals a briefcase from the trunk of Fenton’s car, a briefcase containing a large sum of money and a stack of photographs, all of nude women “arranged in grotesque configurations they’d probably not aspired to in life and they were all unmistakably dead. Legs spread flagrantly, some grouped in mimicry of various acts of sexual congress. Their faces painted in carmine smiles. […] Breeze himself, nude and gross and grinning, capering gleefully among the painted dead” (23). After Tyler’s older sister, Corrie, attempts to blackmail Fenton, the perverse undertaker hires convicted murderer Granville Sutter to retrieve the photographs at whatever cost.

Like Lester, Fenton is ostracized from his community because the townspeople view him as weird. As in Child of God, first-person anecdotes punctuate the first part of the novel, helping to both establish Fenton’s character and his place within the Centre, Tennessee community. As told by Squire Robnett at the Bellystretcher Café:

I never cared for undertakers in general and Fenton Breeze in particular. There was just always something about him. I done some work for him out there when he was buildin that mansion he built, but times was hard and I’d of worked for Hitler if he’d of been hirin. Whatever it was, he was born with it because I knowed him when he was a boy and he was just as peculiar then as he is now. Fenton was a rich kid, and that’s when I first begun to suspect rich ain’t all it’s made out to be. […] I always believed Fenton just liked foolin around with dead folks. He just didn’t fit in. Didn’t or couldn’t. He used to get dead animals off the side of the road and play like he was embalmin em. […] If he couldn’t find none and the mood was on him he took to killen em hisself. Strangle em. There for a while he was hell on the neighborhood cat population. (18)

The people of Centre dislike Fenton for the simple fact that he just doesn’t fit in. Despite the fact that he comes from a wealthy, well-liked family, he is still shunned by his community. At the same time, however, Fenton and his extravagant mansion have become part of the folklore of the town: “Set on the gently rolling slopes of grass, the house might have been the counting house of some wicked ruler living in exile. The glittering bricks came wrapped five to the bundle and woe to the mason who marred one in the laying. The tile came from Italy, the light fixtures from France” (19). The townspeople are fascinated by Fenton’s wealth and are obviously interested
enough in him to incorporate his domestic affairs into the mythology of their town. Though they find him odd, the town needs him; Fenton is not only an institution, he is also the only undertaker they have. While Gay seems to be criticizing the Southern community for its hypocrisy, he seems also to be criticizing the social hierarchy that seems only to focus its disapproval on those less fortunate. Gay literally perverts the romantic image of the Southern aristocrat and through this calls attention to the contradictions of Southern society.

And yet Fenton, like Lester, is described in surprisingly sympathetic terms. He is portrayed as somewhat pathetic, especially in his affection for Corrie. When Fenton first sees Corrie:

She was walking past the café as he had his nine o’clock coffee. She was wearing a tight black shirt, and he was watching the side-to-side movement of her hips when the man next to him said, I wouldn’t kick that out of bed. Breece turned on the off-chance the man might be speaking to him, but he wasn’t. […] Breece watched her out of sight. He felt the weight of eyes and when he turned the man was watching him with sardonic amusement, as if he had looked not at Breece but into him and read his thoughts. (15)

Fenton finds out where Corrie works and what time she gets off, then drives there in his fancy white Lincoln, reeking of aftershave “made from the glands of male hogs and possess[ing] aphrodisiac properties” and wearing “one of the seethrough nylon shirts that were just beginning to catch on” (16). When he arrives, he notices that she is having car trouble and seizes the opportunity to offer her a ride. She almost accepts until she notices that he is alternating between staring at her breasts and staring at her crotch. Disgusted, she declines, but he persists until the point at which she tells him to “fuck off” (16). Fenton is not only pathetic in his attempt to win Corrie’s heart with his expensive car and pheromonic aftershave (not to mention his inability to control his gaze), he is furthermore desperate in his attempt to entice her into his car, appearing to Corrie not seductive, but creepy.

Fenton is a social pariah also because he has difficulty interacting with the rest of his community, “as if he’d gone too long without the companionship of the living” (48). For this

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8 Faulkner’s Snopes trilogy – The Hamlet (1940), The Town (1957), and The Mansion (1959) – reflects “‘redneck’ class resentment,” which historically and socially rests on a romantic image of the ‘honorable aristocracy’ of the Old South (Kartiganer 31). Ike Snopes, “an idiot, adult in age but child in mind,” has a bestial affair with a cow (Williamson 263).
reason, Fenton’s necrophilia can be read as way of coping with his loneliness, an attempt (like Lester’s) to create a community that will accept him. When Corrie is killed, Fenton takes her body not to the funeral home, but to his home, where he dresses her in a pink evening gown and sits with her on the couch listening to music and radio soap operas. In one scene, Fenton places Corrie sitting upright on the couch and sits next to her. The omniscient narrator describes:

For a time they just sat there listening to music. He chatted away at her and her face wore a slightly quizzical look, as if she couldn’t quite fathom what he was talking about. Brandy? he asked her. He got up and from a sideboard brought a bottle of brandy and two snifters. He moved a small table near her knees and set her snifter atop it and sat with his own cupped in his small white hands. After a time he drank it, and drank hers as well. The sourceless music wafted about the room. That’s Mahler, he told her. I don’t suppose you’re familiar with Mahler. His voice gently chided her lack of erudition. (146)

Towards the end of the novel, when Fenton’s perversions have been discovered by the townsfolk, he tries to skip town, taking Corrie’s body with him. As he tries to get her in the car, he screams at her: “Goddamn it […] What the hell’s the matter with you? Can’t you see I’m in a hurry here? Can’t you do anything for yourself? Can you not do so simple a thing as pick up your foot?” (207). Like Lester, Fenton seems not to recognize the fact that Corrie is dead, speaking to her as he would a live person, dressing her in expensive clothing, and keeping company with her in a disturbingly grotesque perversion of domesticity.

Squire Robnett’s account of Lester’s childhood further illustrates Fenton’s fascination with death and his disposition towards violence. Later in the novel, Fenton confides to Sutter: “I killed someone myself once, while I was still in college. I killed a whore in Memphis. […] I killed her with a Pop-Cola bottle. […] You never saw so much blood. The bedclothes were soaked, white sheets with great crimson centers, like flowers…the bottle broke something loose inside her, punctured her in there somewhere, and all the blood ran out of her” (50). After telling Sutter about his exploits with a Pop-Cola bottle, Fenton explains: “It’s only natural that a person as intimately associated with death as I am would think quite a lot about it. There’s a poem I’ve remembered that seems to sum it up best” (51). The poem Fenton recites is by W.H. Auden: “As poets have mournfully sung/Death takes the innocent young/The rolling-in-money/

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9 In Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1931), Popeye rapes Temple with a corncob.
Auden’s poem, along with Fenton’s perverse obsession with mutilating and photographing the dead, treats death in a mockingly callous sort of way. Fenton was born into a family of undertakers, and as such, has been involved with death for as long as he can remember; death is *business* for Fenton, but it is also just another part of life.

Gay’s portrayal of necrophilia is far less graphic than McCarthy’s, for Gay only implies that Fenton may be copulating with the dead; at one point, Sutter tells him, “I expect I could smell [Corrie] on your fingers if I was a mind to” (110). Fenton never kills anyone for the purpose of copulating with the corpse (at least, not that we know of), but as represented by both Squire Robnett’s account and Fenton’s own personal anecdote, it is obvious that he finds some sort of sexual pleasure by inflicting pain on others. To some extent, this is a symptom of his desire to be part of the community. Like LaChaud explains about Lester, violence is a means for Fenton to reduce his solitude; Fenton similarly develops a relationship with others by inflicting pain on them (65). Moreover, Fenton seems to participate in acts of violence – arranging dead bodies into “grotesque configurations they’d probably not aspired to in life” (23) – as a means of asserting a sort of godlike dominance. As Ciuba explains Bataille’s theories of eroticism: “If taboos circumscribe sacred territory, transgression enables the devotee to stray into the illicit kingdom of God” (173). Necrophilia is thereby a transcendent religious experience for Fenton because it gives him a sense of power. The need for human contact and a sense of belonging within the community is certainly a concern for Fenton, but he wants more than to just *belong* to the community, he wants to be a powerful part of the community. After Fenton hires Sutter to retrieve the stolen photographs from the Tyler siblings, Sutter asks: “Let me get this straight. You want the pictures and you want it hushed up. This threat to your social standin removed. Is that about it?” After thinking a moment, Fenton replies: “Yes, that’s what I want. What I really want is for everything to be back like it was before they stole my pictures” (51). Fenton is concerned about the perverted pictures because he doesn’t want them to soil his reputation, for even though the community shuns him and views him as
weird, he is still revered. He is the town’s aristocracy, and I believe this to be Gay’s most explicit critique of the Southern notion of community. Because there are also issues of class at stake in *Twilight*, Gay’s treatment of Fenton’s necrophilia seems to be criticizing the way Southern community is structured around powerful, aristocratic figures that, because of their wealth and nothing more, are revered and deemed honorable. Gay’s criticism seems also to be directed at the fact that Fenton apparently prefers the company of the dead, that Fenton is so far removed from this society *because* of his wealth and profession – spending his formative years killing cats and “play[ing] like he was embalmin em” (18) – that his ideal community is comprised of corpses.

Fenton’s detached view of reality is reflected in the way Gay sculpts the landscape of the South. In an attempt to evade Sutter by truck, Tyler wrecks and Corrie is killed. Leaving her body at the scene, Tyler realizes his only course of action is to journey through the dangerous wilderness of the “Harrikin,” named so after a tornado – “Folks called the tornado a harrikin, a hurricane, one fierce storm the same to them as another” (87) – nearly destroyed the town in the early 1930s. The Harrikin, once a mining town, is now grown over with weeds, “[t]rees sprouted up through the works of man. Kudzu and wild grapevines climbed the machinery until ultimately these machines seemed some curious hybrid of earth and steel. […] Brush and honeysuckle obscured the sunken shafts” (87). At the very end of the first part of the novel, the omniscient narrator describes: “When Tyler fled and Sutter pursued him, this was the closest thing to a wilderness there was, and there was really no thought of going anywhere else, and as these fugitives, mentor and protégé, fled from a world that still adhered to form and order they were fleeing not only geographically but chronologically, for they were fleeing into the past” (87,88). Michael Upchurch, in a Seattle Times book review, writes: “At times, Tyler seems to be wandering less through a physical landscape than a whole frozen labyrinth of decaying Southern memory, as he comes across derelict mansions, abandoned mines and lone survivors” (“Twilight”). Peopled with “misanthropic misfits who felt some perverse kinship with this deserted, tortured land” (86), the Harrikin is an ungoverned, lawless wilderness, and it is within this space that the novel’s most violent scenes occur. In his flight from Sutter, Tyler meets an array of the Harrikin’s eccentric residents, some of whom give aid and shelter to Tyler – Claude Calvert and his family take him in for a night and treat him as one of their own; as Claude tells
Tyler, “Can’t let you wander around here all night, and it wouldn’t be Christian to leave you to the varmints” (156) – and some of whom do Tyler more harm than good, such as the woman who catches him stealing food from her kitchen and as punishment, holds him at gunpoint while he paints the generator behind her house. Tyler suspects she does so in an attempt to keep him there until Sutter comes (100).

And Sutter does come; seemingly aware of every step Tyler takes, Sutter follows Tyler’s path from house to house, unleashing his fury on those who have helped him along the way. Sutter comes to the Calvert’s home shortly after Tyler’s departure to inquire of his whereabouts. Claude, drunk and angry at Sutter’s three a.m. intrusion, tries to fight Sutter off. But Sutter, the violent convicted murderer, is more than prepared:

Sutter’s hand had found the knife. Its blade lay against his thigh. A forefinger felt its edge. […] Claude’s blow was thrown wild but it caught Sutter hard enough to jar him and make blue lights flash behind his eyes. Claude seemed halfdrunk. He was windmilling his arms crazily but a glancing blow jarred Sutter’s jaw and Sutter could taste blood in his mouth. Now Claude was listing to the side like a drunken dancing bear and Sutter just stepped inside the flailing arms and hooked the knife deep and jerked upward in an explosion of blood and putrid gasses so hard Claude’s feet momentarily cleared the floor. When he withdrew the knife Claude stood disemboweled and looking down at himself with stunned incredulity and trying to put himself back together with both bloody hands. (186)10

Later, it is revealed that a “wagonload of bodies” have been brought to Sheriff Bellwether at Ackerman’s Field, an allusion to the novel’s prelude, which describes:

The dead exhibited in the strawstrewn wagonbed. A man or the bloody remnants of one, a rawboned middleaged woman with one bare and dirty foot protruding from the makeshift shroud. A girl with hair the color and sheen of a bird’s wing. About her throat an arrowhead tied to a leather thong, and the thong wound tightly into the bluelooking flesh. A boy of fourteen or fifteen and another younger yet and over all a welter of congealing blood. […] A mound of curly hair. A dog in there. (6,7)

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10 This scene is starkly reminiscent of Outer Dark’s murderous threesome’s disemboweling of the man who “wouldn’t turn Satan away for a dink” (McCarthy 129).
Sutter mercilessly kills not only Claude, but also his entire family, including their dog. Towards the end of the novel, Sutter manages to capture Tyler and the two duke it out against a backdrop of an eerily peaceful, snowy Tennessee wilderness. At one point hidden from Sutter, Tyler realizes: “Anymore the line between dreams and reality was ambiguous at best” (137). The wild, violent, lawless land of the Harrikin, covered now in snow, seems not to resemble any sort of landscape, but rather a dreamscape, a place detached from the reality of the rest of the world.

Upchurch writes also: “Gay’s stark prose taps straight into primal, feral feelings, amplifying them into some mythic realm” (“Twilight”). The realm of the Harrikin is indeed somewhat mythical, for here is where Gay applies subtle yet distinguishable fairytale imagery. When Tyler first enters the Harrikin he sees “a brick outbuilding and a tiny wooden shanty like a witch’s house in a fable” (126). Later, when Sutter comes to the Calvert’s house, Claude mistakes his knock at the door for Tyler’s, asking: “You the Lost Sheep back?” Sutter replies, “Yes…as lost a sheep as ever was” (185). Sutter, the veritable wolf in sheep’s clothing, is thereby granted entry into the Calvert’s home, where he thus brutally and ruthlessly murders the entire family. As mentioned previously, Sutter eventually manages to capture Tyler, and does so, in an allusion to the story of Little Red Riding Hood, by dressing as an “old grandmotherlike woman,” dressed in “an anklelength dress and men’s brogans broken out at the side and a ratty plaid shawl wound about her ample shoulders,” who asks for Tyler’s help unloading a sack of cowfeed from the trunk of her car (190). Gay’s frequent allusion to fables and fairytales does, as Taylor suggests, combine “menace and levity,” establishing the Harrikin as a land of fable, a mythical backwoods. But the Harrikin is, I believe, used as a larger metaphor for the South as a whole. In this way, Gay seems to be commenting on the myth of the South as a place of pastoral harmony, yet pervaded by violence.

While Sutter and Tyler fight in the snowy Harrikin, word gets out about the wagonload of dead bodies, discovered by Sandy Barnett (who Tyler meets on his journey through the Harrikin and tells of Fenton’s grotesque photographs), and Fenton’s perversions are subsequently discovered by the townsfolk. An angry mob appears at Fenton’s front door; sneaking out the back (with Corrie’s body in tow), he manages to escape by hearse. Because of the snow, however (and in an echo of Tyler’s earlier wreck that killed Corrie), the hearse skids and is sent careening over an embankment and into the brush. The townspeople surround him and Fenton threatens to shoot himself with the gun he brought with him. At the sight of Fenton with the gun
in his mouth, the mob “hesitated, more dumbfounded than intimidated: they’d expected to be shot at but here he was crouched in the blowing snow with the pistol in his mouth threatening to do what they’d traveled so hard and fast this night to do themselves” (209). After a member of the mob kicks the gun out of Fenton’s mouth, the omniscient narrator notes: “They’d been trying not to look at the girl but now they had to. Lord God, one of them said. They stood before this strange pair of lovers in a sort of perverse awe, aspirants before some strange god they couldn’t even begin to fathom how to worship” (209). Again, the townspeople display for Fenton a simultaneous disgust and admiration, emphasizing the hypocrisy of the Southern community. But the mob never kills Fenton as they set out to do; Tyler kills Sutter, knocking him into a pit and leaving him there to freeze to death. A day or so later, Tyler stands on the side of the road trying to hitchhike (to where is unclear). He stands across from “a graveyard with toilers at work, and he saw that the dead were still being replevied from the earth” (222). One of the workers mentions to Tyler that Fenton is “still alive in a hospital for lunatics in Memphis” (223). The novel ends when a black Buick approaches, stops, and Tyler gets in.

Interestingly, both Lester and Fenton end up in hospitals in Memphis, one a cadaver and the other a mental patient. Though neither novel offers any sort of moral in its conclusion, they are not entirely nihilistic. The “status of humanness itself” does not, as Bell argues, “seem intolerably ambiguous and frail – nugatory, even, in the unimplicated, insentient otherness of the world” (68); rather, through their respective treatments of necrophilia, both authors reflect on the primitive nature of the human condition and man’s need for community. Through this, McCarthy and Gay reveal and question the social and ideological contradictions of Southern community as a unit that hypocritically condemns its residents for exhibiting behavior that has been instilled in them through the social values of the community. Child of God and Twilight, as well as Outer Dark, furthermore reveal the contradictions of the South as a whole, as a mythical place of pastoral harmony, yet also of pervasive violence. Chapter Three will examine the South as a place of chaos and violence in Harry Crews’s A Feast of Snakes (1976), a novel that completely subverts the notion of harmony.
CHAPTER 3
WHAT A SNAKE CAN DO FOR LOVE:
HARRY CREWS, THE GROTESQUE BODY, AND BESTIALITY

The serpent deceived me, and I ate.
Genesis 3:13

Unlike McCarthy’s Outer Dark and Child of God, which tend to be overlooked as Southern novels, it is, as Tim Edwards writes, “impossible to deny the inherent Southernness” (64) of Harry Crews’s A Feast of Snakes (1976). Because of this “inherent Southernness,” the problem with what little criticism exists on Crews is not that A Feast of Snakes is ignored as a Southern novel, but rather that critics tend to misread his depiction of Southern issues. In “Carnivalesque Rituals and the Theological Grotesque in the Southern novels of Harry Crews and Cormac McCarthy,” the same essay in which she suggests that Child of God represents Lester’s search for meaning in the chaotic South, Maxime LaChaud claims that A Feast of Snakes too depicts a search for order and meaning, arguing that Joe Lon Mackey has “the feeling of being in control of everything as he fires at the crowd of Mystic, Georgia” (64). But A Feast of Snakes is not so much a search for order and meaning as it is a criticism of that search, of religion, for LaChaud’s essay fails to consider the Southern religious practice of serpent handling that Crews incorporates into his novel. With this in mind, I feel also that critics typically misread the unconventional sexual politics that govern Crews’s novel. I agree that Kristeva’s conception of the abject can be applied to Crews’s representation of the body, that A Feast of Snakes presents “not only a fictional universe based on an abject representation of the body but more than that, Harry Crews offers readers a challenging metaphysics of obscenity in which the desire to ‘go beyond’ is always doomed,” as LaChaud argues in another essay, “The Abject Body in Harry Crews’s Fiction” (52). Instead, however, through Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque, I want to suggest that the way Crews presents the body in an animalistic sort of way, oftentimes dehumanizing both male and female characters by frequently applying bestial qualities to the human body, implies a form of bestiality. Although most instances of bestiality

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11 Erik Bledsoe writes in the introduction to Perspectives on Harry Crews: “Despite having published fifteen novels, two collections of non-fiction, an autobiography that ranks among the best works to emerge from the South in the last twenty-five years, and various other limited editions and collections, Harry Crews is not very well known outside of a limited circle” (ix). At the same time, as Bledsoe acknowledges, Crews has “a devoted and passionate” cult following.
in the novel are rhetorical, Crews, like Gay, insinuates some instances of physical bestiality as well and directly relates this implication with religion. For this reason, and given also the obvious phallic and Biblical connotations associated with the snake, I believe that Crews’s treatment of bestiality in both its rhetorical and physical manifestations is an attempt to question and, ultimately, condemn Southern religious convictions, especially since the form of religion he deals most exclusively with – serpent handling – is a distinctly Southern religious practice.

Set in Mystic, Georgia during the time of the annual Rattlesnake Roundup, *A Feast of Snakes* follows the story of Joe Lon Mackey, a former high school football star who finds himself, years later, still stuck in Mystic selling whiskey and moonshine out of his father’s store. Stuck in an unhappy marriage to the dowdy, near toothless Elfie, Joe Lon spends his time reminiscing about his high school glory days of football and his time with ex-girlfriend Berenice, who returns to Mystic this year to attend the Roundup.

I refer to the sexual politics of Crews’s novel as unconventional primarily because of his animalistic depiction of the human body; what is interesting about his attempts to define these politics are the ways in which he chooses to represent these *female* bodies of Elfie and Berenice, never glorifying or idealizing either character. Jerrilyn McGregory, in “Wiregrass Country and the Carnivalesque,” recognizes the Bakhtinian implications of Crews’s construction of the body. She writes: “In accordance with the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, Crews’s images exist in polar opposition to all that is refined, pretentious, and doctrinaire. […] Crews restores the carnivalesque principles of folk humor, relying foremost on images of grotesque realism” (97). According to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque body:

> The grotesque body…is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.

[…] [T]he grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon. (317,18)

Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque body, as well as Crews’s representation of it, serves to de-romanticize the human body, reminding us of our carnality. As Nancy Tuana explains in her

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12 Elise S. Lake’s essay “Having a Hard Time of It” discusses the role of women in Crews’s work, observing Crews as “a social reporter and critic, who embeds his fictional women in uniquely Southern sociocultural contexts” (Lake 79,80).

13 McGregory writes against the monolithic view of the South and “shows how the Wiregrass region of Georgia has impacted [Crews’s] work and how this specialized sense of place allows him to overturn and lampoon traditional hierarchies in his work” (Bledsoe xii).
book *Revealing Male Bodies*: “[T]he nominative identification of material bodies as ‘male’ or ‘female’, ‘abled’ or ‘disabled’ is based on the alignment of certain body parts and specific functions” (103). She states further:

Consequently, only certain bodies are normalized while other bodies are rendered culturally abnormal or grotesque. In their list of the discursive norms of the grotesque, Stallybrass and White include the following: impurity, heterogeneity, disproportion, decentered and eccentric arrangements, a focus on gaps, orifices, and symbolic filth, and materiality. They argue that “the grotesque physical body in invoked both defensively and offensively because it is not simply a powerful image but fundamentally constitutive of the categorical sets through which we live and make sense of the world.” (qtd in Tuana 103)

Crews uniquely constructs these male and female grotesque bodies by creating them in relation to one another; to explore this dynamic, it is necessary to first examine Joe Lon’s relationship with both Elfie and Berenice. Despite the fact that Joe Lon acknowledges Elfie as “about as good a woman as a man ever laid dick to,” he despises her, mainly because he is disgusted by her teeth (10). As Bakhtin further explains:

Of all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body; the head, ears, and nose also acquire a grotesque character when they adopt the animal form or that of inanimate objects. […] But the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth.

(316,17)

By drawing attention to Elfie’s teeth as he does, Crews paints a particularly disturbing and, frankly, quite pathetic image of a downtrodden housewife, teeth gone bad from “having two babies so close together,” a woman whom Joe Lon expects to stay home and take care of the children (10). More importantly, this emphasis on the mouth – especially the teeth – encompasses a very specific Freudian implication that should be considered in relation to Joe Lon’s view of Elfie’s sexuality. Crews’s imagery, the way he describes Elfie’s mouth and impresses upon his readers Joe Lon’s utter disgust with Elfie’s teeth, is “reminiscent of the classic male nightmare of the *vagina dentata* (’vagina with teeth’), of a woman’s body as a supreme castrating danger” (Charmé 155). Joe Lon’s masculinity is structured around this
schematic; that in the case of Elfie, it seems to be not just a fear of female sexuality, but a complete disgust with Elfie’s sexuality. Joe Lon knows he “treat[s] her just like a goddam dog” (12) and though he hates this about himself, he makes no attempt to change his ways and continues to treat her badly.

Similar to the ways in which the mouth, eating, and drinking play a role in the formation of the grotesque body, other bodily functions play a role as well. As Bakhtin states:

[D]efecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. (317)

Whereas Joe Lon is repulsed by Elfie and detests the thought of being around her for an extended period of time, he puts Berenice on a pedestal, constantly reminiscing about their time together as high school sweethearts. Yet he still describes her in a grotesque sort of way; the graphic, coprophilic sex between Joe Lon and Berenice, in which Joe Lon says: “Love…is taking it out of you mouth and sticking it in you ass. […] But true love…goddam true love is taking it out of you ass and sticking it in you mouth,” is a stark reminder of both Berenice’s humanness and the relationship between the oral and the genital (121). Interestingly, Joe Lon doesn’t seem to be at all repulsed by the grotesque aspects of Berenice’s body. He demonstrates no fear of Berenice’s mouth, as evidenced by the aggressive oral sex scene. Although he thinks to himself: “She was a crazy bitch, has always been, and she sometimes scared him. She was always doing crazy shit and saying crazy shit, and sometimes it scared him,” Joe Lon seemingly reveres Berenice’s sexuality (31). He appreciates her sexual aggression, perhaps because he is able to identify with her primal, sexual instincts, Moreover, through this and also through Joe Lon’s disgust with Elfie’s teeth, Crews acknowledges the relationship between the oral and the genital, and further recognizes

[T]he special role of orality and anality for female sexuality, because of the receptive nature of the oral cavity and because of the proximity of vaginal and anal openings. […] The vagina takes over the role of the mouth. Coitus signifies the restoring of the first relation of unity in which the distinction of subject and object is annulled. Under the stimulation of the penis, the vagina takes over the passive role of the suckling mouth. (Breen 185)
This dynamic is obviously at work between Joe Lon and Elfie. For Bakhtin, “the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss” (317); Elfie is likewise reduced to “the gaping mouth,” for as Joe Lon sees Elfie, he is only ever able to concentrate on her mouth and teeth. Her mouth becomes a symbol of her sex, an organ that Joe Lon is both afraid of and disgusted by. As Jean-Paul Sartre further notes: “Beyond any doubt [female] sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis” (qtd in Charmé 155).

The act of eating, of devouring, is, in and of itself, a recurring motif in Crews’s novel; as the title implies, A Feast of Snakes is indeed a novel that prefers the oral equally as much as it prefers the genital. The characters in the novel are constantly eating and drinking, and in most cases, these instances are closely correlated with some manifestation of sexuality, whether rhetorical or physical. The most significant instance of such occurs when Joe Lon invites Willard, Duffy Deeter, Susan Gender, Hard Candy, and Berenice back to his trailer, where he tells Elfie: “Thought we’d cook up some snake and stuff, darlin, have ourselves a feast” (110). Crews very meticulously describes Joe Lon cutting the snakes into half-inch steaks and the way Elfie prepares to cook the snakes; she says: “Ways I do mostly is I soak’m in vinegar about ten minutes, drain’m off good, and sprinkle me a little Looseaner redhot on’m, roll’m in flour, and fry’m is the way I mostly do” (110). But he begins with and places the most emphasis on a detailed account of Joe Lon skinning the snakes:

Joe Lon skinned snakes in a frenzy. He picked up the snakes by the tails as he dipped them out of the metal drums and swung them around and around his head and then popped them like a cowwhip, which caused their heads to explode. Then he nailed them up on a board in the pen and skinned them out with a pair of wire pliers. (109)

Crews is so scrupulous and crude in this description to remind us, as he does throughout the novel, of our animalistic tendencies. Like Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, the Rattlesnake Roundup is “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete … all were considered equal during carnival. […] People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations (Bakhtin 10). Freud first recognized the “functional primacy of some part of the human body, the sites of ‘vital’ (oral, anal, genital)
needs,” and I most definitely believe this primacy is at work in Crews’s novel (Althusser 26). As Denis Foster explains: “Oral pleasures are among our first, combining the vital necessity of eating with the pleasing activity of sucking” (487). The act of eating in the novel is an extension of this basic development, for it seems as though none of the characters are ever able to grow beyond their primal urges.

Eating and sex are two of the most basic human needs, both of which are addressed in this particular scene. For it is during this elaborate snake feast also that, while “Joe Lon had sat listening, choking on both snake and the thought that he had spent his time and life selling nigger whiskey and watching Elfie’s teeth fall out,” Susan Gender challenges Hard Candy to a baton twirl-off, giving Joe Lon and Berenice the opportunity to sneak off and have sex (114). But the love scene Crews creates is far from tender and romantic; it is instead violent and aggressive. Joe Lon orders Berenice to “[g]et naked and take a four-point stance” (115). Throughout, Berenice rattles on about how much she loves her boyfriend, Shep, and reminisces about her high school romance with Joe Lon. As she does this, he realizes: “He did not know what love was. And he did not know what good it was. But he knew he carried it around with him, a scabrous spot of rot, of contagion, for which there was no cure. Rage would not cure it. Indulgence made it worse, inflamed it, made it grow like cancer” (118). Although Joe Lon recognizes his feelings for Berenice, sex with her really does not involve any sort of emotional connection. He views love as a disease, trying to annul his feelings by reverting to rage and indulgence. For Joe Lon, sex is not some transcendent, intimate connection between two human beings; it is simply a carnal act.

Tim Edwards, in “‘Everything is Eating Everything Else’: The Naturalistic Impulse in Harry Crews’s A Feast of Snakes,” argues that because of its emphasis on eating, the novel “taps into the rich vein of naturalism that has shaped social criticism in American fiction since the 1890s” (64). He writes:

Even relatively minor characters are figured as brutes: Hard Candy, for instance, is described in serpentine language – she felt “slick as oil, in all the joints of her body, her bones, in the firm sliding muscles, tensed and locked now, ready to spring, to strike” (3). Her boyfriend, the new Boss Snake Willard Miller, is rendered in equally appropriate terms; indeed, he, quite literally, looks like a snake: “He had a direct lidless stare and tiny ears. His hair was cut short and his
round blunt head did not so much sit on his huge neck as it seemed buried in it” (19). [...] In Lottie Mae’s twisted consciousness, Brother Boy transforms into a snake; Buddy Matlow, after donning a snake-headed condom, is butchered like a hog. (69)

Crews’s emphasis on sex and bodily functions, he explains, “expose the animal nature of humankind” (65), and that “[t]he animal imagery employed by Crews is the most self-evident naturalistic element in *A Feast of Snakes*. [...] But Crews’s novel does not really deconstruct the traditional binary opposition of man/beast; instead, it shows us that ultimately there is no difference between the human and the brute, between man and beast” (68). While I find a naturalist reading of the novel agreeable, I at the same time feel that Crews’s use of animal imagery is more complicated than to so simply be labeled as *naturalism*, for it is through the animalistic, bestial language Crews applies to the body that we can see the subtle themes of bestiality which punctuate the novel. Consider the encounter between Joe Lon, Willard, and Hard Candy in which Joe Lon states: “Ain’t nothing as pretty as a goddam snake.” Hard Candy replies: “I’m pretty as a snake,” to which Joe Lon and Willard agree: “You almost are…but you ain’t quite” (22). These descriptions continue throughout the novel, from Joe Lon comparing Elfie to a dog to describing Berenice’s movements as she “deliberately makin[es] her body twist and writhe in the supple windings of a snake” (32). Not only does Crews’s animalistic language have about it a strong sexual undertone, relating animals with sexuality, but Crews furthermore depicts a number of occasions whereby snakes are present during sex. The reason why Lottie Mae is so terrified of Buddy’s “snake” is because of such an instance. After arresting her for no reason, Buddy locks Lottie Mae in a cell, refusing to let her go until she has sex with him. He threatens her with a rattlesnake, telling her: “The snake or me one is coming in there with you. Which you reckon” (37)? Unfortunately, Lottie Mae really has no choice in the matter, for both Buddy and the snake come in. While Buddy has his way with her, the snake coils up in the corner and Lottie Mae cannot take her eyes off it. Similarly, Joe Lon recalls a night during the Rattlesnake Roundup of his high school years in which he and Berenice, drunk, have sex in the snake pit. In this case, the poisonous rattlesnakes “represent an intimate and persistent link between sex and death, between pleasure and punishment, desire and revenge which may prove significant in understanding certain key details of male sexuality and desire, and, consequently, given the differential oppositional structure of sexual identities and positions, in specifying
elements or features of female sexuality and subjectivity” (Grosz 279). Furthermore, because of
the way Berenice “deliberately mak[es] her body twist and writhe in the supple windings of a
snake,” she herself assumes these same representations for Joe Lon (22). He realizes that
“loving” Berenice “seemed to mess everything up,” and for the rest of his life, Joe Lon is unable
to find happiness. It is Berenice who is blamed for Joe Lon’s disillusion, which bring about his
ultimate demise. Crews also frequently calls attention to the obvious phallic symbolism of the
snake, at one point referencing “[r]attlesnake fangs hanging from all the throats of the world.
[…] Being dicks…Snakes and dicks. Sweet slick dicks and snakes” (31). Vendors at the
Rattlesnake Roundup sell “several well-crafted items that could only be dildoes of different
shapes and sizes; all were marked with the unmistakable pattern of the snake. Several of the
dildoes had reshaped and formed rattlesnake heads, complete with fangs” (53). There is a
particular instance in which Buddy Matlow, the town Sheriff who has a penchant for arresting
and raping young girls, purchases “two snake-headed rubbers with diamondback patterns” from
such a vendor, using one to later rape Lottie Mae.

Richard Rankin Russell observes in his essay “Graham Greene’s Influence on Harry
Crews,” that Crews has claimed in an interview with Erik Bledsoe: “All of my books, everything
I’ve written, as a matter of fact, including the journalism, in one way or another is either about
people searching for something to believe in, something that has to do with faith, or the nature of
faith” (39). The scene in which Buddy rapes Lottie Mae in the jail cell, brining a rattlesnake into
the cell with him as he does so, is perhaps one of the most convincing instances of the way
Crews, through his treatment of sexuality, seems to criticize Southern religious convictions, for
this scene most definitely reflects what Crews refers to as the “nature of faith.” After threatening
her with the snake, telling her, “The snake or me one is coming in there with you,” Lottie Mae
replies, “I ruther you” (37). Before slipping the snake into the cell anyway, Buddy snickers and
says, “Ain’t it a God’s wonder what a snake can do for love” (38)? Not only is this statement
maliciously mocking, calling Lottie Mae’s attention to God and making it sound as though she
had any agency in this matter, but furthermore calls attention to this particular Southern region’s
obsession with snakes. The “nature of faith” in this scene seems to insist that regardless of one’s
belief, we are subject to fate, not to God.

Rape is also the ultimate expression of masculinity; in fact, the repetitive emphasis on the
phallic is itself nothing more than a reaffirmation of masculinity. Potency, the ability to assert
one’s sexuality and demonstrate one’s virility, is a huge component of masculinity. It is furthermore “a narcissistic quality. […] And it is the narcissistic investment, fixated onto this instrument that he fears losing if he uses it, which leads to this state. Phallic narcissism, a direct consequence of the castration complex, constitutes for the man a way of emerging from the Oedipal conflict” (Breen 130). The fact that Buddy not only is guilty of raping Lottie Mae and various other young girls, but that he feels the need to draw further attention to his penis by encasing it in a “snake-headed rubber” is evidence that Buddy’s masculinity is centered entirely around his dominance. Furthermore, the fact that Elfie and Berenice both represent the grotesque body, the two women in Joe Lon’s life who each represent two starkly opposite ideologies – is especially indicative of the way Joe Lon’s masculinity is constructed in the novel. According to Lynne Segal:

[A] ‘pure’ masculinity cannot be asserted except in relation to what is defined as its opposite. It depends on the perpetual renunciation of ‘femininity’. No one can be ‘that male’ without constantly doing violence to many of the most basic human attributes: the capacity for sensitivity to oneself and others, for tenderness and empathy, the reality of fear and weakness, the pleasure of passivity. (qtd in Tuana 121)

Joe Lon’s relationship with Elfie is structured much in the way Segal describes; his masculinity is based on her passivity. Elfie is constantly doing things to please him, worshipping him, and yet he has no “capacity for sensitivity” towards her. On the other hand, while he physically dominates her, Joe Lon loves Berenice (though he has trouble recognizing that emotion).

Because they share such similar carnal urges, because they are both equally sexually aggressive, I would argue that Joe Lon and Berenice are, in a sense, gender equals. Berenice is as equally self-centered and unconcerned with the feelings of Elfie and Shep as Joe Lon, as she betrays them both by having sex with Joe Lon. In this sense, Berenice is renouncing her own femininity and thereby asserting her own dominance; much in the way Joe Lon asserts his.

Though most of the instances of bestiality in the novel are rhetorical, there are a couple of insinuated examples as well. Tommy Hugh, the man who owns over five hundred snakes, which he brings with him to the Rattlesnake Roundup, is allegedly “tainted” from doing so, and is referred to throughout the novel as a “tainted sumbitch.” As Coach Tump notes: “‘This one’s the one…Tainted’. Then he mouthed the word again: _tainted_” (144). Later, five men, a woman, and
two small children, armed with hatchets, mutilate and kill one of Tommy Hugh’s two hundred pound anacondas. Upon discovering the remains of his snake, “Tommy Hugh actually knelt and lifted the anaconda’s head into his lap. […] Tommy Hugh looked up at Coach Tump, tears streaming down his face, and said: ‘You would’ve stopped them if it’d been a dog they was chopping’” (169). It is questionable whether Tommy Hugh actually engages in sexual activities with his snakes, but his affinity for and apparent attachment to his five hundred snakes is out of the ordinary.

The snake is not only a phallic symbol, but also incorporates a number of obvious Biblical connotations, thus tying together the sexual and the spiritual. According to James Nelson’s book *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*: “To pronounce both of these words in the same breath still sounds like an oxymoron to many people – they seem to cancel each other out” (71). He further explains:

Indeed, that reaction is understandable, for the dualistic inheritance of the classical world deeply affected Christianity and shaped the understanding of spirituality into body-denying directions. Spirit was viewed as essentially different from and superior to the suspect sexual body. Hence, the cultivation of spirituality meant the control, discipline, and repression of the body. Christian spirituality was seen as a life controlled by disciplines of meditation and prayer whereby one could rise beyond the flesh to higher communion with the divine. (71)

That Crews seems to directly associate and explicitly insinuate interspecies sex with the one religious figure in the novel is Crews’s strongest condemnation of religion. Victor, the serpent-handling preacher, is an alleged “snake fucker” (76). Though Crews neglects to cite any specific examples of such practices, Joe Lon, on more than one occasion, notes: “I seen’m kiss a snake and a snake kiss him. He’s been bit in the mouth. He’s been bit everywhere” (101). It is also very telling that Crews relates this sexuality with a religious practice that is distinctly Southern: serpent handling. According to Scott Schwartz’s *Faith, Serpents, and Fire: Images of Kentucky Holiness Believers*: “The development of serpent handling in the South, and more specifically in Appalachia, has been traced to the first decade of the twentieth century” (27). W. Paul Williamson and Ralph W. Hood, in “Differential Maintenance and Growth of Religious
Organizations Based upon High-Cost Behaviors: Serpent Handling within the Church of God,” explain the origins of serpent handling as a Southern Pentecostal practice:

The Church of God (COG, Cleveland, Tennessee) is one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in the world. A distinctive characteristic of Pentecostalism in general, and of the COG in particular, is glossolalia, which is accepted as biblical warrant for possession by the Holy Ghost. […] [A]s the early COG carefully socially constructed the importance of tongues-speaking as evidence for Holy Ghost possession, they also encouraged, supported, and utilized serpent handling as another biblically warranted sign. Over time, however, as the church grew from a small sect to denominational status, it came to oppose serpent handling. The churches that refused to abandon this practice became “renegade” Churches of God and remain as such to the present time. (150)

According to Williamson and Hood, the Church of God “emerged initially in Appalachia as a sectarian movement focusing upon intense experiences identified as possession by the Holy Ghost” (152). This sect focused mainly on tongues-speaking as evidence of Holy Ghost possession, but “the various biblical passages used to justify tongues-speaking also appeared to legitimate other practices likely to elicit intense emotion” (153). Biblical justification for this practices and can be found in the gospel of Mark, which reads: “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover” (16:17-18). Williamson and Hood credit George Went Hensley with the emergence of serpent handling in 1908. Hensley believed that “eternal security rested upon obedience to these mandates – and specifically the taking up of serpents” (153). Searching for God in prayer, Hensley climbed White Oak Mountain, later descending “with rattlesnake in hand to launch only a few days later his first evangelical campaign with a challenge that believers should practice all that Jesus had commanded – including the taking up of serpents” (153).

Hood, in another essay, “Serpent Handling Holiness Sects: Theoretical Considerations,” considers the theoretical implications of serpent handling as evidence of Holy Ghost possession. He explains:
The legitimization of serpent handling is described in terms of attributions derived from a literal interpretation of the King James Bible. Psychodynamic symbol theory is used to argue for the universality of the serpent as a source of body projections ultimately linked not simply to the phallus, but to death and resurrection. [...] The cultural transmission of serpent handling as a socially constructed religious practice thus builds upon the universal appeal of the serpent base upon body symbolization. (311)

As Hood further states: “[B]ody symbolization can activate fantasies involving the totality of the body, including a wide variety of infantile fantasies associated with various developmental stages. Second, overt cultural transmission of symbols in legends, myths, and religion can be read as partly supported by repression of bodily desires that find release in these symbols” (313, 14). Most importantly, as Schwartz points out, are the ways in which “believers attribute their successful handling of serpents…either to spiritual anointment or to an unquestioning faith in the powers of the Holy Spirit” (53).

But Victor has been bitten – a lot; it would therefore seem that Victor does not have God’s protection when handling serpents, perhaps because he does in fact engage in perverse sexual acts with snakes. Because of the novel’s apocalyptic ending, I believe Crews, through his treatment of bestiality as a form of deviant sexuality, is saying that a belief in God is irrelevant. For even as Victor holds a rattlesnake in each hand and “sings on about good and evil,” Joe Lon still “reached to the rack where the shotgun hung behind him and in a single movement came out of the cab and blew a hole the size of a doorknob out of Victor’s pale naked chest” (176). At the end of the novel, after Joe Lon shoots Luther Peacock, Berenice, and various other nameless snake hunters, he runs out of bullets and is thrown by a mob of people into the snake pit. LaChaud writes that Joe Lon has “the feeling of being in control” during this final scene in which Joe Lon grabs the shotgun off the rack in the truck and opens fire on the crowd at the Roundup (“Carnivalesque” 64). Joe Lon, she explains, participates in “acts that are either sadistic or masochistic or both, and in most cases, [his] masochism is very close to religious penance (as it is a way to atone for [his] sins, or the sins of others” (64). But Joe Lon doesn’t seem to recognize his sins, feeling no remorse for his adulterous tryst with Berenice, his jealousy of those who moved on after high school and of Shep’s relationship with Berenice, his gluttony (it is a novel of eating, after all), or his vice of betting on dog fights. Furthermore, Joe Lon’s
rampage does not bring order, only more chaos. Once out of bullets, he is thrown into the snake pit and the chaos of the Roundup ensues.

_A Feast of Snakes_ is a novel of decadence, one that, I would argue, definitely “call[s] into question established codes, habitual methods of mediating, organizing, and explaining experience” by reminding us that even as humans, we are still animals (Gray 189). As McCarthy suggests in _Outer Dark_ and _Child of God_, and as Gay suggests in _Twilight_, the South is still a center of violence and carnality, and that we who reside in this region cannot escape our most primal urges, regardless of our gender. The fact that Crews chooses to explore these themes of bestiality through the snake, quite possibly one of the most symbolic of all animals, is particularly relevant, considering especially the pervading phallic and religious connotations that surround it and given also Crews’s incorporation of serpent handling. Through this, and through also Joe Lon’s violent rampage and ultimate demise, Crews reminds us that a search for order through violence will only result in more chaos. The search for order and meaning is, in the world of _A Feast of Snakes_, utterly useless, again drawing attention to the irrelevant nature of faith. We are all free agents in this world, all of us animals, all of us subject to whatever hand fate deals us.
EPILOGUE

This thesis has challenged traditional readings of McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, Gay’s *Twilight*, and Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes*, providing an in-depth examination of the deviant sexuality represented within these texts – incest, necrophilia, and bestiality, respectively – that critical scholarship only dares to acknowledge. In doing so, I have demonstrated the ways in which these contemporary male Southern writers, through their treatment of sexual deviancy, reveal and question the cultural and ideological contradictions prevalent within Southern society.

It argues against Edwin T. Arnold’s and Maxime LaChaud’s assertion that these texts all convey a message that is essentially religious, that there is evident in these works “a profound belief in the need for moral order” (Arnold 46). While theological allusions and Biblical imagery are widely prevalent, particularly in McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, McCarthy, Gay, and Crews subvert these religious implications through pervasive violence and grotesque imagery. Chapter One illustrates this violence as a representation of the abject, and through this, shows that McCarthy’s treatment of incest promotes the Southern importance of family while criticizing the region’s moral code that seemingly exploits religion as a means of advocating ritual violence. The trio of mysterious men in *Outer Dark* are not, as Arnold posits, “agents of retribution and thus figures of judgement” (49); rather, in accordance with William C. Spencer’s viewpoint, the three marauders are crafted as supreme hypocrites, delighting in destruction and killing even those innocent “who wouldn’t turn Satan away for a drink” (McCarthy 51). Chapter Three provides a historical context for the Southern religious practice of serpent handling that Crews incorporates into his novel. As Pentecostal evidence of Holy Ghost possession, serpent handling is a way of demonstrating that one has attained God’s protection. Victor, the serpent handling preacher and only religious figure of *A Feast of Snakes*, has been bitten numerous times, evidence not of Holy Ghost possession, but of the fact that Victor does not apparently have God’s protection. Victor is furthermore gunned down by Joe Lon, suggesting the irrelevance of faith in God. Joe Lon’s maniacal shoot-out, as LaChaud suggests, is not a search for order; it is a criticism of man’s need for order, for Joe Lon’s rampage only brings with it more chaos, as he is thrown by Roundup attendees into the snake pit.

At the same time it argues against religious readings of these texts, it also denounces Bell’s position that these novels – specifically, McCarthy’s novels – are nihilistic, “the status of humanness itself…seem[ing] intolerably ambiguous and frail – nugatory, even, in the
unimplicated, insentient otherness of the world” (Bell 68). Chapter Two, through its examination of necrophilia in *Child of God* and *Twilight*, demonstrates the hypocrisy of the Southern community that condemns its residents for exhibiting behavior that has been instilled in them through the social values of the community. I show how Lester and Fenton are constructed as sympathetic characters, that we as readers share with them certain “fundamental aspect[s] of ourselves – of our fear, of time, our programmed infatuation with death, our loneliness, our threatening appetites, our narcissistic isolation from the world and the reality of other people” (Bell 55). For this reason – despite the fact that neither McCarthy nor Gay offer any sort of moral to their novel’s conclusion – the status of humanness is not “ambiguous” or “frail”; instead, McCarthy and Gay reflect on the primitive nature of the human condition and man’s need for community.

That these authors sculpt the landscape of the South as a place of violence, lawlessness, and essential primitiveness reveals the contradictions of the South as a whole, as a mythical place of pastoral harmony, yet also of pervasive violence. This thesis sought to show that, in their examinations of perverse sexuality, McCarthy, Gay, and Crews probe the depths of the human condition as a means by which to deconstruct Southern experience, revealing the hypocrisy of the Southern moral code, challenging Southern religious sensibilities, and questioning the contradictions of Southern community. Furthermore, this thesis intended to show how contemporary Southern literature has developed from its Faulknerian roots, how the concerns of the Agrarians and the Southern Renascence have informed the Southern writers of today, and how McCarthy, Gay, and Crews, as contemporary authors, have recontextualized these concerns and the figure of the “other” as an examination of the human condition, thus recontextualizing existing concepts of Southern identity.
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cameron Williams was born in Burlington, North Carolina, where she lived for three years before her family relocated to Florida. Although her upbringing on the east coast of Florida amongst the snowbirds and tourists left her without a Southern accent, she was nonetheless raised to appreciate her Southern heritage and considers herself a Tar Heel at heart. In 2006, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. Two years later, she completed her Master of Arts degree, also at Florida State University. Her research interests include contemporary American fiction, gender studies, and Southern literature. After a brief respite, she plans to pursue a PhD in literature and continue her study of the South.