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## **The Southern Gothic Style in Cormac McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper* and *Outer Dark***

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### **Abstract**

Cormac McCarthy is the author of ten acclaimed novels. All McCarthy's books share a sense that humans are at best narrow, often insensate or crude and sometime evil. McCarthy adapted the southern gothic mode in his works that made his works unique. As one reads McCarthy's description of his characters one finds humanity differs only in degree from the rest of the animal world. The present paper discusses the southern gothic style in Cormac McCarthy's novels *Outer Dark* and *The Orchard Keeper*.

### **Keywords**

American Novel; Southern Gothicism; Postbellum Era, Cormac McCarthy;  
*The Orchard Keeper*; *Outer Dark*.



American Novel in all its variety does not reflect American life so much as it refracts it. It has developed into a complex vital form. From the beginning, the American novel reveals a sense of personal displacement. America may be the land of freedom, but democracy exacts a price for freedom it confers. There is change in system of politics, economics and technology. These intoxicating changes also leave the individual reeling under the effect of forces that seemed beyond his or her control. It is little wonder that the early American novels deal with displacement, misfortune and even terror.

The political founders of America like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and Samuel Adams were followers of John Locke, who thought humankind is capable of tolerance, democracy and reason. These writers were partially correct.

The Gothic mindset accounts for everything the Enlightenment overlooks such as terror, perversity, strangeness, a sense of not knowing where one is or how one got there. Gothicism can be defined as a mode of fiction utilized by critically acclaimed modernist writers of the Southern Renaissance, characterised by grotesque characters and scenes. It deals with the exploration of abnormal psychological state, dark humor, violence and a sense of alienation or futility. Many Southern Gothic tales utilize similar myths of Southern society such as religious fundamentalism, racial tolerance, genetic deformities, perverted sexuality and unrequited violence.

In each successive phase of the southern gothic space one finds an inversion of a contemporary vision of an idealized utopia or the attempt to redeem the world from unreason. After the massive destruction and horrible defeats of the Civil War, Postbellum literary endeavors were subverted by the victorious northern industrial culture.

In the postbellum era of reconstructing and reviewing the world, a few southern writers chose gothic form to reveal a different view of both contemporary and past southern societies. Authors such as George W. Cable,

Thomas Nelson Page and Charles W. Chestnutt painted a Gothic portrait of Southern society. The nineteenth-century writers provided the springboard from which the gothic works of southern renaissance were launched. The modern and contemporary southern gothic's adapted the repudiation or inversion of social ideals that they had learned from their nineteenth-century gothic predecessors.

In the wake of the southern renaissance, contemporary southern writers adapted the southern gothic mode. Walker Percy, Shirley Ann Grau, Cormac McCarthy, James Dickney created a new myth of the south through their fictions.

The Southern Gothic literary tradition evolved from the antebellum South as an identifiable subgenre in American literature. What makes the school southern is that most of its authors come from southern states and the focus is on the southern subjects such as sense of loss and deprivation of history because of their defeat in the Civil War, class conflicts and religious fanaticism in the form of harsh Calvinist doctrines and their belief in fatalism.

The atmosphere of decay in the southern gothic tradition has a variety of manifestation in McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper* and *Outer Dark*. Both the novels focus on social transgressions such as bootlegging, necrophilia, murder, rape, incest, cannibalism and infanticide. McCarthy's interest in the elemental and eternal problem of human depravity is felt in his early works.

In his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy made a point of continually violating the comfortable expectations of his readers. Setting for McCarthy, is of paramount importance. In fact, geographic contours seem to precede and form the characters that act within their folds. This stands as a kind of philosophical principle for McCarthy, who places the human dimension of life in perspective, always vigilantly invoking the presence of larger, more powerful, mystical forces that drive and control people's lives. The hilly region east of Knoxville is perfect for supporting the thematic thrust of the novel. During the

time in which the novel is set, between the 1930's and early 1940's, the area was yet outside the jurisdiction of law and beyond the reach of modern civilization.

Only gradually do the readers come to know about the three main characters. Marion Sylder a bootlegger; John Wesley Rattner, a young boy who traps game illegally; and Arthur Ownsby, an old, single man who is the orchard keeper. Though these characters have no discernible relation to one another when the reader meets them, they are drawn to one another as the narrative unfolds. Sylder has killed John Wesley's father, partly in self-defense, without even knowing who the man was. Sylder dumps the body of the dead man into an insecticide spray tank on the old decaying orchard kept by Ownsby. Ownsby finds the body but keeps it a secret making periodic ritualistic visits to the makeshift grave, watching the body decay. John Wesley however knows both of them.

The social transgression in the southern gothic tradition such as bootlegging, murder, and alcoholism is felt in *The Orchard Keeper*. There are recurrent descriptions of the corpse floating and decomposing in water for months and years which constitute the gothic aspect of the book. Whilst the most grotesque image comes from Ownsby's discovery of Rattner's corpse in an orchard.

The thing seemed to leap at him, the green face leering and coming up through the lucent rotting water with eyeless sockets and green fleshless grin, the hair dark and ebbing like seaweed. (54)

McCarthy's southern gothic books evince a tragic arc that has a main character, always male, who intentionally engages in action often in the form of quest and gradually he is destroyed by the convergence of events of his own making and those beyond control. The action that surrounds this main character is unusual for its violence, its exploration of social taboos and for its cast of secondary characters typically lack human emotion.

In addition to creating characters with whom readers do not want to identify, McCarthy operates against long standing literary methods in his works.

One of those methods is the use of pastoral theme. The pastoral existence defines a mode of living in which the individual lives in harmony with nature in a rural setting completely removed from the corrupting elements of the society. The idea of pastoral life, for McCarthy is totally incompatible with southern society. Harmony with nature is unattainable because of southern civilization, city, and country have been poisoned by endemic racism. Thereby McCarthy's characters are all confined to an inevitable tragic arc. The landscape described below is an example of the waste land motif.

In the late summer the mountain bakes under a sky pitiless blue. The red dust of Orchard road is like powder from a brick kiln. You can't hold a scoop of it in your hand. Hot winds come up the slope from the valley like a rancid breath, redolent of milkweed, hoglots rotting vegetation. The red clay banks along the road are crested with withered honeysuckle, pea vines dried and in dust. By the late July the corn paths stand parched and sere, sheathed stalks eschewing defeat. All greens pale and dry. (10-11)

In *The Orchard Keeper*, the protagonist struggles against the brutal, hostile world. Realistic and highly stylized dialogue is one way in which the reader experiences McCarthy's southern gothic characters. He creates characters in such a manner that they gain knowledge about the world, yet they are inherently static and their experience does not change their flaws. This is evident in all male characters in *The Orchard Keeper*. Their flaws become intertwined with their virtues until the two are almost indistinguishable. Therefore one sees how the innocent John Wesley and Rattner is ruined by other characters. The murder of John Wesley's father is made horrific yet ironic as the body is guarded in the orchard by uncle Arthur Ownby. There is irony in Arthur Ownby's ignorance of the corpse's identity and in the fact that young man Wesley, unknowingly befriends the murderer.

Gothic literary “space” is conventionally characterized by feelings of claustrophobia, fear, dread and isolation elicited by a succession of enclosed space, all of which one encounters in *Outer Dark*. In her study of the function of gothic spaces in Eudora Welty’s fiction, Ruth Weston provides the following definition which corresponds to McCarthy’s use of gothic space in *Outer Dark*.

The most basic element of Gothic is the gothic space, the definition which proceeds from the earliest literary appropriations of labyrinthine enclosure, such as cathedral and castle dungeons, as well as from a general awareness of a psychological or parapsychological realm that impinges upon the everyday world of actuality. The gothic space is difficult and unpredictable setting that surrounds center of suspense. It is often part of a bare-stage wasteland that heightens the exposed nature of the human being who is trapped there. It is always mysteriously charged with power. Gothic spaces engender anxiety, dread and the sense that escape is not possible. (Qtd. in Greenwood 18-19)

*Outer Dark* opens and closes with dreamlike sequences infused with motifs of blindness and darkness which involve Culla Holmes, the protagonist and the terrifying nightmare vision, filled with longings for clemency and salvation that will never be fulfilled.

The readers soon learn that the reason for Culla’s dream-world guilt principally lies in the fact he has violated a foundational social taboo by sleeping with and impregnating his sister Rinthy. Culla and Rinthy live in total isolation from any kind of community or social network. They are isolated even from their own family and they live out a wretched existence in a characteristically awful domestic setting. Furthermore, Culla fails to summon any kind of medical help to assist Rinthy during the torturous delivery of the child. However, Culla is not done with violating taboos. While Rinthy is recovering from the child birth, Culla takes the unnamed child and leaves it for dead in the nearby woods, and upon

his return to their cabin, Culla tells Rinthy that child has been buried. Culla reluctantly takes her to the supposed burial scene.

Rinthy finds no body buried in the child's ostensible grave and she correctly infers that the baby is still alive and in the custody of an itinerant tinker who sells household goods and pornographic postcards. Rinthy sets out in search of the child, and Culla in search of Rinthy. Although neither quest is successful, brother and sister continually cross paths with each other

Culla encounters considerably great peril in his travels. He sees men hanging from trees. In one unforgettable sequence, he crosses a river in a runaway ferry boat whose captain has been swept overboard. Upon reaching the other shore, Culla encounters three murderers. Culla is then forced to exchange his nearly new boots for rotten old ones and is left to fend for himself in the night. When Culla Holmes takes shelter in an abandoned house, he is arrested for trespassing and is sentenced by the local squire. Culla faces additional danger when he encounters a group of hog drovers. After the hogs inexplicably stampede and plunge over cliff, taking one of the drovers with them, the surviving men conclude that Culla has somehow been responsible for catastrophe and decide to hang him. Culla escapes this bit of irrational and undeserved punishment by leaping in the river.

In addition to the thematic conventions, the dissolution of society in southern gothic novels is embodied by a cast of violent and disturbed characters whose struggle is personified by the trope of imbecile, which is another common feature of southern gothic tradition. The imbecile is a character born in a corrupted state and who is doomed to an inescapable fate, despite yearning for freedom from the corrupting elements of society.

McCarthy gives a sense of closure to *Outer Dark* when Culla Holme finally comes across the infant he left for dead. What follows is the most harrowing scene in *Outer Dark*.

Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a long cat's eye slant and malevolent and 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 one eye glazing over like a wet stone and black blood pumping down its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. He was drooling and making little whimpering noises in his throat. He knelt with his hands outstretched and his nostrils rimped delicately. The man handed him the child and he seized it up, looked once at Holme with witless eyes, and buried his moaning face in its throat. (210)

The landscape in *Outer Dark* is portrayed as a barren wasteland, where nothing seems to grow. Not only does the natural world here seem stricken by some terrible plague, but nature itself is a threatening presence which seems to be engulfing the human form. McCarthy continuous use landscape to represent the interiority of his characters, which is a valuable technique in a novel where many protagonists do not possess cognitive reasoning or consciousness to accomplish such task.

Another convention of the Southern Gothic tradition is its treatment of romantic love. In Southern Gothic novels, romantic love is a common element. The lover and the beloved are joined in union and this union is typically ill-fated. McCarthy's works however are wholly devoid of romantic love. Male-female relationships in his works are debased. They appear as incest in *Outer Dark* and they are totally absent in *The Orchard Keeper*. The absence of romantic love in McCarthy's quartet of southern fiction demonstrates his departure from tradition.

McCarthy's characters tend to inhabit predominantly masculine settings. His female characters are all flat and for the most part grotesquely disfigured or symbolically embroiled in hate-filled relationships and domestic arrangements that resemble a particular type of entrapment by women in gothic fiction. Rinthy in *Outer Dark* is the victim of sexual abuse and incest and the other women she



meets whilst on the road are the victims of hideous misfortune and domestic violence. For instance the women with whom, Rinthy stays and learns that the woman's five children have died from cholera and whose husband calls her a "flap tongued old bat" (107) in the prelude to the heated physical altercation. Rinthy, also encounters a series of older women who appear curiously asexual and who are seemingly without any reproductive capability.

McCarthy pushes the degree of violence beyond normal heroics, in which there is a clear-cut winner and a loser who determines the moral content of society. McCarthy's south is steeped in ultra-violence. Necrophilia, rape, violent murder and other violations occur because society is weak. McCarthy sees the destruction of the south as an altered society at its most basic level, so that humans are free to indulge in their most base instincts and compulsions. His fictions speak of unredeemable moral decay on the social and individual level.

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