

Rewriting Pastoral Convention: History, White Manhood and Abjection in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*

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Abstract Cormac McCarthy's southern novel *Child of God* sometimes inaccurately falls into the category of "typical pastoral novel". However, a nostalgic interpretation overlooks McCarthy's indifference to discourses of grand history, particularly the southern myth. This paper reinvestigates Ballard's tragedy and hopes to offer some new interpretations with the help of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Kristeva believes that the subjects establish their subjectivity via the abjection of others, but such abjection is in perpetual danger and frequently challenges the subjects' perception of subjectivity. This paper looks into main character's effort to enact the patriarchal order of the old south and reestablish his lost subjectivity by tints of abjection others, and how such practice ended tragically. Ballard's attempt to achieve order through abjection is mainly manifested in his endeavor to a static familial order that encapsulates the hierarchical structure of the Old South. In other words, this paper highlights the incompleteness of abjection. With a detailed depiction of Ballard's changing psyche, McCarthy indicates that the bygone pastoral order is more of a spiritual malady than a comfort. Therefore, this paper affords several new insights to the existing studies. Firstly, it addresses the previous studies' relative oversight of historical discourse's influence on Ballard. It argues that he was not only a scapegoat of the undesirable edge of modernization, but also a victim of the haunted ideology of the old south. Also, it offers a new perspective to see how contemporary southern writers like McCarthy broke the anxiety of influence, deviated from and innovated southern

literary traditions.

Keywords Cormac McCarthy, Abjection, Southern Literature

1. Introduction

For many critics, the pastoral elements in Cormac McCarthy's (1933-2023) third novel *Child of God* (1973) are too conspicuous to ignore, although there is little consensus on whether this novel is pastoral or fundamentally antipastoral. This novel, with a touch of Faulknerian style, revolves around disputes over property issue, dramatizes with murders, and ends up with the death of the protagonist just like *A Rose for Emily* (1930). The similar theme of the lost land invites some scholars to categorize this novel as an elegy of the foregone idyllic world, a convention that features many works about postbellum south. Indeed, the loss of family land in the novel happens simultaneously with the depletion of family land in the southern regions of Appalachian Mountain, when many Appalachian subsistence farmers who usually titled only the small portions of land they cultivated lost to the timber companies the untitled land on which they hunted and fished [1]. However, a close examination of the psyche of the main character Lester Ballard, a white trash-turned serial killer, suggests that the novel is far from being a lamentation of the lost world. The analysis of this

southern novel cannot be complete without acknowledging the cultural history of the region and McCarthy's mixed feelings towards his homeland burdened by its glorious history and the regional myth of The Lost Cause. The failure of Ballard to reconstruct the order of the old south indicates that McCarthy is not wistfully in remembrance of the lost plantation world and romanticizes the past as a shield against the overwhelming modernization in a way similar to his predecessors back to the Southern Renaissance; instead, by showing Ballard's thwarted attempts to reclaim the domestic order of the antebellum south by dint of his violent behavior, McCarthy implies that the obsession with "the good old days" is a precarious turn. After losing his house due to unpaid tax, Ballard reduced himself into a voyeur, a necrophile and a murder step by step. His horrific behavior was not forged randomly. It is the projection of his inward version of the pastoral ideal with submissive women, domesticated animals and other old rituals. With the help of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this paper looks into the inner journey of Lester Ballard, from his engendered subjectivity after losing his house, his abortive efforts to restore it via putting others (mainly women) into abject state, to his moral awakening and renouncement of abjection. It then argues that the incomplete course of abjection manifests that the identification with the order of the old south is hardly conducive for southerners to form their subjectivity as the south moves into future. McCarthy, unlike the southern literati, ceases to derive comforts from the golden pastoral world of the past, whose existence constitutes part of the well-fabricated southern myth.

Before discussing in more depth, the paper would like to make some clarifications so as not to be misleading. This first is to elucidate the seemingly dubious relationship between Southern literature and Appalachian literature. Does the latter rightfully fall into the category of the typical school of Southern literature, whose pedigree can be found in plantation system of the Deep South? In other words, whether it is logically reasoned to see *Child of God*, among other works set in sub-cultural Appalachian region, as an evolution of the southern school, is open to many interpretations. For this question this paper argues that the Appalachia, a liminal state where the north and the south overlap, is upheld by self-sufficient agrarian tradition and shares similar experience with the Deep South in confronting the rising influence of industrial north. Besides, an intertextual scope enables readers to capture the liaison of McCarthy's work and the south tradition. McCarthy's penchant of adopting violence elements is reminiscent of that of Flannery O'Connor. And like many contemporary writers from the Deep South, he is highly conscious of the burden of the southern history. The most telling example reveals itself in *Suttree* (1992), when the eponymous protagonist drifted into illusion and saw the much-celebrated past was nothing more than an insane feast [2]. All these considered, it is safe to incorporate McCarthy's

south novels into the more commonly known southern literary norms. The South in McCarthy's writings is an ambiguous and highly culturally symbolic space. The other problem is, investigating the victim's psyche risks rushing into a conclusion which may unfairly blame the victim and played down the pernicious social factors. This paper refrains from hastening into such a conclusion. It wishes to pinpoint that Lester Ballard was not only a victim of modernization, but also a victim of the haunted ideology of the old south. Ballard's moral degeneration was inseparable from the obsession with the mythological pastoral past.

2. The Withdrawal of Pastoral World: Ballard's Subjectivity in Peril

The novel starts with the auction of Ballard's family land. Holding a rifle, Ballard showed up at the auction scene and tried to reprocur his house, only to be evicted from the scene teeming with "carnival folk" with appraising eyes fixed on his lost land [3]. After this incident Ballard never could hold his head because his neck had been violently beaten [3]. He had but to take shelter in an abandoned hunting cabin and by then he had already looked half crazy [3]. He eked out a precarious existence, "on a diet of stolen fieldcorn and summer garden stuff for weeks save for the few frogs he'd shot" [3].

Ballard's misfortune is a token of the fading agrarian economy of the American South. Although the influence of the capitalized north already began to reveal itself after the Civil War, the economic structure of the south remained unchanged for a long phase. "A last agricultural South cannot be described as modern in any way, either in the very old sense of being part of the plantation society and the original world economic order or in the new sense of being well capitalized, at least partly mechanized, and connected to metropolitan markets" [4]. Substantial changes only occurred after the implementation of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal (1933-1938). Vital capital sponsored by the Federal Government combined with accelerated labor mobility subsequent to World War II, the mechanical cotton harvester, and new agricultural chemicals to turn the south's agriculture into a capital intensive one [4]. Lester's farm stands in a typical pastoral landscape, maintaining the old-fashioned form of the Agrarians' rural, agricultural society [5]. Back to the 1930s, Appalachian highlands were populated by farmers whose modest production was used at home [1], but by the 1960s when the story took place, the self-sufficient mode became hard to sustain. Although McCarthy doesn't directly explain why the county forfeited Ballard's house, scholars generally agree that it is due to tax issue, since back then many farmers in Appalachian regions had to sell land to absolve their tax debts [1]. Uninvited, Ballard showed up in the auction, disrupting the uplifting speech of the

auctioneer, according to whom “there is no sounder investment than property” [3]. The rising in property value also reflects the changed conception of land. The coal and timber companies that started to enter the Appalachian regions in the 1920s paid the locals to work for them, either as hired hands or odd job men; thereupon, farmers’ lessened dependency on their farms and their newly developed appetite for cash nudged them into cutting liaison with lands or selling them altogether [4]. “Hillbillies became people without places, on the move, tied not to the cycle of farm work but to the vagaries of industrial opportunity” [4]. Ballard’s folk viewed land not so much as the indispensable means of livelihood than a common investment.

Ballard was ill-fitted to the vast change, not to mention the following hostility imposed on him. In the traditional southern reigns, members of a community are loosely connected, and “it was not unusual for rich and poor relatives to be living near one another, nor for the wealthy to assist their less fortunate relatives” [6]. But Ballard’s south was not what it used to be. If Ballard could barely survive the hardship in the physical plane, the animosity he received from his following county people is more intolerable. Shunned by his community, he was close to the liminal status of “wolf-man” as described by Giorgio Agamben [7]. He scrambled between urban environments and wilderness spaces. While he still retained his human form, his scavenging behaviors and displaced state endowed him with traits characteristic of animals. “What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf-is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city” [7]. In case of Ballard, he received less respect than animals. When he went to the church people did not bother to look back and tell him to lower his snuffling voice, less than the efforts they put on a noisemaking woodpecker [3]. His cabin was once harassed by packs of foxhounds, among whom Ballard himself became a prey. Worse still, Ballard was wrongly accused with sexual assault and thrown into prison for a few days [3]. Such experience dealt a huge blow on Lester Ballard, whose subjectivity had already been mired in danger due to his childhood experience. His mother had run off, shortly followed by his father’s suicide when he was nine or ten years old [3]. For the people of Sevier County, it marked the beginning of Ballard’s craziness. Dispossessed and disabled, he wandered lonely in a moral wasteland where people had become money-diggers, bewitched by the rising commercial culture. Small

wonder that his subjectivity was under threat, although people were apt to attribute his mental issues to family heredity.

3. Ballard’s Attempt to Reclaim Old Order through Abjection

However, McCarthy does not criticize the social ailments of the progressive south for the purpose of deifying the old one in a fashion valued by so many old masters of the Southern Renaissance; it is not a story about “white southern men besieged by the forces of modernity” [7], an unending topic for older generations of white male writers; rather, McCarthy’s depiction of Ballard’s depravation and ultimate moral salvation prove that the nostalgic turn is equally dangerous. Ballard was not a monument of the pastoral past, “a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town” like Miss Emily [9]. Interpretation of this novel as an elegy of the past would therefore be too narrow and of McCarthy’s sense of history and place. McCarthy lays bare that Ballard was not only a victim of modernization, but was also poisoned by pastoral myth—Ballard’s efforts to turn back time was carried out in a dangerous way at the cost of others. Although such nostalgic malady was more commonly found in upper-class writers from the deep south, McCarthy’s depiction of Ballard’s vicissitude indicated that poor white like Ballard could fall prey to such discourse as well.

Julia Kristeva argues in her 1982 essay *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* that the repulsion of the abject constitutes the boundary of collective existence of being and individuals’ identification. She argues that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded [10]. The sense of loss and the fear of the unnamable drive one to recognize with the order and to repel the uneasiness evoked by the things opposed to “I”. “What is abject... the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” [10]. The south marching towards future assumes a new outlook, something for Ballard that is nothing familiar, “not even the shadow of a memory” [3]. He turned into a man much for himself, secluded from the external world [3]. His endangered subjectivity called for rebuilding, and for Ballard the way was to retreat into an old order. When Ballard, armed with his rifle, tried to defend his former land, “he is claiming a role for himself in one of the central dramas in the pastoral republican mythology” [11].

Ballard's most appalling attempt to reestablish the old order is shown in terms of his turning women into abject bodies. Ballard's actions exemplify a psychological mechanism wherein he sought to regress to the old south and to reassert his masculinity. Regarding the former, Ballard attempted to attain a psychological superiority over women through acts of violence. His inability to cope with social changes rendered him to maintain traditional gender dominance through extreme behaviors. "Having inherited these cultural constructions of gender, he then reconstructs the traditions by warping them even further with his sexual violence" [12]. Ballard did not learn much about proper gender relationship from his cultural heritage. Like many southern highlanders, Ballard was of Celtic origin [3], a culture with a long tradition of unequal gender relationship. "They (Celts) much preferred to enjoy life while their animals, their women, or their slaves made a living for them" [13]. For Ballard, women had become sources of abjection, something that "disturbs identity, system, order" [10]. Or more precisely, women, being no longer docile, served to be a reminder of Ballard's inability to accustom to the new norm, the embodiment of all frightening things. "Phobia bears the marks of the fragility of the subject's signifying system" [10]. For Ballard, women were close to uncanny, both fascinating and repelling. They were fascinating due to their role as the pillar of the old way of life, something never to return; repelling because they were free of his control. Ballard's voyeuristic turn started after he was deprived of his house. Voyeurism often appears as the "side effect" of phobia. "Voyeurism is a structural necessity in the constitution of object relation, showing up every time the object shifts towards the abject" [10]; the failure of Ballard to symbolize his current condition drove him to use voyeurism to quell his narcissistic crisis. When he ran into a couple's love affair in a car, he could not help raising himself up and chancing one eye at the window corner [3]. "One looks at an object in order to share in its experience" [16]. Watching others' sexual activities insidiously, Ballard vicariously engaged himself in this process. The woman, unknowingly, became the object of his desire.

Ballard's act of killing a woman and transporting her to his home more explicitly demonstrates his desire for time to stand still. He tried to construct an environment in which the temporal progression is effectively arrested, and all constituent elements were maintained in a state of absolute stasis. Ballard's scopophilia deteriorated into necrophilia when he encountered a dead couple. He took the girl's body home [3] and went to store to buy some clothes for her with the money he had stolen from the dead couple. In the course of this Ballard was replicating the mode of his ideal family life of the old order. He utilized the material resources she brought and laid full claim on her body, like a master of the home in the patriarchal old south. "The phobia object has led us, on the one hand, to the borders of psychosis, and on the other, to the strongly structuring symbolicity" [10].

Kristeva's diagnosis of people's defense mechanism for dealing with phobia objects explained Ballard's psychological state. Women, which had now become "a hieroglyph that condenses all fears, from unnamable to namable" [10], drove mentally morbid Ballard to recognize all the more fraternity with the old order. The foray into an imaginary family life of the old south, with himself dictating borderlines between proper or not, enabled Ballard to appreciate a sort of symbolic authority as the dictator of the domestic life. He now had a woman, stuffed animals he had won on a fair when he had been a child with his rifle. Ballard was on his way to replicate the old way of life as a harvest hunter with an obedient wife, a typical image of patriarchal old south. Ballard's treatment of women as abject bodies and retreated into a cave embodied his desperate wish to restore his subjectivity via going back. "This gesture, as other readers have noted, is Lester's mad protest against history itself, against the passing of time. Among his corpses, there is a timeless order, immunity to change" [11].

However, Ballard's newly-established subjectivity was soon burned into ashes as the sudden fire swept across his house, which left nothing but a blackened chimney with a pile of smoldering boards [3]. This incident has two major influences on Ballard. He degenerated into a murder so as to collect women's body, and with the temporary shelter gone he had to inhabit in a cave. Kristeva points out that the abjection of body flows (urine, blood, sperm and excrement) reassures a subject his "own and clean self" [10]. And in this process, man spares himself the risk of being castrated without having to come face to face with another; but this experience also gives him the power of possessing the bad objects of the maternal body, and "abjection then takes the place of the other" [10]. A similar trace of change can be found in Ballard. If his construction of the lost cabin offered him the object of desire in an immersion without the trouble of confronting living women, the sources of phobia, it also justified his need to put them in a further degree of abjection when such immersion could not hold sway. The second loss of dwelling place led to Ballard's abjection of women in its most aghast form. He treated two more atrociously, shot them to death and hoarded their bodies in his cave.

4. The Failure of Abjection: A Literary Response to Predecessors

"Any fictional theme is, by definition, a challenge to the single signified since it is a polyvalent signified, a 'blasting of selfhood (Georges Bataille)' [10]". Ballard's split selfhood and his unavailing efforts show that it is impossible to replace one absolute order with another. Like Louis-Ferdinand Celine's work under the inspection of Kristeva, *Child of God* takes readers to the "fragile spot of our subjectivity where our collapsed defenses reveal,

beneath the appearances of a fortified castle, a flayed skin” [10]. While Ballard had taken a wrong turn farther and farther, the instability of abjection began to reveal itself. As is illuminated by Kristeva, “Abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” [10]. Ballard’s life in the cave was closer to a static order, yet the image in which he recognized himself rested upon an abjection “that sunders as soon as the repression is relaxed” [10]. Sometimes he began to reflect upon his experience and wondered what stuff himself was made of [3]. His turning into a transvestite further implicated the failure of recognition with the patriarchal authority. Ballard started to wear the dress of the dead women and used their makeups. This was the point at which Ballard was closer to the archaic maternal experience rather than the symbolic laws; his “fleeting, fragile, but authentic” subject allowed itself to be heard in the interspace [10]. In his dream he knew that he had to ride on since there was no way back and he was riding to his death [3].

After he was arrested, Ballard pulled out of custody and concealed his passage in the cave. However, this time the sojourn in the cave afforded him a different experience. The cave was no longer a shield against the flow of change; rather, it became sources of horror. Stumbling along in the channels in the cave, he could hear nothing but the echoes of his voice, which filled him with fear [3]. That “he was half right who thought himself so grievous a case against gods” marked the moral awakening of Ballard [3]. He longed to find a way out, digging with his hands, with a wish that “some brute midwife to spald him from his rocky keep” [3]. Ballard’s departure from the cave, his renouncement of the order he had taken pains to build, alluded to his rebirth. He turned himself in after having extricated from the cave, dismissing the best opportunity to get away with his wrongdoings. His subjectivity was only fortified finally though briefly. With touches of self-esteem, he rightfully distinguished himself from a “demented gentleman who used to open folk’s skulls and eat the brains inside with a spoon” and was unwilling to share the spoon with the cannibal [3].

This paper aims to examine Cormac McCarthy’s intentions in assigning such a tragic fate to Ballard through an analysis of Ballard’s failed abjection. Ballard remained unaccepted into society to the moment of his death, and his tragic fate did not make him an object of mourning and remembrance, nor did it evoke a pastoral elegy. This study posits that McCarthy’s narrative formed an intertextual response to the predecessors of the Southern Renaissance, and inherited and surpassed the classic motifs of Southern literature.

To begin with, there is the time-honored theme of the south women. The image of women of old south is culturally constructed as charming, submissive and dedicated. Although it’s not a rare convention to idolize feminine roles, the figure of southern women is particularly

wide-spread. From the Southern Belles of the elite class to the impoverished yeomen farm wives, southern women worked most of their lives [6]. In contrast to their docile and gentle image, the men assumed the complementary role of protector and primary economic provider of the family. As the modernization process spread across the south, many women were liberated from the traditional gender roles and their image no longer conformed that of the submissive housewives. The tendency casts a threat to the traditional white manhood. Once the women’s ideal image was shattered, negative associations began to hold sway. That women foment materialist climate, a key social ailment, is not uncommon among many southern white men, sometimes even including cultural elites. John Crowe Ransom, the Tennessee born literary critic, a founder of New Criticism School, declared in one article entitled “Reconstructed But Unregenerated” in the co-published agrarian manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (2006) that “there can never be stability and establishment in a community whose every lady member is sworn to see that her mate is not eclipsed in the competition for material advantages” [14]. Likewise, Brooks’ inspection on the works of Faulkner revealed his association between evil and women characters. Brooks observes that “In nearly every one of Faulkner’s novels, the male discovery of evil and reality is bound up with his discovery of the true nature of woman. Men idealize and romanticize women, but the cream of the jest is that women have a secret rapport with evil which men do not have, and that they are able to adjust to evil without being shattered by it, being by nature flexible and pliable” [16]. However, the failed abjection executed by Ballard revealed that the association between social malady was far-fetched. The false charge of sexual assault against him rendered him to state that all the trouble he ever was in was caused by whiskey or women or both [3], despite that the truth was that he had more trouble and less experience with women. He said so only because “he’d often heard men say as much” [3]. It was the dilapidated discourse, rather than the personal experience, that made him haste to this conclusion.

Ballard’s failure of abjection also showcases that the restoration of the old order was equally infeasible. Ballard managed to replicate an order immune to change through his hoard of dead women’s bodies and stuffed animals. It was in line with the southerners’ unique perception of history. It could be found in Poe’s short stories, where the death of young beautiful heroines suspends the passage of time and preserves their eternal beauty; and the most eloquent expressions could be found in the works of postbellum writers. Robert Penn Warren potently states that “if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other” [17]. The tension between the past and the future, however, ceased to become a main concern for McCarthy’s generation. The glorious essence of the past becomes questionable. Through the voice of an old man, a witness of past evils, McCarthy stated a view in a negative tone

unacceptable to many of his predecessors. "I think people are the same from the day God first made one" [3]. The old man said so because he did not necessarily believe that people had hardly derived moral inspirations from the past. They remained mean and uneducated all the same. As is noted by Matthew Guinn, McCarthy is pivotal in southern literary history because he consciously brings a postmodern sensibility to landmarks of southern history that were largely sacrosanct to his predecessors. "The spiritual emptiness of the contemporary era, McCarthy indicates, is not a lapse from the organic past but its legacy" [18]. Ballard's exit from the cave was a gesture to phase out of the past, a theme that resonates with McCarthy's other southern novels, in which the main characters chose to bury the past and leave the south. It is also in line with McCarthy's personal decision to cast his sight beyond the south and work on western novels.

5. Conclusions

This paper discusses the social context that generates in the mind of Lester Ballard an impetus to put others in the abject state, the order he aspired and the cultural connotation behind it. After investigating Ballard's failed practice, this paper finds that he is a victim of the encroaching power of modernization as well as the ideology of the Old South. The later factor receives relatively less attention compared with the former. Through Ballard's tragic experience, McCarthy critically examines the entrenched obsession with white manhood and historical narratives within the context of the Old South. He also embodies the ongoing dialogue between the new generation of Southern writers and their literary predecessors, a process that infuses Southern literature with renewed vitality.

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