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Cormac McCarthy's Unloved Child of Southern Loneliness

The preoccupation with a dead but unburied, sometimes paralyzing Southern past that pervades the literary consciousness of the South from William Faulkner to Cormac McCarthy may be seen as a form of symbolic necrophilia. The theme of necrophilia, explicitly treated or presented through subtle implications, can be observed in several Southern literary works. Perhaps the most widely known such text exploring the 'dead lover' motif is William Faulkner's short story, 'A Rose for Emily.' However; nowhere in Southern literature is it treated so bluntly and straightforwardly as in Cormac McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*. This essay focuses on this particular novel with the aim of explicating how an ever-deepening social loneliness, a desperate yearning for love, for human companionship, and a hypocrite society's scapegoating mechanisms turn the novel's protagonist into a necrophilic, delusional, cold-blooded murderer.

The 'dead girlfriend' motif, which appears in McCarthy's short story 'Wake for Susan' first becomes fully developed in McCarthy's *Child of God*, where the theme of necrophilia is addressed in a staggeringly straightforward manner. The novel centers around the story of a necrophilic criminal, but here, unlike in Faulkner's writings, the motif of necrophilia does not signify an obsession with a decaying Southern order. There are references to the Southern past, as McCarthy deconstructs the myth of the Southern pastoral. However, unlike in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,' in *Child of God* there are no endeavours to preserve the dead Southern traditions along with some over-idealised old manners.

In contrast to Faulkner's Emily Grierson, Lester Ballard does not belong to a more noble Southern community, nor does he belong to the industrialist, capitalist society of his generation. Actually, he does not belong at all, which is one of the main causes of his mental decline and murderous deeds. He has no family; his father hung himself, and his mother abandoned him. He has no place among the townspeople either, and can only find comfort in the company of his dead lovers.

From a psychological perspective Lester is a genuine necrophile, since, according to Jonathan P. Rossmann's and Dr. Phillip Resnick's definition, a genuine necrophile has a persistent attraction to corpses, which is manifested in a series of necrophilic acts. Furthermore, the motivations behind Lester's perverted acts also match the motives medical literature offers. Rossmann and Resnick observed that the most common motive for necrophilia is the desire for the possession of an unrejecting and unresisting partner.¹ As society's outcast, Lester does try to take control of a

¹ ROSSMAN, Jonathan and RESNICK, Phillip. 'Sexual Attraction to Corpses: A Psychiatric Review of Necrophilia'. *Bulletin of the American Academy and Psychiatric Law*, 17 (2), (1989): 155.

lover who cannot reject him, or object to his bizarre sexual desires. Collecting dead girlfriends, Lester tries to gain comfort and to overcome the feelings of isolation, which are also common motives for necrophiliacs. Another trigger for Lester's deviant behaviour is the unavailability of a living partner, while his necrophilia also allows him to overcome his fear of living women.

P. Rossman and Resnick explain that the necrophile develops a very low self-esteem, which may stem from a significant loss, and necrophilia may actually serve as an attempt to deal with that loss. Due to his poor self-esteem, the necrophile is very afraid of rejection by women, and yearns for a sexual partner who is not capable of expressing any resistance.² Dianne C. Luce explains that Lester's necrophilia recalls the 'true necrophiles' reported by Robert E. L. Masters and Eduard Lea in their study, *Sex Crimes in History*, a survey of sexual deviancy, which includes psychological profiles, as well as clinical cases. During their research they found that in several instances, the necrophiles they studied lost their parents at a young age, and for them the corpse represented the lost mother. Based on these findings, Luce suggests that Lester's abandonment by his mother may also generate a latent wrath towards women that becomes increasingly intense as his experience of loss grows.³

Lester may turn into a true necrophile in the end, but he does attempt to court living women first. However, all these attempts end in rejection. Lester feels inconvenient and embarrassed around living women, and as the narrative proceeds, he becomes resentful towards women, and develops a misogynistic attitude. Female sexuality can only be safe for him when the women of his interest are dead. Furthermore, the only way for him to guarantee that unlike his parents, his girlfriends will not abandon him, is that he condemns them to eternal sleep.

His misogyny is raised when he walks in the woods and stumbles across 'a lady sleeping under the trees in a white gown.'⁴ He watches her 'for a while to see if she were dead.'⁵ When the woman opens her eyes, Lester is kind enough to ask whether she is cold, but the woman answers him very rudely. They exchange harsh words, and later she accuses him of raping her. Due to this incident, Lester has to spend nine days in the Sevier County jail. No wonder that he sees living women as a threat, while dead women cannot cause him such trouble.

Rich Wallach highlights that when the woman is sleeping and de-animated, she is referred to as a lady, but after the encounter, Lester calls her a 'goddamned whore' and the narrator refers to her as the 'old whore.'⁶ But already in the woods Lester and the narrator are seemingly disappointed by the fact that the woman is

² ROSMAN and RESNICK, 158.

³ LUCE, C. Dianne. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2011. 134.

⁴ MCCARTHY, Cormac. *Child of God*. London: Picador, 2011. 40. (hereafter: CoG)

⁵ CoG 40.

⁶ CoG 52.

not dead. Lester is more comfortable with ‘sleeping women,’ who are completely under his control, just like dolls.⁷

He also treats his dead ladies like giant dolls, as his gestures towards his first ‘dead girlfriend’ demonstrate. The girl dies of carbon monoxide poisoning in the back seat of a car. Lester brings her ‘home’ to the cabin he recently occupied, and buys her a pretty dress, a red lipstick and a dimestore brush. He dresses her up, paints her lips, and when she is not in use, he just puts her away in the attic.

He sat down and brushed her hair with the dimestore brush he’d brought. He undid the top of the lipstick and screwed it out and began to paint her lips. He would arrange her in different positions and go out and peer in the window at her... Later he hauled her back into the other room.⁸

Living women are shut out from the narrative; moreover, according to Rick Wallach, they are associated with some sort of sexual guilt, as if their guilt could justify their victimisation. The woman whose nightgown Lester steals is an ‘old whore,’⁹ while the girl who dies of carbon monoxide poisoning was having illicit intercourse right before her death; furthermore, the deputy sheriff also hints that she was promiscuous.¹⁰ Wallach notes that towards the end of the narrative Lester murders a young girl, whom he finds sexually immoral. Wallach also underlines that Lester refers to his first dead lover as a ‘Goddamn frozen bitch,’¹¹ while he describes his last victim as a ‘succubus’¹² – a term that refers to a demonic woman, who has intercourse with sleeping men, and can also mean that a woman is a prostitute. As a result, the girl becomes a sexual predator from Lester’s perspective.¹³

At the beginning of the novel, Lester does want a living girl for himself, but he is unable to seduce Reubel’s daughter, or any other women. Living women are not only dangerous; they are unwilling to satisfy Lester’s needs for love and for somebody to love. As living women abandon him just like his mother did, Lester tries to recreate a domestic space, a home and a family out of dead women. He can arrest time and making his lovers stay with him forever by pretending that his lovers did not reject him. He acts as a gentleman, as a real suitor around his ladies, as he buys gifts, and tells sweet words to his beloved ladies.

As the community’s outcast, the only means for Lester to force women to be with him is killing them and making them immobile. When he realises that he has

⁷ WALLACH, Rick. *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. 74.

⁸ CoG 57.

⁹ CoG 52.

¹⁰ CoG 97.

¹¹ CoG 97.

¹² CoG 144.

¹³ WALLACH 75.

no chance with Reubel's daughter, he murders her, then burns down her house with her mentally disabled child burning in it. An earlier scene, in which Lester brings a bird to the son of Reubel's daughter as part of the courtship ritual, already foreshadows Lester's murderous act. The child eats the leg of the bird so it cannot run off. His odd behaviour may be paralleled in Lester's own, which clearly demonstrates Lester's insanity. Lester kills the child's mother partly out of revenge, and primarily for the very same reason the child kills the bird: he wants to make sure that the girl can never escape him.

Lester tries to establish a completely normal life, a real home with a real wife in it. According to Jay Ellis, his actions are sad attempts to replicate a version of domesticity, physical relationship, and companionship that mirror the very practices of the society that has rejected him.¹⁴ After his family home is auctioned, he desperately looks for a new home for himself and later on also for his dead companions. First, he moves into an abandoned cabin, but once the cabin is burnt down with his first dead lover hidden in it, he finds his new home in a cave. In his temporary home he tries to set up housekeeping, sweeps the floor, gets rid of the spiders and furnishes the abandoned cabin with his belongings. He even brings the stuffed animals he won at the fair to the cave, his third home. The description of the cave is rather like that of a normal house with 'rooms' and 'corridors.'¹⁵ Lester tries to imitate the acts of an ordinary human life by smoking and reading a newspaper after finishing his dinner, and by whispering erotic words into the ear of his new girlfriend, before he spends the night with her. He undresses her 'very slowly, talking to her,' then he pulls off his trousers and lies next to her. 'You been wantin it, he told her.'¹⁶

Ironically he gets the closest to his image of a normal life, when he commits the cruellest, most inhuman crimes of a cold-blooded, necrophilic murderer. In spite of the fact that he pretends that his life is just like anyone else's in the community, deep down in his heart he does feel that something is wrong with him. 'Whatever voice spoke to him was no demon but some old shed self that came yet from time to time in the name of sanity, a hand to gentle him back from the rim of disastrous wrath.'¹⁷

The root cause of Lester's descent into madness and sinking into a pathological state of mind is complex; however, the lack of home, family and the community's hostile attitude play a major part in it. Family and communal structure remain significant elements of the evanescent and idealised Southern societies McCarthy's Southwestern protagonists yearn to inhabit and immortalise.¹⁸ Jay Ellis suggests in *No Place for Home* that although none of McCarthy's protagonists have a happy fami-

¹⁴ ELLIS, Jay. *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. Oxford: Routledge Press, 2006. 77.

¹⁵ CoG 126.

¹⁶ CoG 98.

¹⁷ CoG 149.

¹⁸ WALLACH 18.

ly life, Lester has the least family background of all his characters. Ellis explains that ‘abandonment by the mother, witness of the father’s suicide, forced homelessness, and several blows to the head are the recipe for the Ballard we see by the end of the book. His craziness is then not something outside us, but implicitly the symptom of more subtle societal sicknesses.’¹⁹

Lester Ballard’s intensifying mental decline starts after the death of his father, when he becomes dispossessed of his family home at an auction. This event serves as a catalyst for his transformation into a necrophilic criminal. He gets deprived not only of his land, but also of his traditional Southern identity as a farmer, a land-owner. He is also deprived of his masculinity, as owning a plot of land once signified the dominance of a Southern man. The aggression of the rising financial capitalism is sharply criticised in McCarthy’s novel. The rise of the new era leaves no place for the rural, agricultural, traditional Southern society. It leaves no place for traditional human values, either. The community of Sevier County do not care about any kind of values, they only care about becoming rich. The community’s attitude becomes apparent at the real estate auction, where Lester loses his home. The auctioneer reminds the townspeople that ‘there is real future in this property... There is no sounder investment than property. Land... A dollar might not be worth but fifty cents a year from now. And you all know that. But real estate is goin up, up, up.’²⁰

On the other hand, the past and the past generations are not idealised, either. According to the elderly, representatives of the past generation were not more courageous, courteous, or noble. Some townspeople think that the flood of the Little Pigeon River serves as a punishment for society’s erroneous ways. However, after the flood, an old man makes the following remark: ‘I think people are the same from the day God first made them.’²¹

Lester becomes an outsider rejected by a commodity-centred modern society and its normative institutions. His ostracized status in society is one of the main triggers for his necrophilic behaviour. The community’s institutions fail to fulfil their traditional roles in helping their fellow society members, when they are in need. Instead of supporting Lester, the community treats him as a scapegoat. They hold on to empty dogmas and rituals, and even the church, the shelter of love, is unwelcoming towards Lester. When Ballard entered the church ‘with his hat in his hand and shut the door and sat alone on the rear bench they turned back more slowly... The preacher stopped... Ballard had a cold and snuffled loudly through the service but nobody expected would stop if God himself looked back askance so no one looked.’²² It becomes clear to the reader, as well as to Lester, that there is no hope for him to find love and acceptance amongst the living in a community that deeply resents him.

¹⁹ ELLIS 80.

²⁰ CoG 7.

²¹ CoG 158.

²² CoG 31.

The townspeople's accounts of Lester reveal that they were biased toward him already from his childhood on, even though back then he showed no signs of mental aberration. This clearly demonstrates that the community's treatment of Lester was largely responsible for the distortion of his identity. They talk about his past and recall an occasion where Lester, as a child, punches another boy in the face, because the boy is unwilling to bring back a softball that rolled away. 'I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that. He never done nothin to me.'²³ At another time another community member describes him as 'crazy,' only because, according to the storyteller, his reaction to his father's suicide was not emotional enough.²⁴ Later on he is innocently arrested for a rape charge, and even though he has committed nothing at this stage, the sheriff offers no clean slate to him.

What sort of meanness have you got laid out for next.
I ain't got any laid out.

I figure you ought to give us a clue... I guess murder is next on the list ain't it? Or what things you've done that we ain't found yet.²⁵

The society of Sevier County lays down its expectations toward Lester quite early on, and eventually the sheriff's predictions get fulfilled, as Lester does turn into a heartless serial-killer. The town needs a crazy outcast, a misfit, so that its members can themselves feel normal. They are 'a race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in history and will have it.'²⁶ Communities tend to have a scapegoat like Lester time and time again. Yet they do not feel responsible for creating a criminal: they deal with Lester only through storytelling, and treat him as some fictional character.²⁷ Through persistent storytelling Lester becomes a part of the region's mythology, and ironically, he does earn a place in the community that excludes him otherwise.²⁸ Lester embodies the collective nightmare of the town, but in the end, in spite of the townspeople's best endeavours, Lester does not get indicted for any crime.

When it comes to Lester, the townspeople act as if they lived according to some pure gentlemanly standards, as if some remnants of the Victorian morality still pervaded the community of Sevier Country. This Victorian thought embraces a radical dichotomy between civilisation and savagery. The Victorian middle class loathed everything that was animalistic, irrational, immoral, backward, and placed it un-

²³ CoG 19.

²⁴ CoG 22.

²⁵ CoG 54.

²⁶ CoG 147.

²⁷ DAVIS, Melissa. *Barrent, Silent, Godless: The Southern Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. (2008). All Theses Paper 333. 35.

²⁸ VEREEN, M. Bell. *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1998. 54.

der the heading of 'savagery'.²⁹ The community in McCarthy's novel also seems to firmly refuse the irrational tendencies of human nature that could lead to excessive pain, cruelty and violence. However, their actual behaviour is far less moral, ethical, rational and civilised than they pretend it to be. For them Lester represents the uncultured, uncivilised, animal side of human nature, the barbaric savagery, while the abyss between cultured and savage, animal and human seems to be unbridgeable. Just like the Victorians, the townspeople think that savages like Lester need to be evaded to maintain peace, order and civilisation.

Being denied of love, and having been evicted from the society of human beings, Lester becomes more and more alienated from civilisation, and eventually moves into the wilderness. He loses his identity not only as a Southern man, but also as a member of a human community. The three sections of the book describe the three phases of his mental decline. In the first chapter, he cannot 'hold his head right',³⁰ in the second section 'he looked half crazy',³¹ while in the third section he completely descends into madness.³² He hardly has interactions with other living human beings. He surrounds himself with his dead girlfriends, while the Earth replaces his lost mother, and the cave encapsulates him like a mother's womb. He loses touch with reality and shakes off social conventions so much that after a while he even wears the dress of his female victims. He becomes 'a gothic doll in illfit clothes'.³³ Wearing his victims' clothes provides a sense of belonging for Lester. His victims had the life Lester so desperately wishes to have, and represented the normalcy he strives to experience with no avail. Moreover, some of his victims presumably experienced the state of being loved, since they were with a partner at the time of their death. Through cross-dressing Lester identifies with his victims, who, unlike Lester, were accepted members of society.

The theme of cross-dressing, as well as the concept of the modern serial killer Lester becomes, may also recall the character of Norman Bates from Robert Bloch's novel and Alfred Hitchcock's movie, *Psycho*. Norman wears his mother's clothes, whenever he wants to switch personalities, and thus slips into his mother's identity. Dianne C. Luce notes that the *Psycho* phenomenon must have been pivotal to the genesis of McCarthy's novel. As Luce explains, McCarthy started to work on *Child of God* in 1957, thus, it is very likely that he was familiar with the necrophilic serial killer Ed Gein's murder case, which broke in the same year, filled the pages of national newspapers, and provided Gein as the model for Norman Bates in Bloch's and Hitchcock's *Psycho*.³⁴

²⁹ SIGNAL, Daniel Joseph. *The War Within. From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994. 27.

³⁰ CoG 10.

³¹ CoG 15.

³² ELLIS 72.

³³ CoG 132.

³⁴ LUCE 148.

However, while Norman Bates is regarded as a freak whose gruesome deeds are seen as the symptoms of a revolting psychic condition, Lester Ballard is depicted as an ordinary human being, whose horrific deeds are triggered by his deprivation of love and human companion. Lester Ballard may be a strange misfit, but he is still very human, a 'child of God much like yourself perhaps,'³⁵ who suffers from the universal feelings of extreme loneliness and agony. According to Luce, the psychoanalytic analysis of Bates's behaviour 'separates him from the experiences of normal humans,' from that of the other children of God.³⁶ Consequently, while Norman Bates may not evoke sympathy and understanding in the readers of *Psycho*, the miserable existence of Lester Ballard does touch the readers' feelings and raises their sympathy. As opposed to Bloch and Hitchcock, McCarthy invites the readers to view the character of the modern serial killer from a different perspective. He encourages us to discover the human being behind the cruel criminal, and to recognise our commonality with him. Interestingly enough, neither in Bloch's nor Hitchcock's *Psycho*, is sexual necrophilia explicitly described: only Lester Ballard's sexual perversion is exposed openly; still, he is the character the reader may feel most compassionate about. McCarthy handles 'his shocking subject with restraint and delicacy, treating it as an extended metaphor for man's spiritual blindness, his confusion by materialism.'³⁷

Exiled from society, Lester Ballard's only chance for human companionship is to create a community of his own out of the women he murders. With the lack of social context and due to his mental state, he cannot recognise the value of another person's life or the human body's sanctity. Society sees the evil in Lester, however; he lives outside the social structure in which evil exists. He does not see his actions as right or wrong, he commits them simply because he feels the urge to commit them. He demonstrates what may happen to a human being who is completely marginalised, evicted and deprived of his basic human needs.

Lester is unable to live according to the rules of a real community, and does not have the right skills to survive in a materialist society, however, he adapts very well to the terrain of the woods and the wilderness. His inability to fit in a social structure dominated by the ideas of capitalism is tellingly displayed in a scene where he tries to sell the watches of his victims at a county store. Since he does not know the last thing about trading, he sells them really badly, while the man who buys them immediately resells them at a higher price. On the other hand, Lester becomes well-versed in traditional crafts, learns to read animal tracks, can make a fire and shoots brilliantly. He gets by better in the natural world than in the civilised one. According to Georg Guillemín, the novel may also be read as a fable on the failed Jeffersonian ideal.³⁸ But Lester becomes a 'lonely hunter,' who cannot find peace living in

³⁵ CoG 9.

³⁶ LUCE 153

³⁷ LUCE 147.

³⁸ GUILLEMIN, Georg. *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. Texas: A&M University Press, 2004. 42.

nature. His life on his own in the wild is nothing like Thoreau's experience about establishing a simple, settled life in natural surroundings. Deep down in his heart Lester does want to belong to human society, but his attempts to recreate a world he is unable to fit in are doomed from the very beginning.

Lester becomes a voyeur and a distant onlooker, who travels back and forth from the surrounding community to the wilderness. At times he briefly shows up in churches, stores, and meets fellow community members, but they usually treat him with caution and contempt. He becomes more and more isolated both physically and emotionally, maddened by his ever-deepening social loneliness, and eventually uncontrollably driven to carry out the most brutal, bizarre and perverse act of violence.³⁹

At times he does realise that he is different from average society members. When Lester, a necrophilic murderer, acknowledges that he can never be accepted in the world of living human beings, he begins to cry the tears of an abandoned child. 'He watched the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the grey fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees were spreading. Squatting there he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry.'⁴⁰

In spite of his murderous acts, Lester makes the impression of an innocent child throughout the novel. Lester shows childlike perplexity and a lack of maturity, particularly when he is in the company of women. He blushes and feels embarrassed when he goes to a clothing store to buy lingerie for his dead girlfriend. He holds on to the stuffed animals he won, he brings them to the cabin and looks out for them, even when he lives underground in a cave. During a walk in the woods he sees robins hopping and hobbling in the snow, and happily starts to chase them. 'He caught one and held one warm and feathered in his palm with the heart of it beating there just so.'⁴¹ The cold-blooded murderer of McCarthy is at times gentle and kind-hearted. Due to his desperate loneliness and yearning for belonging, his dysfunctional role in society, and his innocent, kind gestures toward his surroundings, Lester evokes pity in the reader instead of revulsion and disgust. According to Vereen Bell, 'underlying all of Lester's mad cruelty is the simple fact of human loneliness.'⁴² In one of the most melancholic scenes of the book, McCarthy's lonely hero recalls a childhood memory of his father, but then he comes to realise that he is all by himself.

Lying awake in the dark of the cave he thought he heard a whistling as he used to when he was a boy in his bed in the dark and he'd hear his father on the road coming home whistling, a lonely piper, but the only sound was the stream

³⁹ FRYE, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2011. 41.

⁴⁰ CoG 161.

⁴¹ CoG 73.

⁴² VEREEN 65.

where it ran down through the cavern to empty it maybe in unknown seas at the center of the earth.⁴³

Violence surrounded and shaped the terrain of Lester's mind from a young age, and the patterns and attitudes he saw in his family are likely to have led to his violent behaviour. According to Gary M. Ciuba, the author of *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction*, by committing suicide, Lester's father became a victim, a victimiser, and a model for victimisation. Ciuba explains that individuals have often been brutalised during their childhood years. They might have undergone actual, or may be exposed to threatened violence. Usually these individuals have had to witness a family member suffering from violence, or the representatives of authorities imposing violence on someone close to them. Ciuba suggests that Lester develops a disposition towards violence due to his violent childhood experiences, as he seems to have grown up under the shadow of parental violence. He underlines that there is only a little told about Lester's childhood in the narration, but it becomes apparent that he suffered a great deal of trauma caused by the violence his immediate family displayed.⁴⁴ According to one of the narrators, 'he never was right after his daddy killed himself.'⁴⁵

We should also remember that the world of the novel, including the society of Sevier County, is not void of violence, thus Lester Ballard's violent behaviour is not an isolated aberration. It is rather the part of a more profound crisis in the society of Sevier County. Ciuba suggests that there is an urge of collective violence throughout the entire novel. Numerous acts of outrage are mentioned in the narration including rape, assault, hanging, incest, stoning and robbery. Even the law, the rules and norms of society, festivals and gatherings offer new opportunities for violence not only for murderers like Lester, but for any other 'ordinary' members of the community.⁴⁶

Bell Vereen explains that the community of Sevier County is portrayed as psychologically placid. On the surface, they have constructed a calm, tested structure that allows no anxiety, no disturbance. The normalness of the town on the other hand implies a common tendency towards violence, the rituals of fighting, hunting, and a fixation on death and on long gone community members invoked in well known, repeated stories.⁴⁷

The community's heartless atrocities towards Ballard only demonstrate that the culture of Sevier County is filled with violence. Ballard reacts with rage to the atrocities he has to suffer. First he only wants society's acceptance and a normal

⁴³ CoG 162.

⁴⁴ CIUBA, Gary. *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction: Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Walker Percy (Southern Literary Studies)*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007. 168.

⁴⁵ CoG 21.

⁴⁶ CIUBA 180.

⁴⁷ VEREEN 54.

life to himself. His growing aggression is an answer to society's aggression towards him. First he is abandoned by his parents, then his home is taken away from him, and in addition, he is clubbed unconscious by local authorities. Later he is arrested for a crime he did not commit, and then gets kicked in the head by his accuser. The community's violent attitude culminates with the victimisation of Ballard. They chase and eventually lock Lester up. 'They want this man's life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with lanterns and cries of execration.'⁴⁸ Having turned into a victimiser, at the end of the novel Ballard becomes a victim once again. However, in contrast to the community's expectation, peace and order will not be restored once Ballard is dead.

Lester Ballard gradually becomes a necrophiliac, as he sinks deeper and deeper into desperation. Due to constant rejection and ostracism, he grows increasingly violent, and in the end the young man looking for love becomes a ferocious criminal. The last murder committed by Lester is heartless, intense, staggering and heart-breaking. Lester surprises a boy and a girl parked on an abandoned road, and when the boy tries to start his truck, Lester shoots him within an instant. Later he mercilessly shoots the boy's terrified girlfriend, as well, then drags her into the woods, throws himself on her, pulls down her panties and curses, because the girl has wet herself.

After his last brutal crime, Lester gets caught and locked up in a mental institution. His housing journey ends, and he is forced back within the frame of social norms and society's normative institutions, and thus he becomes reintegrated to a community that otherwise denied him. By the end of his journey he does achieve some self-recognition: he manages to escape from the legal authorities, but then he voluntarily returns to the mental hospital and admits that he 'is supposed to be here.'⁴⁹ After he dies, his organs are sent to a hospital in plastic bags, which further demonstrates how insignificant someone's life can be seen in an industrialist modern society, if one fails to follow the prevailing rules, norms and expectations.

The novel offers a harsh criticism of an inhumane, capitalist society; however, it does not show sentimentality for the past, or for the world of the glorious 'Old South'. Lester Ballard does not fail to function in a modern community because he belongs to a long outdated Southern order, nor does he have a taste for dead women because he relentlessly clings to a dead era. Lester's tragedy and necrophilic behaviour stem from his personal childhood traumas, and from the industrialist society's rejective attitude. His pathological behaviour is the consequence of living with an extreme form of the most desperate human loneliness.

While in Faulkner's fictional world the implications of necrophilia signify the characters' hopeless fixation on a diminishing Southern order, Lester's collection of dead lovers is not an attempt to arrest time and to resist change in order to pre-

⁴⁸ CoG 147.

⁴⁹ CoG 182.

serve the values and traditions of the past. He does try to conquer time, but only to chain his lovers to himself forever, and to have a new family that will not abandon him as time passes by. He is not interested in traditions or in society's cultural changes, since he stopped belonging to human society, and lives according to his own distorted value system and according to the rules of the wilderness. Lester creates his own social surrounding out of his dead victims, as collecting dead girlfriends remains the only chance left for him to connect with other human beings. Although the novel shares the characteristics of the Southern Gothic, and Sevier County is located in East Tennessee, the story of becoming displaced, alienated and desperately lonely in a commodity-centred, materialistic modern society represents a universal phenomenon. '*Child of God* can be read as a Gothic horror and allegory, as an indictment of America's materialism, as a naturalistic story of society's creation of its own scapegoat villains, as a rumination on the mystery of evil.'⁵⁰

Abstract

*My research concentrates on the necrophilic characteristics of the literature of the American South through the works of William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy. There is a certain preoccupation with a dead but unburied, sometimes paralyzing Southern past that pervades the literary consciousness of the South, and may be seen as a form of symbolic necrophilia. The motif of necrophilia, explicitly treated or presented through subtle implications, can be observed both in Faulkner's and Cormac McCarthy's writings. This essay focuses on Cormac McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, where the theme of necrophilia is very directly treated. Unlike in Faulkner's works, here necrophilia does not signify the characters' hopeless fixation on an outdated Southern order and on the diminishing traditions of the past. In *Child of God*, McCarthy describes how an ever-deepening social loneliness, desperate yearning for love and human companionship eventually drives the novel's hero into necrophilia and into carrying out the most brutal and perverse act of violence. In order to explain the protagonist's acts and motives, my essay explores the role of a community's scapegoating and marginalizing mechanisms in forcing someone to exist outside society's normative context, and in turning him into a cold-blooded, necrophilic criminal.*

Keywords

Southern literature, Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God*, necrophilia, Lester Ballard

⁵⁰ LUCE 134.

Rezümé

Kutatómunkám egyik célja az amerikai déli irodalom nekrofil jellegzetességeinek bemutatása William Faulkner és Cormac McCarthy művein keresztül. A déli gondolkodásmódot mindmáig kísérti a rég letűnt, mégis temetetlen, sokszor bénító déli múlt, amit szimbolikus értelemben akár nekrofilianak is tekinthetünk, ráadásul a nekrofilia mint visszatérő motívum mind Faulkner, mind McCarthy írásaiban fellelhető. A cikk témája Cormac McCarthy Child of God című, harmadik regénye, mely kendőzetlenül tárja az olvasó elé a nekrofilia jelenségét. Faulkner írásaival ellentétben McCarthy regényében a halottak iránti kóros vonzódás motívuma nem a regényalakok szinte reménytelen, rögeszmés múltba tekintésére, illetve a múlt letűnő hagyományaihoz való ragaszkodásra utal. McCarthy azt mutatja be, hogyan válik a regényhősből hullagyalázó, a kegyetlenség és perverzitás határait nem ismerő gyilkos a társadalmi elidegenedés, illetve a szeretet és a társ utáni elkeseredett vágyakozás hatására. A főhős tettei mögött rejlő indítatások feltárásához tanulmányom megvizsgálja, hogy a társadalom bűnbakképző és kirekesztő mechanizmusai miként változtatnak egy egyént eltévelyedett, hidegvérű bűnözővé.

Kulcsszavak

déli irodalom, Cormac McCarthy, nekrofilia, Lester Ballard