

Local perspective in cormac mccarthy's child of god



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ The strangeness of the story of Lester Ballard, the child of God, begins not with its subject

matter but with the way the story is told.”

Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*

In his 1991 essay, Andrew Bartlett suggests Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* “ derives not so much from the force of Lester Ballard as subject or object but rather from the play of positions taken by the narrator through whom we see Ballard” (Bartlett 3). With that being said, much of the novel relies on the descriptions of a third-party narrator intermixed with first-person accounts of Ballard's fellow Sevier County residents. Characterized by the community as violent, unpredictable, and sociopathic, Lester Ballard is alienated from his peers from a very young age. Surrounded by a tight-knit community situated within the isolated confines of the Appalachian mountains, Ballard is unable to escape the negative characteristics projected onto him by the community he is a part of. With that being said, the novel presents a constant struggle between Lester's personal choices and his socially determined welfare. By presenting Ballard as a communal scapegoat, McCarthy emphasizes the role of community in deciding moral standards. Furthermore, McCarthy presents Lester Ballard through two opposing narratives: one lens which views Ballard sympathetically, a “ child of god,” and another perspective from the eyes of the surrounding community (4). Often times harsh, subjective, and judgmental, McCarthy uses the local's vision of Ballard to explore inherent moral hypocrisies characteristic to the Appalachian region. By doing so, he reveals the community's responsibility for Lester Ballard and his atrocities.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the social climate which shaped Ballard, it is necessary to first consider the historical implications of the region. In the late nineteenth century, a group referred to as the “ White Caps” plagued the Appalachian region, specifically in Sevier County, Tennessee where McCarthy’s novel is set. The vigilante group “ threaten[ed] those who deviated from traditional community mores” and reacted violently when their authority was compromised (Banker 143). In turn, the group perpetuated national stereotypes of Appalachians as “ gun-toting, revenge-seeking hillbillies” (Banker 144). Internally, this point in history exacerbated an Appalachian tendency to construct identities based on local and national biases. Similarly, McCarthy uses this mindset to shape Lester Ballard’s identity. In the final chapter of Part I, unidentified communal narrators reveal speculation about Leland Ballard, Lester’s grandfather: “ I’ll tell you one thing he was if he wasn’t no soldier. He was a by god White Cap” (McCarthy 80). By making a point to reference the White Caps in the last chapter written in first-person narration, McCarthy reminds his reader to consider the significance of this regionally influential group in relation to the fictional community’s creation of Lester Ballard.

As Bartlett points out, only the novel’s first section employs the voices of characters situated in the middle of Sevier County alongside Ballard (6). Interestingly, when the townspeople’s voices disappear in Part II and III, Lester’s isolation and violence increases exponentially. Although Bartlett believes the communal narration serves as “ gentle preparation” for Lester’s atrocious acts in the subsequent sections, I contend that the first person

narration in Part I reveals insight into the community that made Lester into the man he becomes (6).

The novel begins with Lester being forced out of his Sevier County home after foreclosure. When the home is being auctioned, potential buyers “came like a caravan of carnival folk” intending to purchase the home cheaply and knowingly send Lester into the streets (McCarthy 3). Lester, unable to comprehend the insensitivity of his peers, insists they get their “goddamn ass off [his] property” (7). However, his protests are in vain and he is eventually removed from the only home he has. Understandably, Lester “never could hold his head right after that” (9). This initial experience exposes Lester to the disdain and general contempt his community has towards him and serves as the catalyst for his mental deterioration. More directly, the communal narration reveals the illogical fear and hatred towards Lester that is inherent within the county. Describing Ballard punch a younger boy, one speaker admits: “I don’t know what it was... We just felt real bad. I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that. He never done nothing to me” (18). A relatively custom event in the fictional community, not much thought is given to other characters who engage in the same time of petty violence and fighting. Yet, this local voice expresses the general animosity the community projects onto Lester. As a result of his alienation, Lester is obligated to find comfort in inanimate objects (and later, inanimate people). During the county fair, Lester participates in a contest by demonstrating his marksmanship only in hopes his prize will be “them big’ns [stuffed animals] yonder” (63). After winning two stuffed bears and a large tiger, Lester becomes attached to them as a young child would a toy and

totes them around for the rest of the novel. Once again, his strange behavior can be attributed to his ostracization from society.

Ironically, the community which isolates Lester is the same community he blindly looks to for appropriate thought and action. For example when he is at the fair, he sees another man cheating during a game by “ trying to steer two fish into his dip net at the same time” (62). After watching the man for awhile and coming to the conclusion his behavior was acceptable, Lester copies him and begins cheating himself. Interestingly, it is Lester who is caught and reprimanded for violating game rules. Nevertheless, it was another member of the community that unknowingly taught and prompted Lester to cheat – this urge did not originate in Lester himself. A similar incident is depicted during Ballard’s unwarranted stay in jail for alleged rape. Another inmate tells Lester, “ white pussy is nothing but trouble” and never having considered it, “ Ballard agreed that it was. He guessed he’d thought so but he’d never heard it put that way” (53). Once again conforming to the ideas of those around him, Ballard blindly believes and agrees with things he overhears other community members say. Even when he boasts to other inmates claiming “ all the trouble [he] ever was in...was caused by whiskey or women or both,” he admits it was only because “ he’d often heard men say as much” (53). Throughout the first part of the novel, it is clear Lester is simply a bi-product of his environment and the community at fault repeatedly refuses to take responsibility for the savage they have created.

On another note, McCarthy’s communal narrators never directly address Lester’s most egregious offenses – his murders, necrophilia, and extreme acts of brutality are all described to the reader by the third-person narrator.

Although the community subtly acknowledges Lester's tendency for these behaviors, it is never explicitly mentioned in fear his actions could taint the already complex reputation of Appalachians as violent savages. For the locals to accept one of their own as a homicidal sociopath would compel them to openly consider their culture's tendency for unnecessary aggression, and force them to recognize their role in Lester's personality. In the final communal narration, the general tendency to avoid conversation about Lester becomes evident:

I'll say one thing about Lester though. You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn't outstrip em all.

That's the god's truth.

Talkin about Lester...

You all talk about him. I got supper waitin' on me at the house. (81)

The desire to disassociate Lester from the Sevier County community is confirmed by the local narrator's assertion that he is the worst human being to exist throughout the course of history, not simply the worst from the region. By failing to discuss Lester's most deplorable acts, his society once again refuses to take responsibility for their role in creating him. It is hard to say whether the community's acknowledgement and support would have altered the course of Lester's life, but their refusal to do so reinforces his character at the very least. After all, his destructive and primitive nature does not surface until after he is fully alienated from society.

Ultimately, to understand the social, cultural, and regional context in *Child of God* leads to a greater understanding of Lester Ballard himself. Isolated from an already isolated community, Lester is left to struggle with his own self agency while he is exposed to the negative opinions and expectations of those around him. His role as the community's collective scapegoat reveals not only the culture's moral standards, but the grounds they are based off of. In addition, choosing local storytellers to narrate a majority of Part I allows McCarthy to explore and illuminate moral hypocrisies characteristic to the Appalachian region.

Works Cited

Banker, Mark T. *Appalachians All: East Tennesseans and the Elusive History of an American Region*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010.

Bartlett, Andrew. "From Voyeurism to Archaeology: Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*." *Southern Literary Journal* 24 (1991): 3-15.

Bell, Vereen M. "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy." *Southern Literary Journal* 15 (1983): 31-41.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Child of God*. Random House, Inc. 1973.