

MISOGYNY IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S SUTTREE

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I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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## ABSTRACT

American novelist Cormac McCarthy has recently begun to gain long-overdue recognition in the academy. Following the publication of his novel All the Pretty Horses, a National Book Award winner, the production of critical works examining the author's fiction has surged. However, even in light of this recent attention to the author, a number of problematic critical absences remain. Few critics focus on Suttree, the author's longest and most complex work. Additionally, although a number of commentators mention the intensely male nature of McCarthy's fiction, very few pay extensive attention to issues of gender in McCarthy's novels. My project simultaneously addresses these two needs.

The close examination of gender issues in the text of Suttree reveals profound misogyny in the work. I argue that this facet of the novel's construction restrains it from attaining the high level of artistic achievement one finds in McCarthy's other novels. One need only examine the roles of the primary female characters in the novel to witness the illustration of this assertion. The novel's speaker and its main character consistently and unrepentantly devalue the work's female characters. Furthermore, the narrative voice and protagonist of Suttree denigrate even male characters dominated by females and characters of uncertain sexual orientation. Any departure from a male-dominated world prompts revulsion and rage. Despite the novel's many other remarkable characteristics—its language and theme are particular strong points—this antiwoman core prevents Suttree from achieving the designation of great literature.

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## Misogyny in Cormac McCarthy's Suttree

In 2001's How to Read and Why, Harold Bloom groups Cormac McCarthy with Philip Roth, Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon as living American masters. McCarthy undoubtedly represents the least well-known of Bloom's lauded foursome. However, Bloom proceeds to unabashedly declare McCarthy's Blood Meridian the strongest and most memorable book created by a living American author (254-5). He then compares the work, and McCarthy's style, to both Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, and Melville's Moby Dick. Although Bloom designs How to Read and Why for literary laypersons, his observations initiate even academic readers unfamiliar with McCarthy into the novelist's style and relevance. Primarily, Bloom's estimation of McCarthy's prominence in the canon of American literature stands out. One notes that Bloom bases his assessment of McCarthy's greatness on 1985's Blood Meridian. Many critics concur. In fact, a high percentage of academic work in McCarthy studies focuses on Blood Meridian. However, 1979's Suttree is McCarthy's longest and most complex work. Even so, of the seventy-three peer-reviewed articles the phrase "Cormac McCarthy" brings up in the MLA database, twenty-one articles specifically reference Blood Meridian in their titles, while only three articles mention Suttree. Even as Bloom's observations regarding McCarthy's literary importance invite academic investigation into the whole of McCarthy's canon, one wonders why Suttree is not mentioned and studied alongside Blood Meridian as a seminal achievement in McCarthy's literary career. I submit that one possible reason for Suttree's diminished status is its persistent misogyny.

In recent years, McCarthy has gained the recognition in the academy due an important American author, and scholarship addressing his novels has flourished. For example, in Dianne

Luce's 2004 all-inclusive bibliography of scholarly examinations of McCarthy's work, one notes that scholarly articles begin to appear in greater and greater numbers around the mid 1990's, ostensibly following the 1992 publication of McCarthy's National-Book-Award-winning novel All the Pretty Horses. Doctoral dissertations and master's theses on the author begin to appear around the start of the third millennium. Even so, when one considers his importance in American literature, it seems a relatively small number of critics have published on McCarthy. For example, only five book-length studies on the author exist, and the first did not appear until 1988, nearly a quarter century after the publication of The Orchard Keeper, McCarthy's first novel. The lack of critical attention and implied need for additional study evident in McCarthy scholarship seems doubly true of Suttree. When I contacted Dianne Luce and Richard Wallach, preeminent McCarthy scholars and founding members of The Cormac McCarthy Society, they concurred with me as I decried the lack of research on the book. Both agreed with my estimations for the need for more scholarship on Suttree (Personal Correspondence Oct. 2006).

In terms of Suttree's importance within McCarthy's general body of work, Georg Guillemín remarks that the novel represents the last in McCarthy's southern cycle, a canonical position of note. If Suttree represents the pinnacle of the author's compilation of Southern grotesqueries, it surely follows that scholarly attention to the novel represents an important aspect of McCarthy studies. Additionally, Guillemín asserts that "actually, *Suttree* is less a pivotal than a prototypical work" (4). He points out that the novelist utilizes expository tableaux, scenes of violence, and episodic tangents, all elements that populate McCarthy's other novels. Guillemín argues for the book as an entry point into understanding McCarthy's novels in general, and he uses it as such in his book. Richard Marius echoes Guillemín in his article "Suttree as Window into the Soul of Cormac McCarthy." Marius argues that Suttree emerges

from the Knoxville of his and McCarthy's boyhood, and he examines the crossover between Suttree and the "real" 1950's era Knoxville. Marius argues for this cultural heritage as the basis of McCarthy's technique, a reading that assumes the author's relevance and prominence by its structure. If a prominent writer such as Marius feels inclined to argue for the importance of the book's setting, it follows that attention to the other major elements of the work—such as its profound maleness—demand critical inquiry. As James Lilley observes in the introduction to 2002's Cormac McCarthy: New Directions, "issues of race and gender in McCarthy's fiction remain largely unexplored critical terrain" (7). Despite McCarthy's rise in the academy, and despite the demonstrated prominence of Suttree, the book remains under-studied. Furthermore, although a large number of articles mention in passing McCarthy's habit of creating thinly realized female characters, few scholars specifically address issues of gender in his works, a critical absence that demands remedy.

As Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl write in their feminist collection Feminisms, "one of the axioms of traditional literary study has been that 'great literature' represents 'universal' experiences. But as more women and people of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds have begun to study literature, that notion has come into question" (191). Their observations seem tailor-made for the problem regarding Suttree's place in McCarthy's canon and in American literature. The design of Suttree obviously attempts to express a universal experience. The work's impressionistic and death-obsessed opening and closing position the work as an allegory for human existence in the face of death's unavoidable grasp. Both sections directly address the reader and seek to characterize death in McCarthy's distinctive prose. In the beginning, the narrative voice questions the character of death:

Is he a weaver, bloody shuttle shot through a timewarp, a carder of souls from the world's nap? Or a hunter with hounds or do bone horses draw his deadcart through the streets and does he call his trade to each? Dear friend he is not to be dwelt upon for it is by just suchwise that he's invited in. (5)

Later, at the novel's close, the narrative voice again conceives of death as a hunter:

Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of the cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them. (471)

No human experience is as universal as death, and, therefore, no artistic subject would seem to hold more promise in the pursuit of the traditional idea of great literature. McCarthy's ageless writing style—combining philosophical reflection with commonplace dialogue and violent events—seems to mark him as particularly well suited to address this theme.

In his reflections on McCarthy's prose style, Harold Bloom compares McCarthy's purposefully archaic use of language with Faulkner and Melville. In nearly all his works, McCarthy combines the high-flown, atypical and archaic language of the sections of his narrative voice with accurately rendered regional dialect. For example, one can take this section from the opening of 1973's Child of God:

To watch these things issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning is a man at the barn door. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. A child of God much like yourself perhaps. Saxon and Celtic bloods. Wasps pass through the laddered light from the barnslats in a

succession of strobic moments, gold and trembling between black and black, like fireflies in the serried upper gloom. (4)

The ornate narration starkly contrasts with the character's first speech in the novel: "I done told ye. I want you to get your goddamn ass of my property. And take these fools with ye" (7).

However, rather than creating the disjointed reading experience one might anticipate, McCarthy's successful combination of the differing characters of his narrative and dialogue stands as a testament to his success as a prose stylist.

In addition to the nature of McCarthy's prose style, other specific elements of the novel show a preoccupation with death. Suttree's protagonist's recurrent ontological and theological conversations with a strange ragman, arguably a stand-in for death or perhaps a symbol for everyman—"I always figured they was a God. . . . I just never did like him"(147)—demonstrate the character grappling with issues of death. As Vereen Bell writes, "Suttree is a novel about transcending death—not in fact, of course, but in the mind and spirit" (69). The protagonist Cornelius Suttree's continual brushes with death throughout the novel support this reading. Suttree nearly starves to death, has his skull fractured by a floor buffer, sees two friends murdered by firearms, and contracts a bout of typhoid fever so severe a priest performs his last rites. Furthermore, many of the major pronouncements in the book, both by the work's narrator and by Suttree himself, concern death. For example, the narrator says of Suttree, "He saw how all things false fall from the dead" (136) and "He recognized the utter perishability of his own flesh" (354). However, despite the resonance of his celebrated prose and the grandiosity of his set task, McCarthy fails to craft a universal work. Its angry, near-militant maleness—in short, its core sexism—prevent Suttree from achieving the distinction of great literature.

One treads dangerous ground when accusing a novel of misogyny. After all, many works containing sexist characters, denigrated females, and misogynistic themes succeed admirably. Hemingway's works come to mind. However, even in considering Suttree from the context of a perspective that refutes the idea of universal experience, one can hardly countenance, let alone champion, a novel that universally denies female characters full existence. Lillian S. Robinson addresses the difficulty as well as the positive prospect of denying universal literary standards in her essay "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon." She argues that "the predominantly male authors in the canon show us the female character and relations between the sexes in a way that both reflects and contributes to sexist ideology—an aspect of these classic works about which the critical tradition remained silent for generations" (213). Furthermore, she asserts that the feminist must balance between championing worthy female writers and reacting in a knee-jerk way to traditional male writers and works. However, even by Robinson's moderate feminist standard, Suttree's continual anti-feminine bias denies the novel's claim for lasting relevance.

Naturally, further danger rests in crafting a reading that assigns the misogyny of a character or text to its speaker or to its author. In her study of Joe Christmas' misogyny in Faulkner's Light in August, Doreen Fowler succinctly summarizes the difficulty in undertaking this sort of criticism. Examinations of Faulkner, incidentally, seem particularly analogous to those of McCarthy, as both authors deal extensively with the American rural south and even had the same editor at Knopf, Albert Erskine. Fowler writes of Faulkner,

Of course, the attitude of any particular fictional character is not necessarily the author's attitude and should not necessarily be attributed to the author; nevertheless, the obtrusive and pervasive woman-censuring in Faulkner's fiction

inescapably raises a troubling question—If Faulkner is not a woman-hater, why, then, do so many of his male characters hate women? (145)

One can easily ask the same question of McCarthy. To satisfy the question, Fowler chooses to examine one alleged misogynist in one novel in detail, to ascertain the context and reason for the misogyny in the text, to seek its narrative purpose, and to address whether the author's rendering of antiwomanism accepts or critiques this attitude (146). I adopt her technique here, though it must be noted that I modify it slightly. Fowler presents her study in the context of Faulkner's seeming misogyny. I do not intend to demonstrate that McCarthy is sexist, but, rather, that the novel Suttree itself is. Fowler ultimately decides that though Faulkner's Joe Christmas is sexist, Light in August is not. In her study of the adversarial feminine in McCarthy's western novels, Megan Riley McGilchrist arrives at a similar conclusion about McCarthy. Her assessment of gender in the author's western novels might easily read as a critique of Suttree as well: "The absence of fully developed female characters, and the implied destructive potential of most females who do appear, and the subtext of homoerotic relationships between men, suggest either full-fledged misogyny or allegory" (90). Ultimately, however, McGilchrist asserts that the gender imbalances and seeming misogyny in McCarthy's western novels, particularly the Border Trilogy, function allegorically. She claims that these aspects of the works aid in McCarthy's conscious subversion of the conventions of western masculinity and the myth of the frontier. Adam Parkes echoes her contentions, writing specifically of Blood Meridian, itself another of McCarthy's whore-filled macabres, "McCarthy subverts the opposition of natural and unnatural by presenting bodies, human and animal alike, as costumes that are equally well suited to masculine and feminine roles. The body, it seems, does not simply allow clear-cut divisions between these two genders; it functions instead as a borderland where sexual boundaries often

remain obscure or undefined, where other genders and new ‘unguessed kinships’ (247) might become possible” (111). With so few critics dealing with gender in McCarthy’s works, the temptation appears to map existing theories over other novels in an attempt to add to the extant scholarship and help to establish coherence in the greater body of McCarthy criticism. Sadly, however, unlike McCarthy’s later western works, even the most astute reader cannot find evidence of subversive intentionality in the denigration of Suttree’s females; the most creative critic cannot in good conscience come to an upbeat conclusion about gender in Suttree.

A unique feature of McCarthy’s prose allows for this extension from observation of a sexist character to accusation of a sexist novel. Throughout the novel, the distinction between the consciousness of the work’s speaker and the consciousness of its protagonist becomes blurred. Though Suttree does not narrate the novel, the narrative voice merges and departs from his consciousness often and without warning. One can never absolutely decide if the novel’s “gravid slattern[s],” “wizened whoreclown[s],” or “stringy sloe-eyed cunt[s] with false teeth and a razorous pelvis” are the result of Suttree’s prejudices or the insertions of the narrative voice (307, 383-4). Suttree’s attitudes toward women do not change within the work, yet the narrative voice seems to present him at the end of the novel as purified, even perfected, by his experiences. This narrative attitude damages an otherwise magnificent literary accomplishment, a book that in its other facets receives rightful comparison with to Ulysses and Huck Finn. As Suttree’s misogyny holds no consequence, and as the narrative voice in no way holds him accountable for it, the work is undeniably diminished.

McCarthy’s novels almost always focus on the outcast and abhorred of society. From Lester Ballard, the murderous necrophilic protagonist of 1973’s Child of God, to Judge Holden, the pedophilic, genocidal author of much of the violence in 1985’s Blood Meridian, to the

cannibalistic blood cults of 2006's The Road, McCarthy seems to relish directing the reader's gaze toward the grotesque. Suttree proves no exception to this trend. The main thread of the novel follows the path of a fallen son of an upright Knoxville, Tennessee family, a "reprobate scion of doomed Saxon clans" (136). The character, Cornelius Suttree, defiantly ekes out a living fishing in the diseased Tennessee River, living on a rickety houseboat, and drinking and debauching among the outcasts—drunks, blacks, criminals—of MacNally Flats, a Knoxville slum.

In his essay addressing the re-centered marginal in Suttree, critic D.S. Butterworth notes that "McCarthy's overt condemnation of the 'righteous' seems clearly to mark his project as the restoration of 'illshapen, black and deranged' humanity. By restoration I mean the recovery of the value and importance of the marginalized, the reconstitution of marginal figures as subjects of concern and sympathy" (95). Butterworth unintentionally leads the careful reader to consider a seeming contradiction in Suttree. The narrative voice in the work seems intent on creating sympathy for the denigrated citizens of the society he creates. Simultaneously, the speaker invariably denigrates and scorns the female characters in the novel. Suttree is overtly hostile to women, a telling textual characteristic in a novel so concerned with the marginal and oppressed. Careful attention to Suttree's language regarding femininity, especially in terms of the primary female characters as well as examination of their role in the novel's "plot," illustrates this trend.

For the most part, the work proceeds plotlessly. The protagonist drifts through a number of drunken and violent years, whiling away his time fishing on the river and drinking in bars and brothels, surrounded by a motley collection of societal castoffs and degenerates. Convicts, derelicts, the homeless and drunks make up the majority of his group of friends. Ostensibly, the educated protagonist chooses to remain in this low-caste life, seeking markers for the natural and

the genuine in his chosen outcast society, an alternative to the well-to-do trappings of his upbringing. In the pursuit of his indistinct ideals, Suttree drifts through interludes with a child-like river girl and a prostitute, with the character (Suttree) and the novel's speaker ultimately proving antagonistic to each woman. Although the character's interactions with the main female characters in the work provide the basis for the novel's misogyny, a number of additional elements add to this reading. In the protagonist's interaction with his male friends, casual sexism emerges. Furthermore, Suttree's relationships with male members of matriarchies in the narrative as well as his interaction with the novel's lone transvestite character reveal misogynistic undertones in the work.

Suttree's protagonist engages in two extended female relationships during the course of the novel. After he has been conned into rowing his skiff out into the countryside surrounding Knoxville as part of a partnership in an arduous and unprofitable freshwater mussel brailing business with the father of an attractive young girl named Wanda, Suttree seduces and then subsequently rejects the nubile river-dweller. One observes that the relationship is profoundly unequal. The narrative voice consistently describes Wanda with language that emphasizes both her physical aspects and her girlish innocence, traits that lead Thomas D. Young to typify Wanda as a "child-woman" (114). Early in their "romance," she and Suttree row upriver to hunt mussels: "Her pointing, her young breasts swinging in the light cloth of her dress, turning in the boat, caught up in a childlike enthusiasm, a long flash of white thighs appearing and hiding again. Her bare feet on the silty boards of the skiff's floor crossed over the top of the other" (350). Later, when Suttree kisses her for the first time, the language again demonstrates Wanda's youthfulness: "He leaned to her and took her face in his hands and kissed her, child's breath, an odor of raw milk" (352). Interestingly, an earlier conversation has revealed that

Wanda is eighteen years old, not an adult emotionally, but certainly not the near-pedophilic conquest that the childish language leads the reader to envision. This language seems a marker for the profound inequality of psychological power in the relationship. Suttree, a university-educated and reasonably worldly man, has little invested in his relationship with Wanda. Just as he does with nearly every other sexual encounter in the book, he takes for a lover a woman he cannot consider as his intellectual and emotional peer. On the other hand, Wanda has never entertained a lover prior to Suttree, and based on her poverty, lack of education, and scruffy drifter family, her chances of ever attaining a healthy relationship seem highly unlikely. Wanda represents a source for sexual release for Suttree, while for Wanda, Suttree literally represents a release from her doomed life circumstances.

Despite this imbalance, their relationship initially proceeds like a pastoral idyll: “They swam in the river and slept in the sun. They woke in the hot forenoon and laughed at the hurry with which they worked” (354). For a moment during their interlude, it seems that Suttree might truly be content in the rustic company of Wanda and her family. He discovers an affinity for the simple, rooted patterns of their life. A newfound appreciation for the natural world mirrors this awareness. The narrator has previously noted primarily the harsh and grotesque aspects of nature. In fact, “the collision between man and the natural world” stands as a prominent theme in the work (Sanborn 91). Suttree’s primary interaction with nature to this point has been strictly oppositional: he has sought to capture and destroy fish from within their river home. Suddenly, however, the protagonist begins to view scenes of natural beauty: “The willows from the far shore cut from the night a prospect of distant mountains dark against a paler sky” (354). He discovers an old carved rock and keeps it as a talisman, considering the universe with awe: “He was struck by the fidelity of this earth he inhabited and he bore it sudden love” (354). However,

at the first mention of permanence between Suttree and Wanda—a none-too-subtle hint from her father about her prowess as a cook—the protagonist ends the relationship. He forbids her from returning to his bed, and after one final sexual interlude, Wanda returns to the camp with her family. She is subsequently crushed to death by a rain-collapsed cliff. Suttree climbs into his boat and returns to his life in Knoxville, “a man with no plans for going back the way he’d come nor telling any soul at all what he had seen” (363).

The analogy could not be clearer. Wanda’s utter disposability and impermanence in Suttree’s emotional life stands as a template for his relationship with femininity in general. Repeatedly in the novel, the encounter of a woman leads to a degree of destruction for the protagonist, the woman, or both. The metaphysical reverie that accompanies Suttree’s initial relations with Wanda cannot overcome the character’s inability to engage in an equal partnership with a woman. To that end, Thomas D. Young, Jr. asserts that the dream-like idyll of Suttree’s time with Wanda stands as allegory:

But it must be added that Wanda herself, in Suttree’s mode of perception, seems mostly allegorical as well. With her wild black hair and perfect beauty, she is reminiscent both of Suttree’s abandoned wife and the Gatlinburg ballad-girl he imagines in the pool. Like them, she seems more emblem than person, the dream of a perfect—and therefore lost or unattainable—passion. (117)

Young attributes Suttree’s inability to maintain a relationship with a woman to the character’s failure in his continual quest to rid himself of his ontological questions in favor of a more instinctual worldview. However, the critic’s observation that Wanda functions allegorically also illuminates a telling trend in the character’s inner life. By the standard Young sets, Suttree’s inner conceptions of a perfect relationship with a woman include his abandoned wife and the

cast-off and annihilated child-woman Wanda. The character symbolically reveals his deep antagonism for Wanda and his wife when the reader finds him contemplating an entirely imaginary mythological drowning victim he conceives of while wandering in the Gatlinburg mountains:

In an old grandfather time a ballad transpired here, some love gone wrong and a sabledressed girl drowned in an icegreen pool where she was found with her hair spreading like ink on the cold and cobbled river floor. Ebbing in her bindings, languorous as a sea dream. Looking up with eyes made huge by the water at the bellies of trout and the well of the rimpled world beyond. (283)

This black-haired trio, then, represents the character's conception of feminine perfection: two cast-offs and one girl he has subconsciously drowned. Even in his most abstract conscious conception of femininity, the character functions as a destroyer.

The symbolic coupling of Wanda and Suttree's abandoned wife also directs the critic's attention to the wife's role in the text. A fact heretofore ignored yet nonetheless of note ought be presented as preface for examination of Suttree's relationship with his abandoned wife. Despite his continual debauchery and demonstrated prejudice toward women, Cornelius Suttree is an eminently sympathetic protagonist. McCarthy spends nearly five hundred pages on the character, yet the reader does not tire of examining his inner workings. Since the novel depicts Suttree's existence as a quest for greater meaning, and since the narrative voice observes the protagonist's mistakes with wry humor, one's inclination is to forgive Suttree his missteps, just as one forgives those with whom he dallies. Nearly lost in this flood of reader goodwill is the fact that Suttree has abandoned his wife and son. Only when his young son dies does the reader even learn that Suttree had a family, and when the character returns to Knoxville from the burial

in the rural hamlet of his wife's family, the narrative proceeds in the same rowdy vein as before, despite Suttree's apparent suffering during his rural sojourn at the death of his son. The speaker's tone regarding the wife's kin and hometown represent an implicit pardon of Suttree's abandonment of his wife and son. For example, the small-town sheriff who runs Suttree out of town attributes his familial inconstancy to his education: "I will say one thing: you've opened my eyes. I've got two daughters, oldest fourteen, and I'd see them both in hell fore I'd send them up to that university. I'm damned if I wouldn't" (158). However, because he ignores the townspeople's wishes and merely runs Suttree out of town instead of arresting him, the Sheriff represents Suttree's only ally in his return to his wife's hometown. The Sheriff's masculine-centric use of language demonstrates this bond. Women only enter his speech in relation to men: "The reason I'm investin five dollars in your absence is because the man whose daughter's life you ruined happens to be a friend of mine and a man I not only like but respect" (157). The phrase "the man whose daughter's life you ruined" seems particularly telling. Only in a possessive relation to her father does Suttree's former wife, the actual victim of his desertion, warrant a mention. Despite the fact that Suttree's education and life circumstance mark him as an other in the puritanical environment of a rural town, the ugliest fact of the character's construction remains; he, like the small-town sheriff he mocks, has a stunted view of women. The sheriff's overt use of woman-denigrating language brings this part of Suttree's makeup into stark relief.

Additionally, before the sheriff ushers Suttree out of town, the protagonist encounters his former in-laws. Anti-feminine tones abound in a section wherein the protagonist becomes an unwilling participant in a brawl with his former mother-in-law:

By now the mother had come from the porch. She was dressed in black and closed upon them soundless as a plague, her bitter twisted face looming, axemark for a mouth and eyes crazed with hatred. She tried to speak but only a half strangled scream came out. The girl [Suttree's abandoned wife] was thrown aside and this demented harridan was at him clawing, kicking, gurgling with rage. The girl tried to pull her away. Mother, she wailed, Mother . . . The old lady had gotten Suttree's finger in her mouth and was gnawing on it like a demented soul. (150-1)

Despite the understandable root of her grief and rage, the text depicts Suttree's mother-in-law as a crazed and illogical character. Her attempt to remove Suttree's phallus—gnawing on his finger—stands as a particularly rich symbolic expression of his relationship with her and all women. Instructively, the protagonist's final direct contact with his mother-in-law comes in the form of an act of physical aggression: "You ghastly bitch, he said, and fetched her a kick in the side of the head which stretched her out" (151). The character's neglected wife herself initially plays no active part in the fight, only coming to speak with Suttree as he approaches the house and breaking into tears. In fact, only two sections of text explicitly feature Suttree's abandoned wife in the entire novel. In this, the initial one, she is reduced to emotional instability, with the reduction functioning as an obviously misogynistic attack on femininity. In Suttree's only other depiction of the wife a sexual undertone emerges, again assigning her value as with many other female characters in the work specifically to her capacity to stand as a sexual object: "Remember her hair in the morning before it was pinned, black, rampant, savage with loveliness. As if she slept in perpetual storm" (153). The openness of his abandoned wife's remembered coiffure, as well as its function in recalling the black-haired Wanda, with her "hair like black seaweed"

(358), cements this impression. Evidently, for Suttree, females are only tears and sex, elements he links to the feminine and thus finds repulsive. Additionally, the failure of Suttree's marriage—and the implication of rejected domesticity, a quality he evidently associates with femininity—creates a connection between that relationship and the protagonist's last major female interaction in the work, the sections of the work wherein he becomes involved with a call girl named Joyce.

Joyce—so named perhaps in wry acknowledgment of Suttree's Ulyssesean qualities—represents the closest Suttree comes to finding a female peer in the work. Like him, she has rejected societal mores and dwells among outcasts. Like him, she attempts to deflect from the gravity of her life with humor and liquor. Early in their relationship, she and Suttree drink whiskey and discuss one of her fellow hookers:

Was that Margie in here?

Yeah. She's jealous.

What, of you or me?

Silly. Her old man put her down I think. She's jealous of me sure but that chick is almost fifty years old for Christ sake. She's a hundred dollar a night girl.

Her?

Sure. All she has to do is turn fifty tricks. (394)

Later in the same conversation, she wryly tells Suttree she was once arrested “for selling my pussy” (394). Joyce's flip recognition of the commodification and objectification of her sexuality seem to make her a perfect fit for Suttree, who also relies on a dry wit throughout the work. Of all the female characters in the novel, he spends the greatest amount of time with Joyce. Early in their relationship, Joyce confesses an inability to hold on to money once she makes it.

Gradually, Suttree becomes her de facto pimp, receiving and securing the money she sends back from business trips to cities outside Knoxville. Several features of these events reveal the same anti-feminine patterns that appear elsewhere in the novel. Again, despite Joyce and Suttree's relative equality in intelligence and experience, the text reveals an imbalance in power between them. Suttree seems secure in the relationship because although Joyce is a prostitute, she diverts the profits from that activity to him and pays for him to stay in hotels, get new clothes, fancy meals, and any other material need he might have.

Additionally, Joyce eventually reveals that she is a lesbian. However, she establishes a non-professional romantic relationship with Suttree, subverting her true sexuality and denying the pleasure she might find with another woman as an unconscious act of submission. Suttree enjoys his power over Joyce, and she yields to him throughout their relationship, despite her role as the economic superior. For example, they discuss moving out of their current habitations, a seedy hotel. Joyce asks, "I thought maybe, I don't know . . . get an apartment. What do you think?" (399). Suttree replies, "It's up to you" (399). Joyce indicates her willing acquiescence with her return: "No it's not" (399). Early in their relationship, they take a scenic cab ride through nearby snowy mountains. The possessive aspects of Suttree's enjoyment of this activity are particularly telling: "The silent cabman carried them through a white silent forest by caves in the roadside cliffs all toothed with ice and the only sound the trudge of the shackled tires in the dry snow of the road. Suttree cozied up with his trollop and his toddy, she looking out with child's eyes at this wonderland" (399). Joyce's "child's eyes" put the reader in mind of the deceased Wanda. Vereen Bell extends this coupling farther: "An illusion of *déjà vu* permeates the entire episode, as if Wanda had slipped back into the world through a hole in time, grown-up and stouter and wiser in the ways of the world, though every bit as doomed" (102). Furthermore,

the use of the possessive pronoun “his” in the particularly pat phrase “his toddy and his trollop” reminds one that no matter Joyce’s attractive qualities, just as with Wanda, Suttree seems only to feel affection in disproportionately weighted liaisons. The symbolic interchangeability of Wanda and Joyce also speaks to one of the core feminine attributions one finds in Suttree’s narrative voice: As with one woman, as with all.

In adding to the facets that deny reading Joyce as an empowered character, one notes that when Joyce leaves to ply her trade in a far off city she effectively ceases to exist. Only in her relationship to Suttree does she have meaning within the context of the novel. Otherwise, she becomes an almost non-entity, reduced to envelopes full of money arriving for Suttree. Thomas D. Young Jr. characterizes this situation—and perhaps explains Suttree’s initial comfort in Joyce’s company—as a parody of domestic life: “Together they enjoy caricaturing the pleasant rituals of bourgeois courtship: eating out, going to movies and nightclubs, taking vacations—while always secretly thumbing their noses at the respectable individuals around them engaged in identical rites” (118). However, Joyce gradually begins to take their domestic play-acting more seriously. They move out of the hotel and obtain an apartment. The narrator characterizes Joyce as a “soiled dove,” depicting Suttree’s perch on the cusp of his tolerance for her (401). As their home becomes less of a “household” and more of a household, Suttree begins to dwell on aspects of Joyce he finds unpleasant. Her domestic rituals begin to wear on him: “In her bright metal haircurlers she looked like the subject of bizarre experiments on the human brain. And she was growing fatter” (404). As Suttree tires of the domestic role-play, he and Joyce begin to fight and anger one another more: “Follow now days of drunkenness and small drama, of cheap tears and recrimination and half-so testaments of love renewed” (405). Suttree uses some of the profits from Joyce’s continued prostitution to purchase a Jaguar convertible,

ostensibly seeking to extend the conceit of their relationship's basis. However, Joyce eventually tires of his half-hearted, tongue-in-cheek involvement with her, and in a kind of fit, begins to destroy the car:

Suttree grabbed her wrist and held it and she raised one foot and kicked the knobs off the radio.

You crazy bitch, he said.

But now she slumped in the seat for leverage and kicked out with both feet. The righthand windshield went blind white. She kicked again and it fell onto the hood and slid off into the street.

He wheeled in to the curb. She was screaming at him something senseless.

You dizzy cunt, he said. (409-10)

The rapidity with which Suttree falls into the use of the word "cunt" speaks volumes. After the car's destruction, he leaves Joyce and the ruined car, the symbol of their pretend domesticity, and returns to his life on the river. Though their unstinting allegiance to depravity and non-conformity establish Suttree and Joyce as kindred spirits within the societal underbelly, her femininity ultimately means that Suttree cannot join with her in a genuine way. Ultimately, as with his wife and as with Wanda, the incident with Joyce seems to have left no permanent mark on the character. His antiwoman instincts run too deep.

After each run-in with one of the woman characters, Suttree returns to old friends and old patterns largely unchanged, retreating into an almost exclusively male environment. Although these sections of the text do not display their misogyny as blatantly as do the sections with Wanda or Joyce, they nonetheless contain a number of incidents and trends that add to the

novel's anti-feminine aspect. To this end, John Rothfork summarizes the Joyce/Suttree relationship neatly, and he points out an important contrast in the text:

Sut's relationship with Joyce, characterized by parody and boisterousness, illustrates the defensive attitude typical of a bright high-school boy on a first date. With women, Sut exhibits none of the compassion that flows among the outcast disciples: Ab Jones, City Rat Harrogate, Michael, and the nameless ragman. This may be a boy's club of latent homosexuality, but they minister to each other simply by talking, by listening, by caring. (395)

In contrast to those with Wanda and Joyce, as Rothfork notes, Suttree's relationships with several of the male characters in the novel demonstrate balance and respect between the two participants. He enjoys a close partnership in a number of his misdeeds with J-Bone, a childhood friend; though J-Bone works at a department store, a distinctly "establishment" means of making his living, Suttree does not interpret J-Bone's denial of Suttree's worldview as implicit criticism. Rather, he and J-Bone find equality in their mutual love of whiskey and seedy barrooms. Additionally, Suttree engages in a father-son relationship with Ab Jones, with the old black bootlegger calling him "Youngblood" and doling out sage advice, and Suttree offering comfort and solace after any number of Jones' violent encounters with the Knoxville police department. Jones also consistently provides Suttree with free beer, no small kindness in Suttree's near-destitute world. Jones' final fight with the tyrannical police officer Tarzan Quinn results in his death. Suttree responds by stealing the policeman's cruiser and dumping it in the river, an action that necessitates his departure from Knoxville and ends the novel. Interestingly, the only female character the narrator does not openly repudiate is Jones' wife. She serves a role strictly as a domestic servant, cooking and cleaning in his riverfront beer joint, and though she does not

approve of Ab's brawling, she does not attempt to change or control her husband. Evidently, the only acceptable female characters in Suttree must exist in willing servitude.

Notably, despite the relative weight of the major female characters' appearances in the text, they take up a minimal number of pages. The novel proceeds in an almost entirely masculine world for long periods, only broken up by the appearance of the occasional prostitute or waitress. However, careful attention to even these fleeting mentions of women and femininity reveals the protagonist's deep-seated distrust and dislike. Even in the novel's first mention of a female character, the work attempts to subordinate women. Suttree identifies his tempestuous relationship with his father as the result of his father marrying a woman beneath him and his father's subsequent contempt for her. Later, he remarks that his father must have thought he was saving his mother "out of the whorehouse" by marrying her (20). The language of the section rings with the same anti-feminine tones as the rest of the work. Even regarding his mother, and even in the most fleeting mentions, Suttree, both the character and the novel, reveal deep resentments toward women. One might even attribute the entirety of the character's misogyny to this formative dislike of his mother. Robert Jarrett attributes the character's inability to engage women meaningfully to a fundamental, childhood-rooted psychosis: "In a social sense, Suttree rejects her [Joyce] as inferior, in mimicry of the structure of his father's view of his mother" (59). Early in the work, an incident occurs that might lend credence to this assertion. Suttree's mother comes to visit him in the workhouse. He has been incarcerated after passing out drunk in a car used to rob a drugstore. The character seems surprised to see his mother, and he tries to return to his cell, but the jailer denies him. He notes that she "looked old," and he notices "her slack and pleated throat, the flesh beneath her jaws. Her eyes paler" (61). He greets her curtly: "Hello Mother, he said" (61). However, Suttree's façade of indifference soon fades. As his

mother begins to cry, seeing her son imprisoned, the narrative voice shifts to express her consciousness: “Here is the anguish of mortality. Hopes wrecked, love sundered. See the mother sorrowing. How everything that I was warned of’s come to pass” (61). Suttree is unable to remain in the same room with her. He seems disgusted at the emotional response she prompts in him: “Hot salt strangled him. He wheeled away. Blackburn would have stopped him at the door but when he saw his face he let him go. Suttree jerked his arm away and went through the gate and up the stairs” (61). The simultaneous occurrence of the protagonist’s visceral weeping and his retreat from his mother, marked by the violence inherent in the word “jerked,” illuminates Suttree’s relationship with his mother. With his descent into low society and crime, he has demonstrated an affinity with her lowborn roots, the aspect of his mother that his father ostensibly despised. However, the character’s root distrust of women—perhaps emerging from his father—does not allow him to extend his allegiance to his mother on a personal level. The character rebels against his privileged upbringing, but he cannot rebel against his own misogyny. As Jarrett notes, “Curiously, in his relationships with women, Suttree mimics the behavior of the father he has repudiated”(58). However, to claim Suttree as simply an evolved Oedipal exploration fails to give the novel enough credit even as it pardons the work its sins. Suttree’s psychology seems too complex to accommodate such a simple interpretation, and Suttree’s misogyny seems too entrenched to emerge only from the work’s mother/son dynamic.

A trend emerges that the reader can use to predict the appearance of female characters in the work. A number of times throughout his wanderings in the novel, Suttree gets some money, goes drinking and whoring, and wakes up bloodied and penniless. Early in the novel, the character takes a blow on the head from a floorbuffer in the midst of a brawl that has broken out

in a whore-filled roadhouse. As he sways in the midst of the brawl, drunk and with a fractured skull, he sees an old prostitute watching him. He perceives it as his dying vision:

He swayed. He took a small step, stiffly fending. What waited was not the black of nothing but a foul hag with naked gums smiling and there was no Madonna of desire or mother of eternal attendance beyond the dark rain with lamps against the night, the softly cloven powdered breasts and the fragile claviclebones alabastine above the rich velvet of her gown. The old crone swayed as if to mock him.

What man is such a coward he would not rather fall once than remain forever tottering? (187)

The narrator associates destruction with femininity, just as in the section with Wanda. The motif of feminine destruction reliably reappears. The misogyny shines through in that whenever female characters enter the story, they enter in denigrated form, and they invariably carry the seed of disaster with them. McCarthy seems to demonstrate awareness of this trend, and parodies Eve's betrayal in the Garden of Eden when he places Suttree into a diner, seeking food after a long hike through the Gatlinburg mountains. The hike has hollowed Suttree both physically (he has little to eat for weeks) and mentally (he has seen crazed visions in the mountains). He emerges from the mountains as an avatar of the first man, untainted, and enters the restaurant:

What for ye? said a leery matron. . . .

Country steak, he said. Mashed potatoes and beans. Cornbread. And bring me a cup of coffee.

You get three vegetables.

He looked again. Let me have the apples, he said. (291)

Instructively, Suttree finds the cornbread inedible, curses the waitress, and is thrown out of the diner. This incident seems to symbolically tie the disconnect between Suttree and womankind to the original biblical conflict. By establishing his protagonist as a symbol for all men, McCarthy perhaps seeks to couch Suttree's gender conflicts within a larger frame. However, the reader senses that biblical symbolism in a decidedly un-Christian novel must not be accepted at face value. Despite the admirable craftsmanship of the symbols' insertion, and despite the author's ostensible intentions, the Adam and Eve diner scene hardly rescues the work from blame for its continuing hostility to females. If anything, it merely serves as yet another incident in which conflict arises from the interaction of male and female characters.

The work's gender bias does not stop with its speaker's masculine partiality and consistently negative portrayal of women. This trend emerges even from the careful investigation of the novel's portrayal of a number of the male characters. Despite the fact that its protagonist surrounds himself with murderous brawlers, bootleggers, gamblers, and other unseemly characters, Suttree's tone toward its cast is generally approving. The good-natured banter and joking that accompany each gathering of the MacNally flats degenerates leaves the reader with sympathetic feelings toward a group of distinctly unsympathetic characters. For example, the reader imagines Big Red Callahan as a jovial and dear friend, despite the fact that the character is a brawling drunk, a petty thief, and a convicted felon. However, in the case of the drunks and outcasts controlled by women in the work, the narrator's tone shifts. Primary among these characters is Wanda's father, Reese. Reese's actions do not differentiate him from any number of Suttree's friends. He and Suttree sneak away from the family to go to a bar filled with prostitutes, just as Suttree and his MacNally friends often darken the door of Comer's, their favorite Nashville hangout. As with his actions, Reese's use of language also echoes that of

other characters in the novel. When he proposes the visit to the road house, Reese offers a lascivious plan to Suttree: “We go up there, Sut, we’ll run a pair or two down and put the dick to em. He winked hugely and set one finger to his lips” (333). His diction hardly distances him from Suttree’s MacNally friends like J-Bone, who suggests they visit a particular bar because “the place will be crawling with lovely young cuntlets” (302). Nevertheless, the speaker of the text seems to mock Reese’s petty schemes—his attempts to sell a jeweler some freshwater pearls are an unqualified, hilarious failure—though the exploits of J-Bone and his ilk are relayed as if they were the deeds of mythic heroes. For example, the narrative depicts their waiting in the cold for an early-morning beer joint to open as an epic struggle of man against nature. Suttree develops a genuine dislike for Reese that the narrator seems to echo. The root of this dislike emerges from Reese’s relationship with his wife. Though he projects a brash, free-wheeling image, the character’s wife actually dictates his actions, a state of affairs that leaves Suttree unsympathetic. In the face of a serious rainstorm that disrupts their work on the river and threatens to wash them away, Suttree perceives Reese’s family structure accurately, and he understands the source of Reese’s braggadocio-laden and wheedling persona: “A frailly structured matriarchy showed itself in the latter days, and Suttree reckoned it had always been so” (357). This realization comes just before Suttree abandons the mussel-brailing scheme in the aftermath of Wanda’s death. The reader finds evidence that the protagonist would likely have abandoned the woman-led Reese clan with or without the death of his child-woman lover.

The other male character that demonstrates Suttree’s intolerance for men led by women is Leonard, a pock-marked youth who enlists Suttree’s aid in a hilarious and disturbing welfare fraud scheme. Leonard’s mother has the family on welfare. His ailing father has died, meaning the family will receive a substantially reduced welfare payment. Instead of burying the body,

they simply dump him into a refrigerator, and for six months they continue to draw his check. However, at the instant Leonard seeks Suttree's help, he has drunkenly sold the refrigerator for whiskey money, and he needs to dispose of the body using Suttree's boat. The scheme echoes those perpetrated by Suttree's young friend Gene Harrogate throughout the book. At one point Harrogate dynamites a hole in a sewer main, thinking he has found his way to a bank vault in Knoxville's extensive subterranean caves and tunnels. However, rather than viewing Leonard's plan with the bemused good nature that Harrogate's schemes elicit in him, Suttree emphatically discourages him:

Forget this goddamned notion and just call the police or whatever and tell them to come and get his stinking ass.

Leonard looked at Suttree. He shook his head. You don't understand, he said.

I understand and I'm not getting mixed up in it. (245)

Outside of his desire to avoid illegal activity, which interestingly never seems to lead to him censuring any of Harrogate's similar schemes, Suttree's denial of Leonard's scheming seems to issue from two factors. Primarily, he seems to find Leonard's acquiescence to his mother's commands off-putting. Just as with Reese, the text denies Leonard full membership in Suttree's jovial community of outcasts because he is subject to matriarchal power structures. Furthermore, Leonard's indeterminate sexual preferences ("weird Leonard, pale and pimpled part-time catamite") leave Suttree uncomfortable (241). This discomfort with alternative forms of sexuality emerges elsewhere in the work as well. Though Suttree's social status means he frequents the same locales as Knoxville's gay community, and even though he seems a friend to a black transvestite, characters with non-traditional sexualities receive the same cold,

uncomfortable treatment from Suttree and from the novel's speaker as the matriarch dominated males.

Jessica Simmons notes in her study of transsexualism in Suttree that both Suttree and the narrative voice seem to struggle with non-traditional sexuality. She points out that when Suttree's transvestite friend mentions another transgendered friend, Suttree struggles to phrase his question regarding which of them is older: "You or her. Him. It" (412). Additionally, the novel's speaker seems unsure of how to refer to the character, twice using female pronouns and a dozen other times using the male pronoun (Simmons 56). Furthermore, the narrative names the homosexuals that favor the same bar as Suttree "a group of dubious gender" (72). This profound discomfort reveals an anti-homosexual tone in the work's prose. Billy Ray Callahan, one of Suttree's convict friends—and the character that comes closest to perfecting the anti-establishment, malcontented heroism within the MacNally Flats pantheon—supports this tone. Newly released from prison, he arrives at the Huddle to see a group of gay men seated in a corner booth. "The queers is back," he shouts. "Hidy Queers!" (284). The malice inherent in his over-friendly greeting could hardly be more obvious. In this way, the narrator (and Suttree's consciousness) conflates homosexuality and indistinct gender allegiance with femininity and then internally repudiates it. Though Suttree attempts to focus on the masculine aspects of his transvestite friend, whose chosen name is "Trippin Through the Dew," by instead calling the character "John" and consistently using the wrong pronoun ("he" instead of "she") in a subconscious attempt to remain friends with the character despite his/her indeterminate gender, a sense of discomfort remains. McCarthy too attempts sympathy for the character, granting Trippin Through the Dew a buoyant personality and a resourceful and entertaining fashion sense. At one point she sports cufflinks made of bicycle reflectors and a secondhand muskrat coat, dyed

purple. However, as Simmons points out, the narrative voice also reveals a core discomfort with transsexualism, referring to Trippin as an “androgynous” (110), and an “invert” (412). Ultimately, both character and narrative voice realize their core misogyny is undone without strict gender assignment, and they resist attempts to break down the male/female dichotomy.

Near the conclusion of Suttree, in one of the work’s most famous sections of prose, the fever-addled protagonist imagines his last judgment. Tellingly, a vision of a female—a nun with “dead breasts” and “soricine claws”—recites Suttree his sins:

Mr. Suttree it is our understanding that . . . you betook yourself to various low places within the shire of McAnally and did there squander several ensuing years in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murders, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, toppers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees. (457)

Instructively, the doomed catalog includes no archwhores or archtrulls. Even at its most effusive, even when arranging and lauding Suttree’s downcast cast with Whitman-like bombast, the narrative voice remains antagonistic to women. Though the character’s fevered subconscious grants near-kingly status to the “sots” of his previous experience, it refrains from extolling the whores, bawds and trulls in its list, instead sandwiching them between other lower forms on the register.

In the beginning of the grips of the same typhoid that later births his super-loquacious voice of inner judgment, the protagonist experiences another hallucination that further

illuminates Suttree's misogyny. The character's consciousness distorts the folk-healer woman helping him into a succubus:

A dried black and hairless figure rose from her fallen rags, the black and shriveled leather teats like empty purses hanging, the thin and razorous palings of the ribs wherein hung a heart yet darker, parchment cloven to the bones, spindleshanked and bulbed of joint. Black faltress, portress of hell-gate. . . . Dead reek of aged female flesh, a stale aridity. Dry wattled nether lips hung from out the side of her torn stained drawers. Her thighs spread with a sound of rending ligaments, dry bones dragging in their sockets. Her shriveled cunt puckered open like a mouth gawping. He flailed bonelessly in the grip of a ghastr black succubus, he screamed a dry and soundless scream. (427)

Surely even the most open-minded of readers must assent that the section reveals a profound distrust or dislike of women and femininity in its language. The novel's speaker reveals this distrust by the severity of the horror implied in the passage. Nothing can frighten and disturb Suttree more than the female form, and this sentiment finds its ultimate expression in the subconscious conversion of the witch-healer into an apparition of pure terror wherein her femininity marks her most frightening aspects. Furthermore, the language of the section adds to the character's psychology to further this trend. With her "razorous" ribs, dark heart, and supernatural vagina dentata, the woman of Suttree's dark fantasy serves as interior expression of his perspective on all women. As Vereen Bell notes,

This generic hag of his dreams is the messenger of his reality, the mocker of sweet expectations, the nourishing mother become monsterlike, the sweet Grandmother

of the Grimms' tale who becomes a devouring wolf. She is also the evil warning of suppressed sexual fear that associates woman with biological imperatives and biology with the curse of death. (95)

Additionally, the character's fevered impression of the witch woman is not the only instance of this type of language in the work. Suttree dreams of ill-willed, supernatural vaginas several times in the novel. Another example occurs while Suttree still lies in the grips of the same fever. The character hallucinates a disembodied vagina sucking out his life: "He no longer cared that he was dying. He was being voided by an enormous livercolored cunt with prehensile lips that pumped softly like some levantine bivalve" (452). Again, the narrative voice assigns female genitals overtly aggressive characteristics. Even in the earliest grips of the fever, the protagonist experiences yet another imagined vagina dentata:

But the sounds he heard began to coalesce and rush and he no longer knew if he dreamt or woke. In the long afternoon, he fell prey to strange cravings of the flesh. Out of a pinwheel of brown taffy his medusa beckoned. A gross dancer with a sallow puckered belly, hands cupping a pudendum grown with mossgreen hair, a virid merkin out of which her wet mauve petals smiled and bared from hiding little rows of rubber teeth like the serried jaws of conchshells. Suttree groaned in his sleep. He lay in a sexual nightmare. (449-50)

The misogynistic connection between the novel's speaker and its protagonist becomes complete when the critic returns to the original vision of ravenous vagina and considers the old black witch's name: Mother She. By this designation, the author seems to assert that the witch character stands for all women and all femininity. The "Mother" section of the witch's name

draws attention to Suttree's profoundly stunted relationship with his own mother and his subsequent inability to assign value to women in his reckoning of the world.

Critic J. Douglas Canfield names this the “devouring mother” trend in the work and writes that, “in patriarchal, patrilinear societies, men define themselves, their genealogical identity, against this power, which they must control if they wish to preserve that identity” (667). The “power” Canfield addresses is the power of the feminine to both horrify and attract the masculine. He reads Suttree in the context of the French feminist psychoanalytic theory developed by Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's work seems particularly relevant to the previously mentioned sections of the novel because of her attention to literature that horrifies the reader. In her theory, the “feminine”—the body of woman, the body of mother, elements in nature such as mud and blood associated with woman—is both terrifying and alluring to the male subject precisely because it represents and threatens abjection. The idea of “the feminine” is here defined as not merely “woman,” but anything in the realm of experience or existence that lies outside what Lacan calls the “symbolic order,” elements that must be repressed if the male subject wishes to retain his illusions of autonomy and identity (Fisher-Wirth 126). Interestingly, Anne Fisher-Wirth also reads McCarthy in a Kristevan context, sweepingly asserting that McCarthy's almost womanless novels stand as testament to his creative powers:

Fully developed female characters do not exist in McCarthy's novels, . . . But paradoxically, McCarthy's female characters become more interesting the less he attempts to develop them, for their power is poetic, gestural. McCarthy is a brilliant symbolist of “the feminine”; unforgettably, he articulates the dread, loathing, and fascination that, Kristeva says, characterize the subject's response to whatever would undo it. What would in another novelist's work be

sensationalism, even pornography—the corpse brides, the incest victims, the raped and mute and scalped and maimed—is in McCarthy’s fiction apprehended so powerfully at the level of the unconscious that it becomes the stuff of nightmare and beauty. (127)

Although Fisher-Wirth rightly recognizes the often striking implicit Kristevan threat of abjection present in the female characters, she errs in thinking that any “poetic” or “gestural” power they possess in the context of Suttree overcomes or mitigates the work’s speaker’s demonstrated disdain for femininity. For example, if Joyce and Wanda are pure symbols, one can far more easily argue for their symbolic value as disposable entities than for their standing as unconscious visions of nightmarish beauty.

In contrast to positive readings of McCarthy’s persistent maleness, one need only note that James Basil Potts III, in his study of masculinity in McCarthy’s southern cycle, asserts that the woman characters function “almost like props” (295). They are usually drawn, he says, from a group of stock characters that includes “innocents,” like Wanda, “terse and righteous maternal figures like Suttree’s mother,” or “prostitutes, or sometimes a combination of the two” (295). He goes on to note that “the men do define themselves by extricating themselves from the feminine,” a trend “most clearly demonstrated by Suttree” (295-6). Furthermore, to recontextualize discussion of abjection and the feminine in Suttree specifically into the text, one must merely observe that by tagging the surname “She” to the Mother She succubus character, the narrative voice leads the reader to consider the relatively few number of times that specific pronoun appears in the novel and also to consider that when the word “she” does appear, it almost invariably refers to a sexless servant character or a whore.

Many readers note the number of doubles in Suttree. The protagonist's still-born twin haunts his dreams, and he often imagines himself doubled, accompanied by a "doublegoer," Suttree and "othersuttree" (287). However, the character's most significant double in the work occurs in the form of Gene Harrogate, the scheming "country mouse" Suttree befriends in the work house. Harrogate represents the pure human instinct that Suttree attempts to reach with his descent into the lowest castes of society. He is, according to Young, "the amoral acquisitive center of the human animal, prior to the development of a socially expedient moral sensibility" (113). Vereen Bell eloquently glosses Harrogate's consciousness as "a bumpkin's Eden" (85). Gene's first act in the novel is to be imprisoned for sexually violating a watermelon patch. Even as he provides bawdy comic relief, however, Harrogate's actions often echo Suttree's antifeminine ideas. This trend appears initially in the watermelon rape section of the novel, Harrogate's first entry into the action. Just after a scene wherein the narrator has noted Harrogate's gaze falling to his own half sister's "pendulous breasts" as she washes laundry, his invalid mother calls from inside the house:

After a while a thin voice came again from the rear of the house.

She [Harrogate's sister] stopped and looked at him.

See what she [his invalid mother] wants, will ye?

He spat. I didn't take her to raise, he said.

She lifted her bleached and wrinkled hands from the water and wiped them on the front of her dress. All right, Mama, she called. Just a minute. (31)

Immediately following this scene, the narrative shifts to follow Harrogate as he engages in unnatural fruit copulation. Two factors seem to influence this choice. Primarily, he seems to find in the melons a release for his unresolved sexual feelings toward his half-sister.

Secondarily, in addition to exposing the root of Harrogate's melon attraction, the scene functions to ally him with Suttree. Harrogate seems to hold domesticity in the same low regard Suttree does, an attitude that proceeds from his apparent contempt for his ailing mother. In this way, the characters mirror one another. Additionally, Harrogate pursues Wanda, and his unsophisticated lust functions to reveal that Suttree, though more urbane than his devious doppelganger, hardly extends this sophistication to his consideration of women:

How do you get them to take off their clothes. That's what I'd by god like to know.

You take them off.

Yeah? Well what does she do while you're doin that? I mean hell, does she just look out the winder or something? I don't understand it at all Sut. The whole thing seems uneasy to me.

They swung off the right of way and went along a dogpath, Suttree grinning. Tell her she sure has got a big old set of ninnies on her, he said.

Shit, said Harrogate. She's liable to smack the fire out of me. (316)

Suttree and Harrogate's conversation reveals their shared sensibilities. Their shared perception of the sexual act as the combative end to a conquest and their mutual objectification of women shine through. Suttree's encouragement for Harrogate to "Tell her she sure has got a big old set of ninnies on her" is a reprisal of Harrogate's earlier appraisal of Wanda's qualities. Although Suttree's later sexual relationship with the girl marks a particularly dream-like section of the novel, and though their relationship, as mentioned, leads him to momentarily consider the natural world with a less cynical eye, the reader rightfully recalls that the character who bears the earth "sudden love" (354) in the midst of his connection to Wanda is the same lecher who notes her

“big old set of ninnies” (316). No matter the circumstance, Suttree cannot separate himself from his core antiwomanism.

Sadly, in final consideration, one must conclude that Suttree is a sexist book. A revisit of the magnificent prose of the work’s conclusion illustrates this sadness:

Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming  
corn and in the castellated press of cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds  
tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed  
with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them. (471)

Unfortunately, honest assessment of Suttree leads one to postulate with chagrin that if the work’s philosophical basis were extended, the narrator would identify the crazed hellhounds of the work’s close as bitches, driven on by their male subjugator.

The work’s sexism undoubtedly damages Suttree, but any understanding of the novel and of Cormac McCarthy’s total body of work is incomplete if it fails to acknowledge this element. Despite McCarthy’s rightful rise in the academy and in American literature in general, Suttree may be destined to standing as a complex lesser work, regardless of the power of the novel’s apparent aims. Even with its memorable prose and complex scheme of ideas, the book seems doomed to second tier status among its author’s accomplishments due to its unrelieved, unrepentant misogyny.

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