Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 10 (59) No. 2 – 2017

The grotesque in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*

Mădălina Larisa KIMAK[1]

This paper aims at analysing Cormac McCarthy's novel Child of God through Mikhail Bakhtin's perspective on the grotesque. Bakhtin's theory is used as a bond between the text and the context, namely the story of the horrific murderer Lester Ballard and the Southern Gothic genre. The purpose of this endeavour is to illustrate that the combination between a synchronic and a diachronic approach to the novel reveals that the text focuses not so much on framing the social tensions of the South, but on creating a tale about humanity's capacity for evil in general. This way, the analysis shows that the novel can be integrated into the Southern Gothic genre, but it is in no way limited in its interpretation by this classification.

Keywords: *Cormac McCarthy, grotesque, Mikhail Bakhtin, Southern Gothic*

1. Introduction

It is quite rare, if not absolutely impossible to succeed in describing something as either white or black these days. There will always be details that will contradict one interpretation or another. This is why the shades of gray seem like a more secure choice that can capture both the whiteness and the darkness of the issue, thus providing a more comprehensive approach to the subject. Although abstract, this short presentation of the phenomenon we are witnessing can very well be applied to the theory of literature. Literary criticism has known this dichotomy throughout its entire development. Critics have been focusing either predominantly on the text, while dismissing the context in which it has been written, the authors' biography and their cultural affiliations, or they have been engaged in an almost obsessive pursuit of textual elements that could explain a certain reality, be it historic, biographical or even psychological. Going in either of the two directions can be delusive and the interpretations thus obtained rather incomplete. This is where the shades of gray come into play and the synchronic and diachronic approaches intertwine.

Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God* is a suggestive example of how important blending text analysis with context analysis really is. Concentrating solely on the content of the book can make the entire story quite confusing, especially since the main character is an utterly deranged character, a necrophile and a

[1] West University of Timişoara, madalina.kimak92@e-uvt.ro

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

murderer, who is painted in a surprisingly more positive light than expected. Thus, referring to the literary context in which the story can be integrated may shed some light on the text and on the author's intentions. However, at the same time, a desperate attempt to integrate the novel in a certain literary current and to find proofs for this connection within the text may lead to a superficial reading and an equally naïve interpretation of the book. As a consequence, a valid solution in this case seems to be an approach that combines the two directions presented above.

Known for his exploration of violence and human degradation in bleak scenarios, Cormac McCarthy is usually associated with the Southern Gothic tradition, which has a recurrent pattern of cold-blooded criminals, violent imbeciles, freaks and other deranged and deformed characters. All these "lost individuals" who are trying "to find redemption in self-actualization" live in "warped rural communities and small towns of the modern South" and are surrounded by an "element of mystery invoking a haunting suspicion of some entity just beyond our verifiable perception" (Boyd 2002, 315).

The Gothic has been fueled by historic realities, changes at the level of society, of ideology and overall developments. As a ramification of the Gothic, the Southern Gothic as well has gradually come into existence under the influence of a major event in the American history, the Civil War. According to Willard P. Greenwood, the war has not only altered the "South's racist, slave-based economy", but it has also "stripped away the veneer of beauty and elegance and civilization, revealing what churned beneath Southern society: ugliness, debauchery, and the encroaching wilderness" (2009, 16). Moreover, Alan Spiegel observes that the industrial revolution, the urbanization and the First World War have all transformed the agrarian society of the South, producing new social types like "the city slicker, the encroaching Northerner, the avaricious poor white on the make" which have been added to the already existing ones, among which Spiegel mentions "the Kentucky colonel, the plantation belle, the colored mammy, the gentlemanrake riding to hounds" (1972, 428). Spiegel identifies the emergence of the modern Southern literature as a result of the collision between "the values, customs and beliefs" of the two categories of social types enumerated earlier (1972, 428). In this context, both the dark legacy of the South and the tensions of a changing society which, according to Spiegel, generate the grotesque (1972, 428), have proved to be sources of inspiration with significant Gothic potential.

Analyzing Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* from this perspective can easily lead to the conclusion that Lester Ballard is the embodiment of all the flaws that Southern society has kept hidden. Although this interpretation may be acceptable to a certain point, it is quite limited and incomplete. Moreover, there are elements in the text that contradict this perspective. Concentrating on these elements that raise questions regarding the regional nature of the story, this paper proposes a more complex approach to Cormac McCarthy's novel that combines both the attention given to the literary context and to the content of the book. What is particularly

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

enthralling about the horrific mélange between human depravity and the gothic scenarios of the novel is a sense of grotesque, which envelops the characters, the scenes and the settings of *Child of God*. The grotesque, thus, seems like an interesting intersection between text and context, between the story of Lester Ballard and the Southern Gothic genre and this is what the paper will be focusing on.

Alan Spiegel writes in this sense that the grotesque employed within Southern fiction refers mainly to "a *type of character* that occurs so repeatedly in contemporary Southern novels that readers have come to accept – indeed, expect his appearance as a kind of convention of the form" (1972, 427). This special type of character is in Spiegel's view "either a physically or mentally deformed figure" (1972, 427). However, despite this deviation from normality, Spiegel notes that "his deformity will not separate him from us, but rather will bring him closer to us" (1972, 427). In other words, the abnormal character will be presented as an embodiment of humanity in general, thus becoming what Spiegel calls an 'archetype' (1972, 427).

A similar idea about the grotesque body as not separate, but integrated into the world can be found in Mikhail Bakhtin's influential theory about the grotesque as developed in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1984). Although providing meaningful observations about Cormac McCarthy's work as rooted into Southern Gothic and filled with grotesque instances, the criticism dedicated to analyzing it so far seems to overlook McCarthy's connection to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque (1984). Even when critics do refer to Bakhtin in their interpretations of McCarthy's novels, they either dismiss the presence of laughter and its regenerating power in the worlds envisioned by McCarthy or they use Bakhtin's grotesque to look at different aspects than moral decay.

In this context, this paper attempts to fill the research gap mentioned above by providing an analysis of the characters' moral decay in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque and the characteristics of the Southern Gothic genre. This way, the paper aims at showing that the instances of moral decay present in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* are illustrated in a grotesque manner and act as an extended metaphor for humanity's corrupt nature, which nevertheless has a regenerating potential ensured by various forms of laughter. In this sense, the paper answers questions regarding the relation between McCarthy's narrative and the Southern Gothic tradition, the degree to which the novels follow Bakhtin's pattern of grotesque, as well as the nature of the laughter employed by McCarthy in his writing.

2. Methodology

The analysis proposed is designed as a theory driven, qualitative research in the shape of a case study, focusing on Cormac McCarthy's Southern Gothic novel *Child*

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

of God. In this context, the general characteristics of the Southern Gothic literature serve as theoretical background, while Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts such as 'grotesque body', 'degradation', 'laughter', 'regeneration', 'carnival' represent the terminology employed in the analysis.

Bakhtin's discussion of these ideas starts from the concept of 'grotesque realism', which he considers an aesthetic particularity of Rabelais's and other Renaissance authors' works borrowed from the medieval "culture of folk humor" (1984, 18). According to Bakhtin, 'folk humor' consisted of three main categories. The first one was represented by carnivals, the second one by oral or written parodies and the third one by "curses, oaths, popular blazons" (1984, 5). What all these categories had in common was, in Bakhtin's view, 'laughter' and 'ambivalence' or in other words, "he who is laughing also belongs to it" (1984, 12). Likewise, grotesque realism focuses on "the material bodily principle" presented as a universal amalgam of "the cosmic, the social and the bodily elements" which become "an indivisible whole", "a collective ancestral body of all the people" (Bakhtin 1984, 19). Moreover, Bakhtin identifies 'degradation' as the center of grotesque realism (1984, 19), which can be translated as being closer to earth, but also as a concern with the lower half of the body (1984, 21). For Bakhtin, degradation has both a negative and a positive function because "to degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better" (1984, 21).

Moreover, just like the Southern Gothic envisions "the dissolution of society" (Greenwood 2009, 18), as a consequence of the disturbance in the predefined order of the Southern society, the 'carnival' in Bakhtin's terms "celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order", marking "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (1984, 10). From this point of view, the carnival becomes the opposite of the official feast in which "the existing pattern of things" is "reinforced" (Bakhtin 1984, 9). Moreover, Bakhtin also argues that "the carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (1984, 8) because the people are not mere spectators, but actual participants (1984, 7). In this context, the carnival becomes life itself, which functions according to "the laws of its own freedom" (Bakhtin 1984, 7). At the same time, the carnival has for Bakhtin a renewing function (1984, 7).

Alan Spiegel has noticed a significant distinction between the Southern and the Northern novel, claiming that while the Northern writer presents the story from the perspective of "a normal character in an abnormal world", the Southern writer chooses to construct the story "from the point of view of the one abnormal character in a normal world" (1972, 428). For Spiegel this normal world is the equivalent of "a real society with awareness of custom and ceremony, and family and community life", whose "values and beliefs […] may be questioned […] by the radical forces represented in the grotesque character", but which nevertheless remains a universe protected by "a moral shield" (1972, 428). While the normality of the Southern

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

world in which the grotesque character lives is a debatable aspect and perhaps depends on every author's vision in this sense, what is certain is the presence of the grotesque character as a specific trait of the Southern Gothic. Although freaks and monsters have populated the Gothic worlds since the very beginning of the genre, causing fear and terror, Charles Crow identifies a shift in this sense and states that "real Gothic fear of the monster occurs […] when we discover that the creature is within us, or us within it" (2009, 167-168). Crow's statement can be seen as a clear proof that Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body can successfully be applied to the analysis of a Southern Gothic novel, since "the creature within us" (Crow 2009, 168) is quite a suggestive embodiment of 'ambivalence' as theorized by Bakhtin in relation to the grotesque body. In this context, it becomes clear that the most efficient way to read a novel within this genre is by paying close attention to the characters because they are the ones most embedded with grotesquery.

3. The human monster

Although addressing horrific ideas like necrophilia or incest framed by a Gothic atmosphere of decay, which places Lester Ballard's story in the darkest zone of the Southern Gothic, *Child of God* seems to be less violent than McCarthy's other novels. A possible explanation for this paradoxical situation is the fact that the novel does not necessarily shock through explicit descriptions, but rather suggests the terrific events in an elusive way. One way through which McCarthy manages to inspire terror without an excessive use of graphical images is by a clever use of Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque, which combines 'laughter' and 'ambivalence' (1984). In the case of *Child of God* laughter is translated into levity, while ambivalence is found in the author's suggestion that real monsters are not some distant creatures that we distinguish as essentially different from us, but rather monstrosity is located within and among us.

This way, the novel terrifies not only through its illustration of a shocking behavior displayed by a character that is strangely human and inhuman at the same time, but also through what this particular story tells about humanity in general. Nevertheless, the effect is that of catharsis or what Bakhtin (1984) calls 'regeneration' and 'renewal'. Although the reader cannot identify with McCarthy's characters, because, beside their repulsive identities, they also have a "totally opaque psychology" (Greenwood 2009, 17), Erik Hage observes that the author describes Lester's harsh living conditions in great detail and immerses the reader in the intimacy of the character's suffering which encourages the reader to empathize with him (2010, 55). Moreover, as terrifying as this character may seem, Hage claims that Lester Ballard's story is not "pure horror" (2010, 55) because the author combines "a peculiar sense of levity" (2010, 55) with an "elegiac, melancholy tone [that] compellingly humanizes the killer" (2010, 55). In this context, the purpose of the novel transcends that of creating fear or shock in a traditional sense where the dichotomy of good and evil, human and

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

inhuman is clearly defined and the reader knows exactly what to feel about each side. Making the reader feel empathy towards a monstrous character may be the author's way of encouraging him/her to reflect upon the evil side of humanity as a whole and this meditation may have a purifying purpose.

In this context, despite his grotesque identity which would normally place Lester Ballard in the position of the culprit unworthy of compassion, he is actually depicted as a victim, thus challenging the traditional understanding of such a monstrous character. Lester's victimization develops on multiple levels. As the novel opens with the auction of Lester Ballard's house after which the character is left without a home, he appears to be a victim of poverty. Moreover, the multiple rejections that he experiences from the people around him transform Lester into a victim of the society. His failed attempts to approach several women, among whom one falsely accuses him of rape, and the community's judgmental attitude towards him and his family, determine Lester's isolation from society to the extent that he starts living in a cave. At the same time, the character's tough existence as a whole translated into "hunger, pain, and exposure to the elements" (Hage 2010, 55) eventually make Lester become a victim of life, thus "aligning us in tenuous empathy with him" (2010, 55), as Erik Hage observes.

Consequently, the relationship between the reader and the fictional monster is challenged as well. No longer constructed in total opposition with other characters or even the readers themselves, the monster becomes part of the humankind in general. This way, not only are the readers associated with Lester Ballard, but they are also made to question their own contribution to the perpetuation of evil. A suggestive example in this sense is the episode in which Ballard is on the verge of drowning, yet he is miraculously kept alive through some sort of bizarre game of chance that favors "the maimed and the crazed":

> He could not swim, but how would you drown him? […] You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him**.** A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. (McCarthy s.a., 45-46)

Here the universal character of the grotesque is made clear through a metadiscourse that addresses directly the theme of human evilness in relation to humanity's fascination with villains. From this point of view, the passage quoted above seems like an invitation addressed by the narrator's voice to readers to meditate upon the ill human nature.

In his analysis of *Child of God* Erik Hage as well goes beyond the idea that Lester Ballard is simply a monstrous character and interprets the character's evolution in a positive light. Considering the novel not only a "work of grotesque horror", but also a bildungsroman that "just happens to be about a serial killer" Hage claims that Lester Ballard "becomes more human and multidimensional as he moves deeper into monstrous depravity" (2010, 57). Although in different terms, Hage's statement

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

captures exactly Bakhtin's idea of degradation as renewal. He exemplifies Ballard's humanity by referring to several key moments at the end of the book which depict a character that is both sensitive and self-aware. One such moment is when he observes "the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the gray fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees were spreading", after which Ballard "left his head drop between his knees and he began to cry" (McCarthy s.a., 50). Another significant moment which according to Hage is a proof of the character's "emotional depth and self-awareness" (2010, 57) is when Ballard watches a "churchbus" passing by while he is hiding on the side of the road and sees a familiar face sitting in the bus, "looking out the window":

> As he went by he looked at Ballard and Ballard looked back. […] He was trying to fix in his mind where he'd seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. (McCarthy s.a., 58)

The scene is also important beyond the character's transformation and beyond the fictional level. Just like Ballard sees the little boy and realizes that he is a sort of younger version of his, the reader sees Ballard and understands that the monstrous character is in fact a dark version of humanity.

4. Universal maliciousness

McCarthy's novel communicates with the Gothic tradition through its illustration of the fears and the proscribed desires that have always hunted the human mind. Revolving around the idea of moral degradation, *Child of God* addresses a series of taboo subjects like necrophilia, incest, and cold-blooded murder, which make the novel appear as a journey into the dark corners of maleficient sexuality and primitive instincts. As a social outcast, a necrophiliac, a serial-killer and a cave dweller whose gradual isolation from society coincides with his descent into madness, Lester Ballard is the main representative of this disturbing mixture of crimes. Steven Frye identifies Ballard as "an extreme contemporary rendering of the gothic villain" (2011). However, he is not the only character in *Child of God* to have such a depraved behavior. From the imbecile child biting off the legs of a bird, to the promiscuous girls of a dumpkeeper that become "pregnant one by one" (McCarthy s.a., 7) and the same man committing incest with one of his daughter, all the characters in *Child of God* seem to have grotesque flaws. In this context, Lester Ballard becomes the evil center of an entire society that is falling apart.

The wilderness, the mountains and the intricate system of caves also add to the Gothic foundation of the novel. As a frontier space, the forest is where evil grows and develops throughout the entire novel. At the beginning, the wilderness is depicted somewhere in the background of the action, with the pines echoing the

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

noises of the auction that takes place at Lester Ballard's farm as if chanting "a lost litany" (McCarthy s.a., 2). But as the novel unfolds, the forest and the mountains become more and more present within the story as the place in which Ballard discovers his necrophiliac instincts, in which he hides from society and explores his violent, primitive nature. However, the cave seems to have an even more pronounced Gothic significance. Lydia R. Cooper observes that apart from the fact that the cave functions as a traditional Gothic shelter for "monsters and their monstrosities, psychological manifestations of horror and hysteria", it is also a reference to the "maternal womb" (2013, 47). Following this interpretation, the cave can also be linked to Bakhtin's idea of degradation as both "coming down to earth" and "[concerning] oneself with the lower stratum of the body" (1984, 21). Just like in Bakhtin's theory where the earth is "an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time" (1984, 21), in *Child of God* the cave catches Ballard in its labyrinth-like tunnels only to release him after three days. Cooper proposes a religious reading of this episode, claiming that "Ballard is 'born again' from the womblike caves, like Christ arising from the dead from a stone-capped burial cave" (2013, 47). The regenerating function of degradation becomes thus visible. Perhaps illuminated by his traumatic experience, Ballard finally seems to become aware of his deranged nature and goes straight to the hospital stating with a strange lucidity "I'm supposed to be here" (McCarthy s.a., 58).

The fact that the story is set in the American South of Sevier County, Tennesse may be read as a suggestive proof that Cormac McCarthy continues the tradition started by other Southern writers who have used Gothic devices to frame issues like racism and slavery, class inequalities, challenged values and beliefs regarding family and community. This way, one may be tempted to interpret Lester Ballard's and the other characters' grotesquesness as a Gothic embodiment of the dark heritage of the Southern history. However, there are certain aspects which contradict such an interpretation and one of them is the setting. Cormac McCarthy's departure from a strictly Southern focus is explained by James R. Giles, who observes that although the spatial and temporal coordinates of the novel are clearly defined as Sevier County, Tennessee and the middle of the twentieth century, "the text evokes a […] sense of unreality" (Giles 2009, 108) given by the often erasure of the "physical and social space" (2009, 108). But there are times when the idea of an imaginary, dreamlike setting developed by James R. Giles may seem insufficient to describe the universe in which Lester Ballard lives:

> Going up a track of a road through the quarry woods where all about lay enormous blocks and tablets of stone weathered gray and grown with deep green moss, toppled monoliths among trees and vines like traces of an older race of man. (McCarthy s.a., 7)

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

In such instances, the surreal character of the setting is doubled by a mythical, ancestral sensation given by the elements of the scenery that seem to have been there since the beginning of time.

But the setting of the novel is not the only aspect that pushes the story to the very beginning of history or even out of it. Willard P. Greenwood observes that Cormac McCarthy's characters "hearken back to the Bible or Homer's epics" (2009, 17). In this context, Lester Ballard is not so much an individual bound to a certain time and space as he is an "archetype" (Spiegel 1972), a character that is representative of humanity as a whole, while transcending history and geography. Similarly, Marcus Hamilton argues that the way that McCarthy's characters are presented as "symbolic children of God divorces their depravity from that of the real South" (2016). This way, in the case of *Child of God*, Hamilton claims that read in the "context of original sin" (2016), the main character's deeds appear "less uniquely depraved and more symbolic of a universal human capacity for evil" (2016).

The idea of universal maliciousness is reinforced throughout the entire novel. Even when the author seems to adopt a more realistic approach and introduces more or less subtle references to the dark history of the South, the purpose of capturing the evil aspects of human nature remains unchanged, since the racist past of the American Southern society is in fact just one of the many manifestations of humanity's violent potential. A suggestive example in this sense appears towards the end of the novel when an old man talks about the White Caps, a real negative episode from the American history. Although inserting this reference in reality, which at first may seem like the author's attempt to anchor the story to the history of the South, McCarthy ends the scene by emphasizing once again the universal significance of the story. Thus, at the end of the discussion, the deputy of the county asks the old man if he thinks that people were "meaner" (McCarthy s.a., 50) in the past, to which the old man answers "I think people are the same from the day God first made one" (s.a., 50). A confirmation to this statement comes at the end of the book, when Lester Ballard's corpse is dissected by four students "who saw monsters worse to come in their configurations" and then "scrapped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city" (s.a., 58-59). Thus, Lester Ballard appears once again not as an exception, but as only one of the multiple manifestations of evil in the entire human race.

5. A "caravan of carnival folk"

Child of God can also be linked to Bakhtin's conceptualization of grotesque through its carnivalesque atmosphere, which transforms the characters' moral decay from pure horror into grotesque instances. From the carnival-like auction, to fairs, or actual carnivals, the novel contains plenty of references to the idea of carnival. Woods Nash offers a reading of *Child of God* through this perspective, claiming that

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

the suspension of social hierarchies exists in McCarthy's novel, but only to the extent that the grotesque becomes a common feature of all the characters, yet the principle of laughter is missing in the carnival-like moments of the novel (2013, 80). While the first statement regarding the blurred social stratification is a valid affirmation, the second one in which Nash dismisses the existence of laughter in McCarthy's novel seems to ignore an important feature of the way in which the author constructs the story, which is levity. Even though levity does not express the same level of joviality as identified in the literature of the Renaissance by Bakhtin, this lightness of behaviour implies a lack of seriousness that is characteristic of Bakhtin's vision of the carnival.

The auction in which Lester Ballard loses his family house is depicted as a carnivalesque event, thus reminding of Bakhtin's concept of "carnival" (1984). The opening line "They came like a caravan of carnival folk" (McCarthy s.a., 1) referring to the people in charge with the auction is suggestive in this sense. It seems to act like a fairytale opening formula, which announces the reader that he/she is about to enter a world which functions according to the carnival rules. The auctioneer, whose voice echoes like "an illusion of multiple voices, a ghost chorus among old ruins" (s.a., 1), together with the musicians that look like "compositions in porcelain from an old county fair shooting gallery" (s.a., 2) animate the carnival-like gathering, thus foreshadowing the grotesquery that is yet to come.

The fair in which Ballard proves his shooting skills is also loaded with a carnivalesque atmosphere: "Down sawdust lanes among the pitch tents and lights and cones of cotton candy and past painted stalls with tiers of prizes and dolls and animals dangling from guy ropes" (McCarthy s.a., 17). The lights, the colourful booths, the cotton candy cones, the dolls and the stuffed animals on the one hand and the mud and the lanes covered in sawdust on the other hand merge in an eclectic mixture that resembles "some medieval fun fair" (McCarthy s.a., 19). As a grotesque figure himself, Ballard feels at ease in this carnivalesque environment. Attracted by the noise of the "rifle fire, […] a muted sound that he sorted from among the cries of barkers and pitchman" (s.a., 18) he arrives at a shooting booth where he manages to win the biggest prize consisting of three stuffed toys, which attracts the women and young girls' attention. But even as a winner, Ballard emanates an unsettling bizarreness: "In the flood of this breaking brimstone galaxy she saw the man with the bears watching her and she edged closer to the girl by her side and brushed her hair with two fingers quickly" (s.a., 19).

But the carnivalesque is present in *Child of God* even beyond these particular events, which are framed explicitly in carnival terms. One of the main manifestations of the carnival spirit is laughter, or more specifically in the case of McCarthy's novel, levity. The lack of seriousness, which accompanies McCarthy's descriptions of necrophilia, rape, incest and murder transform these scenes into grotesque, exaggerated illustrations of the evil potential of humanity. Such a comic, yet horrific image is captured when Ballard discovers the pleasure of wearing his

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

victims' clothes. His transvestite appearance is captured in a ludicrous image: "A gothic doll in ill fit clothes, it's [sic] carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape" (McCarthy s.a., 41). Through this surreal description McCarthy seems to apply Bakhtin's vision of the grotesque body as an unfinished product, always connected to the outside world. The "carmine mouth" that seems to float "in the white landscape" is like an extension of Ballard's body into the scenery. Likewise, the following excerpt illustrates the character as he blends into the nature, borrowing the colors of the cave mud and the snow: "His own tracks came from the cave blood red with cave mud and paled across the slope as if the snow had cauterised his feet until he left dry white prints in the snow" (s.a., 41).

An even more grotesque scene appears later on in the character's degeneration, when Ballard murders a girl and as he starts "kissing the still warm mouth and feeling under her clothes" (McCarthy s.a., 44) he is interrupted by the sound of a truck engine. Thus, he is forced to flee and forgets his gun at the crime scene. Later on, when he returns to take it back he also decides to take the corpse with him. The result is a scene that despite its horrific meaning is actually loaded with a dark kind of humour as we see Ballard trying to run with "the dead girl riding him with legs bowed akimbo like a monstrous frog" (s.a., 45). Steven Frye identifies a similar scene embedded with dark humour at the end of the book after Ballard's death when his victims are discovered in the cave carefully arranged "in attitudes of repose" (McCarthy s.a., 59). Frye considers such instances examples of "seething irony" (2011).

6. Conclusions

Considering the many elements of grotesque present in *Child of God* as well as the Gothic motifs and themes that shape Lester Ballard's story, McCarthy's novel can be considered part of the Southern Gothic tradition in a unique, immediately recognizable way. In this context, the novel is suggestive of McCarthy's style, while providing a fruitful insight into the way in which the author manages to juggle with Gothic and grotesque elements in a carnival-like manner. As it appears in this particular book, McCarthy's gothic is constructed through an acute sense of grotesque delivered through the characters' decadent traits.

As the analysis above has illustrated, there are several important particularities of the way in which the main character Lester Ballard embodies the grotesque. Firstly, he is not portrayed as a mere exception or as a singular case of evilness, but rather as an archetype that tells a universal story about humanity's evil nature. Secondly, his grotesquery is made visible through a bizarre, ambivalent combination of horror and levity, which often results in carnivalesque scenes. And lastly, through his humanization and his depiction as a tragic-comic caricature Lester Ballard illustrates the regenerative forces of degradation.

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)

Taking all these aspects into consideration, it can be concluded that Mikhail Bakhtin's theory about the grotesque body has proved to be a useful tool in analysing McCarthy's novel from both a synchronic and diachronic perspective. Therefore, this approach to interpreting *Child of God* can be further developed into a comparative study in which other novels belonging to Cormac McCarthy, such as *Outer Dark* or even *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* can be analysed and compared to establish whether the grotesque functions in a similar or different manner.

References

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Boyd, Molly. 2002. "Gothicism". In *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs,* ed. by Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda H. MacKethan, and Todd Taylor, 313-316. W. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Cooper, Lidia R. 2013. "McCarthy, Tennessee, and the Southern Gothic". In *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy,* ed. by Steven Frye, 41-54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crow, Charles. 2009. *American Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Frye, Steven. 2011. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. Columbia: University of South California [online]. Available at https://tinyurl.com/ydf7djlf [June 27, 2017].

Giles, James R. 2009. "Discovering Fourthspace in Appalachia: Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*". In *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Cormac McCarthy,* ed. by Bloom, Harold, 107-131. New York: Infobase Publishing.

Greenwood, Willard P. 2009. *Reading Cormac McCarthy*. Oxford: ABC CLIO.

Hage, Erik. 2010. *Cormac McCarthy: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company.

Hamilton, Marcus. 2016. "Elevated above the Real: the Poor White Southerner in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels". In *Rough South, Rural South: Region and Class in Recent Southern Literature* [online] ed. by Jean W. Cash and Keith Perry. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi available at https://tinyurl.com/y8exj33o [April 25, 2017].

McCarthy, Cormac. (s.a.). *Child of God.* [Electronic edition].

Spiegel, Alan. 1972. "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction". *The Georgia Review* 26(4): 426-437 [online]. Available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/41396901?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [April 25, 2017].

BDD-A28076 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:50:37 UTC)