

The Uncanny Necrophile in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*; or, How I Learned to Understand Lester Ballard and Start Worrying

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We have said . . . that man is regressing to the cave dwelling, etc.—but he is regressing to it in an estranged, malignant form. The savage in his cave—a natural element which freely offers itself for his use and protection—feels himself no more than a stranger, or rather feels as much at home as a fish in water.

Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Notebooks* (qtd. in Vidler 5)

Karl Marx wrote this in 1844 as a comment on individual estrangement which, in his opinion, had become class alienation. Because of the rent system at the time, the term “home” was a temporary illusion (Vidler 5). Writing more than a century before Lester Ballard regresses to cave dwelling, Marx somewhat anticipates Cormac McCarthy’s novel *Child of God* (1973). The protagonist Lester Ballard appears as the savage regressing to cave dwelling after he has lost different homes and has been cast out by his community. But as a contradiction to the final part of Marx’s statement, Lester never truly feels at home in his cave, “as a fish in water.” He remains estranged and lonely. As the novel progresses, its message becoming ever clearer, the most troubling question the reader faces is whether Lester is in fact a savage or simply a child of God “much like yourself perhaps” (4), which, as Jay Ellis also points out, “says more, perhaps, about our own normalcy than about Ballard’s deviance” (Ellis 18).

The difficult case of Lester Ballard and especially our conflicted reactions to him have preoccupied readers and critics since the publication of the novel. However, I am unaware of any previous attempts to develop a link between the novel and theories about the uncanny. Here I primarily turn to Freud, another influential thinker, who has done fundamental work on the uncanny. Generally, Freud would no doubt have felt he had hit the mother lode had he been around to read *Child of God*—but not just in the obvious way you would imagine. This essay attempts to define our complex and perhaps even disturbing reaction to Lester’s predicament as an instance of the uncanny.

Child of God is a profound novel. Despite being one of McCarthy’s shorter works, it ultimately resonates as strong, or perhaps stronger, than other and longer McCarthy novels that have been labeled as epic—e.g. *Suttree* (1979) or *Blood Meridian* (1985). For Cormac McCarthy writing is a craft to be developed and perfected. Reading a McCarthy novel is always a stimulating experience, particularly because of the exuberant language that alternately—and quite often simultaneously—beautifully graces and violently stabs the pages. Indeed, “McCarthy’s works should be approached with the simple anticipation of beauty. . .” (Frye 15). At the outset, this beauty may not be obvious to readers, but once you learn to appreciate the beauty of a bush of

dead, bloated babies, you are finally and forever a true Cormackian, and a vast abyss of exquisite dark prose will engulf you. Go towards the light, if you can find it, and if you wish. After all, Cormac McCarthy's "love of this dark world is a fire illuminating it" (Luca xii).

In the dark universe McCarthy has described so eloquently for the past fifty years, it is sometimes difficult to recognize ourselves or a world we know—at least at first glance. A work like *Blood Meridian*, for instance, does not feature much in ways of character development. In fact, one could argue that it is 335 pages of the same thing, over and over. Also, one would have to go to great lengths to find something resembling a hero or a character we can sympathize with. The novel is, however, still regarded as McCarthy's masterpiece by a majority of readers and scholars—and rightly so! It is interesting, if not mildly shocking, that one of McCarthy's characters we sympathize with the most is the "misplaced and loveless" protagonist of *Child of God*, with a taste for necrophilia: Lester Ballard (20). Judge Holden of *Blood Meridian* is no doubt McCarthy's most complex character, but Lester Ballard proves to be a great challenge as well. As readers and critics, the character of Holden becomes a challenge because the novel fails to give us any concrete answers to the crucial question: *Who* is this guy? Or more importantly: *What* is he? Lester becomes a challenge because we realize that *we are*—or *could be*—this guy. When we realize why we understand him, and even sympathize with him, the realization leaves us as shocked as any possible explanation for the mystery of Judge Holden, and his gospel of violence and war. The definitive truth of *Child of God* is that Lester Ballard is us, a child of God indeed.

To experience the uncanny is to experience something frightening. But as Freud—the author of the most widely read study on the uncanny—notes in his initial passages on the phenomenon, it is not to be confused with that which arouses fear in general (Freud 123). I will discuss Freud and expand on his theories on the uncanny shortly. As stated above, I argue that our perplexed reaction to *Child of God* can be categorized as experiencing the uncanny. More precisely, I refer to the complex and strange kinship we as readers feel with Lester Ballard. How do we otherwise explain a kinship with a man who is a brute, a murderer, and a necrophile? The answer is, of course, that Lester is above all a human being, searching for and desperately desiring security, love, and a sense of belonging. His actions and motivations evoke an experience of the uncanny because they are equally strange and understandable, familiar and unfamiliar.

Cormac McCarthy's fiction—his Appalachian novels in particular—can certainly be classified as grotesque. The strange and at times downright disgusting characters, who are often strangely compelling, roam in dark, mysterious landscapes. In her study, *The Gruesome Doorway: An Analysis of the American Grotesque* (1987), Paula M. Uruburu argues that to experience the grotesque is to stand in front of a doorway where you are simultaneously repelled by what you see and attracted by it (135). Hence, there is a clear connection between the grotesque and the uncanny as phenomena that evoke conflicting and, as a result, troubling emotions. Reading McCarthy, it is easy to see the influence of Flannery O'Connor, arguably the most accomplished writer of grotesque (Southern) fiction. William Gay, an American writer who was in

contact with McCarthy in the late 1970s or early 1980s, recalls a conversation with McCarthy:

for some reason, he mentioned Flannery O'Connor. I guess I asked him who he liked to read or something like that. And he started talking about Flannery O'Connor. And apparently he hadn't talked about her for a while, or maybe he had nobody to talk about Flannery O'Connor to, but he really got into it, you know. And he was quoting great lines and paragraphs out of her short stories and out of *Wise Blood*. (Bjerre)

O'Connor and McCarthy both use the grotesque as a vehicle to show man's displacement in the world. The actions of McCarthy's—and O'Connor's—characters are often horrifying, yet comical; repulsive, yet understandable. Experiencing McCarthy's displaced characters through his meticulous descriptions, we want to look away, but find ourselves drawn into the darkness.

It is also possible to trace possible influences on McCarthy's use of the grotesque and uncanny to Edgar Allan Poe and one of his most famous stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). The terror of the uncanny originates in the home and the familiar. Upon seeing the House of Usher, the narrator experiences "a sense of insufferable gloom. . ." and he wonders "what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?" (Poe 16). A similar sensation afflicts him when he sees Roderick Usher, a friend familiar to him who now seems strikingly unfamiliar with a "cadaverousness of complexion" (20). An important element of the uncanny can be the erasure of the boundary between animate and inanimate objects and the experience thereof. Roderick appears almost non-living, much like the now—perhaps—diseased lady of the house, Madeline. Finally, the narrator throughout experiences conflicting sentiments all "having terror as a basis" (18). These sensations where "wonder and extreme terror" are predominant (32) and where "utter astonishment" is "not unmingled with dread" (22). He finds it "impossible to account for such feelings" (22). As we shall see, these descriptions fittingly sum up the uncanny.

Sigmund Freud's text on the difficult case of "The Uncanny"/"Das Unheimliche" (1919) is in itself remarkable, because it is a strange mix of psychoanalysis, an etymological investigation, and literary criticism, with the latter being a reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman" (1816), which features a lifelike doll arousing feelings of the uncanny. In his introduction to the English translation of Freud's writings on "The Uncanny," Hugh Haughton remarks: "There's an uncertainty about the very form of the essay itself. As many critics have remarked, it is a strange amalgam of different genres" (Freud xliii). Freud knows his case is important, and that it requires him to enter uncharted territory, at least for him, as he begins the text by stating: "Only rarely does the psychoanalyst feel impelled to engage in aesthetic investigations. . . . Yet now and then it happens that he has to take an interest in a particular area of aesthetics, and then it is usually a marginal one that has been neglected in the specialist literature" (123).

Even if Freud is the name most people associate with the uncanny—to the point where the phenomenon is often referred to as “Freud’s the uncanny”—he was not the first person to shed light on the uncanny as a strange and seemingly incomprehensible “thing.” His text on the subject is very much a response to a text from 1906 by Dr. Ernst Jentsch called “On the Psychology of the Uncanny.” Freud rightly refers to Jentsch’s text as rich in context but not exhaustive (Freud 123). As mentioned above, Freud saw his task as an investigation in aesthetics. He notes that when we link the uncanny to aesthetics, we find that the majority of research and writing on aesthetics, at least at that time, had dealt with responses to and feelings for the beautiful, the grandiose, and the attractive, as well as the objects that might arouse such feelings (123). The uncanny has often been compared to the sublime, perhaps because the study of it deals with such powerful reactions and responses to something that overwhelms spectators. Extensive research had thus been devoted to findings on the beautiful and attractive, but the opposing feelings, such as repulsion or distress, had not been the object of thorough research. More than anything, Freud’s investigation into the world of aesthetics has to do with the aesthetics of anxiety (xli).

The uncanny begins in the home. “Home” in this context can be an actual home, but more often it is a physical or mental place or state of being which is familiar, safe, and known to us. It is when we experience a particular disturbance of the domestic and familiar that we can call it uncanny. In *Child of God*, obviously the whole idea of domesticity and the definition of “home” are turned upside down. It is important to note that the uncanny is not an either/or, but something in between.

In connection with the uncanny, one must also consider liminality. Liminality is neither here nor there, much like the uncanny. It has been called a place that is not a place. It is relevant in this connection because the uncanny operates within the interesting, yet complex, field between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The term “liminality” comes from the Latin “limen” which means threshold and suggests a place or boundary between two spaces or states of being (Sutton 20). When living in the caves, Lester is in a liminal state because his home in the earth becomes, “a natural enclosure that is both a kind of house and premature grave” (Ellis 14).

Another link between the uncanny and liminality can be made if we consider the comments of Ernst Jentsch on the space between animate and inanimate: “Among all the physical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate. . .” (Jentsch 221). He uses dolls and waxwork figures as examples (221-224), and we can consider Lester’s (in)animate corpses as corollaries. Lester’s family of corpses are in a constant liminal state: they are neither alive nor completely dead, since he insists on keeping them among the living and treating them, dressing them, loving them, as if they were still breathing. At times, their “actions” are described as if they were still living. In an attempt to get his first victim up to the attic, Lester ties a rope around her waist and ascends the ladder with the other end of the rope.

The dead girl's ascension is described as follows: "She rose slumpshouldered from the floor with her hair all down and began to bump slowly up the ladder. Halfway up she paused, dangling. Then she began to rise again" (95). The emphasis is not on Lester's labor of pulling her up, but rather on her movement as she ascends to the attic, as if she were doing it on her own: "she rose," "she paused," "she began to rise again." This continues shortly thereafter when she is brought back down: "She came down the ladder until she touched the floor with her feet and there she stopped. He paid out more rope but she was standing there in the floor leaning against the ladder. She was standing on tiptoe, nor would she fold" (102).

Freud is fully aware that the term "uncanny" is difficult to define and understand, and he begins his characterization of it by saying that "[the uncanny] belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread. It is equally beyond doubt that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general" (123). As Freud highlights, the uncanny is especially interesting and complex because the word itself, much like the phenomenon in general, is hard to define or understand.

Freud is mainly interested in two elements of the uncanny: what it does to us, and what the troubling word "uncanny" actually means. He begins his research by looking up the German words "heimlich" and "unheimlich." He then thoroughly goes through multiple dictionaries in different languages in an attempt to reach a definite conclusion and to define the term "uncanny" and with it also the conflicting emotions experiencing the uncanny causes. Because of the complexity of the word, this largely fails, and Freud can only provide probable definitions and meanings. The best way to define the uncanny is by looking at its meaning in German: "unheimlich." This word etymologically corresponds to "unhomely" (Freud 124). "Unheimlich" is clearly the opposite of "heimlich" ["homely"] and "heimish" ["native"] (124).

Freud links "heimlich" to something "homely" and "belonging to the house" (Freud 126). As discussed extensively by Jay Ellis in *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the novels of Cormac McCarthy* (2006), the home—and especially the elusive nature of the concept—is a recurring theme in McCarthy's oeuvre and also prominently in *Child of God*. In the first part of the novel when Lester is released from jail, his response to the sheriff's question of his immediate plans is that he intends to "Go home" (55-56). But the base word of "unheimlich," which is "heimlich," can also mean something hidden or concealed. By adding the prefix "un-", that which was supposed to be hidden comes to light and that which was once homely becomes unhomely. Furthermore, one definition of the word "heimlich" in Freud's essay is: "Intimate, cosily homely; arousing a pleasant feeling of quiet contentment etc., of comfortable repose and secure protection, like the enclosed, comfortable house" (Freud 127). Again, the prefix "un-" disturbs this notion. In her attempt to define the uncanny, Maria M. Tatar also focuses on the home: "A house contains the familiar and congenial, but at the same time it screens what is familiar and congenial from view, making a mystery out of it. . . . What takes place within the four walls of a house remains a mystery to those shut from it" (Tatar 169). At the end of *Child of God* when

the dead bodies emerge from the ground, that which had been concealed and was supposed to remain hidden in the congenial home of the caves is finally *un-earthed* (195-197).

The American author Don DeLillo has said that “in the American soul there is a lonely individual standing in a vast landscape. He is either on a horse or driving a car, depending, and either way he’s carrying a gun. This is one of the essential images in American mythology” (DePietro 168). While not on a horse or driving a car, Lester is indeed a lonely individual in a vast landscape, armed with a gun ready to protect his property and himself—one of the core American values expressed in the Constitution. John M. Grammer argues that there is a great familiarity for us in Lester’s actions: “An armed man, prepared to defend the country and his own liberty and property, was for our ancestors the ideal republican citizen, the foundation of stable order. . .” (39).

John Lang has argued convincingly that McCarthy uses the first and third part of the novel to build sympathy for Lester and demonstrate “that he is, in many respects, not unlike his fellows” (103-111, 107). When we first meet him, Lester is about to lose his home. In the background hangs the rope that we later find out his father used to hang himself, and he is presented as “a child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4). McCarthy is addressing the reader directly and is “overt in his attempt to encourage the reader’s sympathy” (Frye 48). Furthermore, to stress the importance of the home and land Lester is about to lose, McCarthy depicts the auctioneer ranting extensively about how land and property equal money, opportunities, and a safe and secure future (5-6). Towards the end of the novel, when Lester is almost drowning, McCarthy also addresses the reader when he says about Lester: “He could not swim, but how would *you* drown him?” He continues the passage: “*See* him. *You* could say that he’s sustained by *his fellow men*, like *you*” (156, emphasis added). As Dianne Luce remarks, McCarthy forces us to be voyeurs and, more importantly, acknowledge that we are (150). More importantly, as readers we are not only being forced to “see him” but finally see ourselves. This is a credit to McCarthy’s talent, as he succeeds in consistently putting us on the outside looking in, while at the same time allowing us to see things from Lester’s perspective (164).

As noted above, the first part of the novel in particular is constructed to suggest sympathy for and kinship with Lester. Told by people that know or have known him, the story of Lester’s bleak past appears in brief chapters, while we experience first-hand how he is treated by his surroundings. First, Lester is driven away from his home and cast out by a community that has rejected him. Then he is falsely accused of raping a woman and thrown in jail, almost crying when he is imprisoned (52). To emphasize Lester’s social status, the “nigger” opposite him is described as being in a “cell” while Lester is in a “cage” (52-54). After being released, Lester remarks “You just got it in for me,” referring to the police and the community in general (56). I agree with John Lang who notes that “[b]y endowing Lester with a psychological and emotional history, McCarthy reminds us of his protagonist’s underlying humanity” (111).

There is a sense of innocence about Lester Ballard. Of course, the title of the book suggests this, and throughout the story it comes through in scenes

where Lester is confronted with children to suggest a kinship or understanding. This connection is apparently only obvious to us; there is no indication that Lester likes children. For example, he leaves the idiot child to die after setting fire to the child's house (120). However, he completely understands why the idiot child bites the legs off of the bird Lester gives him: the child wanted to ensure that the bird could not go anywhere (79). The connection to Lester's own collection of dead bodies that will not go anywhere is obvious. Moreover, near the end of the book, when Lester is a one-armed man on the run, he sees a small boy in the back of a bus looking out the window. The boy looks at Lester and Lester looks back: "[Lester] was trying to fix in his mind where he'd seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. This gave him the fidgets and though he tried to shake the image of the face in the glass it would not go" (191). Here Lester has his own experience of the uncanny. He is confronted by something which is familiar to him—himself—but which is also strange and foreign. The encounter with the boy is brief, but the experience haunts Lester. *Blood Meridian* opens with a command to "See the child" and thus acknowledge the potential for "a taste for mindless violence" in all of humanity (3). When Lester sees the child, he is—as are we—forced to acknowledge how easily we as children of God can become estranged, lonely, and be driven to commit horrendous acts.

Lester begins his career as a romancer of the untimely deceased when he stumbles upon a dead couple in a car. Described as a "crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse" (88), he mounts the dead girl and "[pours] into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman" (88). After this bizarre sexual act, he leaves the car and the dead couple, but eventually returns to carry her away to her new home where she will assume the role as Lester's partner.

The ritual of Lester playing a husband is explored especially when he goes shopping not only for groceries, but also clothes and lingerie for his new partner. The lingerie shopping experience in particular is amusing and somewhat disturbing given its context, but surely it would also bring back memories for many a man in Lester's position. Certainly, the experience of looking at rows of lingerie with eyes "slightly wild as if in terror of the flimsy pastel garments" (97) is one that many husbands and boyfriends will recognize. The problem of not knowing your female companion's size is another issue Lester faces. The list of possible excuses for not knowing the size of your loved one is probably long. For Lester, though, the excuse is fairly simple: "He'd never seen the girl standing up" (97). Here McCarthy takes a mundane task and recognizable experience and taints it with a morbid truth about the object of Lester's affection. The result is a scenario that is both grotesque and uncanny.

Furthermore, Lester dresses the dead girl, brushes her hair, paints her lips, and arranges her in different positions only to go outside to gaze at her through the window (103). In an uncanny way, Lester is finally able to be the middle-class husband with the perfect stay-at-home wife that loves him unconditionally and certainly will never leave him. He is certainly attracted by the sexual encounters with this woman. But perhaps he is even more drawn to *the image* of her as she is framed in the window. In this instance, the window functions eerily like a suburban picture window. From the outside looking in, Lester sees the ultimate image of domesticity which is quite disturbing to us. There is

something entirely unhomely (*unheimlich*) about this instance of the homely (*heimlich*).

Aside from being an object of Lester's sexual desires, his dead spouse fulfils her family role and offers Lester a measure of security and happiness. One of the most complex aspects of the novel is whether one can see Lester as a truly evil being. While the scope of this essay does not allow for a thorough exposition of the philosophical ideas and theories on what "evil" is, I will argue that Lester is different than, for instance, the characters in *Blood Meridian*, the majority of which are dark and unfathomable. William Giraldo uses the word "psychopathic" to describe Lester (342). But as Dianne Luce has convincingly shown, there are probable reasons why McCarthy may have been inspired by Norman Bates and *Psycho* (both the novel (1959) and film (1960)) but ultimately chose to write "a study of a child of God rather than of a psycho. . ." (Luce 146-153).

Lester is violent and murderous, and his sexual preferences are problematic, to say the least. But unlike the judge in *Blood Meridian*, the triune in *Outer Dark*, and Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*, Lester is certainly never allowed to become a symbol of universal, unfathomable evil. McCarthy's depiction makes it difficult to simply label him as the "artistic embodiment of darkness" (Frye 79) and "the Devil" (Schimpf 21-24) as Judge Holden has been described. Luce states that Lester primarily kills, "as a means to a practical, sexual end, and he is not primarily motivated by the desire to mutilate and destroy. . ." (135). But above practicality and sex stands his strongest motivation: the dominating loss of community and overwhelming lack of a sense of belonging. Again, the humanity that McCarthy forces us see is crucial in our perception and, finally, understanding of Lester.

When Lester brings home the dead girl from the car, his first act is to lie next to her and pull the blanket over them (92). She is naked and he removes his trousers, and that action may very well be a precursor for sex. But it is ultimately left for the reader to decide, and we are left with the image of Lester finally lying down next to someone. As Luce also notes, Lester shows an interesting sense of care for his victims, seen in his consistent attempt to preserve rather than destroy his victims (Luce 135). More than anything, Lester attempts to create order out of chaos. With the county taking his land and the community telling him that he is "either going to have to find some other way to live or some other place in the world to do it in," his predicament has been determined by others and he is intent to take some measure of control, any way he can: "Given charge Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men's souls" (7, 123, 136). As a result of his obscure attempt at establishing a sense of order, his way of life becomes an example of what Nicholas Royle refers to in his book-length study on the uncanny as "estranged ordinariness" (4).

The crude relationship between Lester and his first dead partner ends abruptly when the cabin where they live catches fire and burns to the ground. Again, Lester loses a home and, since it happens after settling down with his new partner, he again loses his sense of belonging to someone or something. The absurdity of the relationship is furthered when Lester sees "the pinned framing in a row of burning A shapes" (105), as if he is being punished for

adultery by the symbol of the scarlet letters. When Lester returns to the burned down outhouse, he cannot find her remains. McCarthy writes, "It was as if she'd never been" (107), which may illustrate the falsity of their relationship and Lester's attachment to her. In his grotesque attempt at domesticity, the girl not only played the role of wife but was also "a thing" to which Lester had been attracted and attached.

Lester is caught up in an illusion of community and ownership. His community is one that consists of corpses and stuffed animals won at the shooting gallery at the fair. *Child of God* takes place in the 1950s and partly the 1960s; it was during these post-World War II decades that the American way of living emerged and with it came an added emphasis on materialism and the growing importance of household appliances, technological wonders, and "stuff" in general as ways to define yourself and true happiness. Much as we will furnish our homes with furniture and other belongings, Lester populates his home with dead people. His attachment to them is as strong as twentieth-century white middle-class attachment and attraction to household items. When McCarthy makes Lester's first pseudo-wife disappear completely, "as if she'd never been," her role in Lester's version of domestic bliss becomes a symbol of empty, ephemeral materialism. In a way, McCarthy again addresses the reader, albeit indirectly, and shows how easy it is to fall in love with the "stuff" that we use to furnish—or in Lester's case, populate—our homes, and how much of ourselves we lose when the "stuff" is lost—even if that "stuff" is a dead woman.

While Lester's desires and motivations are familiar to the reader, the uncanny experience is finally to discover how much we resemble this child of God. Cormac McCarthy's description of Lester's degradation highlights his human aspects. McCarthy makes us question what we would have done in Lester's situation: driven away from our home, treated as an outcast, and denied any chance of being invited back as part of a community again. Lester's degradation is the result of desperation. Nonetheless, he navigates based on understandable, basic, and crucial needs. Just like Lester in the role of voyeur or peeping Tom observing his potential victims, we as readers are voyeurs. But instead of merely gaining access into a strange and dark world, we are also gazing at ourselves and what we could potentially be. The image of ourselves is reflected back at us, just like Lester seeing the boy on the bus. By confronting the reader with this child of God and by emphasizing just how much he resembles us, McCarthy disturbs the very foundation—or home—of our self-perception and shows us how we all have the potential in us to become a Lester Ballard, if put in a predicament of exclusion and desperation.

An obvious reaction to Lester's humanity is to distance ourselves from him and define ourselves as different entirely—we choose to see ourselves as normal. But so does Lester. This is emphasized at the very end of the novel, which depicts the end of Lester's life. At the state hospital of Knoxville, one of his caged neighbors is described as "a demented gentleman who used to open folks' skulls and eat the brains inside with a spoon." Lester sees him again when they are "out for airing" but has "nothing to say to the crazy man. . . ." (193). In Lester's world, *that* man is "demented" and "crazy"—not Lester.

Nicholas Royle sums up the uncanny quite well: “It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context. It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely in the heart of the hearth and home” (1). Lester Ballard is frightening and strange, but especially because certain aspects of his persona and actions are so familiar to us. In his bizarre domestic space, his home, we find ourselves feeling sympathy for him. Lester himself slowly turns into a savage being, hardly resembling a person at the end. He is in a liminal state between man and savage, much like we as readers are in a liminal state of uncomfortable familiarity. The novel is effective and haunting because we do not feel quite at home with ourselves or safe when confronted with something we would rather not have acknowledged and would have repressed. The confrontation with this child of God, who is perhaps like us, certainly evokes uncanny emotions. As a work of fiction and a comment on the human condition, the novel stands as one of Cormac McCarthy’s most profoundly enlightening and most disturbing achievements.

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