

## Discovering the Romantic in a Necrophiliac: The Question of Misogyny in *Child of God*

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Lester Ballard is a Romantic, and his Romantic qualities go beyond the well-accepted Gothic underpinnings in McCarthy's *Child of God* of Ballard as the necrophiliac, the "crazed mountain troll," and the perverse anti-hero (McCarthy 152). By understanding the more complex Romantic elements of Ballard's character and actions it is possible to better reconcile Lester Ballard the murdering necrophiliac and child of God. Many scholars address this ethical dilemma of reconciling Ballard as a murderer and child of God by attempting to understand the reasons for his necrophilia. In *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*, Jay Ellis suggests that Ballard's necrophilia is a symptom of his mental and physical "unhousing." Other critics condemn Ballard; Nell Sullivan's article "The Evolution of the Dead Girlfriend Motif in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*" considers Ballard an example of a misogynistic character that fears living women and prefers them dead. While Sullivan provides a much-needed feminist critique of *Child of God*, her conclusion that Ballard is a misogynist simplifies the ethical dilemma by discounting feelings of empathy for the protagonist; however, tempering Sullivan's feminist-driven theory with Ellis' emphasis on space and exploring Ballard's Romantic interactions with his victims provides a more profitable feminist apparatus to understand this seemingly irredeemably misogynistic character.

Susan Bordo's theory of the female body provides this incorporation of space for a feminist lens. Her theory stems from Foucault's idea that that "the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movement of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, and femininity" (745). In other words, social discourse is imprinted on the body—and therefore the female body is a text.<sup>1</sup> This theory suggests that space can provide a way of understanding Ballard's view of femininity, but unlike Jay Ellis and Terri Witek, who focus on Ballard's relationship to domestic space, I argue that Bordo's theory can be best applied to examine Ballard's interaction with his victims in burial spaces.<sup>2</sup> Because Ballard devolves into the practice of necrophilia with female corpses, the victims he interacts with are dead and occupy a kind of burial space.<sup>3</sup> The importance of burial spaces for Ballard and his relationship to these spaces may be explained through necromantic ideas about community. Necromanticism—a burgeoning field of study defined and explored by Paul Westover—examines the interactions between the living and dead. More specifically, it examines the practices surrounding death and memorialization in Romantic-era culture. A great deal of the scholarship focuses on tourism culture, and specifically literary tourism, which in some facets relates to ideas of nationalism. This specific connection between text tourism and nation community building provides an understanding of how Ballard is able to build a community of dead victims. Yet by utilizing burial spaces to form a community, Ballard disrupts the societal views of "proper

burial” as he creates a space outside the world of the living. While Ballard may show misogynistic tendencies by stereotyping women, the spaces Ballard creates for his victims and his interaction with them in those spaces suggest his complicated ignorance towards the female sex, and reveal that he is not a vindictive misogynist.

Ballard’s ignorance about women derives from his isolation from society. Perhaps one of the most basic sources of alienation is at the domestic level; it is evident that Ballard does not even experience interaction with his immediate family, because “his daddy killed himself . . . and . . . [his] mother had run off” when he was young (McCarthy 21). Families represent an essential social structure that ensures interaction and generates a basic sense of unity. Because both parents abandon him at a young age, Ballard lacks this foundational understanding of human interaction. Dianne C. Luce’s essay “The Cave of Oblivion” also stresses the importance of Ballard’s orphaning by referencing R. E. L. Masters and Eduard Lea’s 1963 book, *Sex Crimes in History*, to illustrate how “The experiences that lead to Lester’s necrophilia resemble those of the true necrophiles reported by Masters and Lea, many of whom had lost parents to death when they were young” (135). Similar to his family’s dissolution, the local community itself also rejects Ballard. This is seen as Ballard sits in the back row at the community church and “[sniffles] loudly through the service but nobody expect[s] he would stop if God himself looked back askance so no one look[s]” (McCarthy 32). The hyperbole of God himself failing to influence Ballard emphasizes the community perception of his perverse nature, and the congregation’s decision to ignore him demonstrates Ballard’s position as social pariah in the local community. That this incident takes place in a church illustrates the severity of the ostracism, as religion serves as a main structure for human interaction in Ballard’s community; despite the Christian ideal of charity, the community continues to ignore Ballard’s existence.

Similar to Luce’s argument that Ballard’s alienation from society ushers him towards necrophilia, Jay Ellis and Terri Witek specifically link Ballard’s alienation with his necrophile collection of female bodies, which represents a community. The argument that Ballard’s alienation causes him to create his own community elsewhere is common in McCarthy scholarship. Ellis argues that “the plot is launched by this action of unhousing” as Ballard attempts to recreate the domestic space he lost (70). Witek similarly argues that McCarthy characters flee from their community and home, but afterwards they “seem compelled toward imitations of domesticity” (25). Whether flight or unhousing, both interpret Ballard’s actions as attempts to recreate that domestic space, and he uses the dead as “imitations of domesticity”: “think of Lester Ballard’s underground home, complete with dead wives” (Witek 25). While Ellis and Witek agree that these murdered women serve to indulge Ballard’s fantastical recreation of domestic space, the way by which he forms his community receives less discussion. Yes, Ellis suggests that Ballard is able to recreate a domestic space out of dead women by “pretending they are alive, and that they have not rejected him,” but *pretending* seems too weak of a word to describe someone’s ability to imagine that the dead are living (83). Ballard’s exercise of imagination is a powerful phenomenon that deserves more attention.

While calling Ballard a necromancer seems out of the question, Gothic traditions and necromanticism may shed light on Ballard's ability to view the dead as a community. Elements of McCarthy's work, and especially *Child of God*, belong to the Southern Gothic tradition. In an essay identifying Gothic elements in *Blood Meridian*, Ronja Vieth states:

Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian novels and early short stories evoke the Southern Gothic style because of their setting as well as their use of Gothic elements including incest, necrophilia, and doppelgangers. *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* are perhaps the most Gothic of the novels, exploring the social taboos and repressed urges which comprise the Gothic unspeakable. (47)

Although *Child of God* fits within the Gothic tradition, particularly with its theme of necrophilia, McCarthy situates the Gothic theme in such a way that "[t]he word necrophilia is in one sense inaccurate," because "Ballard's necrophilia occurs in an attempt to put back together the bodies of the dead with their living social arrangements, through pretending they are not dead" (Ellis 83). It is undeniable that Ballard's interactions with the dead qualify him as a necrophiliac, but Ellis points out this nuance in order stress that Ballard sees himself building a community, and Ballard ability to believe he is building a community is dependent on burial space. In Paul Westover's essay "William Godwin, Literary Tourism and the Work of Necromanticism,"<sup>4</sup> he labels this type of community building as necromantic: "the romantic impulse to route anxieties about literature, community, and cultural heritage through the dead" (300). Westover's essay examines an essay by Godwin to illustrate the necromantic culture of tourism during the Romantic Era. More specifically, Westover examines the bond formed between the living and dead authors as the living read an author's text and visit their burial place. This connection "concerns itself with building national community" (311). While Westover's essay remains firmly rooted in the interesting connections between necrotourism and the role of literature during the Romantic Era, the interaction between necromanticism and nationalism applies to Ballard's community building process.

This is seen in William Wordsworth's "Essay on Epitaphs," as he espouses the idea of burial spaces as a way to form a stronger sense of community. Wordsworth suggests that "the wish to be remembered by our friends or kindred after death . . . is . . . a sensation that does not form itself till the *social* feelings have been developed" (324). By this, Wordsworth suggests that the impulse for ceremonial burial derives from social interaction. For Wordsworth, it is this emotional and social connection that creates of a sense of community between the living and dead, and epitaphs ensure the remembrance of "the worth of private life . . . [and] . . . public men. . . who by the greatness of their services . . . have filled the heart of their country with everlasting gratitude" (336). Thus burial spaces—which house dead bodies—are a point of connection between the living and the dead, and a force of camaraderie among the living community. In other words, epitaphs and burial spaces build a sense of community because the dead form a common connection between people.

Lester Ballard cannot find healthy interaction through his family or his community, so he creates a connection with his victims.<sup>5</sup> Although his victims do not have epitaphs, if the body is considered to be a text as Bordo suggests, Ballard's interactions with the dead write the epitaphs on their bodies. This tattooed epitaph creates a communal bond. For example, while Ballard is living in the cave, the narration describes his mile-long pilgrimage to a room "where dead people lay like saints" (135). Ballard keeps the victims grouped together as if to form a community; he visits them as if he would visit and interact with friends on a social call. Because Ballard's actions suggest that he views his victims as a community, his ability to see them as such depends on necromantic ideas. While it's obvious that this rather creepy community of Ballard's is in fact dead, for Ballard the community he creates is a living one.

As necromanticism informs the building of Ballard's community, he utilizes the phenomenon of spectralization—a term explained in Terry Castle's essay "The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*"—to see them as living. In this essay, Castle examines the less obvious haunting in Anne Radcliffe's Gothic novel; instead of the "old-fashioned ghosts" that are common in Gothic novels, "a new kind of apparition takes their place" in which "one sees in the mind's eye those who are absent; one is befriended and consoled by phantoms of the beloved" (Castle 123). More specifically, the spectralization of the other is an "obsession with the internalized images of other people" that replaces reality (Castle 125). Examples of this are seen in the language of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in certain passages in which absent or dead lovers are seen in mental visions. While Castle's primary text is a late eighteenth-century novel, she argues that spectralization "encapsulated new structures of feeling, a new model of human relations" not only for the eighteenth century, but for today, as "we [too] feel at home in Radcliff's spectralized landscape, for its ghosts are our own—the symptomatic projections of modern psychic life" (125).<sup>6</sup> Ballard's interaction with his first victim may be interpreted as the spectralization, as "he pour[s] into that [dead woman's] waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman" (McCarthy 88). Whispering in the woman's ear, Ballard envisions the woman before him as living: she is capable of hearing his words. The process of using the images of the mind becomes especially apparent as the novel alludes to the haunting taking place in Ballard's mind, as the same corpse comes "down the ladder until she touche[s] the floor with her feet and there she stop[s]" (102). In this description, the narration depicts the deceased as displaying signs of life as she moves on her own accord. It is quite obvious that a dead body cannot move, so any description saying otherwise uses Ballard's imagination. He interacts with the corpse as if it was alive because he takes his own internalized concept of a woman and superimposes it on the physical body of the dead.

Yet building this community of the dead has repercussions; Ballard defies society's view of *proper* burial as he fuses the world of living with the dead in culturally inappropriate ways. He discovers this corpse mentioned above—the one he whispers into her waxen ear—frozen inside a running car. Uncannily, the dead bodies are inside a car with the engine and radio on. Before Ballard has sexual intercourse with the corpse, he turns off the radio and motor. After he finishes, he returns several times to the car before he decides to take the

body home with him. During one of those returns, he curiously “reach[s] in and turn[s] the key and push[s] the starter button. It crank[s] loudly in the silence and the motor [comes] to life” (89). In a sense, turning off the radio and car suggests a change in time—a time outside of society. Turning the radio and the car off and then on again demonstrates that he understands the significance of his actions: Ballard disturbs society’s traditional “place” of the dead by interacting with them, and in doing so he creates a space and time outside of the civilization that rejects him. When he transports the girl home, he continues to live in this alternative time and space as “the two of them [lie] in the leaves in the woods. Ballard breath[es] quietly in the cold air” as the woman’s chest remains breathlessly stationary (91). This woman next to him should lie *in* the ground according to common conventions, but Ballard places her *on* the ground *next* to him. It is a perverse image—a parody of a clichéd romance: two lovers lying in nature and looking up at sky. Placing the living among the dead in ways that society would label “wrong” illustrates that in creating his own space Ballard abandons the world that the local community lives in, and doing so severs his accordance with social norms of the community.

This space that Ballard creates allows him to complete his fantasy, and this permits readers an assessment of his relationship with women. Although it is preferable to assess a person’s interactions with living women, Lester’s interesting taste in women makes it necessary to look at those he spends his most time with: the dead. Nell Sullivan argues that Ballard’s choice of dead women is evidence that “the seeds of narrative misogyny lying dormant in *Outer Dark* [have] come to fruition in *Child of God*” as “Lester’s victims are devoid of volition and desire, unable in death to exert the power of either *yes* or *no*” (73). Yet by returning to Bordo, we can examine Ballard’s interactions with women as *relationships* rather than just encounters with objects. Bordo focuses on the female body as a reflection of how that person reacts to society’s view of femininity. For example, Bordo suggests that while “slenderness yields multiple readings, some related to gender, some not,” one of the gendered interpretations of eating disorders among women is that it is the “concrete expression of the general rule governing the construction of femininity: that female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed [and] limited” (750). These constrictions subsequently manifest themselves spatially as “[S]lenderness, set off against the resurgent muscularity and bulk of the current male body-ideal, carries connotations of fragility and lack of power in the face of a decisive male occupation of social space” (Bordo 750). This idea draws a correlation between that the amount of space a woman takes up physically and society’s perception of femininity. Incorporating this idea to *Child of God* allows us to examine Ballard’s view of femininity through the space that Ballard creates for his community.

While living in the abandoned house, Ballard wishes for companionship and treats the woman’s body that he brought back home with him with courtesy by incorporating the woman into his living space. The first day with the woman, Ballard comes back into the house and “[lies] next to her. He pull[s] the blanket over them” (McCarthy 92). The fact that Lester shares his bed with her shows an intimacy beyond sexuality; the bed symbolizes a semblance of

companionship. This yearning for companionship implies that he does not see women as objects but as living beings that he can develop a relationship with. When Ballard stores the body in the colder next room, Jay Ellis suggests that this clearly indicates that the cadaver resides outside his living space; however, Ballard keeps the “dead girl...in the other room away from the heat,” which implies that he is caring for her rather than simply maintaining boundaries between his living space and the dead (94). Also, both rooms remain under the overall structure of the house, and the house itself is a living space. Residing in different rooms at times seems, if anything, *more* authentic and natural, in that people tend to spend time in different areas of their homes.

The final move of the cadaver to the attic may seem problematic, since it can be argued that his use of the space in the attic suggests that Ballard views women as an object that may be stored and taken out for sexual pleasure (Sullivan 74). Yet he moves his victims because two boys—visitors outside of this alternate space—intrude and cause him to anxiously wonder if they saw her in the other room. Because Ballard’s alternative space resides outside of the society, it affects his ability to act freely with his victims. In this house, Ballard must maintain some boundaries between himself and his victims because of threat of the outside world intruding into this alternative space he created. The move to the attic does not suggest Ballard’s wish for separation, but protection. Also, when Ballard places his victim in the attic he enacts a type of veneration in “clear[ing] a place on the loose loft floorboards and dust[s] them off with some rags” (McCarthy 95). The clearing of the space suggests a reverence and care for the deceased. Resting the body in the attic places the cadaver above Ballard, and suggests that the victims are elevated, becoming “saints” that Ballard reveres. Moreover, Ballard arranges a domestic scene with the body and then goes “outside and look[s] in through the window at her lying naked before the fire” (92). He yearns to see his home with the presence of a woman; he is building a home for himself complete with a woman to come home to. It is not all about sex. Ballard wishes to have this woman in his living place to satisfy his need for human interaction.

Until this point in the narrative, Ballard’s necrophilia only extends to the body that he discovers, but sympathy for the protagonist wanes as he resorts to murder to procure another body. If this essay attempts to examine Ballard’s perception and relationship with women, this homicide cannot be dismissed. In some ways, Ballard’s willingness to commit murder supports Sullivan’s argument that Ballard is a chauvinist that prefers his women dead—especially with the narrative likening Ballard to a hunter when he kills his first victim. While these two facts may be interpreted as Ballard viewing women as dispensable objects for pleasure, several instances in the novel seem to complicate this supposition. An examination of Ballard’s interaction with the murdered woman’s child illustrates the complexity of Ballard committing homicide. In his book, Ellis draws out complexities when he observes the “chiasmus between Ballard, the child of god, and the idiot child of the floorboards” (Ellis 90). Before killing the woman—even before committing the act of necrophilia—Ballard visits the woman and gives the child a bird to play with. The child promptly consumes the legs of the bird, and Ballard explains the violence by saying “He wanted it to where it couldn’t run off”

(McCarthy79). Ellis argues that “by eating the legs of the bird, the child constrains the bird so ‘it couldn’t run off;’ Ballard will kill the child’s mother so he can keep her” (90). The parallelism extends beyond the actions of Ballard and the child; Ballard believes he understands the idiot child’s reasons for violence because he sees himself in a similar situation: rejected by several women in the novel, Ballard subsequently feels that he must do something violent to have their company. While this does not justify his violence, Ballard’s comment suggests that his reasons for murder stems from loneliness. To call this misogyny simplifies Ballard’s situation and mindset, and ignores the repercussions of Ballard’s inability to emotionally connect with society.

While Ballard manages to connect more with women when they are dead because they cannot run off, the spectralization going on in *Child of God* is unorthodox because it does not stem from emotional connections. Castle connects the phenomenon of spectralization with love, as “the spectral images of those one loves . . . are the products of refined sentiment, the characteristic projections of a feeling heart” (123). More specifically, Castle describes the possibility of spectralization depending on a pre-existing emotional bond between two people. If this is the case, because Ballard does not love these women before they are dead—let alone *know* some of them—he breaks this mold of the Gothic lover. Subsequently, Ballard lacks the sentimentality necessary for spectralization. Without that sentiment, Ballard must resort to using the body—which lacks the potential for deep emotional connection—as a means for imagining the women as living. Spectralization causes mental images to take the place of something that is physically absent—a deceased lover or lovers separated physically—it is absence that allows for the spectralization to take place. Ballard reverses this process as he does not imagine a physical object, but the living person that used to inhabit the body. Consequently, Ballard’s perverse spectralization lacks any human connection from beginning to end.

Ironically, spectralization itself—inversion or no inversion—leads to isolation. According to Terry Castle, spectralization’s problematic side effects include creating “an *idée fixe*, a source of sublime and life-sustaining emotion” that people begin to prefer, as they “no longer desire to experience flesh at all” (136). This reliance becomes somewhat problematic “as the corporality of the other—his or her actual life in the world—became strangely insubstantial and indistinct: what matter[s] [is] the mental pictures, the ghost, the haunting image” (125). Spectralization causes emotional isolation, as one develops a preference for a mental image that is an idealized and flat representation. While Castle states that the phenomenon of spectralization creates a “sublime emotion,” that is not to say that the emotion is shared or connects with others. How can there be an emotional understanding when it is nothing but an image? Yet if this is the effect of spectralization, the phenomenon of spectralization supports Sullivan’s argument that because the women are dead, they are devoid of any narrative voice. Ballard’s loneliness and his courtesy towards the dead women cannot overpower the fact that his victims are dead—and by being dead they will forever remain a one-dimensional representation of women. It is the idea of fixed images that becomes particularly problematic for Ballard, as he projects idealized ideas of femininity onto his victims. Ballard’s situation

desperately yearns for and requires experience to disrupt these idealized views of femininity. Unfortunately, Ballard's victims cannot interact with him and break the myth of femininity described. But how do we know that Ballard's idea of women is similar to the idealistic myth of femininity?

One of the indications of Ballard's belief in a static and idealized view of femininity is the way in which he dresses his victims. After Ballard takes his first victim home with him, he buys a dress and undergarments. After he dresses her, he brushes her hair and puts on her lipstick. This suggests that Ballard believes in a traditional view of femininity: an appearance defined by clean brushed hair, a dress, and makeup. Susan Bordo also argues that the obsessive attention to a woman's outer appearance is driven by the "pursuit of an ever changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity . . . [and subsequently women] are more centripetally focused on self-modification" (745-6). Changing the outfits and fixing the hair of his victims illustrates that he too buys into this traditional idea of women being overly concerned with their appearance. He treats them as he expects that they would want to be treated. Nell Sullivan takes this argument a step further by using the dressing and undressing of his victims as proof that Ballard views his victims as inanimate objects—dolls: "Indeed, women are 'playpretties' in this novel, pretty toys that Lester dresses up, poses, undresses and penetrates" (Sullivan 74). However, the act of buying clothes symbolizes more than playing. When Ballard speaks to the clerk in the store, he refers to the articles of clothing as "needs;" Ballard wishes to provide for his victims' needs as he views himself as a provider. To believe that Ballard treats these women as dolls discounts the sincerity behind buying clothes and dressing his victims. Dolls were originally given to young girls so that they may learn their future responsibility of taking care of children. Because Ballard keeps his victims within his living space and considers them as part of his community, the act of dressing them implies an attempt at responsibly interacting with others as opposed to frivolous playing.

While it cannot be denied that Ballard possesses a narrowly traditional gender construction, what some may deem misogyny may simply be symptoms of a larger condition. Ballard remains in a bind as his community rejects him and he is forced to build a community of the dead. Because this community remains dead he is forced to indulge in spectralization of the Other, and unfortunately the Other cannot even attempt to change those perceptions because she cannot interact with him. It is a self-perpetuating cycle, but the cycle is not perpetuated by misogynistic ambivalence or idleness as Sullivan suggests. Rather it would seem that the misogynistic tendencies of Ballard originate from an unfortunate circumstance of alienation.

With this alienation, Ballard may be seen as an exaggerated portrayal of a modern disposition, because the cause of his loneliness—spectralization—is commonplace in contemporary society. Castle argues that

The twentieth century . . . has completely naturalized this historic shift toward the phantasmatic. . . . Not coincidentally, the most influential of modern theories of the mind—psychoanalysis—has internalized the ghost-seeing metaphor . . . We feel at home in

Radcliffe's spectralized landscape, for its ghosts are our own—the symptomatic projections of modern psychic life. (125)

If the phenomenon of spectralization is pedestrian in the modern world, his perversion and exaggeration draw attention to this modern disposition. By his inversion of the phenomenon of spectralization—using a dead body instead of an emotional connection to conjure images in the mind—highlights his inability to connect emotionally with others. It is obvious that Ballard cannot connect emotionally with his victims because they are lifeless bodies onto which he projects static views of femininity. Ballard may be a Gothic exaggeration—a troll and necrophiliac—but those characteristics qualify him to feel at home in a modern landscape. It is easy to brand Lester Ballard as a misogynist and to damn him for it, but paradoxically it is the damning evidence of Ballard's inhumanity—his search and inability to overcome misanthropy—that makes him a child of god.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Susan Bordo is specifically speaking about the female body in this excerpt, but it certainly applies to the male body as well.

<sup>2</sup> In trying to explain the process in which Ballard is able to create a community out of the dead, it becomes important to note the distinction between domestic and burial spaces. Because of my use of necromantic ideas about community, I consider these burials spaces instead of domestic spaces peopled by dead women.

<sup>3</sup> "Burial space" in this instance means any space that Lester Ballard uses to house the corpses: the shack and the cave.

<sup>4</sup> There is a distinction between the Gothic and necromanticism. Paul Westover describes necromanticism as an "umbrella term" that goes beyond the genre forms during Romanticism (e.g. Gothic). It is a theoretical construct situated in Romantic studies that concentrates on "reading, writing, and the relationship of the living to the dead" (P. Westover, personal communication, 20 October, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> While necromanticism is specifically linked to the Romantic era, it still applies to *Child of God*. This can be seen in the way that Westover's essay examines the imagination of necromanticism that heightens British nationalism during the Romantic Era. Although Westover applies this to the Romantic era, this idea can apply to modern ideas of community as well (e.g. Benedict Anderson's theory that nations are imagined communities).

<sup>6</sup> Castle draws specific connections between spectralization of the Other and modern psychology.

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