

## A Note on “Weird Little Marks”

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Many of the participants in Oprah’s Book Club expressed concern over the relative lack of punctuation in Cormac McCarthy’s most recent novel, *The Road*. Oprah Winfrey addressed that concern directly by asking McCarthy to talk about his style of punctuation in her widely anticipated interview with him. In a segment titled, “Cormac McCarthy on Punctuation,” McCarthy comments:

And uh there’s no reason to, you know, blot the page with weird little marks. . . . I mean if you write properly you shouldn’t have to punctuate. One of the first jobs I had was when I was going to school on the G. I. Bill and I was taking an English class and the professor, Robert Daniel, I remember his name, was writing a text book. The text book was . . . part of the text book was English essays from the 18th century. And he handed me a bunch of these. He said, “re-punctuate these things.” And I was getting paid to do this. . . . So I took them home, and it was just you know, they wrote so well and punctuated so poorly. And every few lines . . . it would be a semi-colon and it was just terrible. So I had to . . . you had to rewrite to some extent in order to punctuate correctly and make it simpler, but I took the first essay which was . . . I don’t know about Swift or someone and brought it in and handed it to him for him to read. And he sat and read it. He said, “This is very good; this is just what is needed.” I thought yeah punctuation is important. It’s important to punctuate so that it makes it easy for people to read (McCarthy, 2007, Oprah Winfrey interview).

Cormac McCarthy took several English courses from Robert Woodham Daniel while an undergraduate student at the University of Tennessee. One of these was a course titled “Expository Writing: Modern Essays and Composition.” At the time Daniel also taught a “Writing of Fiction” course and was a member of the Advisory Board of *The Phoenix*, the student literary magazine that published McCarthy’s first two short stories, “A Wake for Susan” (1959) and “A Drowning Incident” (1960).

Daniel had co-edited an anthology, *Theme and Form: An Introduction to Literature*, in 1956. Four years later, Daniel and Leggett published another anthology, *The Written Word: Forms of Writing*. It included the essay, “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift (1729). Could this have been the “essay . . . about Swift or someone . . .” that McCarthy remembered?

The results of a comparison of the punctuation given in the first five paragraphs of “A Modest Proposal” as given in *The Written Word* and the corresponding paragraphs in a reprint of the pamphlet (1730) are given in Table 1. The number of commas used was indeed greatly reduced, and overall there was a noticeable 21-percent reduction in “weird little marks” in this sample. To my eye these changes did indeed result in an increased ease of reading as McCarthy suggested.

Even though the role of editor grants broad authority, it would seem to take a certain amount of *hubris* to change the punctuation of a classic work in such a significant manner without alerting the reader to such a possibility. McCarthy’s putative contribution to this process was not explicitly acknowledged by the editors of *The Written Word*.

Robert Daniel left the University of Tennessee after the 1959-1960 academic year and went on to become Professor and Chairman of the Department of English at Kenyon College. McCarthy dropped out of the University after the summer 1960 term.

**Table 1**

“Weird Little Marks” in the first 5 paragraphs of *A Modest Proposal*

	<u>Swift (1730)</u>	<u>Daniel &amp; Leggett (1960)</u>
Commas:	51	40
Semi-colons:	5	4
Colons:	0	0
Periods:	7	7
Interrogation:	0	0
Exclamation:	1	1
Apostrophe:	1	0
Quotation (pairs):	0	0
Parentheses (pairs):	0	0
Dash:	0	0
Hyphen:	2	1
Brackets (pairs):	0	0
TOTAL	70	53

### Works Cited

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