

THESIS

THE STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *CHILD OF GOD*

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## ABSTRACT

### THE STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *CHILD OF GOD*

This thesis argued an alternative, sub-textual, reading of Cormac McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, through an in depth study of the novel's structure of narrative. The alternative reading revealed the novel's multiple narrators' biased judgments toward their subject, the novel's protagonist, Lester Ballard, through the narratives they tell. Those biased judgments also revealed both the hypocrisy of the local tellers of the anecdotes and, in turn, the subjective nature of moral truth. Moreover, the examination of the sub-textual reading through narrative theory—particularly drawing from Seymour Chatman's study, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*-- also delineated the novel's self regulated and meta-narrative structure in detail by revealing the dynamics of the relationship between the dominant child of God narrative and the seven shorter local anecdotal narratives, such as how the child of God narrative evolved from the smaller local anecdotes. This thesis concluded that the novel, *Child of God*, is about the tellers and their construction of moral truth: that the seven local narratives have a greater significance than as mere exposition to the dominant child of God narrative that most critiques either suggest or assume is the novel. This thesis further concluded that the structure of narrative in *Child of God* indicated that Cormac McCarthy's early works—his Appalachian period—are as complex and architecturally crafted as is recognized in his later novels.

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## INTRODUCTION

The strangeness of the story of Lester Ballard, the child of God, begins not with its subject matter but with the way the story is told. --Vereen Bell (*The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*)

Every narrative—so this theory goes—is a structure with a content plane (called “story”) and an expression plane (called “discourse). --Seymour Chatman, (*Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*)

Cormac McCarthy’s third novel, *Child of God* (1973), has long challenged critical studies to explain its overall concept and purpose. Vereen Bell comments in his benchmark study, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988), that “[e]ven by McCarthy’s ordinary standards, an unusual degree of unassimilated raw material impedes—or seems to impede—the central narrative flow” (53).<sup>1</sup> Bell’s “unassimilated raw material” refers to seven short local first person narratives that appear only in the first section of the three sectioned novel. He goes so far as to say that the “narrative is so aimless and fragmented that an innocent reader might wonder if there is even to be a plot” (53). Bell’s comment seems to acknowledge that the seven short narratives – the “unassimilated raw material”-- stand apart from the omniscient child of God narrative and thus makes the *Child of God* novel “aimless and fragmented” (53).

Other critiques that address the purpose of the local anecdotes do so from a perspective of content, that is, how the seven anecdotes support the larger heterodiegetic child of God narrative. Most recently, Lydia Cooper’s observes in *No More Heroes* (2011) that the first person narratives are attempts “to explain Ballard” (41). Steven Frye notes in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (2009) that “[t]hroughout these narrative strands, McCarthy’s central concern is with Ballard himself” (44). Perhaps, or does McCarthy’s central concern lie in the moral judgment and how that moral judgment is culturally determined, which the tellers of the individual narratives make of Ballard? That is, can the dominant child of God narrative about Lester Ballard

be read as a device used to expose the hypocrisy of the local narrators that lie within their stories about Ballard?

In this thesis I argue that *Child of God's* multiple narrators support a sub-textual reading that the novel is about moral judgment: those judgments held and revealed by the narrators through the stories they tell. The dominant child of God narrative, which details Ballard's acts of criminal and moral degradation, expresses an odd sympathy toward the protagonist, "a child of God much like yourself perhaps," while the local anecdotes express the opposite as they are told with a distinct lack of sympathy and/or empathy for the protagonist: "I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that" (4, 18). The two polarizing judgments along with the novel's juxtaposition of the narratives – the local anecdotes are chapters interspersed between the chapters of the child of God narrative -- allow the moral traits of both the local anecdotal narrators and the child of God narrator to emerge. Those moral traits are revealed in three ways: by comparison and contrast between the local anecdotes and the child of God narrative; by what the respective narrators say; and third, how they focalize what they say. *Child of God* is as much about the tellers who tell their child of God stories and about their moral judgment of the protagonist, Lester Ballard, as it is about Ballard and the judgments he makes: "You ain't the law, the boy said. I'll be the judge of that, said Ballard" (149). Indeed, Ballard's self centered judgment mirrors the self centered judgments of the Sevierville Tennessee community he is an integral part of.

The child of God narrative dominates the pages of the novel and therefore, for clarity, I refer to that narrator as the DN (Dominant Narrator). The DN tells the child of God story from a judgmental point of view that distances and places him morally above the audience as well as the local first person narrators as much as those narrators have placed themselves morally above

Ballard. The DN's thematic and moral lesson that "people are the same from the day God first made one" seems to mean all people – the local narrators and the story's audience—but not the DN himself (168). However, the seven local narratives are arranged in a deliberate and calculated strategy between the chapters of the DN's larger child of God narrative, which partly act to neutralize and negate the narrators' moral judgments as one opinion versus another. Moreover, this contrast of opinions exposes both the DN and the local narrators' sense of superiority over their subject Lester Ballard and the DN's sense of superiority over the local narrators and his audience. Thus, the DN's moral lesson comes from a focalized – slanted -- position of authority. A point of view that is unreliable as an accurate biography of Lester Ballard because the story is constructed as a means in which to expose the hypocrisy of the Sevierville community.

Furthermore, I will argue that *Child of God* is an implied meta-narrative. Though the novel does not refer to its own making, the narrative structure clearly reflects the child of God narrative evolving from the local anecdotes. The local anecdotes are oral tellings and I assert the DN's two direct audience appeals – "a child of God much like yourself perhaps" and "you could say he's sustained by his fellow men, like you"— suggests the child of God narrative was originally an oral story but is now altered from an oral story for a regional listening audience to a print story for a larger implied readership (4, 156). The two appeals and the moral lesson that "people are the same from the day God first made one" are truths that are both specific and general in the same instance (168). Their context in the child of God narrative is specific to the Sevierville community yet as a printed story easily resonates to all people outside that intended Sevierville audience.

*Child of God's* six short first person local anecdotes are individual recollections of primary fact about the protagonist, Lester Ballard, whereas the DN has created a story – the legend of Lester Ballard, a child of God—that has evolved, in part, from those local anecdotes. The anecdotes do not reflect the sympathetic view of Ballard that the DN has when s/he tells the reader that Ballard is of “Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4).

Instead, the anecdotes “repudiate Lester” and his family history (Jarrett 56): “They wasn’t none of em any account that I ever heard of” (*CoG* 80). The short anecdotes are told by Sevierville community citizens who knew Ballard from his childhood when he had a home, a signifier that he is part of the community. Their narratives portray Ballard as a grotesque figure: “never could hold his head right after that” (9); mean spirited, “He just stood there a minute, then he punched him in the face” (18); disconnected, as when his “daddy killed hisself” by hanging, “We just cut him down [...] He [Ballard] stood there and watched, never said nothin” (21); and obtuse, “thowed a rope over the old cow’s head and took off on the tractor hard as he could [...] Broke her neck and killed her where she stood” (35). One anecdote, however, remarks that Ballard was an excellent marksman: “He had that rifle from when he was just almost a boy. [...] I’ll say one thing. He could by god shoot it” (57). The anecdotes convey a clear image of Ballard’s character and his standing in the eyes of the Sevierville, Tennessee community.

There is no indication that the DN knew Ballard. Rather, his child of God narrative occurs after Ballard’s death and partly evolves from the anecdotes of the local narrators who did know Ballard. One local narrator’s comment that Ballard “didn’t look so pretty when Greer got done with him” establishes that the local narratives come before the DN’s narrative (22). Greer is the man who bought Ballard’s auctioned home and in the DN’s climax Greer shoots Ballard

when Ballard comes back to retaliate against that purchase: Greer “wobbled from the doorway with the shotgun and down the steps to examine this thing [Ballard] he’d shot” (173). The child of God narrative concludes with Ballard not being “indicted for any crime” and his being committed to the state hospital where he died: “[he] was found dead on the floor of his cage. His body was shipped to the state medical school at Memphis” (193, 194). The DN conveys a distant and omniscient point of view that John Lang describes as “detached, his [McCarthy’s] authorial stance frequently that of a journalist recording horrific events in the most objective fashion” (104).

The DN’s child of God narrative, then, details Ballard’s life, from the opening scene of his eviction when his home is auctioned off and he is cast out onto the culturally decaying fringes of the Sevierville community. There, Ballard squats in an abandoned house where his community is moonshiners and the dumpkeeper’s family of nine daughters. Jay Ellis argues in his published dissertation, *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*, that “the plot is launched by this action of unhousing; every subsequent action of Lester Ballard—including necrophilia—follows from that initial scene” (70). Ellis’s argument is true in relation to the child of God narrative, yet my argument is concerned with the novel’s whole, which is comprised of all eight narratives. That is, the relationship between the child of God narrative and the seven local anecdotal narratives. That relationship suggests that the child of God narrative evolves from those short local anecdotes because of their anachrony structure – the chronological interruption – to the child of God narrative.

Thus, Bell’s assertion that *Child of God* is a meta-narrative -- “Lester makes his life with a story that is partly *about* [Bell’s emphasis] stories and storytelling and thus passes over the

edge from fact into fiction” – is substantial ( *The Achievement* 55). Yet, other critiques view the anecdotes as expositions to the larger child of God narrative because they fill in gaps, such as Ballard’s early life and they reinforce the community’s rejection of Ballard. But that view poses the question as to why McCarthy did not incorporate those gaps in the narrative and avoid Bell’s “unassimilated raw material” ( *The Achievement* 53).

In the novel, Ballard is a real person and there are real stories about him. The DN constructs the narrative as a true story about Ballard’s demise. Therefore, the child of God narrative must have certain concrete benchmarks and the small local anecdotes are flashbacks, or analepses, which account for a portion of those benchmarks – Ballard’s eviction; Ballard’s accidental killing of a cow; how Ballard acquired his rifle; and Ballard’s success at a shooting gallery at the fair and his subsequent eviction from that shooting gallery — anchored in local anecdotal ‘fact’ for credibility. Therefore, there appears a distinct literary motive by McCarthy to compose the novel as a compilation of eight independent narratives.

This exposes a gap in *Child of God* scholarship. This thesis addresses the meta-discourse structure, however, I will argue, the eight narratives in *Child of God* serve a larger purpose in addition to a meta-discourse or as expositions to the child of God narrative. The very fact that the novel is a collated collection of multiple narrators makes those narrators characters in the novel. As characters, their focalizations about their subject, Lester Ballard, reveal their own moral traits because each narrator, as a focalizer, can be compared and contrasted against other narrators in the novel. Thus, the narrators’ focalizations form their character. They are unseen but heard in a novel while in their telling stories about Ballard reveals their character traits through their judgments of Ballard. Therefore, the novel’s intention becomes something in addition to the telling of the child of God narrative about Lester Ballard. The child of God narrative is also a

device that by its own sympathetic portrayal of Ballard exposes the local narrators' lack of sympathy and empathy for Ballard.

Narrative theory is best suited to explicate this alternative reading of *Child of God's* intention because it affords clarity to my argument that the novel is about judgment, which is another story about the tellers that may parallel but is still different from the child of God narrative. Narrative theory, or narratology, is the study of how a narrative's plot is arranged—its particular discourse-- in order to effectively convey and establish its story from a certain perspective, that is, a certain focalization. The plot of *Child of God* is in the narrative arrangement of the multiple narrators whereas the plot of the child of God narrative is a chronological string of events that chronicles Lester Ballard's short life and demise.

Seymour Chatman's 1978 work, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, best supports my argument about the arrangements and relation of the local narratives and the DN's narrative. Though narratology has evolved from Chatman's era of classical narrative theory into post classical theory over the last twenty years, Chatman's work is part of the foundation that enabled today's post classical narratology. In that respect, it is best to adhere to the Lewis Carroll *Alice in Wonderland* quote that opens Chatman's *Story and Discourse* Introduction, "Begin at the beginning,' the King said, gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end: then stop'" (15). That is, Chatman's definition and discussion of the nonnarrated story is a concrete foundation from which to begin my argument.

Moreover, Chatman's discussion of author, implied author, narrator, narratee, real reader and implied reader is relevant to my examination of the meta-narrative structure of *Child of God*. The novel has a distinct author, Cormac McCarthy; however the reader's perspective of the author's intention often varies. For example, Steven Frye's assertion that "McCarthy's central

concern is with Ballard himself” addressed earlier may run the danger of intentional fallacy. But Frye’s author, McCarthy, is actually Frye’s conception of an implied author: Frye, as a reader, has reconstructed an image of who the author is and what the author stands for from his reading. Frye’s image of the implied author as concerned with Lester Ballard stems from his perception that the *Child of God*’s central concern is Lester Ballard, whereas my image of the implied author is his concern with the nature of moral truth.

The evolution of classical narratology into post classical narratology is best exemplified in David Herman’s question and 1998 essay title, “Does not the mode of telling also bear crucially on—indeed, alter—the matter told?” The novel, *Child of God*, elicits a different story than the *Child of God* narrative because of its eight narrative structure. Therefore, though this thesis argument is anchored in Chatman’s older classical narrative theory framework, it proceeds toward a post classical conclusion: the *Child of God* novel is not the same story as the *child of God* narrative.

### **Structure of Study:**

In the “Review of Literature” which follows, I categorize *Child of God* critiques into four subject areas. Those topics are the novel’s pastoralism; the protagonist Lester Ballard’s psyche; misogyny; and perspectives on narrative in *Child of God*. The latter is the most relevant to my thesis. I then do a close review of Seymour Chatman’s fourth chapter, “Discourse: Nonnarrated Stories,” from his 1978 seminal work, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Chatman’s discussion most closely aligns and serves as support for my argument of *Child of God*’s eight narrative arrangements.

In the “Argument” I conduct a systematic study of the arrangement of *Child of God*’s eight independent narratives. I first establish that there are six shorter locally told narratives and

one community conversation narrative in addition to the DN's child of God narrative. I demonstrate how the seven shorter narratives are not within but outside and independent of the child of God narrative and therefore neutralize the power of the DN's voice as well as how the six shorter local anecdotes contribute to key episodes of the DN's story. I then argue that the relationship of the eight narratives alters DN's child of God narrative from a locally told and locally intended story to a larger, at world, implied readership.

In the "Conclusion," I reflect on how McCarthy's third novel is significant as literature because of its architecture: its meta-discourse structure and narrative arrangements. Moreover, I assert that *Child of God* exemplifies an ongoing thematic thread that runs throughout McCarthy's corpus, which is that form and content can convey independent themes.

## Review of literature

“Does not the mode of telling also bear crucially on—indeed, alter—the matter told?”  
David Herman. “Limits of Order: Toward a Theory of Polychronic Narration.” 1998.

If *Child of God* is composed as a compilation of eight individual and independent narratives that represent multiple narrators, then, as David Herman’s quote suggests, the child of God narrative is not the same story as *Child of God*’s eight narrative novel. This is the gap that has not been addressed, or considered, in any critical study of McCarthy’s novel. Rather, critical studies that address narrative perspective, that is, the relationship between the seven shorter narratives to the DN’s narrative, often do so in terms of thematic studies and too often as a secondary concern.

Most studies of *Child of God* focus on thematic threads. Georg Guillemin observes in *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004) that many studies “concentrate on individual angles, such as the psyche of Lester Ballard, the novel’s use of vernacular, or the pastoral theme in the traditional sense” (39). McCarthy’s much lauded command of language encourages studies into the nature of setting and character because the novel’s existential world is always designed and shaped through direct concrete empirical presentation. In *Child of God* the landscape is depicted through pastoral description and the protagonist through social construction.

### ***Child of God* and Pastoralism:**

Guillemin himself focuses on a pastoral thread: “Ultimately, the text reveals a narrative consciousness preoccupied with the representation of nature’s beauty as it is plagued by the realization of nature’s indifference to man” (40). He also connects the pastoral theme with the protagonist, and in turn, with “the metanarrative level, [which] is to move the pastoral protagonist further toward the wilderness” (39). Guillemin perceives Ballard as a displaced

“pastoral” farmer who returns to a state of “natural man” and quotes Jarrett: “stylizing the psychopathic protagonist as a ‘throwback representative of Rousseau’s natural man’” (39).

John Grammer’s “A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy’s South” (1999) asserts a different pastoral image than Guillemin: that *Child of God* reflects the “southern imagination,” an imagination that is “the mythology of the pastoral republic, [in which] weapons like Lester’s rifle carry enormous symbolic value,” as it identifies him with “an anachronism, left behind by history: a Daniel Boone” (39).

But the language that presents *Child of God*’s pastoral landscape also elicits the ruins of an industrial past. David Holloway’s *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (2002) examines McCarthy’s language through a Marxist lens. He states that novels are not self-contained texts – “some aesthetic vacuum sealed hermetically from the world in which they were produced”-- but rather that “language will yield, will here be linked to a wider set of problems, and a wider set of socially embedded contradictions, that stand as a more or less hidden or ‘politically unconscious’ motor force for the novels themselves” (11). In other words, McCarthy’s careful articulation of language reveals the “ideologies of its time,” because the novel becomes an artifact telling something about the time in which it was produced (11). *Child of God*’s opening, for example, reflects imagery of the “mute pastoral” with “swales of broomstraw” and “flowering appletrees” against imagery of a long since productivity; “through the weeds in the yard and “good timber ...[that’s] been cut over fifteen twenty year ago so maybe it ain’t big timber yet” (4, 3, 5). Therefore, the careful descriptive articulation of landscape presents more than just setting: McCarthy’s landscape reveals something about the politics of the culture that inhabit that Appalachian landscape in past and present.

Other critical studies offer similar viewpoints. K. Wesley Berry's "The Lay of the Land in Cormac McCarthy's Appalachia" (2002) and Gabriel D. Rikard's dissertation, *An Archaeology of Appalachia: Authority and the Mountaineer in the Appalachian Works of Cormac McCarthy* (2008) demonstrate how *Child of God's* landscape reveals a capitalist disregard for the land and the people whose livelihood depends on the land/landscape for both farming and hunting. Berry argues that McCarthy's landscape "manifests the spirit of inhumanism" because the "human structures on the land hint at the decline of subsistence agriculture. These include the abandoned quarry" which is "indicative of "large—scale industrial development gone bad [and] the short lived prosperity farmers experienced when pulled or tempted from their self sufficient lifestyles to work in quarries, mines and fertilizer plants" (73, 69).

Rikard contends that "[l]ike much Appalachian scholarship, McCarthy's novels reflect the conflicts between the modernizing agents of authority and the mountaineer" (19). He quotes from David Paul Ragan's essay, "Values and Structures in *The Orchard Keeper*" when he says that "the intrusion of the new, alien authority jeopardizes' the traditional existence of many of McCarthy's characters," such as Lester Ballard (19). Where Guillemin's view is that "[f]ar from being invaded by industrialism, Lester's farm is simply taken over by a more ambitious landholder," Rikard and Berry argue an industrial authority at play (Guillemin 38). Rikard notes that "mountaineers have often resorted to violence when outside corporations and absentee landowners have tried, successfully, to evict them from their mountain habitations, and Ballard, as a denizen of just such a contested area, is no different" (175).

McCarthy's presentation of landscape articulates a dichotomy between an indifferent physical world and the conscious life that inhabits it because that physical world lacks

consciousness. Rick Wallach does not address *Child of God* directly in his essay, “Cormac McCarthy’s Metaphors of Antiquity and Deep Time” (2002), but his subject matter, “deep time,” encompasses McCarthy’s entire corpus and is therefore of interest to *Child of God*. He defines deep time as the “repeated invocations of images of antiquity and prehistory” (105). Such imagery is evident and plentiful in *Child of God* as when Ballard enters the dumpkeepers yard and passes by “great levees of junk” and later goes to the quarry and searches for “artifacts” (26, 39). Wallach argues that deep time serves “to deflate the human sense of being at the center of the universe and diminish rather than equalize our comparative stature as organic entities” (105-106). The manners in which McCarthy is able to fuse and at the same time alienate his characters from his novel’s existential world in which they are mere inhabitants create a man versus nature dichotomy.

#### **Critiques that Concentrate on Ballard’s Psyche:**

The man versus nature dichotomy portrays individual characters in McCarthy’s novels as in an ongoing resistance to the environmental factors that shape who they are. McCarthy’s characters are constructed by cultural--social--and physical environments, yet they proceed on a course that seems oblivious to those constructions. The following *Child of God* studies are all centered on the thematic thread of the social and/or environmental construction of Ballard’s psyche.

The earliest criticisms<sup>2</sup> of *Child of God* by William J. Shafer, John Ditsky, and Vereen Bell acknowledge McCarthy’s command of language— “increasing care in the lavishing of verbal embellishment” (Ditsky 4) — and narrative structure: “human life is revealed through anecdote and incident rather than through thematic patterns, in particulars rather than through types” (Bell, “The Ambiguous Nihilism” 35). The studies ultimately focus on the “dehumanization of one

man, Lester Ballard” (Schafer 115). It is the power and depth of the content-- of Lester Ballard’s story-- which encourage an evaluation into Ballard’s psyche.

Jay Ellis’s 2006 published dissertation, *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*, and Brian Evenson’s essay, “McCarthy’s Wanderers: Nomadology, Violence, and Open Country” (1995), examine Ballard’s psyche through his eviction, “this action of unhousing,” that launches the novel’s plot and is the cause of his “descent into full violence” (70,71). In other words, Ballard’s psyche is not constructed from within but from environmental and cultural factors without.

Ashley Craig Lancaster’s essay, “From Frankenstein’s Monster to Lester Ballard: The Evolving Gothic Monster” (2008), argues that Ballard’s psyche is a social construction that determines his fate: “how human social acceptance has the power to determine the outcome of an individual life” and thus “McCarthy rejects the argument that social outsiders are born deviants: in fact, he implicates society as a main contributor to this social deviance from which it yearns to separate itself” (134, 132). The community’s negative judgment of Ballard make him an outcast and thus prevents the possibility to satisfy the desire and need for social integration. Ballard becomes a social deviant. Hence, these criticisms focus on how Ballard is defined through the community’s individual narratives.

### **Misogyny and *Child of God*:**

The concept of Ballard’s downward spiral into violence and necrophilia has misogynist implications in critiques authored by Nell Sullivan, Hillary Gamblin and Lydia Cooper. Sullivan’s feminist critique, “The Evolution of the Dead Girlfriend Motif in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*” (2000) asserts a misogynist attitude in the characters and narrator. Her argument is centered on Ballard’s encounter with “a lady sleeping under the trees in a white gown” (*CoG*

41): ‘she becomes ‘a goddamn whore,’ in Lester’s words, or ‘the old whore,’ in the narrator’s. Lester and the narrator both seem disappointed that she is not really dead” (Sullivan 74). Sullivan seems to implicate the author when she writes that “McCarthy describes Lester’s subsequent victims as puppets or giant dolls, implying that Lester prefers inanimate, ‘sleeping’ women” (74). However, Gamblin argues a crafted and necessary cause and effect structure in her essay “Discovering the Romantic in a Necrophiliac: The Question of Misogyny in *Child of God*” (2011) when she counters “that Ballard is a misogynist simplifies the ethical dilemma by discounting feelings of empathy for the protagonist” (28). Lydia Cooper notes in, *No More Heroes* (2011), that women are not singled out for acts of violence: “men are just as likely to be objectified, turned into corpses, or more explicitly dehumanized by being described exclusively in bestial terms” (17). Yet, McCarthy’s corpus is worth an objective feminist study because the male dominant themes are distinct in their lack of developed female characters.

### **Perspectives on Narrative in *Child of God*:**

Although Jay Ellis’s primary argument is about Ballard’s eviction that launches the novel’s plot, he sets up his argument by addressing Vereen Bell’s contention that *Child of God* is a meta-discourse. This ‘set-up’ reveals the binary from which critics often establish their point of view: the content of the seven narratives reveal something about Ballard; or, the seven narratives reveal something about the teller, which in turn, is something about the Sevierville community.

Bell asserts that *Child of God* is a meta-discourse, because of the seven first person narratives, when he states that “Lester makes his life with a story in a novel that is partly *about* [Bell’s emphasis] stories and storytelling and thus passes over the edge from fact into fiction” (*The Achievement* 55).<sup>3</sup> That is, the local anecdotes, which are recollections of fact about Ballard, pass into the fictional creation of the DN’s child of God narrative. Ellis downplays Bell’s meta-

discourse assertion, saying “any novel’s indulgence in stories—that it is ‘about stories and storytelling’—seems to me over determined” (71). Ellis points out that *Child of God*, and indeed any novel, is about the story told and not about an implied meta-discourse into storytelling, “if a novel contains an interesting story, that makes it compelling. If it contains interesting stories that seem to be about storytelling, that fact alone does little for their interest” (71). Ellis views Bell’s meta-discourse assertion as less important than an analysis of the circumstances that compel Lester Ballard’s actions.

For Ellis, the seven first person narratives stand as a device for conveying “the voices of a community that has rejected Ballard well before his descent into the darker and deeper moral [...] and geographic location” that he inhabits in Parts II and III (71). Robert Morgan’s piece, “Cormac McCarthy: The Novel Raised from the Dead” (2002), agrees as he argues that “[b]esides the voice of the narrator, there are several other speakers telling the story of *Child of God*” and that it is the “alternating narrators who fill in the portrait of Lester Ballard, who give the background,” the circumstance (18). Chris Walsh’s “There’s No Place Like Holme: The Quest to Find a Place for McCarthy’s Southern Fiction” (2003)<sup>4</sup> also asserts that the community’s stories define Ballard.

Still, other criticisms focus on the dominant omniscient narrative and how it constructs Ballard with an overt sympathy. John Lang’s essay, “Lester Ballard: McCarthy’s Challenge to the Reader’s Compassion” (2002), and Andrew Bartlett’s essay, “From Voyeurism to Archaeology: Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*” (2004) examine how Ballard is made into a sympathetic object through the novel’s narrative structure. Lang asserts that:

Because McCarthy’s tone in this novel is often detached, his authorial stance is frequently that of a journalist recording horrific events in the most objective fashion, we must look to the book’s structure, both its arrangements of characters

and events and its shifts in narrative perspective, to determine just how McCarthy creates sympathy for Ballard. (104)

Bartlett argues, in part, that “Ballard’s perspective becomes synonymous with the narrator’s, and thus with the readers, in a kind of voyeuristic tunnel vision” (4). Bartlett also observes that “the subtext would almost imply the unacknowledged presence of an inquirer who has arrived in Sevier county asking questions about Ballard, perhaps as an aspect of the narrator’s curiosity” (6). These arguments align with Bell’s observation of a narrative shift from a focalization on Ballard to a focalization on the community: “the narration has been so scrupulously decentralized from the beginning, it seems intended to be as much about the place and the people in it as about Lester himself” (*The Achievement* 54).

Thus, the local first person narratives in *Child of God* are perceived by many critics as a device that supports what the DN’s child of God narrative lacks, whether it is information about Ballard or a reflection on the community. While this perspective is important, I will argue that the child of God narrative itself is a device used to expose the hypocrisy contained in the local narratives through a comparison and contrast. Therefore, an analysis of the relationships between the narratives and what those relationships portray is important and is best illuminated from a narratology point of view.

### **Narratology and Seymour Chatman:**

This thesis draws from Seymour Chatman’s seminal work, *Story and Discourse, Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978). Specifically, “Chapter Four: Discourse: Nonnarrated Novels,” because my argument’s foundation is that *Child of God* is a nonnarrated novel. Chatman distinguishes between a narrated story and nonnarrated story by saying that if the audience “feels it is being told something, it presumes a teller. The alternative is a ‘direct witnessing’ of the action” (147). I will argue that *Child of God* is a direct witnessing by the

reader of the narrators telling their stories. That is, there is no authorial voice that narrates the *Child of God* novel, but rather the novel is a careful arrangement of six short first person local anecdotes interspersed between the child of God narrative told by the DN, who is that story's omniscient narrator. However, I will argue, the seven local narratives may not signify seven first person narrators. The seven narratives suggest more than two speakers who may or may not be responsible for more than one of the six first person anecdotes.

Furthermore, I will advance Bartlett's observation in the "Argument" that "the subtext would almost imply the unacknowledged presence of an inquirer" (6). I will argue that the "inquirer" is the DN and that he is an oral story teller telling his child of God narrative to a local Sevierville audience although his story is now in print and part of the *Child of God* novel. Chatman examines how the nonnarrated novel is able to create an "illusion" of a "direct witnessing" of the action (*Story and Discourse* 147). I will argue that the readers 'witness' the tellers telling their stories similar to a listening audience around an oral storyteller.

Chatman also identifies the difference between the real author and the implied author. An implied author is determined by the reader:

that is, reconstructed by the reader from the narrative. An author may not hold the particular perspective a work explores and presents but the reader, in order to grasp the work, holds the author accountable to that work's perspective. Chatman further establishes the separation between the implied author and the novel's narrator, which in turn, allows the possibility for an unreliable narrator. He is not the narrator ... (*Story and Discourse* 148)

An unreliable narrator is one whose "values diverge strikingly from the implied author's; that is, the rest of the narrative--'the norm of the work'—conflict with the narrative's presentation, and we become suspicious of his sincerity or competence to tell the 'true version'" (*Story and Discourse* 149).<sup>5</sup> This is an important concept as it relates to my argument because the novel's theme, which is apart from the child of God narrative's theme, is the subjective nature of

judgments. Thus, the DN's child of God narrative, as a true version of Ballard's demise, is unreliable because the DN has constructed his child of God narrative in a manner that exposes the hypocrisy of the local narrators in their moral judgment of Ballard as opposed to a story that accurately and unbiasedly depicts the events of Ballard's journey from his unhousing to his eventual death.

Chatman divides the concept "point of view" into perceptual, conceptual and interest. Perceptual is the actual physical act of seeing from a particular vantage point while conceptual is the attitude toward the objects seen and interest is the passive state of concern (*Story and Discourse* 152). These distinctions are critical to understanding the relationship of *Child of God's* six shorter narrative points to the DN's point of view. Chatman's distinctions highlight how the DN's conceptual point of view undermines the six local narrators' conceptual points of view. More importantly, my argument will show how the implied author's arrangement of the narratives exposes that undermining.

Chatman defines and explains the necessity of distinguishing between naratees – the author's device of making "explicit the desired audience stance"—and implied readers – "Parties immanent to the reader"—and real readers: "parties extrinsic and accidental to the narrative" (*Story and Discourse* 150). The narratee is how the narrator directs the reader to interpret, or understand, his narrative; the implied reader is the particular audience the implied author has in mind for his work; and the real reader is the actual person who reads the work. However, the implied reader is that part of the real reader who embraces and accepts the narrator's created, existential world. I will argue the concept of audience is central to *Child of God* because the DN's audience is different from the implied author's audience.

Chatman establishes how “non- or minimally-mediated narrative records [are] nothing beyond the speech or verbalized thoughts of characters” (*Story and Discourse* 166). Of importance here is his discussion of “pure speech records,” which all eight narratives- including the DN’s narrative-- in *Child of God* mimic.

Indeed, Chatman is a bridge between a classical structural view of narrative that finds its beginnings in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and what David Herman defines as post classical narratology, which “contains classical narratology as one of its ‘moments’ but is marked by a profusion of new methodologies and research hypotheses: the result is a host of new perspectives on the forms and functions of narrative itself” (qtd. in Alber, *Postclassical Narratology* 1). In other words, narrative theory is an ongoing process of redefining and refining narratology concepts, “[w]e do not maintain that there is a unified postclassical model on the horizon [...] [but that] narratologists nowadays see the object of their research as more variegated than was the case twenty years ago” (Alber 23).

My argument that follows is in the traditions of both classical and post classical narratology. The argument focuses on the classical relationship of *Child of God* narratives to one another, that is, the physical juxtaposition of the narratives within the text. The post classical narrative theory informs how the relationships between the narratives function to establish that the DN’s child of God narrative is a story within a novel composed of tellers telling their stories.

## THE ARGUMENT

“The ugly fact is books are made out of books.” -- Cormac McCarthy (“Cormac McCarthy’s  
Venomous Fiction.”)

Most *Child of God* critical studies assume that the novel is a narration by a third person omniscient narrator because that narrator dominates one hundred eighty pages of the one hundred ninety-seven page novel.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, there is an omniscient narrator, who tells the child of God narrative, which commands the novel’s content, however, the child of God narrative shares space with seven shorter narratives told by other narrators: six local first person anecdotes and one group conversation. The seven shorter narratives are not within but independent of the larger child of God narrative. Therefore, the novel *Child of God* is not told by a single omniscient narrator. Rather, the child of God narrative is an omniscient narrative told by a narrator in the first person whose story dominates the novel but is alongside other first person narrators who tell shorter local anecdotes about the protagonist, Lester Ballard. The novel’s narrative structure of multiple narrators makes those narrators characters in the novel, in part, simply by their juxtaposition to one another, which allows the reader a comparison and contrast between the tellers. The novel, *Child of God*, is about the tellers who tell their child of God stories and moreover the judgments the tellers make of the protagonist, Lester Ballard. Therefore, an analysis of the relationships between the narratives is best illuminated from a naratology point of view.

*Child of God’s* structure is what Seymour Chatman terms a nonnarrated novel: The nonnarrated narrative “records nothing beyond the speech or verbalized thoughts of characters” (*Story and Discourse* 146, 166). *Child of God* is nonnarrated because the eight individual and independent narratives are presented with no authorial comment and as recorded conversation.

Furthermore, the DN and local narrators opposing attitude toward Ballard, reveal their character traits through comparison and contrast. The local narratives lack sympathy and/or empathy for Ballard while the DN's narrative displays sympathy toward the protagonist. The eight narratives can be divided into two types of first person narrators: the dominant narrator (DN), who is the omniscient narrator of the child of God narrative; six first person local anecdotes; and one group conversation.

If *Child of God* is a novel composed as a compilation of eight individual and independent narratives of which one narrative dominates then that narrative is still one of seven other narratives within the novel, *Child of God*. Therefore, the *Child of God* novel does not effect the same story as the DN's child of God narrative. Instead, the novel is about the narrators and the judgments they make while the child of God narrative is about Lester Ballard journey to self awareness—"I'm suppose to be here" (192)—after being cast out of the community and his subsequent dissent into a cave dwelling necrophile murderer. Thus, the multiple narrators are characters in the novel, *Child of God*, in which the DN's child of God narrative dominates.

The DN and the narrators of the shorter narratives, then, are as much characters in the novel as the protagonist, Lester Ballard, is in the stories the narrators tell. However, the DN has purposely distanced himself from, and placed himself morally above, the local storytellers and the community they represent as those local storytellers have distanced and placed themselves morally above Lester Ballard.

My argument is twofold. First, the novel is a meta-narrative because the arrangement of the eight narratives self regulate, or explain each other's origination and provide the background to each other's story. Second, the narratives together compose a dynamic relationship that allows the good and bad that is implied in the DN's child of God narrative theme --that "people are the

same from the day God first made one"-- to encompass all "people," which therefore must include not only the characters in the child of God narrative but all the narrators in the *Child of God* novel --the DN as well as the local narrators – and both the actual and implied reader (168). Indeed, as much as the protagonist, Lester Ballard, is "a child of god much like yourself perhaps," so must the narrators and the reader be children of God much like Lester Ballard. It is not Ballard's criminal and perverse acts that make him "much like yourself" but his judgment over acts, "Given charge Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men's souls" (4, 136). This argument shows how the implied author succeeds in including all "people"-- characters, narrators and reader –within the same thematic plane of judgment through the novel's eight narrative structure.

Seymour Chatman defines a narrative as a whole "because it is constituted of elements—events and existents—that differ from what they constitute. Events and existents are single and discrete, but the narrative is a sequential composite" (*Story and Discourse* 21). He defines events as "actions, happenings" and existents as "characters, items of setting" (*Story and Discourse* 19). The eight narratives are individually single and discrete and each conveys action, happenings, through characters and settings in the stories they tell.

Chatman states that "narratives entail both transformation and self-regulation. Self regulation means that the structure maintains and closes itself" (*Story and Discourse* 21). He quotes Piaget when he says that "the narrative will not admit events or other kinds of phenomena that do not 'belong to it and preserve its laws'" (*Story and Discourse* 21). A narrative is its own self contained existential world in which all possibilities can and should be explained within.

Chatman explains further that "certain events or existents that are not immediately relevant may be brought in. But at some point their relevancy must emerge" (*Story and*

*Discourse* 21-22). The seven local anecdotes that Vereen Bell remarks are an “an unusual degree of unassimilated raw material [that] impedes—or seems to impede—the central narrative flow and are “so aimless and fragmented that an innocent reader might wonder if there is even to be a plot” must be relevant to *Child of God* is for the novel to be well formed (*The Achievement* 53).

Therefore, in order to understand the seven narratives’ relation to the DN’s child of God narrative and the relationship of all eight narratives – the DN and local anecdotes -- to each other and the novel *Child of God* it is necessary to first identify and establish that the seven first person local narratives are indeed individual local anecdotes that stand collectively apart from the DN’s child of God narrative.

### ***Child of God’s Two Narrative Types:***

The seven local anecdotes occur only in the first eighty-one page section of *Child of God’s* three sectioned novel. They do not occur at once, or in succession, but are chapters interspersed between the chapters of the DN’s child of God narrative. However, they are not embedded narratives in the child of God narrative because the tellers of the local anecdotes are not characters in that story, but they are characters in the *Child of God* novel. Hence, the seven local anecdotes stand independent and outside the DN’s narrative.

The seven local anecdotes can be identified with their respective beginning page locations in parenthesis as follows: N1 (9); N2 (17); N3 (21); N4 (35); N5 (44); N6 (57); and N7 (80). With the exception of the sixth narrative, N6 (57), which is three pages, the narratives are short one page<sup>7</sup> first person retrospective reminiscences that mimic transcripts of oral recordings. These narratives give background information to the DN’s child of God narrative. Five of the narratives elaborate on Lester Ballard’s character, physical appearance, or abilities; one focuses

on the Sheriff, Fate Turner's character; and the last narrative is a collective 'recorded' conversation of at least two narrators on the character of Ballard's family:

About Ballard:

- N1(9) – “Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that. It must have thowed his neck out someway or another” (9).
- N2(17) – “I remember one thing he done one time” (17).
- N3(21) – “They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself” (21).
- N4(35) - “I’ll tell ye another thing he done one time” (35).
- N6(57) – “He had that rifle from when he was just a boy,” “I’ll say one thing. He could by god shoot it” (57).

About Sheriff Fate Turner:

- N5(44) – “Fate’s all right. He’s plainspoken but I like him” [...] “I remember one night up on the Frog mountain at the turnaround there they was a car parked up here and Fate put the lights on em and walked on up there” (44).

About Ballard's family:

- N7(80) – “They wasn’t none of em [Ballard’s ancestry] any account that I ever heard of” (80).

The anecdotes are voiced in a regional vernacular that stands apart from the DN's elegant command of language. Compare the anecdote's language above that uses derivative word forms and phrases such as “thowed” N1(7), “he done” N2(17), N4(35), “daddy killed hisself” N3(21), “he could by god shoot it” N6(57), “none of em” N7(80) and “they was a car” N5(44) to tell their story against the DN's elegant language: “To watch these things issuing from an otherwise mute pastoral morning is a man at the barn door. He is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry

chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence” (4). There is a clear stylistic separation between the seven local anecdotes’ vernacular and the DN’s carefully articulated voice.

Furthermore, the local anecdotes are physically separated from the child of God narrative because they are presented in their own chapters. That is, with the exception of the last narrative, N7(80), each narrative is its own exclusive chapter in which the only voice is that of the speaker. Each narrative is told in a candid and casual manner, which mimic a transcribed oral recording.

The last local narrative, N7 (80), is also an exclusive chapter and suggests that the seven narratives may have occurred in a onetime casual setting because the narrator, or narrators, is interrupted at the end of his or their story by another voice that seems to be passing by. One voice says, “Talkin about Lester . . .,” to which the voice passing retorts, “You all talk about him, I got supper waiting on me at the house” (81). The last voice signals that the seven local narratives, “You all talk about him,” may have been recorded from an informal gathering. That gathering may be alluded to in the DN’s child of God narrative as the “Sevierville County pocketknife society that convened there [at the courthouse lawn ‘with the benches’] to whittle and mutter and spit” (48). If, as Chatman asserts, that a narrative is self regulated and “will not admit events that do not ‘belong to it and preserve its laws,’” then the child of God narrative suggests by its reference to the “Sevierville County pocketknife society” that the six first person local anecdotes are told in one group sitting and that group is reminiscing about the protagonist, Lester Ballard (*Story and Discourse* 21, *CoG* 48). Thus, the text acknowledges what Bartlett comments as unacknowledged: the “subtext would almost imply the unacknowledged presence of an inquirer” (6).<sup>8</sup>

The DN's child of God narrative's inclusion and description of a gathering of the "Sevierville County pocketknife society" further suggest that the six individual narratives are told by more than one individual; however, one individual may be responsible for more than one anecdote (48). For example, N2 (17) and N4 (35) have the same diction and the latter appears to reference the former: N2 (17), "I remember one thing he done one time" and N4 (35), "I'll tell ye another thing he done one time" (17, 35). The narratives N1 (9) and N6 (57) have the same diction and cadence: N1 (9) "Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that" and N6 (57), "He had that rifle from when he was just a boy" (9, 57). Hence, the six local anecdotes may be the voices of two individual speakers or as many as six individual speakers. Still, the local narratives denote more than one narrator in addition to the DN. Therefore, *Child of God* is composed of multiple narrators.

This is a reasonable assumption because if narrative structures are enclosed self regulated systems then the DN will in some way complement the seven first person local anecdotes as those anecdotes will complement the DN's child of God narrative. Therefore, the DN's description of the courthouse, "gray lawn below with the benches and the Sevierville County pocketknife society that convened there to whittle and mutter and spit," accomplishes three purposes: the description connects the seven local narratives to the DN's child of God narrative and second, by doing so, aids the integration of the eight narratives into one single narrative that is the novel, *Child of God*. Third, the arrangement of the two narrative types suggests that parts of the DN's story were inspired by several of the local anecdotes. That is, the DN has sat down with the Sevierville County pocketknife society, inquired about Ballard's early life and recorded those stories, which also include stories about the community.<sup>9</sup> The DN composes his child of God narrative, in part, from the six local anecdotes.

Hence, the short six local anecdotal chapters are interspersed between chapters of the DN's child of God's story in deliberate, calculated anachronous sequential intersects that show the child of God narrative evolving from those individual narratives. The first local narrative, N1(9), is preceded by the novel's *in media res* beginning in which the DN sets the scene of Ballard's eviction, of his unhousing, and his violent resistance to that eviction, "I want you sons of bitches off my goddamned property. You hear?" (7). The DN has begun his story based on the local anecdote chapter about why "Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that," which directly follows the opening chapter (9).

The fourth local narrative, N4 (35), tells how Ballard accidentally killed "this old cow" when "he thowed a rope over the cow's head and took off on the tractor as hard as he could go [...] Broke her neck and killed her where she stood" (35). That narrative is preceded by the DN's episode in which Ballard accidentally shoots and kills a cow: "He brought the rifle up and leveled it and fired. The cattle veered and surged in the red water, their eyes white. One of them made its way toward the bank holding its head at an odd angle. At the bank it slipped and fell and rose again. Ballard watched it with his jaw knotted. Oh shit, he said" (34).

The sixth local narrative, N6(57), explains how Ballard came to acquire his rifle —"[h]e had that rifle from when he was just almost a boy"—and how good a shot he was —"I seen him shoot a spider out of a web in the top of a big redoak one time"—and also mentions that Ballard was run "off out at the fair one time. Wouldn't let him shoot no more" (57). The child of God narrative chapter that follows details Ballard's experience at the fair —"Ballard among the fairgoers"—his accuracy with a rifle and subsequent run off from the shooting gallery booth:

He fired five times, lowering the rifle between rounds. When he was done he pointed aloft. Let me have that there big bear, he said.

The pitchman trolleyed the little card down on a wire and unpinned it and handed it to Ballard. All of the red must be removed from the card to win, he said. [...]

Ballard's card had a single hole in the middle of it. Along one edge of the hole was the faintest piece of red lint.

[...] He slapped three more dimes on the counter. [...]

When the card came back you couldn't have found any red on it with a microscope.

When he had won two bears and a tiger and a small audience the pitchman took the rifle away from him. That's it for you, buddy, he hissed. (64)

Hence, *Child of God*, has a calculated narrative arrangement. The arrangement is not made by the DN but by the implied author. Here, the implied author serves partly as what Chatman describes as a "mere collector or collator" because he has assembled and transcribed word for word the oral recordings of the local narrator's telling their anecdotes and interspersed the transcriptions as chapters between chapters of the DN's narrative (169). Chatman describes the implied author as "not the narrator, but rather the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative, that stacked the cards in this particular way, had these things happen to these characters, in these words or images. Unlike the narrator, the implied author can tell us nothing" (*Story and Discourse* 148). Chatman's statement that "the implied author can tell us nothing" has a particular significance to *Child of God*. The novel is nonnarrated because it is a compilation of eight narratives, each of which exists independently of one another. Therefore, the novel, *Child of God*, alters the perspective of the DN's child of God narrative because it has combined the local first person anecdotes with the DN's child of God narrative, which then transform the two narrative types into a single narrative that make up the novel, *Child of God*. That transformation alters the mode of telling and therefore, as David Herman asserts, alters the story told.

### **The DN's Story is also a Local Narrative:**

Thus, there is support for Vereen Bell's contention that "Lester makes his life with a story in a novel that is partly *about* stories and storytelling" (*The Achievement* 55). However, the arrangement of the two narrative types has yet another agenda. The seven local anecdotes supply primary accounts of the community's eccentric residents, such as "old Gresham" –"I'll tell ye what old Gresham done when his wife died and how crazy he was" (22)-- and their teller's inherent dislike of Ballard, "I never liked him much before that. He never done nothing to me" that the DN's child of God narrative lacks (18). That lack suggests that the DN's narrative is also a regional story intended for the specific regional audience, Sevierville, which is already aware of its own community's cultural heritage and unique personality. The DN is either a local storyteller or a storyteller who has come to Sevierville to tell a local story.

There is further support for this assertion. The DN appeals directly to an audience with a specific detail unique to Appalachian demographics: Lester Ballard is of "Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps" (*CoG* 4). Anthony Harkins notes in his book, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, that Appalachians in the early 1900's were noted for and proud of their "racial and religious pedigree [...] in short their 'whiteness'." That cultural heritage championed "the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon people," which "stressed the genetic, linguistic, physical, and cultural 'Anglo-Saxonism' of the Appalachian people" (42). Harkins recounts that in the early twentieth century the "Reverend Samuel Wilson, president of Maryville College just outside of Knoxville, Tennessee" stated that Appalachians "celebrated their 'tide of rich red Teutonic and Celtic blood'" (42). Hence, the DN's appeal that Ballard is of "Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps," suggests that the narrator

knows his audience, and that audience is an Appalachian audience, and most likely the Sevierville community (*CoG* 4).

Moreover, the DN tells his story with a specific opinion and moral lesson meant for the Sevierville community in their treatment of Ballard:

He [Ballard] came up flailing and sputtering and began to thrash his way toward the line of willows that marked the submerged creek bank. He could not swim, but how would you drown him? His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to work here. See 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. But they want this man's life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with the lanterns and cries of execration. How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him? (156)

The DN's direct address to his audience, "You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you," which are "[a] race that gives suck to the maimed and crazed" reconnects the audience and Ballard to the shared "Saxon and Celtic bloods" from the beginning of his narrative (156, 4). Thus, the child of God narrative is specifically meant for the Sevierville community. Therefore, I argue that the DN is an oral storyteller telling the child of God narrative within the Sevierville community because of the two direct addresses to his audience, his narratees, in order to convey the moral lesson that "people are the same from the day God first made one" (168).

Furthermore, Northrop Frye notes that "[t]he world of water is the water of death, often identified with spilled blood, as in the Passion" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 150). The passage, suggests a biblical allusion that the evil the community has embedded in Ballard is in their blood as well: that the community "wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it" (*CoG* 156).

Sevierville's wrong blood comes from a sordid and shameful past that allowed and morally justified the vigilante White Caps, who were "a bunch of lowlife thieves and murderers"

(CoG 165). Dianne Luce's well researched essay, "White Caps, Moral Judgment, and Law in *Child of God* or, the Wrong Blood in Community History" quotes Crozier's description of the White Caps:

Men not only of bad habits generally, but men whose lives were polluted with lewdness and adulterous living has assumed the role of reformers and were heading midnight mobs which cruelly beat and in some instances killed persons because it was suspect that they were not living virtuous lives. (Crozier qtd. in Luce, "White Caps" 44)

The Sevierville community has absolved itself of its historical guilt by transferring that guilt, "that wrong blood in their history" onto Ballard because his "granddaddy" was "a by god White Cap" (80, 81). Furthermore, the community's wrong blood is an inherent racism, as the child of God narrative suggests that the high sheriff is about to lynch a black man:

After a week the sheriff came down the corridor one day and took the nigger away. Flyin home, sang the nigger.  
You'll be flyin all right, said the sheriff. Home to your maker.  
Fly like a motherfucker, sang the nigger. (54)

The high sheriff, Fate Turner, whose presence is meant to both uphold and signify the high morals of the Sevierville community – "The High Sheriff of Sevier County came through the courthouse doors and stood on the portico" – possesses the immoral nature of racism that in turn reflects and continues the wrong blood of the community (48).

### **How the Two First Person Narrative Types Combine to Tell a Literary Story that Carries a Moral Lesson about Moral Truth.**

The novel, *Child of God*, is intended for an implied reader who is outside the community, one who is not familiar with the cultural environment of Sevierville, Tennessee, and the physical setting of the Appalachian Mountains. While the ideas explored in the child of God narrative are what Chatman terms as "general truths, that is, philosophical observations that reach beyond the world of the fictional work into the real universe," such as Ballard's existential epiphany, "I'm

suppose to be here,” and the address to the audience that Ballard is “a child of God much like yourself perhaps,” the story is still intended for the Sevierville community audience (*Story and Discourse* 243; *CoG* 192, 4). The narrative makes those general truths contextually specific to the geographically and culturally isolated Sevierville community. The general truth and DN’s theme that, “people are the same from the day God first made one” is the intended lesson of the child of God narrative (168). But because the theme is also a general truth it is applicable to a larger implied readership.

*Child of God’s* eight narrative structure widens that moral lesson to include all the narrators. The local narrators have assumed a position of moral superiority to the stories they tell because they have distanced themselves from their subject, Lester Ballard. The DN assumes a position of moral superiority to the local narrators because his child of God narrative exposes their hypocrisy, which can be traced back to the community’s historical connection to the vigilante White Caps. The implied author has arranged the novel’s narrative structure – a compilation of eight independent narratives – without direct comment so the reader can render their own judgment through a comparison and contrast of the narrators. That arrangement reduces and neutralizes the narrators’ superior stance because their judgments can now be viewed by the reader as based and created from personal prejudice. The reader’s judgment is also based on personal prejudice because they will either have sympathy for Ballard—as the DN does—or will not have sympathy for Ballard, as the local narrators do.

Hence, the eight narratives create a thematic thread that moral judgments are sometimes no more than self validations by the individual—Ballard, the individual narrators, the reader—or the community, such as Sevierville, of their actions. It is the collective whole of the narratives that allow the judgment theme to evolve because of the opposing judgments by the DN and the

local narrators toward Ballard. The DN presents a singular truth: Ballard is “A child of God much like yourself perhaps”; while the community presents their singular truth that Ballard and his ancestry “wasn’t none of em any account that I ever heard of” (4, 80). Ballard’s proclamation, “I’ll be the judge of that,” conveys that truth is an individual point of view (*CoG* 149). Hence, the reader’s reaction to Ballard and the child of God narrative, whether sympathetic or not, is a judgment of moral truth, a singular individual point of view.

Thus, the narrative structure of *Child of God* extends the lesson about moral judgment to an act of human nature from a regional story directed toward a specific regional audience to a story directed to larger implied readership. *Child of God’s* implied author has arranged the seven local narratives and the DN’s story in a calculated manner that places those narrators in the same community and on the same plane as the Sevierville community in the child of God narrative. The DN’s direct address to the reader then places the reader on the same plane and in the same community as well. That enables the child of God narrative to evolve into a moral lesson about the fluid nature of moral truth. Moral judgment, the implied author suggests, is fluid because it is validated by its cultural environment, its community: a race of man that “gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it” (156). The narratives reveal the character traits of the speakers, which in turn presents the ‘meanness’ inherent in human nature--- “You think people was meaner then than they are now?”– and concludes, “I think people are the same from the day God first made one” (168). The implied author presents the narrators and their narratives without commentary because to comment would be to judge. Yet the implied author’s arrangement is in itself a judgment.

## CONCLUSION

*Child of God* is a deceptive novel. It seems simple. It is a quick read. The story draws in the reader with a simply stated approach and through descriptive detail. The story's subject matter, which includes displacement, necrophilia and murder, overpowers the reader's senses and morals: The protagonist, Lester Ballard, is the local dim witted outcast who, upon his unhousing and lack of community, emotionally spirals into an eventual cave dwelling, perverse, serial killer necrophile. That fact alone overwhelms the reader, as it should, because it makes the novel appear entirely about content, about Ballard. *Child of God* is, as Jay Ellis implies, "an interesting story, that makes it compelling" (71).

The literary critic's concern, however, is how a story compels interest in the reader, and how the structure of the story makes the story's content not only compelling, but significant as literature. My argument is simple: the arrangements of multiple storytellers that compose the *Child of God* novel tell another story—about the nature of judgment—that is in addition to the DN's child of God narrative. Those arrangements change the dynamics of the child of God narrative into a device that serves the novel's theme about judgment. The child of God narrative omniscient telling allows a distance-- a separation, a clear boundary-- between the DN from his story, and the reader from the narrative.

The dynamics, which the recognition of multiple narrators achieves in *Child of God*, are that the reader, the DN and the other local narrators are active participants in the story's telling. Although the novel's narrators, as well as the reader, are not part of the action—part of the child of God narrative—they are a part of the telling and therefore the narrators and the reader are part of the moral consciousness and varying judgments the child of God narrative elicits.

The DN's sole position of power – the omniscient and subjective point of view --that accompanies a story that commands the novel is neutralized to being merely one point of view among several points of views given by the local narrators. Thus, the DN's sympathetic judgment toward the protagonist Ballard – made from a distant point of view -- is no more and no less moral than the community's unsympathetic judgment that appears to be formed from primary knowledge about the protagonist.

The reader is absorbed in the telling as a listener and therefore in the same setting. The reader's moral judgment of Ballard is rendered from 'listening' to all the narrator's stories about Ballard and the judgmental tone in which those stories are told. The novel's significance is that the novel's narrative structure allows two stories and two themes to emerge: the child of God narrative in which the protagonist is "a child of God much like yourself perhaps"; and the story about the tellers and their storytelling and how their subjective judgments are formed (4).

Thus, McCarthy's third novel published in 1973 foretells his comment nineteen years later in the *New York Time* 1992 interview titled "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction" that "The ugly truth is books are made from books." *Child of God* is composed, albeit a *faux* compilation, from narrative "books." Furthermore, McCarthy's seventh novel, 1994's *The Crossing*, echoes his "ugly truth" comment and recapitulates Vereen Bell's observation that *Child of God* is "about stories and storytelling" (*The Achievement* 55): that "this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and these tales also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them" (*The Crossing*143). Cormac McCarthy's interest in literature and his contribution to literature is best stated in Vereen Bell's observation about *Child of God*, "The strangeness of the story [...] begins not with its subject matter but with the way the

story is told” (*The Achievement* 53). *Child of God* is significant as a window into how McCarthy approaches his craft. His early works – referred to as his “Appalachian period” -- are as architecturally crafted in content and structurally engineered in form as are his later works and thus signifies an ongoing inquiry into the nature of language: how language conveys meaning and how those meanings may be separate or extend from each other.

The value of McCarthy’s corpus and in particular *Child of God* to the literary world is how individual literary works are narratively arranged and how that arrangement may express a perspective wholly different from the story’s content or more inclusive of the reader in the novel’s existential world. The form and content of *Child of God* is accessible because its meta-discourse demonstrates a simple and systematic construction of a novel. The complex issues McCarthy’s works address and his exploration in how language shapes and directs meaning, and moreover in how language is shaped and shapes each individual’s existential world.

## ENDNOTES

1. Vereen Bell's, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988), is "the first systematic review" of McCarthy's corpus according to the book's editor, Louis D. Rubin. At that time, McCarthy's five published novels were: *The Orchard Keeper* (1965); *Outer Dark* (1968); *Child of God* (1973); *Suttree* (1979); and *Blood Meridian* (1985). Bell's criticism stands as the benchmark of McCarthy studies and is still often referred to and used as the basis from which many scholarly critiques have been launched.

2. William J Schafer's "Cormac McCarthy: The Hard Wages of Original Sin" (1977); John Ditsky's "Further Into Darkness: The Novels of Cormac McCarthy" (1981); and Vereen Bell's "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy" (1983) are the first three scholarly criticisms of McCarthy's works. All three criticisms examine the extent of McCarthy's corpus – the Appalachian novels – published at their publication.

3. Although Bell's statement refers to the novel's self regulated world as its own factual world it is interesting that Dianne Luce establishes that Ballard's bizarre tale has some sort of factual background. She discovers through her research study, "The Cave of Oblivion, *Child of God*" from her larger work, *Reading the World, Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (2009), that "[m]any of the details of Lester's motives and behavior relating to necrophilia are drawn from the studies of necrophiles in R.E.L. Masters and Eduard Lea's curious 1963 compendium *Sex Crimes in History*" (134). Moreover, Luce reveals two "plausible sources" for Lester Ballard's character, "the James Blevin case in north Georgia, near Chattanooga, Tennessee, which came to light in April 1963, and the earlier Ed Gein case in Plainfield, Wisconsin, which broke in 1957" (136). Blevins was a young lover's lane voyeur held for murder of a couple and Gein robbed graves of women for their body parts.

4. Ebsco's data base incorrectly spells "Holme" in Walsh's essay as "Home." The spelling of "Holme" in Walsh's title is a play on words and refers to the central characters, Culla and Rinthy Holme, in McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*. The essay is about both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*.

5. The internal quotes are attributed to Wayne Booth.

6. The page length of the *First Vintage International Edition, June 1993*.

7. Although the chapters may be two pages, the narratives themselves only comprise one printed page.

8. Refer back to my discussion of Bartlett in the "Review of Literature," 18.

9. Ibid.

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