

This is the Day to Shape the Days Upon:
Appalachia as Redemptive Space in the Work

Cormac McCarthy is one of the major authors of contemporary Southern and American literature. After twenty years of novels set in the southwest borderlands, McCarthy has revisited the Appalachian setting of his first four novels in his new work *The Road*. In response, this lecture will consider the relationship of the McCarthy canon to the contemporary Appalachian and Southern literary tradition.

McCarthy's work is full of crossings, in physical, metaphoric and imaginative terms, and *The Road* represents another in the McCarthy canon. Although he came to national prominence with the publication of *All The Pretty Horses*, the first part of the acclaimed Border Trilogy, McCarthy's work never really left the Appalachian setting of his first four novels, *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and the largely Knoxville-based *Suttree*. Indeed, more than simply revisiting familiar geographic terrain, *The Road* suggests that such an Appalachian or Southern setting contains a redemptive and regenerative quality which his narratives — and their various nomadic and marginalized characters — have often sought to regain.

Of course, one cannot help but comment upon the irony in suggesting that a novel which presents us with a wasted, post-apocalyptic setting could be regenerative in any way. Yet McCarthy accomplishes this with *The Road*, his 2006 novel which has been nominated for the National Book Critics' Circle Award. Much like the Appalachian region itself, McCarthy's work has always challenged and problematized the myths of the Southern imagination — the idea of the South as one of the gardens of the world, its Arcadian sensibility and so forth — yet in *The Road* the region functions as a redemptive space which offers the potential to rejuvenate when all other such signifiers, including the fabled western frontier, have simply disappeared.

Thus I will explore that, although perhaps never truly arrived at, all of McCarthy's Appalachian works interrogate the potential for the region to offer a sublime, transcendental or at least defiant moment. Uncle Ather in *The Orchard Keeper* is the fiercely independent mountaineer who, like his mystic forbears, attempts to resist the dictates of a foreign, hegemonic power. *Outer Dark* is a novel where McCarthy reinscribes the genre of the Southern gothic by employing a demonic East Tennessean aesthetic, *Child of God* is a macabre narrative of dispossession, whilst in *Suttree* McCarthy trains his aberrant gaze upon Knoxville, the Appalachian city which informs the exceptional character of the region.

McCarthy's status as one of the most unique, paradoxical and demanding voices in Southern and American literature is assured. *The Road* has done much to cement this reputation, and I will therefore discuss how this novel uses the physical and figurative terrain of Appalachia to a haunting and memorable degree.