

Child of God Study Guide

Child of God by Cormac McCarthy

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Child of God Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Section I, 1 - 25.....	5
Section I, 25- 44.....	6
Section I , 44 - 60.....	8
Section I, 61 - 85.....	9
Section II, 5 - 108.....	11
Section II, 109 - 127.....	13
Section II, 128 - 141.....	15
Section III, 145 - 168.....	17
Section III, 169 - 197.....	19
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	24
Themes.....	26
Style.....	28
Quotes.....	31
Topics for Discussion.....	33



Plot Summary

Child of God is a novel by Cormac McCarthy, author of All the Pretty Horses. The book is loosely based off of real life events. Child of God follows the story of Lester Ballard, an outsider. Lester lives in Sevier County, which is located in Eastern Tennessee. The novel follows Lester's obsession with pedophilia as well as his descent into necrophilia and murder.

The book begins on Lester's family's property. There is an auction being held to sell off his land. Lester breaks into the scene. He is very angry that the auction has started. He threatens to shoot the auctioneer. Before he can carry out his threats, he is tackled to the ground by the sheriff. Lester has always been an outsider. He stays in his shabby home, alone. No one comes to visit him. The only time he interacts with others is to terrorize other townspeople and make them feel annoyed.

Lester does have a few friends that he visits around town. He is friends with the dumpkeeper and attempts to visit him whenever he can. Lester has other motives though. He really wants to see the dumpkeeper because he is obsessed with his daughters. Lester is obsessed with the young girls, mostly because they are very sexual and developing very fast. Lester goes to their house so that he can tease the girls and talk to them.

One day, as Lester is wandering along Frog Mountain, he finds a woman sleeping on the ground. Lester seems to be genuinely concerned for the woman. She looks as if she is freezing. He tries to wake her, but is at first unsuccessful. He moves closer to touch her and she wakes up. The woman then starts to scream at Lester. She is very disoriented and frightened. Lester becomes angry with her because he is trying to be nice, but she begins throwing things at him. Lester then grabs at her, ripping off her nightgown. He leaves her by herself on the mountain.

A few days later, Lester is contacted by a neighbor who warns him that the sheriff will be coming by to arrest him. He tells Lester that he is going to be charged for raping the woman from the mountain. Sure enough, the sheriff comes to collect Lester. He takes Lester to the jail house and begins the process of booking him. Lester is confused. He did not rape the woman. Suddenly the woman comes down the corridor. She begins yelling and cursing at Lester. He yells at her too, calling her old. The woman then attacks Lester. The sheriff pulls the woman off of Lester and locks him up in a jail cell. Lester spends a few days in jail, but is then released. The sheriff asks Lester if he is going to commit any more crimes. Lester says he does not know what the sheriff is talking about.

Lester continues to go wandering around the mountain. One day, he sees a car running on the mountain. Lester decides to investigate. What he finds is very shocking. It is a dead couple in the car. Before they died they were having sex. Lester pulls the man off of the woman. He pushes the man from the car and climb on top of the woman. He begins having sex with her. After Lester finishes, he pulls the woman out of the car. He



decides to bring her to his home. Once he is there, Lester puts the dead girl on his bed and has sex with her again. To preserve the body, he then brings it outside to the barn. The next day, Lester goes into town. He stops at a shop and buys the girl special red underwear.

When Lester returns home, he begins to pose the girl. He sleeps with her again. That night after he puts the girl back in the barn, Lester smells smoke. His house has started to burn down. Lester gathers some things and leaves.

Lester then goes to another friend's house. His friend is not home, but his daughter is. Lester attempts to talk to her. He asks her if he can see her breasts. She refuses him. Lester does not seem angry but he then leaves. He goes outside to retrieve his rifle. Lester then shoots the girl from outside. He goes inside to take her body. While he is dragging the lifeless corpse out, he sets the house on fire.

For the rest of the book, Lester continues to stalk the mountainside looking for victims. He moves into a cave in the mountain. He also begins stealing food from a local farmer named Greer. Lester also tries to kill Greer. It is because of this that Lester ends up in jail. The sheriff and other townspeople finally begin to suspect that Lester has killed the women. When Lester wakes up one morning in his cell, he is accosted by a mob of angry men. They demand that Lester show them where the bodies are. Lester agrees and takes the men to the caves. While he is leading them through small holes and spaces, he manages to loose them. Lester hides in a cave for about three weeks. He survives off of rats and creek water. After that time, he finds his way out of the cave and checks himself into a mental health hospital.

Lester is never charged with the crimes he committed. He lives the rest of his life in a mental hospital. Some time later, the townspeople finally find the bodies of the missing girls in a cave.



Section I, 1 - 25

Section I, 1 - 25 Summary

The book begins with an auction of Lester Ballard's land. The auctioneer, CB, details what is available on the estate. As a large crowd gathers to put in bids, Lester yells from the back of the crowd. He accuses the auctioneer of stealing his land. He wants everyone to clear out. The auctioneer threatens to have Lester arrested and Lester threatens to begin shooting people. Buster, a man attending the auction, punches Lester and sends him to the ground, bleeding. The sheriff takes Lester away in the county car and the auction continues on.

After Lester's land is auctioned off, he is left to live in a two-room shack. The house only has two windows and is infested with bugs and spiders. In the corner lay a pile of mattresses that he uses for a bed. While in complete darkness, Lester lights a lamp. By the light of the lamp, he cooks a potato over a small fire. While he tries to warm himself with food, it does not work. The potato is hard and inedible. Ballard rolls a cigarette and tries to enjoy it in the dim lit night. He blows out the lamp and lays back onto his mattress to sleep.

The book often explores Ballard's strange excursions out into the public. One night, he sees a young couple alone in a parked car. As the couple begins to have sex, Ballard hides in a nearby weed patch to watch them. He gets closer and closer to the car, until he can see. After watching for some time, the young male in the car spots Ballard. Ballard sees him and runs off, frightened of what he will do.

Section I, 1 - 25 Analysis

The first chapter of the book introduces the reader to Lester Ballard. Lester stalks through Sevier County in Tennessee, annoying the people of the town. In the first few chapters, Lester simply sounds like an angry, slightly strange man. He could very well be seen as lonely. This is amplified when the reader learns of the surroundings that Lester does live in. His home seems pathetic. He basically lives in a shack. He only has a mattress to sleep on and raw potatoes to eat.

Later in this section, the reader learns about Lester's affinity for watching people and terrorizing them. This is when the reader begins to suspect that there is something truly strange about Lester.



Section I, 25- 44

Section I, 25- 44 Summary

Lester spends a lot of time shooting rats that are near his house. While doing this, he usually pays a visit to the dumpkeeper who lives down the lane. The dumpkeeper had nine daughters. He had failed to keep an eye on them, and because of that they were very undisciplined and "un"-ladylike. Lester feels as though there is always one of them who is pregnant. All of the girls seemed really lazy and very sexual. Lester could not really tell one from the other. As they all began to fall pregnant, their father beat them. The entire house began to fill up with children. Even one of the youngest girls who was only twelve years old became pregnant. One time, the dumpkeeper caught his daughter and a neighborhood boy having sex in the woods. He crept up on them and scared the boy away. He began to beat his daughter and then began to rape her.

There was one daughter of the dumpkeeper that Lester finds very pretty. He often goes near the dumpkeeper's home just so that he can talk to her. One day, he sees her talking to a local young man. He stops and talks to them, but the girl just teases Ballard. Her top is unbuttoned and she asks him if he wants to see her breasts. Lester seems amazed by her.

On another day, Lester goes to visit the dumpkeeper again. As he talks to the dumpkeeper, he thinks he sees one of the dumpkeeper's daughters in the house, naked. As the dumpkeeper continues to talk to Lester, he explains that one of his girls just ran off with a boy to get married. The dumpkeeper explains that he doesn't know why or how the girls are so wild. Lester then leaves the dumpkeeper to go shoot rats. While he is out the weather begins to change. It begins to rain very hard.

During the bad weather, Lester would often venture to Frog Mountain. One day, he finds a woman sleeping under a tree in a white gown. Lester is not sure if she was dead or alive. He throws a rock at her to see if she will stir. She moves, and Lester bends down to touch her. Suddenly, the woman finally wakes up. She quickly sits up and demands to know what Lester wants. He asks her if she is cold. He also wants to know where the rest of her clothes are. The woman begins to get up, but she is not steady on her feet. When she finally gets up, she rushes to find a rock. She throws the rock at Lester, who is taken aback by the entire situation. Lester advances toward the woman and slaps her across the face. To get back at her, Lester strips her of her thin nightgown and leaves her naked in the cold.

Section I, 25- 44 Analysis

In this section, a theme of pedophilia is introduced. The reader can see that Lester is clearly obsessed with younger girls. He watches them, attempts to tease and flirt, but does not have any success. His interest in the dumpkeeper's daughters only intensifies



because they are young, developing, and also sexually active. The theme is also explored through the actions of the dumpkeeper, who apparently has sex with one of his daughters after he happens upon her and a local boy. The reader questions as to whether this actually happened. It is hard to tell if Lester is relaying this information or if the dumpkeeper is telling him about what happened. Either way, the dumpkeeper's suspected digressions with his own young daughters plays into Lester's obsession. It also shows that Lester does not approve of such horrible behavior.

Also in this section, Lester meets the woman on the mountain. Lester's encounter with her foreshadows his eventual descent into violence towards women and necrophilia. It is interesting to see that Lester is not forceful or mean to this woman. He offers to help her and wake her up. He does not force himself upon her in any way. Because she is disoriented and frightened, she turns on Lester. He could have been more aggressive with her, but is not. All he does is tear her nightgown from her. While this is not as drastic as Lester's behavior will become, it seems as though this triggers his violence and desire to control women.



Section I , 44 - 60

Section I , 44 - 60 Summary

A few days later, a man named Darfuzzle goes by Lester's house. He lets Lester know that the woman from Frog Mountain is claiming that Lester took all of her clothes and raped her. Lester calls the woman a liar and is angry with Darfuzzle for bringing the news. The Sheriff of Sevier County goes to Lester's home to arrest him. The sheriff curses Lester and brings him down to the police station to interrogate him.

The woman from Frog Mountain is also at the station. She begins to curse at Lester and accuse him of raping her. She also questions the sheriff and asks him where the other two men are. The sheriff is confused at first, but she also still maintains that Lester did something to her. Lester begins to deny that he raped the woman. He is getting angrier and angrier by the minute. He begins to advance on the woman, but the sheriff holds him back. As Lester becomes violent, the sheriff pins him to the ground. The woman charges toward Lester and begins to kick him repeatedly.

Lester spends seven nights in jail. While he is there, he becomes friends with a black man named John. The two commensurate about women being the reason that they get in trouble. When Lester asks John what he did wrong, he says that his only mistake was getting caught. The two bond while Lester is in jail, but John is soon taken by a prison guard. Lester is not sure what will happen to him.

The next day, the bailiff comes for Lester. He and the sheriff let him know that he is free to go. They do not apologize for arresting him. They ask him if he is planning anymore evil things to do to people. Lester denies doing anything wrong. As he leaves, Lester looks back to see that the sheriff is still staring at him. The sheriff continues to watch Lester as he walks away from the jailhouse.

Section I , 44 - 60 Analysis

It is shocking that the woman begins to beat Lester. She knows he is not the man that raped her, but wants to take her pain out on someone. Lester's retaliation is to call the woman old. He despises her for her age. In his mind it gives her power. She can stand up for herself and fight back if a man attacks her. Lester already likes younger women, his experience with this older women just reaffirms his attraction for the budding womanhood that young adolescent girls are going through. They are unsure of themselves and more able to be controlled or forced.

The sheriff sees something in Lester's character that is flawed. While everyone in town knows that Lester is strange, the sheriff is the only one that can tell that he will later do more evil. He perceives Lester as a problem, but does nothing to stop him from leaving. The sheriff's questions foreshadow Lester's eventual crimes that he will commit.



Section I, 61 - 85

Section I, 61 - 85 Summary

After Lester gets out of jail, he begins going about town, causing bits of trouble and annoying people. One day he decides to go to a local county fair. He decides to play a game where you pick a fish out of a tank. If the player picks a fish with a mark on it, they win. Lester goes over to the tank and begins taking fish out to look for the markings. The man who works at the booth yells at him and says that he needs to pay or get away from the booth. Lester angrily throws the fish he was holding back into the tank. It splashes the woman standing next to him.

Lester moves onto another booth. Here, all he has to do is shoot a target and he wins a prize. He puts his money down on the counter and the man behind this booth informs him that he must hit the small red target that is located on cards that sit on a wire. He tells Lester that he only has five tries. Lester shoots and hits the middle of the target. When he asks the man at the booth for his prize, the man says that all the red must be removed. With his final four shots, Lester successfully removes all the red on the card. Lester decides that he wants a gigantic teddy bear as a prize. He continues paying for turns and wins two more stuffed animals. The man behind the booth tells Lester that he can no longer pay and should leave the booth right away. A small crowd had gathered to watch Lester win. As he leaves, he spots a young girl in the crowd. She is staring at the stuffed animals, clearly wanting them. Lester is intrigued by the girl, but continues walking on through the crowd. Once he gets home he makes a fire and begins to clean his rifles while he cooks cornbread over the fire. Watching him from across the room are the stuffed animals.

Lester decides to go to the local smith's shop. He has decided that he wants to get a new handle for an ax he has. He wants to know how much it would cost to fix up the ax. The smith tells Lester how much it will cost and takes him to the back room to show him how to fix the ax. He explains how the coals must be very hot. After putting it in the fire, he hammers the handle into the blade. He tells Lester that he has to let the new ax cool. Lester seems to be listening to the smith, but when he asks if Lester could do all that himself, he asks "Do what?"

The next day, Lester goes to visit a friend's house, but finds that his friend is not home. Instead, his wife, daughter, and young toddler are at home. The wife asks Lester to come in. He says hello to her and her daughter and attempts to make conversation with them. He constantly stares at the daughter who is sitting in the living room on the couch, while a baby sits at her feet. Lester declares that he has brought the baby a "playpretty". Out of his coat, he pulls a half-frozen robin and gives it to the toddler. The daughter warns him that the baby will probably hurt the robin. Lester observes how dirty the baby is. He often describes him as also being demented and a monster.



The wife offers Lester a cup of coffee and he accepts. He goes into the kitchen with her to have the drink. A few minutes later, the girl screams. The baby has eaten the robin's legs. While the mother and daughter deal with the child, Lester leaves them.

Section I, 61 - 85 Analysis

This section explores some of Lester's favorite pastimes of annoying people in town. He alienates himself through his actions. Not only does he have no family and only a few friends, but he constantly pushes away others by acting obnoxious. Lester's actions at the fair and in other places in town are nowhere near as extreme as he becomes. Lester further encourages his desire for young girls. At the fair, he stares at the young girl in the crowd. When he goes to his friend's house, he stares at his daughter. Lester's desires are growing more and more each day.



Section II, 5 - 108

Section II, 5 - 108 Summary

On a cold winter morning, Lester goes up to Frog Mountain to shoot some squirrels. While he is coming down the mountain, he finds a car that still has its motor running. At first, Lester leaves, but something pulls his back. Through the fog he can see a naked thigh in the window. He is intrigued and goes closer to the car. He sees that it is a couple who is having sex. Lester finds it is peculiar that they aren't moving, so he opens the car door. He soon discovers that they are both dead. He begins to look at the girl who is laying in the back seat and is half dressed. Lester decides to pull the dead man off of her. After he has detached the bodies, he pushes the man's body to the ground and climbs into the back seat with the dead girl. Lester decides to have sex with her. After he is finished, he decides to leave. After a couple of minutes, Lester turns around. He goes back to the car and gets the girl. He drags her body all the way back to his home.

Once at home, Lester puts the body on his mattress. He lights a fire and brings a blanket in from another room. He takes off his pants and crawls into bed with the body. The next day, two boys come by Lester's house. They say that they are there to hunt on the grounds. Lester yells at them to get away from his house. After this, Lester is frightened that someone might see the girl's body. He takes the body to the barn that is attached to his house. He ties a rope around her body and hoists it up into the attic.

Lester decides to go into town and visit a dress shop. He tells the sales lady that he wants to buy underwear and a bra for someone. She helps him pick out a bra and underwear to match. When Lester returns home, he drags the body down from the attic and sets it up by the fire so that it can thaw out. Once she is warm enough to move, he undresses her and dresses her in the new underwear. For a while, he just watches her. He puts her in different poses and positions. He goes outside to look at her through the window. For a while he just sits and holds her while talking to her. He then begins to undress her again and tells her that she has been waiting for him for a long time. When he is finished, he brings the body back up into the attic and returns to his mattress to go to bed.

Lester wakes up in the middle of the night. He smells smoke. When he gets up to look, he sees that the barn is on fire. He gets some things together and immediately gets out of the house.

Section II, 5 - 108 Analysis

The theme of necrophilia is introduced in this section of the book. At the beginning of the book, Lester simply seems like a lonely, strange, outsider who makes others uncomfortable. Lester finally has the chance to have what he has been longing for—a



young girl. While Lester does have some second thoughts about having sex with the dead girl, his desires overcome him. He can finally have control over someone. He tells the girl how much she has wanted him and longed for him. Because the girl is dead, he has complete control over everything except her consciousness.

While Lester knows the girl is dead, he still chooses to buy clothing and dress her in special outfits and pose her body. He is exerting his sexual power and control over the corpse. Because she doesn't have a choice in what she wears, or what her body does, she has no sexual agency to assert. She will stay a young developing girl and never grow into a woman that can reject and push him away. This is what Lester had experienced with the woman from Frog Mountain. This girl can never reject Lester. After a life of rejection from people in town, Lester is happy to finally have someone to be with him.



Section II, 109 - 127

Section II, 109 - 127 Summary

The next day, Lester goes to see his old friend the dumpkeeper. All the dumpkeeper's daughters have left but one. She is still in the house looking after her baby. Lester talks to the dumpkeeper for a while. He asked him about the fire that burned down Lester's house. Lester says that he does not know what started it.

Lester then goes back to visit his friend's house (where he brought the baby a playpretty). He decides to leave his rifle outside. Through the screen door, he can see the daughter reading magazines while the baby plays on the floor. He rings the doorbell and the daughter answers the door. She tells Lester that her mother and father are not home. He asks her if he can come in. At first she hesitates, but then lets Lester in. He goes into the living room and she heads for the couch. Lester watches her. He asks her if the baby is hers. The daughter is offended by his question and vehemently denies that the baby is hers. He asks her if the baby is from a local boy named Thomas. The girl threatens to tell her father about the way Lester is talking to her. Lester then tells her she should wear less clothing because she is hiding too much. He also asks to see her breasts. By this time, the girl is very angry and tells Lester to get out of the house. He finally leaves.

Once outside, Lester gets his rifle and loads it. From a window he can see the daughter. Lester takes aim, and fires through the window. He goes back into the house to find the girl. She is on the floor but she is still alive. She is trying to get up. Finally, she stops struggling. Lester begins to pile things together in the house. He goes into the kitchen and pushes over the stove. It begins to spark and a fire starts. Lester picks up the dead girl and leaves the baby inside the house.

While Ballard is walking, one day, he is stopped by the sheriff. The sheriff orders him to put his rifle and get into the car. The sheriff begins to question Lester about the fire at the Waldrops. After Lester's place burned down, he was staying with them for a while. Lester denies starting the fire. The sheriff does not seem to believe Lester, but for some reason, he lets him go. Lester is therefore free to wander around the town interacting with more people, even though he is slowly becoming a serial killer. He goes to the local store where he attempts to buy food for himself. The storekeeper asks him when he is going to pay his tab. Lester refuses and grows angry with the store owner. The owner insists that at the rate Lester is paying him, he'll never pay off his tab. He suggests that Lester put something back. Lester refuses and storms out of the store.

Section II, 109 - 127 Analysis

This is a very shocking part of the book. While the reader is still trying to digest the fact that Lester has begun sleeping with a dead body, Lester decides to begin "collecting



girlfriends". He has admired the girl before. Lester attempts to flirt with her. She refuses him, not with violence as the woman on the mountain had. Instead, she is scared, nervous because an older man is making unwanted advances. No one is there to protect her.

Lester now knows what he can feel with a woman— and she does not need to be alive for him to have it. To get what he wants, Lester kills the girl. He does not need to struggle and rape her. In his mind, he can have just as good of sex with a woman who is dead than one that is alive. Once he has the body, he can make the woman say whatever he wants her to in his mind. It also seems that Lester's violence toward women was triggered by the interaction with the woman from the Mountain, as well as the rejection from his friend's daughter. Lester may have also planned to do this, because his old girlfriend burned in the fire. He knew that the friend's daughter was somewhat standoffish towards him in the past. He purposefully brings his rifle with him and sets it outside near the window, so that he can access it easily.



Section II, 128 - 141

Section II, 128 - 141 Summary

Lester begins to spend most of his time wandering the mountainside, stalking young couples in cars. From time to time, he goes back down into town to talk to locals. One day he wanders into a store and bargains with people over three watches. Lester tries to bargain with the other customers, but he does not really know how to interact with other people. He is gruff and disgruntled. Finally, he talks one man into buying a watch. As Lester returns to back to the Frog Mountain, he becomes nervous when he sees other footprints. Lester scrambles to find where he has hidden his rifle. He finally realizes that they are just his tracks and appears to calm down.

Lester continues to discover more about the mountain. He enjoys it so much that he finds a cave to set up his new home. Lester travels deep into the cave, winding around different dark, small tunnels. The cave is dark, dingy, and damp. In the cave are his few worldly possessions—the stuffed animals from the fair and his mattress. As Lester sleeps on his dirty, wet mattress, he shines his light towards one of the corners in the cave. Across the way are the bodies of his victims. As Lester falls asleep, he watches the bodies.

The winter was dreadfully cold and hard. In order to survive, Lester takes to stealing from a local farmer named Greer. During the day, Lester hides outside of Greer's hen house. When Greer is done in the hen house, Lester sneaks into the hen house and attempts to steal a chicken. The chicken begins to squeal and Lester quickly grabs it. He begins to wring the chicken's neck and runs away.

As spring approaches, the winter weather will not leave. Lester continues to stalk the mountainside. He wears his victims' underwear and outerwear. Lester looks insane walking around with a rifle and female clothing, but he does not think anything of it.

Section II, 128 - 141 Analysis

To the reader, it seems that Lester's descent into madness seems to happen over a winter. What really might be going on is that instead, these feelings and peculiar behaviors have been hiding and festering inside of Lester. He continues to annoy the townspeople in anyway possible. When Lester tries to sell watches to the men at the store, his encounter with them is incredibly awkward.

Lester begins to shrink further and further from society as his behavior become incredibly strange. His instincts of survival begin to kick in, as he has no money or friends to give him food. He prowls the mountainside, observing nature, but also being sure that no one else is near where he has stored the bodies. He steals in order to provide for himself. He also resorts to living in a cave so that he can protect himself and his girlfriends from being discovered. The cave becomes a symbol of safety, solitude,



and secrets. Lester's girlfriends are trapped there. When he sleeps among his few possessions he can stare at all the bodies, and is somewhat content. The girls seem to be alive to him.



Section III, 145 - 168

Section III, 145 - 168 Summary

As spring approaches, the sheriff and the rest of town become more aware of the murders that have taken place. They begin to search the mountainside for the bodies of the girls as well as the the murderer. The sheriff and the deputy sheriff go up to the mountain and search one of the missing cars. They look in the glove box and the trunk. They ask other locals questions about the couple. They wonder if there is anyway they could have simply run off together and eloped. Most people agree that the couple must have been killed or abducted and that they would have not run away.

While the sheriff and deputy continue to search for the killer, Lester continues to track his prey. On the mountain, he finds another couple who are making out in a car together. Lester goes up to the window and shines a very bright flash light inside. He knocks on the window. The boy opens the car door and yells at Lester because he is not a cop and has no right to intrude on their privacy. Lester tells the boy to get out of the car. The boy ignores him and tries to start the engine. Lester then shoots the boy in the neck. The girl in the car begins to panic. Lester tells her to get out of the car. She pushes the boy's body aside and gets out. Lester tells her to turn around. He then shoots her in the back of the head.

Before the body can touch the ground, Lester grabs her. Lester drags her body into the weeds and throws it on the ground. Quickly, he is upon the girl—kissing her and feeling her before her body loses warmth. He begins to have sex with her when he suddenly hears a noise. Another person who lives in the mountain has seen Lester. Lester refers to this person as a crazed mountain troll. The "troll" grabs Lester's trousers and gets into the car. The troll begins to speed away, with Lester chasing after him. Lester realizes he does not have his rifle and stops running. Lester returns to the girl, who is now cold. He curses and lifts her onto his back and brings her back to his cave.

Lester decides to move out of the cave to make sure that all of his possessions are safe from a flood. With his rifle, three stuffed animals, and a basket of clothing in hand, Lester comes out of his hiding place. Because of a flood, the nearby creek had overflowed. As Lester exits, he falls into the water and curses. He looks quite a sight carrying stuffed animals and pounds of women's clothes through the mud. Lester begins to travel deeper into the water. As he does, he falls down and begins splashing about. He cannot swim. He continues to get out of the water. Finally he is able to reach the edge of the water. Lester dries the shells in his rifle and begins to run along the side of the creek.

Finally, Lester finds a new cave along the mountain. He puts the first load of his items into the cave. He then goes back to his original hideout and drags each corpse, one by one, to his new hiding place. He also goes back for his soaked mattress. After Lester is finished, he lays down on his mattress and goes to sleep. He frequently wakes up in the



middle of the night cold and freezing. He wakes up to rub his frozen feet and place them in the creek water that feels warm.

The flood also affects the rest of the county. The sheriff and deputy have to continue the investigation by boat. As they travel throughout town, the people ask them if they have any leads on the killer. The sheriff tells them that he still does not know anything, but that they are working on it. They pull up to the home of Fate, an old man who needs a ride to the store. They pick him up in the boat and Fate begins to tell the Deputy about the White Caps and Bluebills that used to run Sevier County. The old man insists that the White Caps were thieves and and low lifes. The Bluebills started up to suppress the White Caps, but were just as horrible. Both groups were sects of the Ku Klux Klan. A man named Tom Davis ran the White Caps and Bluebills out of town. Fate comments that people are not as mean as they used to be.

Section III, 145 - 168 Analysis

It is very interesting that the sheriff does not immediately expect that Lester is the culprit. Who stalks around town annoying people? Who has been accused of rape? Who has attacked the sheriff before? All of these things are actions that Lester has taken. Lester is the tumor of this town, yet the sheriff does not recognize this, which should be obvious especially since Sevier County is such a small place with not many people.

In this section, the reader also learns about how gruesome the murders have gotten. Lester is not adverse to killing anyone. He also does not feel any remorse or sadness. He does not care that he has just taken a life. He will continue to kill and feel nothing at all. He has sunk into the depths of his own perversions. The only thing he is thinking about is when he will get his next victim to have sex with, not the fact that he has killed.



Section III, 169 - 197

Section III, 169 - 197 Summary

As the spring weather finally gets warmer, Lester spends time just observing nature. He also spends a lot of time in his new cave, staring at his corpses and dreaming about his childhood. As a boy he used to walk the mountainside and watch the leaves. He thinks to himself how beautiful everything is and often breaks down and cries.

Lester continues to steal food from Greer. One day, he is hiding in the bushes. He loads his gun and fires at Greer while he is shoveling. The bullet hits the shovel. Lester curses and begins to load the gun, as Greer runs away. Lester shoots again, and gets Greer in the chest, but Greer keeps hobbling toward the house. Greer pulls out a gun and shoots Lester in the arm. Lester passes out on the steps of Greer's house.

When Lester wakes up, he is in a hospital. He slowly realizes that he is missing his arm. He asks the nurse what has happened to it and she said that she does not know. She asks Lester if he wants to know about the man he shot. Lester at first does not want to know, but then asks. The nurse says that Greer survived. She then asks Lester if he even cares whether or not the man survived. Lester screams at her. He says that he wishes Greer has died.

The next day, Lester is visited by a group of men. They all enter his cell and throw clothes at him. They tell him that they know he killed all the women. They ask him if he slept with the corpses. Lester at first denies the accusations. The group of men begin to threaten him and tell him they will kill him unless he tells them where the bodies are. Lester finally agrees. He gets dressed and they throw him into the back of a truck. Once on Frog Mountain, Lester begins to lead the men through a cave. They follow him, not sure exactly where they are going. The group travels deep into the cave, twisting and winding through the paths. As they approach a very small crevice, Lester enters it with some difficulty. After he is gone, the other men stand around and try to figure out how they will squeeze through the hole. They call out to Lester, but he does not answer. They realize that he has escaped.

Lester continues to travel deeper and deeper into the cave. The deeper he goes, the more he hopes he will find an exit on the other side. To survive, he drinks from water that drips in different crevices in the cave. Over three days, he searches for a way out of the cave. He scratches on the wall with a stone or his bare hands. After the long days are over, Lester finally burrows his way out of the cave. Once he pulls himself out of the hole he begins to run. As he is making his way through the forest, he sees a bus coming down the path. He quickly gets out of the way. As the bus passes by, he sees a little boy staring out the back of the window. When Lester sees the boy, he sees himself. It is dawn when Lester shows up to the hospital. He tells the nurse on duty that he believes he is supposed to be there.



Lester is never formally charged with the murders. He is instead placed in a mental facility for the rest of his life. In 1965, Lester is found dead on the floor of his cell. His body is shipped off to a state medical school in Memphis, TN. His body is dissected and cut open. Muscles are removed from every bone. When the medical students are finally done with his body, the pieces of him are scraped off of the table and put into a bag. This bag is brought to the cemetery. There are a few words said for all the bodies that have been donated.

In April of 1965, Arthur Ogle is plowing in his fields when he sees a large gap in the earth. He goes down to inspect. The next day, two neighborhood children go to see the hole. The kids go down into the hole and find the bodies of Lester's victims. The sheriff shows up and calls in a crew to begin taking the bodies out of the cave. One by one, they lift out the moldy, moist, grey covered bodies. By the end of the day, the crew pulls out seven bodies.

Section III, 169 - 197 Analysis

The reader learns that Lester has no moral remorse for trying to kill Greer. Just like with the girls, Lester does not care. With the attempted murder of Greer, Lester only feels as though he was looking out for his own survival. While the reader might feel bad for Lester because he was finally caught, this subsides when Lester says that he does not feel sorry for trying to kill Greer.

It is interesting to note that Lester is not caught in the act of killing and degrading someone, but instead trying to survive and gather food. It is unclear how the sheriff finally figures out that Lester committed the murders. The mob of men that interrogate Lester seem to simply conclude that they have found the murderer. Again, the cave becomes Lester's safe haven and sanctuary. He feels that it will again hide him from the people that will look down on his actions and ways. He escapes into the cave so that he can be in control of what has happened to him.

It seems ridiculous that it took the townspeople so long to find the missing bodies. The sheriff and mob of men knew that Lester liked to frequent the mountains, but they did not look there. Lester's victims stayed trapped in their unpleasant grave a long time before being discovered. Even after Lester leaves the cave, they seemed to hide his secrets for as long as they could.



Characters

Lester Ballard

Lester Ballard is the main character of the novel. He has no living family or connections in Sevier County. Lester is actually the only character that is present in the book for more than a couple of pages. The book follows his descent into solitude and madness. The book begins with Lester as a virtual outsider in Sevier County. His property has just been auctioned off. No one wants to help him because he makes other people uncomfortable with his violent ways and rough demeanor. The only friend he really has is the dumpkeeper, who's character is also questionable. Lester enjoys visiting the dumpkeeper because he gets to look at his young, developing daughters. Lester often teases them and hopes that they will like him in return. For the most part, he does not know how to act around the girls.

Lester is left to his own accord. With no one to comment on his obsession with young girls or awkward social skills, he does not change his ways. He becomes increasingly more secluded from the rest of the town. He stalks the mountain hunting rats, watching people in cars have sex, and strangely observing the subtle beauty of the country side.

After Lester is accused of raping the woman on Frog Mountain, his character descends into dementia. Lester finds the dead couple on Frog Mountain and decides that he will finally take what he has been deprived of for so long. After he experiences being with a woman (even a dead woman), he sees that he can have them and they will not put up a fight. Lester begins killing girls and having sex with their dead bodies. To hide his obsession, Lester finds a cave to hide in. He brings all his possessions and corpses to the cave and lives among them.

The end of the novel follows Lester's character on his quest for survival. As he tries to run from the sheriff and the town residents, he cannot escape him. They literally back him into a cave and he is forced to hide.

The Sheriff

The sheriff presides over Sevier County, Lester's home. He is very respected throughout the county. The residents trust the sheriff's judgment and feel that he can protect them from whoever is committing the murders. From the beginning of the book, Lester does not like the sheriff. This is because the sheriff punches Lester when he is getting out of line at the auction.

The sheriff seems to be the voice of reason throughout the book. Lester certainly is not, and his one friend, the dumpkeeper, is just as disturbed as Lester in some respects. Through the character of the sheriff, the reader is able to identify with someone who is looking to sort through the madness that ensues around Lester.



The sheriff does not trust Lester at all. When the woman on Frog Mountain suggests that Lester raped her, the sheriff locks Lester up without his testimony or statement. While he does not treat Lester unkindly, the sheriff must hope that Lester did commit the crime. It is the only way he can get Lester off the streets and stop him from bothering other people. After it has been determined that Lester did not rape the woman, the sheriff asks Lester what evil he is planning in the future.

It is interesting that the sheriff senses Lester's predisposition to commit some act of evil on the town. However, the sheriff never takes any action besides giving Lester a warning. When he stops him and questions him about burning down the Waldrop's house, Lester denies the allegations. The sheriff leads the investigation to find out who is killing people up on Frog Mountain. He and the deputy sheriff never say they are suspecting Lester. This is very surprising because the sheriff always suspects Lester of doing something wrong. Several times in the book the sheriff warns Lester to keep himself in line.

The Dumpkeeper

The dumpkeeper is Lester's only friend. He is married with nine daughters. His wife also takes care of his daughter's children. The dumpkeeper constantly curses and berates his daughters for sleeping around with the local boys in town. He also physically abuses his wife and daughters. A couple of time he has caught his daughters sleeping with boys in the forest. It is suggested that he has also molested a few of his daughters.

Greer

Greer is the farmer who Lester steals food from. While Lester lives in the cave, he sneaks down to Greer's farm house and steals chickens. One day, while Greer is shoveling, Lester attempts to kill him. Greer gets shot in the chest, but gets to his own gun and shoots Lester in the arm.

Deputy Sheriff

The deputy sheriff works with the sheriff. He goes with the sheriff to investigate the murders that have taken place on the mountain.

Fate

Fate is the old man that the sheriff and deputy sheriff give a ride to during the flood. Fate tells the two men about the White Caps and Bluebills that used to run the town. He tells them about how a man named Tom Davis who kicked the bad groups out of town.



John

John is a black man that Lester meets in prison. He and Lester begin to talk about women in jail. Lester also tells John that he did not commit the rape. John is taken away from the jail cell before Lester is released.

Woman in Night Dress on Frog Mountain

The woman who accuses Lester of rape. Lester finds her asleep in the forest surrounding Frog Mountain. When he tries to wake her to see if she is alright, she yells at him and tells him to go away. Later, she lies and tells the sheriff that Lester raped her on the mountain. Lester becomes very angry and begins cursing at her. She retaliates by kicking and beating Lester while the sheriff is trying to restrain Lester from harming her.

It is interesting to note that Lester never tried to take advantage of the woman, but later on, he feels the need to kill women to have sex with them. It seems odd the Lester would have not taken a chance and tried something with the woman. Instead, he is very nice to her until she threatens him. She could have been the reason he feels he must kill women to be able to have sex with them. When he attempted to be kind to one, she was very disgruntled and violent towards him.

C.B.

C.B is the auctioneer that appears at the beginning of the book. He is selling Lester's land because the county has taken over the property. Lester becomes very upset and attempts to stop the auction. He threatens to shoot C.B. for being apart of the auction.

Daughter of Lester's Friend

This is the young girl who is killed by Lester in her home. Lester comes by to visit her father. When he is not home, Lester begins to make advances toward the daughter. She refuses him. Lester does not seem too upset by the rejection at first. He goes outside and shoots the girl through the open window.



Objects/Places

Sevier County

Sevier County is located in East Tennessee. This is where Lester's home is located. This is a real place in Tennessee.

Frog Mountain

Lester often likes to explore Frog Mountain. This is where he finds the dead couple. This is also where he finds the cave that becomes his home for many months.

White Caps

The White Caps are a sect of the Ku Klux Klan. They do not exist in Sevier County anymore due to the vigilance of Tom Davis.

Bluebills

This is another sect of the Ku Klux Klan. The Bluebills hate the White Caps.

Sevier County Jail

Lester is imprisoned here twice, once for being accused of raping the woman from the mountain and another time when he is finally caught shooting Greer and killing the young couples.

State Hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee

The state hospital is where Lester lives out the rest of his life. He is not convicted for his crime and is deemed mentally insane.

Playpretty

Lester brings this to the toddler who lives at his friend's house. It is another word for a toy. The playpretty turns out to be a bird. The toddler takes the bird and eats it.



The Cave

Towards the end of the book, Lester takes to living in caves. The caves become places for Lester to hide his victims and secrets. Lester feels at one with the cave and the nature that surrounds it.

Lester's Land in Sevier County

This is where the opening of the book takes place. The sheriff and auctioneer are overseeing the auctioning off of Lester's land and property.

Lester's House

McCarthy describes Lester's home as being an unlivable shack. This is where he takes the first dead girl's body. One night while Lester is sleeping, his home catches on fire.



Themes

Pedophilia

Throughout the book, Lester conveys his obsession for younger women and girls. Although McCarthy never makes the age of Lester's victims known, his characters often refer to them as girls. Every time Lester visits the dumpkeeper, he stares at the man's daughters.

He cannot keep his eyes or his mind off of them. He constantly thinks about how they are developing. While visiting, he teases the girls, hoping to entice them into some kind of sexual foreplay or relationship. Lester is obsessed with their sexuality. He is amazed that they run off with local boys and have sex. Because he has never experienced this with someone, he longs to have some type of sexual relationships.

Lester also often sees young girls at the fair or in local shops that he stares at. He watches them in crowds. Lester's obsession with young girls is further validated when he tries to deal with the woman on the mountain. He often refers to her as incredibly old. While she is probably not very old, she intimidates Lester. This is because she is violent, but also because she is older, she can assert herself more. She is not afraid to ask Lester to back away from her. Lester cannot handle taking this from an older woman. He would rather deal with younger girls, whom he feels that he can intimidate.

Survival of the Fittest

Another major theme of this book is survival. Lester has no friends or connections. Because he is disconnected from the rest of the world he depends on himself to find his own food and entertain himself. As the book unfolds, the reader sees the progression of Lester's desire to survive spiral out of control. At first he begins by wanting to protect his land and property. He threatens people because he feels it is the only way he can survive. His instinct to protect his own personal property—all he has left—kicks in.

Another part of survival is the desire to mate or procreate. Lester desires to be with a woman. Although he cannot actually have a child with a dead body, Lester feels like he must have a connection to something in order to survive. As he sinks deeper into his seclusion and madness, he fools himself into thinking he has actually found mates. When Lester moves his things to a different cave after the flood, he is sure to also move the bodies.

Lester also begins stealing food to survive. This is the ultimate act of trying to stay alive. While the reader is not exactly sure why he attempts to kill Greer, it seems that Lester sees Greer as an obstacle to his ability to obtain food. He wants to kill Greer as a means to save his source of food. Lester also again survives the mob of men that demand him to show them the bodies. While "leading" them to the cave, Lester loses the men and is able to again get away.



Necrophilia and Power

During the first half of the book, Lester does not perform any violence against women. While he is incredibly disgruntled, violent, and awkward when interacting with others, it is not until after he meets the woman on Frog Mountain that he begins to act violent towards women. Lester does attempt to be kind to the woman. But the woman is so angry and untamed that she does anything she can to get away from Lester. After finding the dead couple on Frog Mountain, Lester sees a way to easily satisfy his longing for young girls. Dead girls cannot fight back.

Lester's killing and then having sex with the corpses gives him a certain kind of control and power. He takes the girls' lives and then exerts his sexual power over them. While they are alive they can only deny him. When they are dead they have no say. Lester can imagine that the corpses have also been desiring him. Lester wants to control every aspect of the dead girls. For his first "mate" he buys her underwear and clothes so that he can dress her. He then takes her body and poses her. He goes outside of his home to stare at her through the window. By acting as if he is spying on her, Lester also exerts another form of power over the the dead girl.

Even though Lester kills the girls so that he can have them completely, he does not actually own them. He has never experienced these girls willingly giving themselves. Every time Lester sleeps with one of the corpses he tells it how much she has been desiring him. Even though he is trying to control the girls, he can never control the fact that they never wanted to be touched by him.



Style

Point of View

The book is told from the point of view of an omniscient third person, Lester, and other characters. At times throughout the novel, the reader knows what is going on with Lester as well as other characters in the book. The omniscient third person knows that the dumpkeeper has taken advantage of his daughters and that the sheriff is searching for the person who has been murdering young couples in the mountains. This point of view gives the reader a way to know what is going on outside of Lester's lonely existence.

Lester's point of view offers the insight to his own sordid actions and mind. The reader is let into a secret that no one else in the town has figured out yet. They all knew that Lester was kind of strange, but the reader is allowed to see the depths of his madness. Throughout the book, there is a progression from strange oddities in Lester's behavior to full blown delinquency and moral disregard.

The last point of view is that of several characters in the book that are never identified. Sometimes, McCarthy allows these characters to speak about Lester for a page or so. They give more of a voice to the people of the town. From this point of view, the reader can see how a few characters in the book view Lester. Only two people ever talk about him, but it again gives the townpeople a voice in the story.

Setting

The novel is set in rural Tennessee. The area that Lester lives in is in eastern Tennessee in Sevier County. This is an actual county in Tennessee. Lester never leaves Sevier County because he really has nowhere to go. Although he does not have any surviving family in the town, his family has always been in Sevier County. This is why Lester is so adverse to letting go of his land. When the townspeople gather to auction off his home, he is very angry and a fight ensues in front of the property.

Lester also spends a lot of time on Frog Mountain. He usually wanders around the mountain hunting dead squirrels and other rodents that he can find to eat. Many important events in the book happen on the mountain. Lester encounters the woman that accuses him of rape here. This is also where he finds the dead couple. He drags the dead girl from the car and down the mountain to his house.

After Lester burns down his home, he continues to travel deeper into the depths of the mountain. He takes with him a few possessions and the bodies he has begun collecting. The two caves that Lester inhabits become a cover for his indiscretions and obsessions. They shelter him from the rest of the town and the rest of the world. No one knows how to figure out where he has hidden the bodies of the girls.



The caves of Frog Mountain are Lester's salvation until the end of the book. When the town men want to find where the girls bodies are, Lester leads them to Frog Mountain and inside of a cave. He manages to escape into a small hole of the cave. He lives in the cave for a while, surviving on rats and other rodents he can find in the cave. As the caves have hidden his transgressions, they also protect Lester in is time of need.

Language and Meaning

McCarthy's style of writing is very descriptive. The descriptive language becomes confusing to the reader. While description can usually enrich a story and allow the reader to vividly see a picture of the story, McCarthy's descriptions do not always let the reader understand the story. The description often distracts the reader from the plot. An example of the this is below:

"They hung there for a moment in a pushing frame of piebald fur and then bowed through and filled the room, circled once with rising volume dog on dog and then swept out of the window howl on howl carrying first the muntins, then the sash, leaving a square and naked hole in the wall and ringing in his ear."

As seen above, there is often very little punctuation in the story, which also leads the reader to become confused. There are no quotation marks around dialogue between characters, which adds an element of dialogue sloshed with heavy description of the characters and their surroundings.

McCarthy strives to bring the dialogue alive by writing it just as the people from eastern Tennessee would speak it. This also aids in the choppy nature of the text. The reader gets a better sense of the gruff, rough personality that Lester has. When Lester speaks to others he is often perverse and ignorant sounding. Giving the characters an actual accent and way of speaking brings Sevier County to life. The reader can further understand the people that surround Lester. They are not at all glamorous, but instead hardworking, sometimes backward, country folk. Although they are not sophisticated, they seem like normal compared to Lester and all of his transgressions.

Structure

The novel is separated into three parts. McCarthy does not separate the parts of the novel by subject. The book could have just as easily flowed with out the separating sections. The chapters of the book are usually very short. generally around one to three pages each section. This creates a choppy, disconnected feeling in the book. Because McCarthy uses long run-on descriptions and short chapters, the reader gets a spurt of confusing information and then is forced into the next chapter.

Often, the novel feels very disjointed. While the central story outlines Lester's path into madness, McCarthy takes breaks to introduce other character's brief opinions on Lester's actions into the story. There also never seems to be a main flow of the story. At times the central plot line is seen, but often McCarthy deviates from the story. He finds

ways to show how sordid Lester is, but does not always connect it to the main plot. Often, the reader is also confused as to when events have taken place. This is because McCarthy does not do a good job of defining the time period in which Lester's actions are taking place.



Quotes

"They came like a caravan or carnival folk up through the swales of broomstraw and across the hill in the morning sun, the truck rocking and pitching in the ruts and the musicians on chairs in the truckbed teetering and tuning their instruments, the fat man with guitar grinning and gesturing to others in a car behind and bending to give a note to the fiddler who turned a fiddlepeg and listened with a wrinkled face." Section I, p. 3

"He moves in dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like you yourself perhaps. Wasps pass through the laddered light from the barnslats in a succession of strobic movements, gold and trembling between black and black like fireflies in the serried upper gloom." Section I, p. 4

"He stood in the crossroads listening to other men's hounds on the mountain. A figure of wretched arrogance in the lights of few cars passing." Section I, p. 41

"What sort of meanness have you got laid out for next. I figure you ought to give us a clue. Make it more fair. Let's see: failure to comply with a court order, public disturbance, assault and battery, public drunk, rape. I guess murder is next on the list?." Section I, p. 57

"When he got home with the dead girl, it was midmorning. He had carried her on his shoulder for a mile before he gave out altogether. The two of them lying together in the woods. Ballard breathing quietly in the cold air." Section II, p. 91

"She rose slumpshouldered from the floor with her hair all down and began to bump slowly up the ladder. Half way up, she paused dangling. The she began to rise again." Section II, p. 94

"Later he hauled her back to the other room. She was loose and not easy to handle. Her bones lay loosely in her flesh. He covered her with the rags and returned to the fire and built it high as it would go and lay in bed watching it." Section II, p. 103

"As they went down into the valley in the new fell dark basking nighthawks rose from the dust in the road before them with wild wings and eyes as jewels in the headlights." Section III, p. 197

"Coming up the mountain through the blue winter twilight among great boulders and the ruins of giant trees prone in the forest he wandered at the upheaval. Disorder in the woods, trees down, new paths needed. Given charge, Ballard would have made more things orderly in the woods than in men's souls." Section II, p. 136

"The old man was looking out at the flooded town. No, he said. I don't. I think people are made from the day God first made them." Section III, p. 169



"He watched the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the gray fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees are spreading. Squatting there, he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry." Section III, p. 179

" Far below them, the boar they trailed was tilting along with his curious stifflegged lope, highbacked and very black against the winter landscape. The hounds' voices in the vast and pale blue void echoed like the cries of demon yodelers." Section I, p. 68



Topics for Discussion

Lester remarks that he is not sorry for what he has done. Do you think he should have been sent to jail for his crimes? Or at least interrogated for the location of the bodies?

Why do you think Lester goes from committing necrophilia to committing murder?

Why didn't the sheriff suspect Lester right away?

Do you think that Lester's encounter with the woman on Frog Mountain caused him to become violent against women?

Explain how Lester tries to survive in the book. Draw on the themes of necrophilia and power as well as survival of the fittest.

Why do you think Lester is obsessed with younger women?

What do you think about McCarthy's writing style? Did you find it confusing and hard to follow? Or did the descriptions aid in the telling of the story?

While the reader learns about the townspeople through the way they speak and view Lester, do you think that McCarthy should have developed other characters more? Would it have given the reader a better idea as to what kind of person Lester is in this town?