

Outer Dark Study Guide

Outer Dark by Cormac McCarthy

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Plot Summary

Rinthy Holme has a baby boy. She and her brother, Culla, live in a rustic cabin in the woods in Appalachia. When Rinthy goes into labor, she pleads with Culla to go get a midwife to help her. He refuses because the midwife might tell others about the baby. Culla reluctantly helps Rinthy when she gives birth. He takes the healthy baby boy to the woods and leaves it for dead. Rinthy asks for the baby but is told by Culla that the baby was sickly and died. A tinker (vendor) who had stopped by the Holme cabin earlier finds the baby and brings it to a nurse in a nearby town.

As Rinthy begins to recover, she asks about the baby. She wants to visit its grave and bring it flowers. Culla had created a false grave in the nearby woods and brings Rinthy there. She places flowers on the grave and digs in the grave because she wants to see her baby. Rinthy digs in several places and finds that there is no baby. She confronts her brother. He finally tells Rinthy that the baby did not die but that he gave it to the tinker, which of course was also a lie.

Rinthy still very weak and recovering from childbirth. She realizes one day that Culla has abandoned her and is not coming back. She finally gains enough strength to leave. She gathers her meager belongings and sets out on a quest to find her baby. Rinthy walks for miles and miles through woods and from one small town to another. She asks every person she meets up with if they have seen the tinker. Rinthy tells the people that the tinker has something that belongs to her and she needs to get it back. She is met with much skepticism when she is asked what the tinker looks like but she does not know.

Rinthy is relentless and never loses sight of her goal. Her love for the child grows as she hunts the tinker down. However, Rinthy is a sympathetic person and is offered help in the form of meals, places to stay and even transportation in one case. She also makes her way by working and earning enough wages to keep her going. Rinthy's breasts are sore and leaking milk. She sees a doctor and feels renewed when he tells her that her breasts would have dried up if her baby had died. She takes this as confirmation that her baby is alive.

At the same time Rinthy is searching for her baby, her brother Culla is searching for her. When he had returned to their cabin, he had seen that she had left. Worried about her, he sets off on his quest to find her. In this same rugged area, Culla walks for miles and miles, picking up work and asking about for his sister. He runs into some tough situations. In one town he is chased by armed men. Even though he sustains some superficial buckshot wounds, he is able to allude them. A group of outlaws force him at gunpoint to trade his good boots for a worn-out pair. In another instance, he is found guilty of trespassing and serves ten days labor for the judge. Culla then is blamed for the death of a young pig drover. The other drovers wrongly accuse him of stampeding the herd, causing the young drover and some of the herd to go over a cliff to their deaths. The drovers agree to hang him, but Culla is able to escape by jumping off the cliff to the river below.



Rinthy finally locates the tinker and confronts him about her baby. At first the tinker denies any knowledge of the baby but eventually leads Rinthy to his cabin. The baby is not there and Rinthy begs the tinker to take her there the next day. The tinker questions Rinthy about the baby and accuses her of abandoning it in the first place. She explains that her brother told her he sold it to the tinker. Rinthy finally confesses that the baby is the biological product of her and her brother. The tinker is disgusted with her and leaves, warning her not to follow or he will kill her.

There is an underlying theme to the story of the sister and brother. There are shadowy groups of ruffians and murderers who are hanging people and digging up graves. In his travels, Culla has encountered some of these outlaws. On separate occasions, both Rinthy and Culla encounter men hanging from trees. These aspects of the story place an eerie pallor over the story's ambiance.

The tinker, feeling guilty, is taking the baby back to Rinthy, but encounters the murderous group. He tells the bearded man the origin of the baby. The tinker is hung and the outlaws torture the baby. Culla comes upon them and finds the baby burned, with only one eye. The head outlaw cuts the baby's throat and hands the baby to Culla. Later, Rinthy comes across the campfire and sees bones and a small ribcage. She does not know what to make of it and falls to sleep by the fire.

Culla is not murdered by the ruffians. He is allowed to live and wander about the now dark and eerie countryside in search of a peace he is not destined to find.

The story is a parable about innocence and goodness (Rinthy) versus selfishness and evil (Culla). The ominous Bearded Man represents an unforgiving society judging harshly the weakest and most innocent among it. The blind man at the end who tells the restless, guilty soul of Culla to pray represents Blind Faith. Though the sin of incest is reviled by society represented by the murder of the baby, it does not prevent love and peace to prevail in the innocent—Rinthy is at peace when she finds the burned remnants of her baby.



Pages 3 through 18

Pages 3 through 18 Summary

An unnamed man awakes from a dream in which he was asking God to heal him. What awakes him is the noise from a vendor who is in front of his cabin, deep in the woods. The man steps out and waves off the vendor, telling him there is sickness and that the cabin is quarantined. His sister, he tells the vendor, is very ill. When the vendor inquires as to the nature of the illness, the man is vague and does not provide an answer. The vendor has tea, coffee—everything from thread to skillet. The man tells the vendor he does not need anything now but may the next time he comes by.

The man returns inside to his sister, who is ready to give birth. The brother ignores his sister's request for more heat and some cocoa. A short time later, the sister begins feeling labor pains and asks her brother to fetch the midwife. The brother refuses, telling his sister that the midwife will tell others about the baby. The sister continues to ask for the midwife's help, but the brother is adamant and does not fetch help for his sister. The sister goes into labor, and in a long and painful delivery, finally gives birth to a boy. The brother helps deliver the baby in the final stages and cuts the umbilical cord. He tells his sister that the baby looks unhealthy and will probably not live. The man takes the baby deep into the adjoining woods and leaves him there. He struggles his way back toward the cabin in the dark.

Pages 3 through 18 Analysis

The location of the cabin in the woods where the brother and sister reside is not identified. However, it is very rural and rustic and lacking in amenities. They barely have enough to eat and conditions are very rugged. A vendor comes by to sell his wares. The brother waves off the vendor telling him his sister is very ill with a contagious disease. In reality, the sister is pregnant and nearing delivery. When the pains begin, she begs her brother to fetch the midwife, but he refuses because the woman might talk. Why the brother is hiding the fact that his sister is pregnant is not clear at this point. After the sister gives birth to a son, the brother indicates that the baby looks ill and probably will not live. He takes the baby deep into the woods to leave him there. Driven by guilt, the brother returns and retrieves the baby.



Pages 19 through 23

Pages 19 through 23 Summary

The vendor, called a tinker, is walking through the woods following a foot path recently made by another person. He's trying to find his way out but is having problems following the paths. He stops to get his bearings and hears a child's cry. He finds the baby left in a bed of moss. The vendor takes the baby and wraps him in some gingham he had in his cart. He takes the baby back to his store. The woman at the store, perhaps his wife, is of course surprised by what the tinker has brought with him. They decide to take the baby to a nurse who lives nearby.

Pages 19 through 23 Analysis

The abandoned child is saved by the tinker who is following the path made by the man who left the child in the woods. It is day and the baby would not have lived much longer had the tinker not found him. He and the woman at the store (perhaps his wife) decide to take the baby to a nurse nearby. The child, therefore, will survive without the knowledge of the man who left him in the forest or his sister who gave birth to him.



Pages 24 through 36

Pages 24 through 36 Summary

Culla, the brother, goes to town for food, but it is Sunday and the store is closed. He struggles back and finds his sister still in pain and weak, bloody and foul in her bed. Culla makes an egg for his sister and gives her some water. The cornbread they eat that night is beginning to turn green from mold but they ignore it. While his sister sleeps, Culla takes an ax and digs a shallow grave in the glad near-by. The next day Culla leaves for the store again. He tells his sister not to talk to any strangers. She replies that there are only strangers in her world. The sister begins to gain strength and walks about the cabin a bit, although she continues to bleed.

The sister becomes curious about her baby and asks her brother where it was. He replies that it is buried in the ground. Although he at first ridicules her request to bring it flowers, he finally acquiesces and leads the hobbled, slow-moving girl to the false grave he created and leaves her. The girl lays a bouquet on the grave that is big enough for a man and starts to dig around various spots in the grave area. She only finds more clay and rock. Her brother returns and is angry at her actions. His sister is not accusatory but rather bewildered. Culla storms off cursing at the sky.

Pages 24 through 36 Analysis

Culla is being plagued by guilt on two counts. He murdered his son and he is lying about it to his sister. Without medical help, the sister is recovering slowly. The brother is providing her with the little physical nourishment available but starving her emotional needs. The young girl who just had a baby was not allowed to even hold the child before hearing that he had died. When she asks her brother to show her the grave so she can pay her respects, he at first ridicules her that it did not even have a name. The sister suggests that they could name the baby. The brother responds that one does not name dead things. He finally leads her to a false grave he made. While alone, she digs into the ground trying to see the baby she carried for nine months and delivered just a few days before. She finds nothing but rock and dirt. As a mother, will she wonder that her child might be alive somewhere. The brother catches her digging in the grave and becomes angered.



Pages 37 through 50

Pages 37 through 50 Summary

Culla Holme goes into the nearby town. He stops at the store and purchases for a dime a modest breakfast of cheese and crackers. Culla speaks with a wagon driver outside the store, asking him if he needs help. The wagon driver does not, but suggests that Culla apply at the plant or ask the squire down the street if he needs help. Culla follows his advice and goes to the squire's house and asks to speak to him. A servant fetches the squire, who at first says he has no work. The squire stops Culla as he starts to leave and offers him the job of axing a fallen tree for firewood. Culla accepts the job and is given a fifty cent piece when he completes it. The squire senses asks Culla where he is from and where he lives. He senses that Culla is running from something. The squire provides Culla with dinner and a place to sleep overnight.

When the squire wakes the next morning, Culla has already departed. The squire realizes that Culla stole his boots. He has a servant prepare his horse and wagon. The squire, with shotgun in hand, goes after Culla. As he rides down the road alone, some men call him by name, Harmon, and seize the reins of his horse. The squire reaches for his shotgun.

Pages 37 through 50 Analysis

Culla Holme and his sister are destitute. Culla goes to the nearby town looking for work. A squire in the city offers him some labor work on his estate. The squire senses that Culla is hiding something, running from his past. Culla completes the job and enjoys a hot meal that evening. Later as he is sitting in the shed, Culla looks at his worn shoes. His poverty-stricken existence leads him to steal the squire's boots and take off from the property early before the squire awakens. This angers the squire, who feels betrayed by Culla and chases after him with his shotgun. During this ride, his horse's reins are taken over by several men who he knows. The squire prepares to shoot them.



Pages 51 through 76

Pages 51 through 76 Summary

Two men attack the squire, hitting him in the back and severing his spine. The squire falls silent. The sister, Rinthy Holme, realizes that her brother has left their cabin and is not returning. Rinthy gathers her meager belongings, cleans up as best she can and leaves the cabin. She walks to the town and arrives at the general store, where she gets some water. From the store proprietor she learns that her brother, Culla, had been in recently and sold his shotgun to a townsman. Rinthy asks the store owner not to mention to her brother that she had been in. She also asks him if the tinker had been in. The store owner replies that the tinker does not come into his store.

After walking another two miles, Rinthy comes upon a small house and is met on the porch by a man with a lantern. She is invited in for dinner. Along with the man, there are several young woman, a grandmother who has no nose and a young boy. Rinthy asks if anyone had seen the tinker—the tinker had something that belongs to her.

Rinthy stays the night with the family. They all travel to another town in a mule-driven cart. Rinthy leaves the group and walks to the town's general store. The shop owner tells Rinthy that he does not deal with any tinkers. He asks Rinthy why she needs to find him. She tells him that he has something that belongs to her, but she will not tell the shop owner what it is. He asks for the tinker's name and description. Rinthy indicates she knows neither and asks the shop owner to keep her visit to himself. The young boy had left the group. Upon finding Rinthy in the town, he invites her to see a show. Rinthy has never seen a show but has no interest in seeing one. She and the boy rejoin the group just in time for supper. Rinthy asks the family for a ride back with them.

Pages 51 through 76 Analysis

Although it is not clear how she found out, Rinthy has apparently learned that her baby lived and was taken by a tinker. Rinthy's brother has apparently abandoned her in the cabin. Rinthy gathers her belongings and walks to the nearest town—which is miles away. She first visits a shop owner and then a family a few miles outside of town. At both locations she asks if anyone has seen the tinker. She explains that the tinker has something that belongs to her. Obviously, it is the baby, but this she reveals to no one. The family is very welcoming to her, inviting her to supper and to stay overnight. She travels with them the next day to another town. Again, she asks around town for the tinker, but still has no luck. Rinthy is determined to find her child.



Pages 77 through 94

Pages 77 through 94 Summary

Cullen Holme is walking the countryside looking for his sister. He comes across a man in the woods, who offers him a sip of whiskey. The man notices the sturdy-looking boots that Holme is wearing. The two men travel to a town called Cheatham, where Holme seeks work. He stops by a mercantile and learns that there is a big commotion at the church. It turns out that someone had dug up several coffins and exposed the dead people inside them. Holme looks in a wagon going by, seeing and smelling the decomposing bodies of several men. As Holme is walking down the street, he notices that several men are staring at him. Holme picks up the pace as the men are obviously following him. Holme loses the men in the woods.

Cullen comes across a farmer who offers him a job of painting his barn roof, for which he will be paid \$1 per day. After three days, Cullen is halfway finished with the roof. He pulls the ladder to begin the other side of the roof when he sees four men storming toward him, one carrying a shotgun. Cullen runs down the ladder and into the woods as the men follow in pursuit. Cullen thinks he has eluded them when they spot him on top of a ridge. Cullen suffers superficial wounds in his back from the shotgun pellets but manages to run off and winds up jumping in a water-filled ravine.

Pages 77 through 94 Analysis

Cullen Holme is trekking the countryside looking for his sister. He is also looking for work as he is destitute and has long lapses between meals. The reference to the bodies being dug up is not fully explained at this point and leaves questions and gaps in the story at least for the time being. Were the corpses disturbed by grave robbers? Is Rinthy digging up graves looking for her baby? If the graves were robbed, could the ruffians chasing Cullen be the culprits? There is also no explanation as to why the men are angry with Cullen and chasing him. He is wearing the boots he stole from the squire he worked for in another town. Could there be a connection with the boots and the men? Perhaps these are the men who attacked and apparently killed the squire. If so, no motive is yet apparent.



Pages 95 through 116

Pages 95 through 116 Summary

A bearded man in a dust black suit is shown to a wagon where a dead man is laying. It is old man Salter, he's told by another. The man in the suit tells the others they will go after whomever did this. Rinthy continues on her quest to find her baby, sleeping out in the open, sometimes under a bridge. She encounters several people along the way who are sympathetic and offer food and shelter. The first woman Rinthy runs across is a woman hard at work in her garden. The two have a brief discussion and the woman is willing to hire her for garden work. While the woman tends to her crying granddaughter, Rinthy steals away. As she travels on, she is frightened when she confronts two hanged men who are dangling from a tree. Next, Rinthy wanders into a garden and pulls up some turnips. The proprietor sees her and confronts her. The man is sympathetic to her when she tells him that she is looking for a tinker who has something that belongs to her. He tells her to go inside and tell his woman to include her in their dinner. The woman tells Rinthy that she had five children but all were dead. When the couple get into a violent argument, Rinthy sneaks away.

Walking on, Rinthy spots an old woman hoeing in her garden. The woman explains that she was not doing garden work. Rather, she was killing a snake. The woman brings her inside for a bite to eat. The woman is observant and asks her where her child is. Rinthy denies having a child. The woman responds that she must have killed it. Rinthy then tells the woman the truth. Her brother sold or gave her baby to a tinker and she is looking for that tinker to get the baby back. Rinthy learns from the old woman that the men were hung for killing a man named Salter.

Pages 95 through 116 Analysis

The reference to the man in the black suit avenging the death of a man named Salter is sketchy at this point. Questions linger. Is Salter the squire who was killed? Who is this man in the black suit? Rinthy is determined to find her baby. She encounters people along her travels that are sympathetic and willing to help her. One of the people she crosses paths with is a wise old woman. The woman, who presumably sees Rinthy's breasts leaking milk confronts Rinthy, asking her where her baby is. Rinthy confesses the truth, as she knows it, to the old woman. Rinthy tells the woman that her brother told her that he sold her baby to a tinker that was passing by. Of course, the reader knows that Culla left the baby in the woods for dead. Unbeknown to him, the tinker found the baby in the woods and saved its life.



Pages 117 through 128

Pages 117 through 128 Summary

Culla travels through a wooded area and comes upon a cabin where an old bearded man is sitting on the veranda. The old man provides him with as much well water as he wants and encourages him to stay and visit for a while. The old man lives there with his dogs and double-barrel. He used to be a snake hunter, as witnessed by the many rattlesnake skins on the walls. Culla indicates he is traveling to the next town. The old man tells him the next town, Preston Flats, is fourteen miles away. The only civilization between the cabin and Preston Flats is an abandoned cabin about two miles down the path. The old man keeps encouraging Culla to stay and visit. Finally, Culla tells the old man he has to move on. He is looking for his sister who ran off. If he doesn't find her soon, he will have to look for the tinker.

Pages 117 through 128 Analysis

Culla has eluded the group of men trying to kill him. He emerges back in the woods and comes across an old man sitting on the porch of his small cabin. Culla learns that the next town over is fourteen miles, but that there is an abandoned cabin about two miles away. Culla tells the old man he is looking for his sister. This segment of the story underscores the fact that Culla is just as determined to find his sister and she is to find her baby. It is not apparent who will win this race and what the ramifications will be for each one if they find what they seek.



Pages 129 through 146

Pages 129 through 146 Summary

In the dark of night, the old man's dogs bark as three men mount the steps and knock on the old man's door, one announcing that he is a minister. The old man opens the door and is met by a large knife that is immediately thrust into his stomach, ultimately disemboweling him.

Culla emerges after sundown and stealthily moves down the road under moonlight. When he arrives in Preston Flats, it looks to be abandoned, so he moves on. Culla wanders the countryside the next day and discovers a camp of workers, where he asks the supervisor for work. He is told to go into town and see the Clark, the boss. Asking several people, Culla finally meets up with Clark at his store after he returns from an auction. Clark, a very large man, rides up from of his store, the Clark Auction Company. When he arrives, Clark becomes involved with a deputy above removing something from his property. Clark offers Culla a job digging two graves. Culla is told to check with the preacher to see where the graves should be dug. There are two Negroes digging one grave in the church lot. They tell Culla the grave is for Mrs. Salter. Never finding the preacher, Culla decides to dig the two graves in an unattended patch behind the church. He works until nightfall and sleeps in a hayrick nearby. When Culla awakes, he encounters three dead men hanging from trees as he walks toward town. He goes into town to Clark's store. He sees Clark's rig untethered and looks inside the store. An eerie feeling overtakes him as he finds no one around. He leaves town walking but soon running again.

Pages 129 through 146 Analysis

Although not identified, it appears that the snake hunter that Culla had just visited is murdered. The men who murdered him are perhaps the men who had been chasing Culla and are on his trail. An important person in the town named Bud Clark gives Culla job digging two graves. Culla meets up with two workers in the church lot who are digging one grave. He cannot find the preacher for instructions on where to dig his two graves but assumes they should be place in an unattended lot behind the church. The next morning Culla discovers three men hanging from trees. Perhaps the three graves—two dug by him and one by the other workers—are for these men. Culla finds Clark's rig untethered in front of his store. No one is at the store. Is Clark missing? Dead?



Pages 147 through 156

Pages 147 through 156 Summary

Rinthy's breasts are swollen and bleeding. She comes upon a town and asks a man passing by for the town's doctor. The man, a lawyer, shares the office building with the doctor and offers her a place to rest until the doctor comes in. Once the doctor arrives, Rinthy tells him that her breasts are bleeding from lack of nursing. The doctor asks about the baby. Rinthy at first tells him the baby died. The doctor is suspicious and continues to question her. He tells her if the baby died, she would not still be having milk. Rinthy is heartened by the doctor's words that to her prove her baby is alive. She tells the doctor that she is a widow and that her brother took the baby and told her it died. The doctor gives her a salve for her sore breasts and tells her to pump out the milk and return in a few days for a re-check. She tells him she does not know where she will be. She does not live anywhere—she only hunts for her baby.

Pages 147 through 156 Analysis

Rinthy visits a town's doctor for her terribly sore breasts. She receives care for them, but more than that, she receives what she considers confirmation from the doctor that her baby lives. The lawyer and doctor are both very sympathetic to young Rinthy. The reader learns in this segment that the baby is six months old or less. The time frame of the story is more defined here as well. Rinthy has been looking for her baby for roughly six months and Culla has been looking for Rinthy for the same length of time.



Pages 157 through 183

Pages 157 through 183 Summary

Culla is waiting on the riverbank for a ferry ride across the river. The ferryman will not run his craft for a dime, which is all he charges for a person. Culla has to wait until someone with a horse wants to cross. He charges twenty-five cents for a horse and ten cents for a person. The ferryman tells Culla that the town across the river is Morgan, where he may find work. Finally, late at night, a man with a horse arrives at the ferry for a ride. Culla boards the ferry giving the ferryman his dime. The river has risen quite substantially. A cable breaks and the ferryman loses control of the barge as it thumps sideways against the current. Water pours over the rails as the horse, untethered, races back and forth, looking for a way out and finally plopping into the river. Culla calls out in the blackness but no one responds.

Out of control and speeding downriver, the barge finally nears the bank. Culla sees a campfire and calls to the men to catch his rope and pull him ashore. As he casts the rope, oddly, one of the men asks if he should shoot him. Culla is finally on the bank and joins the men, one of whom is dressed in a black suit. They seem surprised to hear that he is not the ferryman and that the ferryman went overboard. Harmon is one of the men. The bearded man in the black suit does not reveal his name and says the third man with the rifle has no name. The bearded man notices the nice boots that Culla is wearing and asks him where he got them. The bearded man in the black suit makes Culla trade boots with him. Culla complies, since he is outnumbered and has no gun. The three men take off, leaving Culla at the fading campfire wearing odorous, worn and mismatched boots.

Pages 157 through 183 Analysis

Culla continues his trek to find his sister, attempting to get to another town across a river, looking for her and for work. Crossing the river, the ferryboat has a terrible accident. After traveling down the river out of control for a while, the barge comes close to the bank near a campfire where several men are able to pull him ashore. Unfortunately, the three men have a very menacing aura and Culla feels threatened. The bearded man in the black suit and his gang appear again. The last time he was mentioned was when he discovered old man Salter dead, vowing to avenge his death. If old man Salter is the "squire" who had his boots stolen by Culla, the plot thickens as the bearded man forces Culla to trade boots with him. So does the bearded man avenging Salter's death now wear the dead man's boots?



Pages 184 through 194

Pages 184 through 194 Summary

Rinthy is sitting on the side of a road as the tinker appears. She stops him as he passes by, telling him that she wants her baby back. At first, he denies knowing anything about it. He then questions whether she is really the mother of a baby. Perhaps she is trying to steal a baby for herself. He cautions Rinthy that she will have to pay the nurse fees for all the months she took care of him. Rinthy had not thought of that, but tells the Tinker she will pay the debt off. She needs her baby back. Rinthy follows the tinker on the road for the remainder of the day. Barefoot and still in pain from her breasts, she manages to keep up with him. At the end of the day, they finally come to a cabin located at the end of a high meadow.

The cabin is the tinker's and no one else is there. Rinthy begs the tinker for the baby, asking if they will go there in the morning. The tinker is elusive, but tells her he did not pay for the baby but found it in the woods. The tinker is evaluating the girl, saying she does not deserve the baby since she abandoned it. Rinthy tells him that it was not her but her brother who took the baby from her and left it to die. The tinker asks her if the baby belongs to the brother. Rinthy says that it does. The tinker becomes enraged and calls her a liar. He leaves the cabin and tells her not to follow or he will kill her.

Pages 184 through 194 Analysis

Finally, Rinthy finds the tinker. She learns that the tinker did not buy the baby but found it in the woods. He takes her to his cabin where she pleads with him to take her to her baby. He thinks she abandoned it but she explains that it was her brother who did so. The tinker asks if the baby belongs to her brother. In other words, what he's asking is whether or not the brother and sister had an incestuous relationship that produced the baby. Rinthy confesses that they did. The tinker becomes upset at this revelation and takes it out on Rinthy. He calls Rinthy a liar and leaves the cabin. He warns her not to follow and threatens to kill her if she does.



Pages 195 through 228

Pages 195 through 228 Summary

On his quest for work and to locate his sister, Culla comes upon an abandoned cabin in the woods. The rustic cabin was in disrepair and overrun with vermin and insects. Culla gathers some wood and makes a fire as the season is turning cold. He falls asleep on one of the cabin's crusty mattresses and awakens to the end of a double-barreled shotgun. The man holding the weapon forces Culla outside and down the road. The man does not allow Culla to put his boots on and forces him to walk on the cold terrain for miles.

They finally come to another cabin, where a man is in the middle of his breakfast. The man with the gun tells the other man that Culla was trespassing on his property. Culla defends himself, saying that he did not break in and thought the cabin was abandoned. Culla is asked to plead guilty or not guilty to trespassing. The man having breakfast sentences him to ten days labor. The labor is to be served at the present location. The man with the gun is upset and claims that the man should work at his place since his property was violated. The other man does not bend. Culla will serve his ten days at fifty cents a day at his property. After the man with the gun storms off, the man has his woman make and serve breakfast to Culla. Culla asks if he can stay beyond the ten days. The man does not have a need for his services beyond his sentence.

Rinthy is staying in a cabin. A man with a mule and a plow comes to the cabin. Rinthy prepares and serves him dinner. He asks why she is not being civil to him. Rinthy ignores him and goes off to bed. In the middle of the night, she rises and leaves with all her belongings, careful to not wake the man. As the sun rises, she has made her way quite a way down the road. Rinthy is frightened as she hears a horse approaching. She hides in the bushes as the horse and rider race by.

Culla is sitting on the side of a road when he sees a large herd of pigs heading his way. One of the drovers, Billy, stops to chat with Culla and invites him to catch up with them for dinner. Culla sits on top of a rise as the large herd and drovers pass by. The pigs become spooked and are out of control as they try to pass through a narrow passageway. After the pigs are finally in control again, Culla catches up with the group of drovers. Billy blames Culla for stampeding the herd, which caused his young brother and some of the herd to plunge to their deaths. The drovers all agree that Culla could have saved the young man but did not reach out a hand in help. Culla denies any guilt.

A preacher appears to see what the ruckus is about. He looks into Culla's eyes and agrees that his is eaten up with guilt. The drovers decide to kill him in retribution for the lost drover and lost pigs. They ask Culla if he prefers hanging or being thrown off the cliff. They decide to hang him and force him to walk with them back to their wagon to get a rope. As they walk, Culla is able to get away and jump off the cliff into the river below. He hurts his leg but his life is saved.



Pages 195 through 228 Analysis

Culla is not giving up his quest to find his sister and to find work. His existence is walking long distances from one town to another. In this segment, his exhaustion leads him to curl up in what he presumes is an abandoned cabin. However, he is found to be a trespasser by a man who is presumably a judge or county official. Culla's sentence is ten days labor at the judge's house. Culla does not mind the sentence since he is given a warm breakfast, a place to stay for ten days and the chance to make fifty cents per day. At this point, it is not clear if this encounter has any relevance to the main story.

Rinthy has been staying with someone but is not happy, so she gathers her belongings and leaves. She hides in the woods as a man on horseback gallops by. The identity of the man is not revealed. Since the man has a plow and a mule, it cannot be Culla unless he came across a windfall.

Culla once again finds himself in trouble. He is wrongly blamed for the death of a young pig drover who fell over a cliff to his death with some of the pigs. The drovers blame Culla out of their own guilt for bringing along such a young boy to help herd. They are unreasonable, but just as unreasonable is a man claiming to be a preacher. He looks in Culla's eyes and agrees that he is eaten up with guilt. Culla jumps off the cliff to a river to escape a lynching. Culla travels downriver with the current, alive and still on his quest.



Pages 229 through 242

Pages 229 through 242 Summary

Culla struggles with his injured leg to a campfire, where sits the bearded man in the black suit, his two henchmen, and a squalling baby. The tinker is dead, hanging from a tree. The baby has only one eye and has a healed burn down one side of him. The bearded man confronts Culla about the baby and about his sister. The man says that Culla used the baby as trade with the tinker. The bearded man suggests that Culla was having the tinker hide the baby for him. Culla denies it all. The bearded man tells Culla to bring the baby to him. Culla is afraid and tells the man that his sister will care for the child. The bearded man takes the child and slits his throat. The man hands the baby back to Culla.

Rinthy comes across the campfire. She sees a small, burnt ribcage and bones but does not know what to make of it. She falls asleep by the campfire, hoping someone will come back. The tinker, in his burial tree, is being mutilated by vultures. He stays there until he is all bones, which drop to the earth one by one.

Years later, Culla encounters a blind man who is at peace with his fate. He tells Culla that he just needs to pray for what he wants. Culla discounts the blind man's advice and goes off shoeless in search of the next town or next menial job.

Pages 229 through 242 Analysis

The bearded man comes across the tinker and the baby. The tinker tells the bearded man the heritage of the baby. The men kill the tinker hanging him in a tree. The bearded man tortures and kills the baby, handing it back to Culla. The bearded man was acting on malevolent feelings toward the baby who was borne from incestuous parents.

Although she does not know it, Rinthy has found her child. He has been murdered and burned in the campfire where she sleeps awaiting someone to return.

Unlike his sister who found what she was looking for and what she needed, Culla goes on wandering around the dark and gloomy countryside. He is destined to never find what he needs or wants but will continue on without peace or resolution a life devoid of soul. He questions why the blind man is walking into the unknown—not realizing that he himself is facing the same unknown sent their by his own deception and without the blessing of peace and contentment.



Characters

Rinthy Holme

Rinthy Holme is a nineteen-year-old woman in rural and rustic Appalachia around the turn of the century. She is not well educated and is socially isolated. When Culla tells her to talk to no strangers while he is gone, she responds that strangers are the only people in the world that she could talk to—she know no one. The story begins with Rinthy about to give birth in the remote and rustic cabin in the woods that she shares with her older brother, Culla. Rinthy defers to her brother in most cases as he is the man in the family. There is a reference to a father who died sometime ago. Her brother has no sympathy for her as she goes into labor. Rinthy begs for the help of a midwife, but Culla refuses to get her this assistance. He fears the midwife will "talk." After the baby boy is born, Culla takes the baby and leaves it in the woods for dead. He tells Rinthy that the baby was sickly and died. When Rinthy takes flowers to the grave, she digs into the earth just to get one look at her child. When she finds there is nothing in the grave, she confronts Culla, who lies once again telling her he gave it to the tinker who was passing by.

From this point on, Rinthy has but one mission in her life. She is on a quest to find her son. The only transportation that Rinthy has is her two feet. She walks and walks from small town to small town, covering miles and miles on her journey, never faltering from her goal. Rinthy questions every person she meets about the tinker. She has no idea of his name or his appearance. Rinthy does not tell them she is looking for her baby. Rather, she tells them that the tinker has something that belongs to her. She encounters many kind and supportive people along the way who offer her a warm meal, a place to stay, transportation and even opportunities to make a menial wage.

As frustrating and unrewarding her journey is, Rinthy continues on for eight months. Since her breasts are sore and leaking milk, she visits a physician in one of the towns. She lies and tells him her baby is dead. He replies that her baby cannot be dead if she is still producing milk. This heartens Rinthy's cause and compels her continue her quest. She finally finds the tinker and confronts him about the baby. Although he first denies, he questions her motherhood credentials for having abandoned her baby. She explains that her brother told her he sold it to the tinker and that he was the one who left the baby for dead. Through their conversation, Rinthy confesses that the baby was fathered by her brother. The tinker is disgusted with her and threatens to kill her if she follows him.

The end of Rinthy's tale takes place at a campfire she encounters where there are burned bones and a small ribcage. She is not sure what the significance of her findings is, but she feels so much at peace that she falls into a restful sleep by the campfire.



Culla Holme

Culla Holme is a young man who lives with his sister in a remote cabin in rustic Appalachia near the turn of the century. He is dismissive of his younger sister's plea for the help of a midwife as she goes into labor to deliver her first child. Her fears that the midwife may "talk", potentially exposing the fact that he fathered the baby. Culla reluctantly provides assistance as Rinthy, his sister, gives birth to her baby son. Culla immediately takes the child to the woods and abandons it for dead. He tells Rinthy that the baby was sickly and died. When Rinthy digs in the false grave that her brother created and finds no baby, Culla lies to her and tells her he gave the baby to a passing vendor, referred to as "The Tinker."

Culla abandons Rinthy and sets off to find work in many surrounding small towns. He has no horse or mule and cart and walks miles and miles in his quest to find work. Culla has some luck in finding labor jobs and earning menial wages just to get by. Unfortunately, Culla also encounters some unpleasant and dangerous situations as well. At one point, for reasons not apparent, he is chased by a group of armed men. He suffers only superficial wounds and manages to escape. Culla only finishes part of one job, leaving early the next morning and stealing the fine boots of the man who hired him. Culla has to part with those same boots when the ominous Bearded Man forces him to trade his sturdy boots for the man's worn, mis-matched boots. Culla encounters a group of pig drovers who wrongly accuse him of stampeding their herd. A young drover and a large number of pigs fall to their deaths during this stampede. The drovers decide to lynch Culla, but he manages to escape by jumping off the cliff into the river below. At one point, Culla returns to the cabin and discovers that his sister has left. From that point on, Culla is on a quest not only to find work but to find his sister as well. He fears that word of their incest will come about from his sister's journey to find the baby.

Culla happens upon the Bearded Man and his group of henchman. The tinker is hanging dead from a tree nearby. The baby is with this group of ruffians. The baby has a healed burn down one side of his body and is missing one eye. The Bearded Man confronts Culla about the baby but Culla confesses nothing. The Bearded Man forces Culla to bring the baby to him. He slits the baby's throat and hands it back to Culla.

Culla's story ends when he encounters a Blind Man who tells him about the power of prayer. Culla dismisses the man, thinking why a blind man would be set out in the world not knowing where he was heading. Culla apparently sets off on his seemingly endless journey.

Bud Clark

Bud Clark is the owner of the Clark Auction Company where Culla is given the job of digging two graves.



The Tinker

The Tinker who remains nameless throughout the book is the man who Rinthy searches for throughout the story. He is the elusive vendor of household goods and coffee and tea and the man who has possession of her baby.

The Squire

Culla works for the man referred to as "The Squire" one day. Instead of pay, Culla steals the man's boots.

The Bearded Man in the Black Suit

The Bearded Man in the Black Suit is another nameless character. He is the shadowy and ominous head of the group of dangerous men who are terrorizing the countryside.

Harmon

Harmon is one of the Bearded Man's henchmen, who wields a long rifle and intimidates Culla.

Billy

Billy is one of the pig drovers who blames Culla for stampeding the herd. The drovers decide to lynch Culla for his actions.

The Preacher

The Preacher he determines that Culla is eaten up with guilt and agrees that he should be punished for the death of the big drover.

The Blind Man

Culla ignores the Blind Man at the end of the story who tells Culla that he needs to pray.



Objects/Places

Appalachia

Rural Appalachia is where the story takes place, in an unidentified state.

Cheatham

Cheatham is the town where Culla looks for work and is chased and shot at by a group of angry men.

Chicken River

The Holme cabin is located in the woods near the Chicken River.

Preston Flats

Preston Flats is one of the towns where Culla seeks work and looks for his sister.

Johnson County

The Holme cabin is located in Johnson County—an area that has a rough reputation.

Clark Auction Company

Culla gets a job from Clark, the owner of the auction company, digging two graves.

Dr.'s Office

Rinthy visits the doctor in one of the towns she visits. Her breasts are sore from not nursing after the birth of her child.

Moran

The ferryman tells Culla that the town across the river is Morgan where he could find some work.



Charlestown

Charlestown is the town where the pig drovers are taking their herd.

The Bearded Man's campfire

The Bearded Man's campfire is the location that reunites the baby with Culla and eventually Rinthy.



Themes

Deception

In this parable, Culla Holme represents the self-centered man who will go to any lengths, even murder, to save appearances. Culla Holme's sister Rinthy is pregnant with her brother's baby. As Rinthy nears delivery, she begs Culla to get help for her. Culla discards her pleas, afraid that the midwife will talk. In other words, he is willing to risk his sister and his baby's health to save his own standing and reputation. After the baby is born, Culla takes the healthy baby boy to the woods and leaves it for dead. He tells his sister that the baby died and that he buried it nearby. As Rinthy begins to recover, she asks to visit the child's grave and bring it flowers.

Uncaring that she is hurt and in pain, Culla tells her that she cannot bring flowers to a person with no name. When she suggests that they could name it, he scoffs at her, driving the knife further by telling her that dead people are not named. He finally relents and leaves her alone at the false grave he created. Rinthy digs into the earth, just wanting one glimpse of her child. Of course, she finds no baby. Once again her brother has deceived her—her baby is alive. Confronted with the empty grave, Culla once again opts for deceit, telling his sister that he gave the baby to the tinker who had passed by recently. Of course, he is sure that the baby perished in the woods. Culla deceives his sister in other ways. Rinthy realizes that Culla has left their rustic cabin and is not returning. She learns from a shop owner that Culla took the only valuable item they had—their father's shotgun—and sold it.

Determination

Once Rinthy Holme finds out that her baby is not dead but instead taken by a tinker, she sets out on an unrelenting quest to find him. The rugged, rural area in which Rinthy lives does not keep her from hunting for her child, despite the fact that she is weak and not in the best of health. Rinthy walks from town to town and from remote house to remote farm in hot weather and often with ill-fitting shoes or with no shoes at all. No obstacles stop Rinthy from the hunt for her baby.

Just as determined to stop her is her brother, Culla. Culla leaves the cabin ostensibly to look for work. He does not have enough respect to tell his sister, Rinthy, who surmises that he has abandoned the family cabin for good. When Culla realizes that his sister is gone, he figures rightly so that she is hunting down the tinker. Culla had told Rinthy that he gave the baby to the tinker. Culla was aware of Rinthy's growing feeling for the child that had been stripped away from her. Culla is all but certain that Rinthy is on a quest to find her child. Culla wants to prevent his sister from finding the baby and is determined to find her and stop her. Since he fathered the child, his guilt and shame impels him to search for her. He does not want word out that he fathered his sister's child.

Customs and Manners of the Day

In these rural areas, the people are lonely and happy to talk to someone even a stranger. Additionally, living such a hard life, strangers are considerate of one another. They know on a personal basis how difficult life is—how a cup of water or a hot meal is akin to a miracle when a person is traveling by foot from woods to town.

Culla asks for work in a teamster shop. The shop owner quickly dismisses him but his kindness gives him pause for second thoughts. As Culla walks off, the man calls after him. "Well, I never meant to be short with ye. I hate to see a feller act shipped though. I hope ye luck." This segment shows that although the teamster is busy, he felt bad that he may have been rude with the man and calls him back to wish him luck. Again, this caring for each other—even strangers—is a strong factor in this look at human nature at the turn of the century.

When Rinthy is sick and asking for the town's doctor, the man she asks, a lawyer, offers to let her rest in his office until the doctor is available. Even though she is ill, Rinthy does not forget her manners. Her first response is "I don't want to put ye out none."

Style

Point of View

The story is written partially in the omniscient narrative. Using this style, the reader understands the thoughts and feelings of the main characters—at least those that are revealed as the author at times tends to withhold more deeply held motivations. However, the reader is introduced to minor characters in a more one-dimensional fashion. That is, the reader meets and sees the characters only as the main characters view them. The reader is not given insight into the thoughts and feelings of those more minor figures. This sub-set of characters maintain a veil of mystery, especially a shadowy group of dangerous men who appear and reappear periodically throughout the story.

After Rinthy is told by her brother that the Tinker took her baby, she sets off in a quest to find him. After finally finding the Tinker, he is disgusted by her confession that her brother fathered her baby. He takes his anger out on her, threatening to kill her if she dares to follow him. The Tinker has the baby, or at least knows where it is, but in his harsh judgment of her, he decides not to punish her by not allowing her to find her baby. He has no sympathy for her and blames her for the incestuous relationship with her brother. Even though young Rinthy appears weak and frail and sympathetic, the Tinker does not consider that she may have been a victim, perhaps raped by her brother. Rather, he decides to be the final barrier to her finding her child.

The Bearded Man and his henchmen represent an unforgiving society who punishes the weakest among it—he kills the baby who is representative of what a judgmental society finds vile and sinful. At the end of the story, Culla questions why the world would unleash the blind man he encounters with an horizon (future) he cannot see. The blind man is happy with his life and tells Culla he needs to pray. But the soulless Culla discards the advise, not understanding what blind faith is.

Setting

The story of *Outer Dark* is set in nineteenth century Appalachia, in an unnamed US state. From the vernacular of the characters, one would assume that rural West Virginia or Kentucky would be high on the list of possibilities as opposed to Pennsylvania or southern New York state. None the less, the gritty, life-on-the edge tale of incest and confusion takes place in an equally gritty, life-on-the edge rural setting that is as unkind to its inhabitants as they are to one another. The reader can almost feel the blisters on one's feet as these poorer-than-poor characters walk miles and miles from one miserable town to the next with tomorrow's hope only promising more of the same. One virtually inhales the dust from the worn and rickety roads as these woe-begotten characters move about their small though infinite universe of hopelessness and misery.



Outer Dark, a parable of the negative consequences of shame and deceit and pride, begins in a rustic cabin in the woods of Appalachia. The woods are thick—so thick in fact that the ease with which one can be lost is an ever-present factor. The roads that one can take to venture from this isolated cabin are sparse and their access inconvenient. However, convenience in this rural setting is not a consideration. Rather, it is a way of life—a life that is as rough and unforgiving as the terrain.

The small towns offer brief respite for the travelers. There are rustic homes that provide a break from the unkind land—a warm meal or a safe night's sleep. There is Rinthy's visit to a town's doctor's office that heartens her quest for the peace she seeks. But these are just temporary and cruel in their brevity. More cruel than the dusty roads or the thick forests is the campfire where Rinthy, Culla and their baby meet a final time. The shadowy trio of dangerous men who lurk throughout the story provide the setting where the treks of the main characters come to a sudden and final end.

Language and Meaning

The tone of the story is gloomy and foreboding. The frustrating journey that Rinthy mounts to find her stolen child engenders understanding and sympathy. Rinthy represents goodness and purity of motive. What can be more pure or good than a mother trying to find her baby? Her brother, Culla, on the other hand represents selfishness and lack of emotion in trying to thwart her quest.

The story uses what appears to be authentic vernacular indicative of turn of the century rural Appalachia. For example, "I'm tolerable thank ye. I taken you to be the bossman?"; "You got kin over towards the flats?"; and, "Oldest'n been near your age I reckon."

Although the characters in the story that takes place in Appalachia are rural and uneducated, a politeness and consideration comes through in most of the dialog. The story reveals country people who are neighborly and caring. When Culla asks for water, he is invited for dinner. When Rinthy asks about the tinker she is looking for, she is invited in for a bite to eat, a place to stay the night, a ride to a nearby town, or the opportunity to earn some money.

Perhaps as homage to the vernacular, the author runs his narrative into his dialog totally lacking of any quotation marks, giving the reader pause as to the author's words versus the character's statement. Another anomaly found in words in this novel is how the author runs two or more words together creating one word—for example, "flaptongued", "boardfloored dogtrot", "waterbucket", "finelookin'." No doubt words such as these are used to emphasize the vernacular and regional accent and lingo of the time.

Structure

The author, Cormac McCarthy, employs the cliff hanger question in many of the chapters which of course spurs interest and compels the reader to read on to the answer. The sequence of the story is not necessarily in order. That is, the time frame of



many of the segments is vague and not discernible. In part, this structure was opted for to produce suspense and anticipation in the reader. The chapters are untitled, just grouped by pages.

There is an underlying theme to the story of the sister and brother. There is a shadowy group of ruffians and murderers terrorizing the countryside. There are incidents of hangings; both main characters encounter dead men hanging from trees. Unidentified people are responsible for digging up graves and violating the dead. In his travels, Culla encounters this dangerous group. Culla is able to survive these brushes with death and elude them. This aspect of the story places an eerie pallor over the story's ambiance. The reader is allowed neither the point of view nor the motives behind this group or groups of bad men.

The story begins in plausible, realistic terms. However, as the story unfolds, the author employs surrealism and symbolism as tools in developing the parable that is the essence of *Outer Dark*. The reader begins to realize that the story is one of purity and innocence against an unforgiving and judgmental society. Toward the end, it becomes obvious that the dangerous group of murderers represents a stringent and unsympathetic society. Culla is the selfish and soulless man while his sister and her baby represent goodness and innocence. The blind man who tells the empty Culla to pray represents Blind Faith.



Quotes

"He did think she had died, lying there looking up with eyes that held nothing at all. Then her body convulsed and she screamed. He struggled with her, lifting her to the bed again.:"
p. 14

"The child had come awake again and begun to squall. He entered a stand of cottonwoods where the ground held moss of a fiery nitric green and which he prodded with his foot for a moment and then laid the child upon."
p. 16

"Don't take in no strangers while I'm gone.
She sighed deeply. They ain't a soul in this world but what is a stranger to me, she said."
p. 29

"I just thought maybe if you was to show me where as I could see it. . .and maybe put some flowers or somethin. . .
Flowers, he said. It ain't even got a name.
We could give it one.
It's dead, he said. You don't name things dead."
p. 31

"Above the odor of sweat and manure he could smell the musty decay of the boxes. When he came abreast of the wagon he could see a waxen gray face scowling eyelessly at the bright noon. In the next box lay what appeared to have an old man."
p. 87

"I'm like my granny that way. She always said what she despised worst in the world was snakes, hounds and sorry women."
p. 110

"You live here by yourself?
Not exactly. I got two hounds and a ten-gauge double-barrel that keeps me company. They's lots of meanness in these parts and I ain't the least of it."
p. 119

"They don't nobody live there now. Used to be a mink-trapper lived there but he got snakebit and died. When they found him he was kneelin down like somebody fixin to pray. Stiff as a locust post. . . They said they had to break ever bone in his body to get him laid out in his box."
p. 120



"Even a snake ain't all bad. They's put here for some purpose. I believe they's purpose to everthing."

p. 124

"I don't live nowheres no more, she said. I never did much. I just go around huntin my chap. That's about all I do any more."

p. 156

"Get ye some cornbread.

I've got all I need.

Ain't much of a big eatin gal are ye?

I'm some out of the habit."

p. 190

"Times is hard.

Hard people makes hard times. I've seen the meanness of humans till I don't know why God ain't put out the sun and gone away."

p. 192



Topics for Discussion

When Rinthy has her baby, what does Culla do with it? What does he tell Rinthy and who finds the baby?

Searching for her son, Rinthy Holme visits a family consisting of a man, several young women, a young boy and an old grandmother who has no nose. Who tells Rinthy how the old woman lost her nose and what was the story he told about it?

When Cullen Holme visits the town of Cheatham, what commotion is going on in town and what unusual site does he witness? Describe what he sees in detail.

A lady working on her garden agrees to hire Rinthy as a garden worker. When she goes inside, she hears a baby crying and steals away. Why did Rinthy leave and what were most likely the state of her emotions?

Why does Rinthy see a physician in one of the towns she visits? What does the doctor tell her and why does it hearten Rinthy in her quest to find her baby?

When Rinthy discovers the bones and small ribcage at an abandoned campfire, what is her reaction? What is it that may have given her peace?

What do the dangerous men led by the Bearded Man represent in the story? Discuss what their presence and role added to the story.