

The Orchard Keeper Study Guide

The Orchard Keeper by Cormac McCarthy

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Contents

The Orchard Keeper Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Pages 8 - 27.....	5
Pages 28 - 48.....	7
Pages 51 - 73.....	9
Pages 74 - 94.....	11
Pages 95 - 127.....	12
Pages 131 - 158.....	15
Pages 159 - 168.....	17
Pages 171 - 195.....	18
Pages 196 - 215.....	20
Pages 216 - 246.....	22
Characters.....	24
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	34
Topics for Discussion.....	36



Plot Summary

Marion Sylder, a whiskey bootlegger, is attacked by the lawless Kenneth Rattner but winds up killing him in self-defense. Years later, Sylder becomes friends with Kenneth Rattner's son, John Wesley, but neither knows their tragic connection. Elsewhere in Red Branch, an old orchard keeper named Arthur Ownby gets in trouble with the law for resisting the government's intrusion on his life, symbolized by a tank they keep on his property. When all is done, Ownby is in an asylum, Sylder is in jail, and John Wesley is the sole representative of the way Red Branch used to be.

The story opens with Kenneth Rattner unsuccessfully trying to hitch-hike on a stretch of highway in Georgia, not far from Atlanta. He is trying to get to Knoxville. He meets up with the desperate Marion Sylder, who has just been fired from his job, somewhere in between and tries to make him the next victim of his larcenous ways. When Sylder's tire goes flat, Rattner strikes him with a tire iron and injures his shoulder, but it is not enough to take Sylder out. The two men wrestle and Sylder ultimately gets the upper hand. He denies Rattner's pleas for mercy and strangles him to death. He dumps the body on Arthur Ownby's land, an area he knows well since it is frequently where whiskey is dropped off for his bootlegging runs. John Wesley Rattner, Kenneth's only child, and his mother, Mildred, barely survive after Kenneth dies. They live under the illusion that their father was a noble, hard-working, honest man who was probably the victim of the precise kind of man that he was in reality. John Wesley, a frequent adventurer through the woods, even late at night, makes a kind of pact with a voice he hears late at night to exact revenge upon whomever took his father's life. Meanwhile, Arthur Ownby discovers the corpse on his property and, instead of informing the police, decides to turn the pit in which the body was dumped into a kind of crypt. He covers it with trees to protect it from the elements and, probably, to symbolically separate it from himself.

While on a whiskey run one night, Sylder is picking up some bottles stashed on Ownby's property when he sees the old man firing a shotgun into a government tank that is kept on his property. The defacement is methodical, almost ritualistic. Sylder hurries up, grabs the rest of his whiskey, and leaves, unsure what he ought to expect from the old man next. Ownby, however, has no intention of harming him and instead just watches his black car peel away onto the highway. Not long after he leaves, Sylder winds up careening off into the woods and landing in a stream. It so happens that John Wesley is checking some animal traps he laid there the night before. John Wesley helps him out; Sylder is injured, but not seriously, and the two head off to June Tipton's house, Sylder's friend. He takes them to Sylder's house where they get cleaned up—it is very cold out and both are soaking wet—before Sylder drops John Wesley back at his house. As a sign of gratitude, he gives John Wesley one of his dogs. The two develop a relationship and Sylder even teaches Wesley how to hunt. Neither, of course, know that Sylder killed John Wesley's father.

The Red Branch police are aroused both by the car crash—the car's whiskey cargo was still partially intact—and the defacement of the tank. Jefferson Gifford, one of the policemen, starts interrogating people around Red Branch for more information. He



suspects John Wesley's involvement on account of his shoes; when John Wesley got cleaned up at Sylder's house, he put on a pair of slippers, hardly ideal footwear for cold weather. He threatens to charge him with trapping without a license and aiding a criminal, but John Wesley refuses to say anything against Sylder. The cops then show up at Arthur Ownby's house to ask him about the defaced tank. When they arrive, he is standing in his doorway, waiting for them with shotgun in hand. They call for backup and Ownby escapes after injuring several cops with shotgun blasts. They track him down only much later, far from his home. Sylder, too, gets caught when his car stalls on a bridge while transporting whiskey. They assume Ownby is insane or at least senile and send him to a mental hospital. Sylder gets sentenced to three years for illegally transporting whiskey. John Wesley leaves Red Branch for a few years and returns to find almost no one there, the last representative of the way things were.



Pages 8 - 27

Pages 8 - 27 Summary

Kenneth Rattner is on the side of a road trying, unsuccessfully, to hitch-hike with the occasional car that passes by. He eventually walks to a gas station and wanders through the aisles, his purpose unclear. The storekeep asks him if he needs some help and he lies and says he is looking for a tire pump. The storekeep shows him where they are and Kenneth lies again, saying that he needs different kind. He asks the storekeep the distance to Atlanta—seventeen miles—and says that he better get going. The announcement confuses the storekeep, who was under the impression he had a flat tire. Kenneth finds another customer of the store on his way out and is able to ride with him part of the way to Atlanta which is just a stopping point on the way to Kenneth's ultimate destination, Knoxville.

To the west of one of the Appalachian Mountains named Red Mountain is a small community named Red Branch. Marion Sylder was born there in 1913 and lived there most of his life, leaving the town at times for various reasons. After returning from one such departure, this one lasting five years, the purpose of which is not revealed, Sylder goes to one of the local bars, the Green Fly Inn. The building is situated, rather dubiously, high up on a mountain. It is tethered to a pine tree to keep it in place, an improvisation which does not prevent the walls of the establishment from wobbling and shifting from time to time. The patrons of the Inn seem to take no note of it, at least not while they are inside, as if it were a fact that they would rather not admit. He goes to the bar and finds an old acquaintance, a man named Cabe. He buys a round of drinks for Cabe and everyone else.

Meanwhile, Rattner finds himself outside of a dumpy bar somewhere outside of Atlanta. After examining the wound on his leg—a cut from barbed wire, apparently—and looking into the insides of the cars in the parking lot, he goes inside.

On Saturdays, Sylder drives his car down the highway and picks up whatever young boys he finds walking towards the town and offers them a free ride. One Sunday, he goes back to the Green Fly Inn—it is the only bar open on Sunday—and finds a man named Jack the Runner. He and another man named June question a man named Jack the Runner where he left some people. He tells them he dropped "them" off at Henderson Valley Road. Sylder and June drive out there and find the people they are looking for—two girls and a boy—and offer them a ride into town. Their hitch-hikers quickly realize that the men do not have good intentions. Instead of taking them to Knoxville like they asked, they take them somewhere remote and rape them and leave.

Rattner orders a few beers at the bar. He has been away from Red Branch for a year now. He left just a few days after he arrived with his wife and child with money he had just acquired by robbing the corpses or unconscious bodies of men who had the misfortune to be on the Green Fly Inn's porch when it collapsed.



Pages 8 - 27 Analysis

One feature that reader will immediately note, perhaps with some frustration, is how McCarthy intentionally obscures what is happening in many of the scenes. He makes heavy use of pronouns, sometimes waiting several paragraphs to specify their referents. The reader is often thrust into a situation without being given any background as to what is happening. For example, when Sylder goes to the Green Fly Inn to question Jack the Runner, the reader has no clue who he is looking for or why and his associate, June, seems to appear out of nowhere. The only connection so far between the chapter's most prominent characters—Sylder and Kenneth—is the city of Red Branch and the fact that both seem to be evil or at least criminal men.

There are several possible explanations for this obscurity. For one, McCarthy obviously wants the reader only to learn about the exact intentions of his characters later. What exactly Rattner is up to is not clear, but evidently it would be spoiled if it were revealed immediately. One assumes, however, that he does not have good intentions, given the way he lurks around the gas station and parking lot, presumably with an eye to theft. The style of narration also has the effect of making the reader truly feel like an observer who has no access to the thought processes of any of the characters involved. In a way, it might be called a cinematic style of narration, for the reader is forced, like the viewer of a movie, to gather all of his information from the actions of the story's characters; McCarthy provides no extrinsic narrator for assistance.



Pages 28 - 48

Pages 28 - 48 Summary

Sylder, now twenty-one, is fired from his job at a factory for getting into a fight with one of his co-workers. With no idea as to what he will do next, he goes to a bar and decides to just start driving. After leaving another bar sometime later, he heads back to his car. He is barely conscious, not so much from alcohol but from exhaustion. When he opens up his car door, he finds a man sitting inside. Too tired to be startled, he asks him what he is doing. The man explains that he is sick and begs for a ride back to Maryville, where he surmised Sylder was from given his license plates. Sylder says no and demands the man to get out of his car, but the man instead just slides over into the passenger seat as if he misunderstood Sylder. Too tired to pursue the point—and too disturbed by something about the man's appearance—Sylder decides to let him ride along. Though he had no intention of going back to Maryville, at least not yet, he decides that it is as good as anywhere else. He finds himself quickly annoyed with the man, who is stubbornly talkative.

While they are driving, one of the car's tires goes flat. Sylder and his passenger get out of the car to fix it. After they put on the spare, Sylder hands the man the tire jack to store away in the trunk, but the man instead swings it at him. Though he did not see it coming, Sylder, somehow, expects it. The jack slams into his shoulder and he falls against the car and slides to the ground. The man swings again, but misses and instead opens a hole in the car's body. Sylder grabs the other end of the jack and manages to stand up. The two wind up wrestling one another on the dirt road. Sylder finally gets the advantage. The man begs for mercy—he asks to just be let go—but Sylder refuses. He grabs his windpipe and crushes it, killing the man. Still dazed from the combination of his exhaustion and his wound, Sylder falls unconscious for awhile. When he wakes up, he realizes he has to do something with the body, but it is not sure what exactly. As he is trying to store in the nearby foliage, he hears a truck coming and instead decides to stick the body under his car. The inhabitants of the truck, a man and his son, apparently, get out to see if he needs any help. Sylder lies and says that the tire jack broke and a piece of it flew into his shoulder. He says that his "friend" is under the car trying to fix the muffler. He tells the trucker that he will not need their help since, he lies, his "friend" finally just got the car working. After the two leave, Sylder tucks the dead body into his truck and starts driving.

Sometime during the night, Sylder arrives in the middle of the woods. He is surprised by the strong odor of decay when he opens the truck and vomits. He gets control of himself and pulls the body out to dispose of it. Meanwhile, an old man is somewhere in the woods, and at least saw Sylder arrive; what else he saw is unclear.

A few years later, in 1936, the Green Fly Inn burns down.



Pages 28 - 48 Analysis

This chapter gives some insight into Sylder's unclear background. He evidently hails from some wealthy family, but his family's wealth has either become depleted or he has been cut off from it. As a result, he is forced to take a job at a factory and seriously reduce his standard of living. He obviously does not have the kind of temperament for steady employment, as he loses his job for getting into a completely unnecessary fight.

The scene in the forest where Sylder buries the corpse is interesting for two reasons. First, though the reader is probably not surprised that Sylder is the type of person who would murder someone, as he has already raped someone, his discomfort with the dead body betrays his inexperience. He is, at this stage at least, an unseasoned murderer.

Second, the presence of the old man in the woods obviously must have some significance, though none is explicitly revealed quite yet. An obvious guess would be that his dogs have found or will find the body that Sylder hid, or perhaps he saw it himself. What exactly the old man is doing in the middle of the woods late at night is unclear; one would think it would be far too dark to hunt. The reader should keep these questions in mind as the story continues to unfold.



Pages 51 - 73

Pages 51 - 73 Summary

Six years later, the old man that was in the woods when Sylder was burying the corpse is in an orchard which had evidently been abandoned or otherwise gone to ruin some time ago. He is sitting in a peach tree eating what fruit that he can find. When he is done eating, he gets down and starts heading back to his home. He passes by the pit where Sylder buried the corpse and recalls how he discovered it. He happened across two children who looked terrified. He tried to get them to say what was wrong, but they were mute. They led him to the pit where he discovered the foul, decaying corpse. He tried to find the children again, but they were gone. He came back a few days later and covered the corpse up with a cedar tree.

He goes back to his house, a somewhat run-down little house. He lives there only with his two dogs. He has an irrational fear of cats, for when he was a child a freed slave had warned him about "wampus cats" that prowled invisibly around the mountains. They could not be seen by normal people, but she put some drops on his tongue which, she said, would make them visible for him. He was always afraid that he would see a cat outside his window at night, and sometimes he did. Once he even blasted his window and wall with a shotgun because he thought a cat was sneaking up on him. After that, he decided to no longer keep the shotgun by his bed.

Captain Kenneth Rattner's widow and their son, John Wesley, now live a meager existence. They have basically no income now that Kenneth is gone, but they live in their house for free; they do not even pay taxes, since the county is not aware the house exists or that anyone owns the land. Their house is sufficient for their needs, but they have to put up with a number of annoyances, like wasp infestations and a leaky roof which often soaks their beds. The boy spends a lot of time outdoor, especially late at night after his mother has gone to bed. While in the woods, he watches the town go to sleep and hears voices. They tell him to avenge his father's death. He asks how he can do that and is promised that the way will be made clear. He swears that he will do what they ask.

Months later, John goes into town and sees a girl he knows. He recalls how, months previous, they had met while he was going fishing. She was obviously flirting with him, but he showed no interest. She followed him to the lake and even got in and waded in it. A leech latched onto her leg and, horrified, she begged him to pull it off. He did and she used the opportunity to try to him embrace him, but he pulled away and left her. Now, she just passes by him and giggles with her friend. He returns home. His mother always tells him how great his father was. She says that if he was still alive, they would not be in such bad shape as they are, since he was such a hard-working man. He was an honest man, too, she insists.



Pages 51 - 73 Analysis

It should be obvious from this chapter that the man Sylder killed was Kenneth Rattner. There were, indeed, clues in the chapter which might have suggested it. For one, Sylder felt a kind of evil presence emanating from the man. Of course, there are many evil men, but besides Sylder, Rattner was the only other one of note in the story so far. McCarthy, however, seems to have had no intention of making it completely clear in the previous chapter, for there were a number of ways he might have made Rattner's identity clear without naming him—like referring to the barbed wire wound on his leg, for example.

This chapter also further develops the theme of ignorance and obscurity. So far, the theme has mainly been manifested by the style of narration, but now the characters' ignorance becomes an important element of the story. Rattner's widow and child both are laboring under the utterly false notion that their husband was a completely honest man who was unfairly taken away from them, somehow. (How they know he is actually dead is unclear; the man on the orchard evidently never revealed the corpse on his property to anyone, as evidenced by the fact that it is still there.) Of course, in reality, Rattner was no better than the man who killed him; indeed, if anything, Sylder was defending himself, even if his self-defense was a bit excessive.



Pages 74 - 94

Pages 74 - 94 Summary

Sylder is driving down the highway running from the police. He seems to have the advantage in terms of speed, but he is facing some challenging curves in the road. He misjudges one such curve and winds up careening off the road into a storefront. The cops follow him, but the accident is not so serious that he cannot escape. He casually lights a cigarette as he drives off.

John decides to make use of some animal traps he bought some time ago from a storekeep. He had just earned a dollar by killing a wounded chickenhawk and selling it. The traps are normally thirty cents a piece, but he manages to get four of them for his dollar in exchange for a promise—which, by all appearances, he has no intention of keeping—to buy eight more at the same price. He takes the traps out into the woods and sets them, but has little luck catching anything in them; at best, he finds a toenail. He sets the trap again and goes out before dawn the next day with a flashlight to check them.

The orchard keeper travels late at night to the pit where Kenneth Rattner's body is buried (of course, only he does not know the body's identity). He anticipated the visit with some fear but finds that it did not live up to his anxieties. He gets to the pit, but it is too dark to make out anything distinctly. He is spooked by a rustling in the pit and hurries away. He goes back to his house and feels something move past him as he opens the door. He goes inside to a chest, opens it, and gets a set of shotgun shells out. He carefully "circumcises" all of the shells with a knife.

Pages 74 - 94 Analysis

It is worth noting how the story's background during the time of Prohibition is subtly introduced in this section by John Wesley passing by the demonstrators. One might have figured this out, simply by the dates and the fact that Sylder drives a fast car, a kind of a staple or stereotype of bootleggers. However, McCarthy, as he frequently does, never makes this background explicit, instead preferring to insert it indirectly into the action of the story itself. There is this same indirectness in Sylder's escape from the police. Given that the last scene with Sylder involved him dumping Kenneth Rattner's body into a pit, one might assume that he was running away for fear of being arrested for murder.



Pages 95 - 127

Pages 95 - 127 Summary

Bootlegging operations, a response to Prohibition, which at this time was still in effect, had been changed by some recent arrests. Garland Hobie and his mother used to be at the center of the operations, but the mother was arrested when Jack the Runner was caught. As a result, Garland now carried the whiskey halfway, up to the orchard keeper's property, and hid it in some honeysuckles. There, Sylder would pick it up and take it the rest of the way. Sylder is doing one such pickup when he is startled by shotgun blasts. He ducks and hides for a moment, but discovers that they are coming from an old man—the orchard keeper—shooting a large "x" in the side of a government tank that is on his property. His operation is methodical: He slowly loads the shotgun shells, discharges them, opens the shotgun, examines the spent shells, discards them, and repeats it again. Sylder gets the rest of his whiskey, and as he is ready to leave he sees the old man standing on a hill, shotgun still in hand, watching him. He ducks his head and speeds away.

Meanwhile, John Wesley is creeping through the woods with his flashlight looking for his traps. As he is wading through the stream, he hears the sounds of a car approaching. He stands there motionless for awhile as he listens, and eventually the sound of cracking trees and a pulse of water make it clear the car has crashed nearby. John goes to the car to help the driver—who, he assumes, must be hurt—and smells the distinct odor of whiskey. At the precise moment he tries to open the door it swings violently open from inside and sends him flying backwards. He struggles to find his flashlight, which was nearly lost forever in the dark stream. He sees the car's driver—Sylder—get out of his car, his face smeared with blood. He helps him to the bank of the stream and asks if he is hurt. Sylder is not sure, but guesses that he injured his leg; he seems to be okay to walk, though. John is injured, too, though he did not realize it before; he figures that he must have hurt himself earlier while going through the stream. Sylder proposes that they head out—evidently, he knows somewhere nearby to go—so that they can take care of their windows.

They finally reach a house and an old man—Sylder's friend, June—greeted them at the door. June's wife is shocked to see them both wounded and covered in blood. They go inside and get cleaned up a little. After refusing breakfast several times, they load into June's truck and drive to Sylder's house, which is not very far away. Sylder's wife, a young but harsh-looking blonde, greets him with a series of reproaches for, once again, getting into trouble. He assures her that he is not really hurt. She asks about John and he explains that he is not Sylder's helper; he just found them. They change into some cleaner and drier clothes and meet back out in the living room. Sylder asks John if he knows what was in the car—concerned, perhaps, about the legal implications—and John says that he does. Sylder does not appear concerned though and instead just remarks how good the whiskey was. After eating breakfast, Sylder takes John out to his



barn and introduces him to his dog, Lady. Evidently, she just had a litter of puppies and Sylder says he can have one when they are a little bit older.

Jefferson Gifford and Legwater, two local cops, meanwhile, have just heard about the car crash and the cargo it was carrying. They are a bit surprised to find it was a Plymouth; normally, bootleggers use faster cars. Gifford decides to investigate the scene and talk to some of the locals before reporting it to the sheriff. They arrive at the crash scene and pull the car out with a winch. They find a few bottles of whiskey inside which they hold onto for evidence. Judging from the tracks, they realize that there were two men, but Gifford reasons that the second pair of tracks was not from someone inside the car, but rather from somebody who just happened to be close by. They go to a store where locals often congregate to try to gather more information. John is there. They ask if anybody knew anything about a crashed Plymouth. John, who seems torn, asks them to say what kind of car it was again, and they tell him. Gifford notes John's strange footwear and asks if he always wears slippers in this kind of weather but they leave before he can answer.

Some time later, John and Sylder go hunting with Sylder's dog, Lady. Lady is chasing after a raccoon and is wrestling with it in a stream. John, who has never been hunting with a dog before, betrays his inexperience by diving into the stream after the dog and scaring away the raccoon. He apologizes after Sylder points out his inexperience. Sylder tells him to hurry home so he can change his clothes.

Pages 95 - 127 Analysis

The orchard keeper's defacement of the government tank on his property is strangely ritualistic. The purpose of "circumcising" the bullets is probably to alter how the gun fires; if the casing is not attached to the bronze part of the shell, the shot will spread over a great area. However, given how the scene is depicted and the fact that McCarthy actually uses the word "circumcision," it is clear that there is meant to be an almost religious significance to the act. This significance is re-emphasized when he actually fires on the tank; Sylder watches him examine the shells after he fires them, so slowly as to almost be reverent. The significance of this act is not entirely clear, at least not yet. The tank obviously belongs to the government so perhaps it is an act of rebellion or resentment that the government has put this burden on him. If anything, it seems to be more a matter of principle than anything, since it is obvious the old man does not really use his land productively anymore, as evidenced by the fact that he does not tend to his orchard anymore. This could be seen as a kind of symbolic reaction against government intrusion into a person's life, an issue which has already been featured in the story given the background of Prohibition.

This section also sets up the great irony that will be the main feature of the story: the budding relationship between Sylder and John Wesley. Sylder, unbeknown to John Wesley, Kenneth Rattner's killer, the very man that John Wesley had sworn to exact revenge upon. In their interactions so far, John Wesley has no reason but to be grateful to Sylder. He seems to genuinely concerned for the boy's welfare, gives him a dog, and

even invites him along on a hunt; when John Wesley messes up and lets the raccoon get away, Sylder remains patient with him. John Wesley's feelings towards Sylder are made clear when the police come to the store asking for any information about the wreck. John Wesley decides to keep Sylder's secret safe.



Pages 131 - 158

Pages 131 - 158 Summary

The orchard keeper wakes up early in the morning and goes outside. Nothing is stirring; everything is quiet. He goes back into house, picks up an old magazine, and drifts into thought while he mechanically turns its pages. It had been snowing, but has just recently stopped. He sees a bright red cardinal dart across the white landscape. After some time, he goes out and begins cutting down and dragging trees to the peach pit where Kenneth Rattner's body was dumped.

Meanwhile, John Wesley meets up with some local kids who are about his age. He only recognizes one, Warn Pulliam, whom he met when he saw the latter playing with a buzzard. The others are Boog and Johnny Romines. They are evidently ought hunting—they have already caught a rabbit—and are going after a skunk they have trapped in cave. John Wesley decides to go with them. They reach the cave and Warn gives them a brief tour of its interior; he has made it into his own kind of crude home or hideout. In one of the larger rooms, they start a fire and smoke some cigarettes, but the smoke quickly becomes intolerable and they leave. They catch the skunk and take it back to Mr. Eller's shop to trade. They go back out and Warn shows his friends where he keeps his traps. They all hope to catch a mink because they are worth upwards of ten dollars each, especially if you catch the higher quality ones. He points out some landmarks in the area, including "Uncle Ather's" house; Uncle Ather is the orchard keeper.

They go up to his house and he graciously welcomes them. Uncle Ather is interested in learning more about the skunk they caught and Warn tells him, in detail, exactly what happened. The story reminds Ather of a time when he caught a panther kitten. It did not end well, for the kitten's mother came looking for it and wound up killing almost of all his pigs until he let the kitten loose.

The next day, the orchard keeper goes up the hill back to the peach pit, which he finds smoldering. The corpse inside has been reduced to ashes and he feels a combination of anguish and relief, as if the dead man had finally been released from his body.

Pages 131 - 158 Analysis

This is the first time that the "old man," also referred to as the "orchard keeper," has been referred to by name and "Uncle Ather" is not even his proper name. At the very least, it reveals his first name—"Ather" is a corruption of "Arthur." Given how important he is the story, it is somewhat strange that McCarthy would wait so long to give him a name, and surely this is not without significance. Arthur is a kind of outsider to the community and insofar as names are a social necessity—one has no need for a name if he lives alone—it is perhaps fitting that he is referred to only by what he is, rather than by who is.



Indeed, his separation from society seems to be his decisive characteristic, symbolized most dramatically by his defacement of the tank on his property. The tank's presence was a sign of the government's intrusion into his life but also of his belonging to a community, for the government could only put a tank where they have jurisdiction and jurisdiction implies the existence of some kind of social organization. Arthur, of course, is not completely anti-social, as he seems genuinely happy to have the boys come in, at least for awhile. Nevertheless, he does genuinely seem to be a man who simply wants to be left alone.



Pages 159 - 168

Pages 159 - 168 Summary

John Wesley tells Sylder about how all of his traps were confiscated and he had been threatened by Gifford. He was told that he was trapping without a license and that he could be charged for aiding a criminal, too, since the man he helped out of the car was a bootlegger. Gifford implied that if the boy gave him some information about Sylder, the charges might be dropped. John Wesley stayed firm, though, and insisted that he did not help anyone, let alone a criminal. Gifford left without making an arrest. Sylder tells the boy that Gifford is just bluffing and would never arrest a fourteen year old boy.

Sylder leaves and while he driving, he remembers how he lost part of his toe in war. He was in the Navy, a sailor on a boat that was under fire. A bullet grazed his foot and took off his toenail and the top part of his toe. He traces through other memories of his past—a bonfire, a church service—before he finally arrives at his destination, a house where he is supposed to drop off his current cargo of whiskey. He heads home, but stops at Gifford's house first. He sneaks into his bedroom and finds the policeman sleeping. He punches him in the face and leaves before Gifford knows what happens. He returns home and crawls into bed with his wife, who can only wonder why he is laughing. As he falls asleep, he experiences a strong sense of doom as he tries to figure out why the orchard keeper was shooting the government tank.

Pages 159 - 168 Analysis

In this section, Sylder's distinctive toe injury is finally explained. He was shot in the foot some time ago while on a boat. The most obvious interpretation of this passage would be that Sylder was a seaman for the Navy, but the book's time line makes it difficult to place him in any specific war. Given that he was born in 1913, it would not have been possible for him to have served in the First World War (America was only directly involved from 1917 to 1918) and America would only just be entering into the Second World War at this point in the story (around 1941). There were no major conflicts to speak of during the intervening period and, thus, the more reasonable interpretation might be that he was involved in some kind of criminal activity, perhaps smuggling.



Pages 171 - 195

Pages 171 - 195 Summary

Arthur Ownby—the real name, as it turns out, of the man referred to so far as "Uncle Ather," "the orchard keeper," or simply "the old man"—is traveling outside in a severe downpour of rain. Despite his old age, he seems to manage the wet terrain dexterously at first, hopping from one firm spot to another, but eventually he slips and lands bodily into the wet mud. Meanwhile, a large cat—probably a panther or something like it—is roused from her sleep in Ownby's outhouse: the water is starting to seep in. She crawls out and begins to search for new refuge. She finally finds some in the Rattners' barn. Kenneth Rattner's widow, Mildred, opens the barn some time later and is confronted by the creature which lunges at her and runs away. She goes off again, now in search of food. She unsuccessfully goes after some birds but, through some good fortune, finds a dead mink. She begins to tear into it, but as if remembering some other, urgent duty, leaves it and goes off. The next day, John Wesley goes to check his traps and finds that he has caught a mink; unfortunately, it was the same mink ravaged during the night by the panther. He takes it, and the trap, anyway.

Sylder, meanwhile, is getting ready for another whiskey run. He stops by Mr. Eller's shop first and fills up his gas tank before he drives to Ownby's orchard to pick up his cargo. Once arrived, he gathers all the bottles—this particular job, apparently, is a big one—sloshing back and forth between the road where his car is parked and the alcove where the whiskey is stashed. As he is leaving, his car is having some trouble and even dies. He manages to revive, but the remedy, evidently, is only temporarily, and he winds up stalling on the bridge.

Gifford and several other policemen arrive at Ownby's orchard to arrest him for defacing the government tank on his property. They see him standing in the doorway, menacingly holding a shotgun and decide to call for backup before trying again. A few more policemen arrive and they storm his house, but he is hidden under his stove and can fire on them with impunity. He hits a few of the officers—though he does not kill anyone—and they retreat once again. He sneaks out the back of his house, loads a sleigh with a few items he can grab, and leaves with his dog, Scout. The policemen throw tear gas canisters into the house to try to take him for a third time, but he is already gone. Ownby starts walking—heading, apparently, for a place named Harrykin. Two men in a car see him walking and, probably moved by the pathetic sight of the old man and his mangy dog, offer to take him at least part of the way and perhaps have some breakfast first. He is initially reluctantly, but finally accepts. They go back to the man's rather nice cabin and eat. They drop him off in the wilderness and he sets out once again.



Pages 171 - 195 Analysis

It is probably not a coincidence that Arthur Ownby is finally named only when he is forced to directly come into contact with the law. Ownby wants nothing more than to be his own man, free from any ties to the community and especially from any ties to the government. As has been discussed regarding previous chapters, Ownby's anonymity—he is often only referred to as "the old man"—might be interpreted as a sign of this isolation, insofar as names are a sign of one's social existence. Thus, when the police come to his house, Ownby is forced to face the reality that he is part of a larger community and, therefore, he is finally given a name. Ownby, of course, is not at all willing to surrender to this fate, and his stand is anything but desperate. He seems both more prepared and more clever than the police who are trying to arrest him and somehow manages to escape. His choice of a new destination is telling of his character. He wants to go to Harrykin, a region which is apparently more or less uninhabited.



Pages 196 - 215

Pages 196 - 215 Summary

Gifford is questioning a storekeep named Huffaker about Ownby. Huffaker tells him that Ownby comes by the store occasionally, but not in any predictable fashion. He asks if the old man is in any trouble, but Gifford does not reveal anything; he just says he needs to talk to him about something. Gifford returns each day—evidently, he does not think there is much hope of finding Ownby out in the wilderness—hoping to catch him. After about a week, Ownby finally shows up and Gifford arrests him. Ownby does not resist but only pleads with Gifford to allow Scout, his dog, to come along. He even tries opening the doors on Gifford's cruise to let Scout in, but Gifford refuses and threatens to add resisting arrest to the rest of Ownby's charges. Scout watches in the distance as the car, with his owner in it, leaves him behind.

John Wesley, meanwhile, is showing his mink—or what is left of it—to Warn. Warn guesses that it would be worth about ten dollars if it were in good condition, but it seems that it is basically worthless in its current, ravaged condition. They speculate about what possibly could have done so much damage and conclude that it must have been a bobcat, since nothing else around there, they think, has sharp enough claws to account for how shredded the mink is.

John Wesley then goes to visit Sylder in jail. Sylder is being questioned about where he lives, what he does, and so on. He obstinately gives false answers, but the desk sergeant knows all the information anyway. When he is asked about prior convictions, he remains silent. The desk sergeant manages to get him to say that he has none and, seemingly content with that answer, fills it in on the paperwork. Sylder is then told by the jailer that someone wants to see him, a "fella named Gifford." Gifford decides to use his position of authority to exact some revenge on Sylder for punching him a few weeks ago.

John Wesley arrives and lies to the jailer, claiming to be Sylder's nephew. John Wesley gives Sylder two dollars—claiming that he owes it to him. Sylder is at first reluctant to accept it, but when he sees how insistent John Wesley is, he takes the bills and folds them into his pocket. John Wesley is shocked to see how badly beaten Sylder is and asks if he was a in a car wreck. Sylder explains that he was not, but rather that it was Gifford that gave it to him so badly. Outraged, John Wesley resolves to make Gifford pay for what he did, but Sylder is adamantly opposed to it. He wants John Wesley to stay out of it and not get in any trouble. Besides, he says, if John Wesley winds up attacking Gifford, it will probably only mean more charges for him. John Wesley says nothing and leaves. As he sits in his cell he thinks to himself that he wishes he could take back every word and hopes Gifford gets what he deserves.

Pages 196 - 215 Analysis

When John Wesley shows the ravaged corpse of the mink he caught to Warn, McCarthy concludes the strange subplot involving the cat. It is an extremely simple subplot and seems really like nothing more than a narration of what happens out in the wild: The cat wanders around a bit, seeking a place to avoid the rain and looking for food, but eventually becomes prey itself for a hawk. It is important, however, to understand the significance of the cat in its proper context. Cats, so far, have enjoyed a strange significance in the story. Early in the story, Ownby's peculiar superstitions about cats was discussed; he was so afraid of them that he once even shot a hole in his wall because he thought one was watching him. The idea of reincarnation is floated at a later point by one of the boys. While the cat is not literally meant to be a reincarnated human, she probably is at least meant to be symbolic of the most important dead character in the story: Kenneth Rattner. The cat's life, in a way, encompasses everything that is known about Kenneth Rattner. He is a predator whose predations eventually led to his demise: The cat, the reader should recall, was killed when it was looking for squirrels to eat.



Pages 216 - 246

Pages 216 - 246 Summary

The wildcat is still on the prowl, searching the countryside for food. She smells some squirrels and goes searching for them, but finds nothing. Instead, an owl screeches and takes her up in its claws to devour her. While Mr. Eller is closing up his shop, he hears the cat's final scream, but it barely causes him to pause.

An agent from the welfare department arrives at the jail to talk to Ownby, ostensibly to prove some assistance to him. He asks him a few basic questions like his age or address, but Ownby, either out of genuine ignorance or just obstinacy, gives only vague answers, if he provides an answer at all. Frequently, he just turns the questions back on the agent, as if they were just casually trying to get to know one another. The agent realizes that Ownby is not receptive to his services just yet and decides to leave. On the way out, he learns that Ownby is in jail for, among other charges, shooting four officers.

The authorities apparently judge that Ownby is mentally ill and send him to a mental asylum. John Wesley goes to visit him there, once again lying and claiming to be his nephew. Ownby is happy to see him and especially happy to see that the boy has sneaked in a generous bag of tobacco. John Wesley tells him that they arrested Marion Sylder, too, and sent him off to prison for three years for running whiskey. Ownby recalls the name only with difficulty and remarks that he never met him, but saw him driving his black car around a few times. Ownby is not sure how long he is going to have to stay there and is even less sure about what will happen to him once they realize that he is not actually crazy. Ownby asks John Wesley what he plans on doing as he gets older, but John Wesley is not sure. Ownby remarks that there are a lot of ways for a young man to make money nowadays, not like when he was young. In fact, the older he gets, the fewer things there are that he wants to do. There are some things, however, that a person just has to do, no matter how old they are, because unless he does them, he will not have any peace. All men want peace, especially old men like himself. He changes the subject and asks if John Wesley has seen Scout. He has not, but promises to take care of him if he finds him.

John Wesley leaves and goes to the courthouse where he sold the chickenhawk months ago. He tries to recover the chickenhawk's corpse in return for the money he got for it, but the woman is confused, and perhaps a little disturbed. They burn the bodies of the animals after they get them, she explains. He decides to leave the dollar on the counter anyway and runs away before she can give it back.

John Wesley leaves the town months before local authorities discover Kenneth Rattner's burnt corpse in Ownby's peach pit. They believe that it is his corpse, though they cannot find the platinum plate in his head that he supposedly had put in from an injury. The police tell his widow but choose not to reveal that he was wanted in three states. They let her live with her false belief that her husband was a good, honest, hard-



working man. Legwater, Gifford's partner and the county humane official, decides to start sifting through the ashes hoping to find the valuable platinum plate. He spends three days sifting through the ashes in vain. At one point, Scout comes by and he shoots at him, but the dog runs away. Gifford finally comes and gets Legwater, telling him that there is no platinum plate and that he is wasting his time. Legwater finally gives up and comes with him. As they walk back, they see Scout again and Legwater shoots and kills him.

Years later, John Wesley returns to his town and finds his old house empty and the entire community more or less unpopulated. His mother has died and he visits her gravestone; she died in 1946 at the age of thirty-nine. John Wesley leaves Red Branch, as the last of a race of men who have since been lost forever.

Pages 216 - 246 Analysis

The reader might think it strange that McCarthy never dissolves the story's chief irony, that Sylder is John Wesley's father's killer. The fact that he never does so indicates that the irony had a different significance. One might interpret this in a few ways. First, it might be meant to show the senselessness of revenge. If John Wesley discovered that Sylder killed his father, it would not change who Sylder was, even if it changed how John Wesley perceived him. Sylder would still be the friendly and somewhat sympathetic (if also somewhat criminal) character that he is, hardly deserving of John Wesley's anger. To put the same point in another way, if John Wesley knew that Sylder killed Kenneth Rattner, it would not make him see Sylder more clearly, but less clearly, for then he would be blinded by rage and his quasi-demonic oath of vengeance.



Characters

Marion Sylder

Marion Sylder is born in Red Branch, a small town outside of Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1913. His early years are spent mainly in the town, with the occasional excursion elsewhere. When he is twenty-one years old, having just returned from one such excursion, he takes a job at a factory. It is a significant downgrade from his normal standard of living as a whiskey runner; he makes hardly a fraction of what he once did. He gets quickly bored with the job and winds up getting fired for getting into a fight. Unsure what he wants to do, he just starts driving without any idea of where he wants to go. After stopping at a bar, he returns to his car to find Kenneth Rattner waiting inside for him. He begs him for a ride back to Maryville, the county where Red Branch is located, and ignores Sylder's many refusals. Sylder, exhausted, gives up and gives him a ride. Rattner attacks him when Sylder's tire goes flat, but Sylder, the younger and stronger of the two, winds up killing Rattner. He dumps the body in a peach pit on Arthur Ownby's land. Years later, he makes friends with Rattner's son, John Wesley, though neither know their connection to one another. He eventually is caught running whiskey and gets sent to prison for three years.

If there is an identifiable main character in the story, it is probably Sylder, though that does not mean that he is meant to be a sympathetic character. Though Sylder's main criminal activity, bootlegging whiskey, is not something which will strike the modern reader as immoral—nor is it supposed to—there are many other questionable parts of Sylder's past. Little is revealed about what exactly he did before he returned to Red Branch, though it was during that time, apparently, that his toe was shot off in some kind of skirmish with law enforcement. He also apparently rapes a young hitch-hiker early in the story.

John Wesley Rattner

John Wesley Rattner is the young child of Kenneth Rattner. He and his mother both believe that Kenneth Rattner was a heroic man, distinguished by his service in the military. When he leaves them, shortly after they arrive in Red Branch, they believe he did so to get a job. In fact, he had just robbed the corpses of the men who had the misfortune to be on the Green Fly Inn's porch when it collapsed. He uses the money to fund his fraudulent and larcenous activities in several states. John Wesley vows to find the man who killed his father and exact revenge upon him. Of course, when he happens—by dumb luck or providence—to meet Marion Sylder, he does not know that he has, in fact, met his father's killer. He takes quickly to Sylder, the latter becoming a kind of father figure to him. He also develops a relationship, however distant, with Arthur Ownby, whom he knows simply as "Uncle Ather." When both of the men are arrested on different charges, he lies his way into seeing each of them. After both are sentenced, he leaves Red Branch for several years. When he comes back, his mother is dead and



almost everyone else is gone. He realizes he is the last free and living representative of the way life was in Red Branch, Tennessee.

Arthur Ownby

Arthur Ownby is the old man who owns the orchard where Marion Sylder dumps Kenneth Rattner's body. He is eventually arrested for defacing the government tank on his property and sent to a mental asylum.

Kenneth Rattner

Kenneth Rattner is a fraud and criminal who deceives his family into thinking that he is a hard-working, honest man. He leaves Red Branch after stealing money from the corpses of men who died when the Green Fly Inn's porch collapsed. He hitch-hikes with Marion Sylder and tries to attack him, presumably to rob him, but winds up being killed.

Jefferson Gifford

Jefferson Gifford is a Red Branch policemen. He is the driving force behind the campaign to catch and arrest both Marion Sylder and Arthur Ownby.

June Lipton

June Tipton is Marion Sylder's friend. They pick up the hitch-hiking girls together early in the story and rape them. When Sylder crashes, he and John Wesley go to June Tipton's house.

Warn Pulliam

Warn Pulliam is a local boy whom John Wesley becomes friend with, mainly as a result of their mutual interest in trapping and hunting.

Mildred Rattner

Mildred Rattner is John Wesley's father and Kenneth Rattner's widow. She winds up dying while John Wesley is away from Red Branch.

Legwater

Legwater is Jefferson Gifford's partner and the county's humane officer. When he hears, falsely, that Kenneth Rattner had a platinum plate in his head, he sifts through the dead man's ashes for three days hoping to find it.

Mr. Eller

Mr. Eller runs the shop in Red Branch. It is hinted that he has a considerable amount of wealth, at least more than anyone else in Red Branch.



Objects/Places

Red Branch

Red Branch, Tennessee is a small mountain town near Knoxville.

Knoxville

Knoxville is the closest major city to Red Branch.

Atlanta

As the story opens, Kenneth Rattner is trying to get through Atlanta to Knoxville.

The Green Fly Inn

The Green Fly Inn is a rickety bar located on the outskirts of town. Kenneth Rattner finds twenty-six dollars on the bodies of the men who died or were knocked unconscious when the porch collapsed. It burns down a few years later.

Mr. Eller's Shop

Mr. Eller's shop is the social center for Red Branch.

The Peach Pit

Sylder dumps Kenneth Rattner's body in a peach pit on Ownby's property. Ownby turns it into a kind of shrine and crypt.

The Government Tank

Arthur Ownby is arrested for defacing a government tank on his property. It represents the government's intrusion into one's personal life.

Harrykin

When Arthur Ownby escapes from the police, he tries to get to Harrykin, a wild and uninhabited area of Tennessee.



Whiskey

Sylder makes his living illegally trafficking whiskey.

Prohibition

The story set against the backdrop of Prohibition, a movement which criminalized the production and exchange of alcohol.

Themes

Resisting Government Intrusion

One of the story's key themes is the conflict between individual liberty and government expansion. The historical setting of the story immediately puts this issue in the spotlight, as the age of Prohibition is often understood as a low point in American history for individual freedom. Though Sylder is not a thoroughly sympathetic character, McCarthy does not expect or desire the reader to think less of him for transporting whiskey against the law. Indeed, none of the characters in the story, other than the policemen, seem to care about what Sylder does. John Wesley, far too young to drink, is even eager to help him and protect him from the police, even though he can smell whiskey at the scene of the crash where the two first meet.

Arthur Ownby's story is perhaps even a more direct treatment of the issue of liberty. Ownby's stand against the government is almost entirely principled. He hardly uses his land—the orchard has not been tended to in decades—and yet he finds the tank on his property to be unbearably loathsome. He finally decides to do something about it by almost ritualistically defacing it with shotgun shells. The defacement attracts the attention of the local police whom he resists with gunfire, despite being well into his eighties. When he escapes, Ownby's only goal is to make it somewhere that he can be left alone, which appears to be his chief motivation throughout the story.

Ignorance and Irony

One of the most important aspects of the stories is how little characters understand who the other really is. Kenneth Rattner's family believe that he is a hard-working, honest man; in fact, he is a law-breaking, violent, and fraudulent criminal who is wanted in three states for his crimes. Their innocent deception leads John Wesley to swear an oath to some mysterious mystical forces that he will find and punish whoever killed his father. Ignorance, of course, winds up being an integral part of the relationship that develops between Marion Sylder and John Wesley. If John Wesley knew Sylder was his father's killer, they could hardly develop the almost filial relationship they wind up enjoying, at least until Sylder is sent to jail. Indeed, in an ironic way, John Wesley's ignorance of Sylder's history actually makes him see Sylder more clearly than he otherwise would have. Sylder is flawed, and has certainly done some immoral things in the past, but there is at least a part of him which is honest and good. If John Wesley were consumed with vengeful rage, he could hardly appreciate Sylder's good qualities.

McCarthy foregrounds this theme of ignorance stylistically. Characters are rarely referred to by their names, leading to an obscure narrative style. The reader is often forced to examine the text carefully for contextual clues to determine exactly who is doing what. Indeed, some characters are not named until very late into the story. For



example, the reader knows Arthur Ownby only as "the old man" until well over halfway into the story.

Hints of the Supernatural

One subtext of the novel that might be missed is the occasional reference to the supernatural. This occurs several times in the text. First, Arthur Ownby has an irrational fear of cats, inspired by something he was told by a former slave (who, seemingly, was some kind of voodoo witch) when he was a young child. His fear is so strong that he actually winds up shooting a hole in his wall and window when he thinks a cat is stalking outside of his bedroom window. Second, John Wesley Rattner has a strange kind of spiritual pact with something out in the wilderness. He tells these spirits—or, perhaps, they are just voices he imagines—that he will avenge his father's death. Finally, Warn Pulliam tells John Wesley later in the book that men become animals after their death.

Against this backdrop, the strange subplot involving the cat becomes comprehensible. Though McCarthy is not suggesting, perhaps, that the cat is literally a reincarnated man, the cat is probably at least meant to represent Kenneth Rattner. Like Rattner, the cat is a predator and, also like Rattner, his predation winds up getting him killed: the cat is hunting for squirrels when it an owl swoops down on it.

The exact purpose of this subtle supernatural subtext is not entirely clear, but it perhaps might be explained as an attempt to make the town of Red Branch seem somewhat otherworldly. The story is hardly a fantasy, but as the closing paragraphs make clear, McCarthy is writing about a kind of people that are lost in the modern world and, therefore, they are something that must seem strange and alien to the modern reader.

Style

Point of View

The book is narrated in the third-person perspective. Generally speaking, a given section of the book follows only one character and the narrator's knowledge is limited to the character's perspective. As a result, the important ironies in the book are never made explicit; it is up to the reader to make those kinds of connections.

One feature of the narration that will be immediately noticeable to the reader is how McCarthy often makes the identity of the characters obscure. He will often write several paragraphs with only personal pronouns and may never provide their referent. It is never completely unclear who is doing what, though, as the reader can at least figure out who is who from certain contextual clues. There is certainly a distinct purpose for this obscurity, as ignorance is one of the main motifs throughout the story's plot. For example, the story's crucial irony is the fact that Marion Sylder and John Wesley Rattner becomes friends despite the fact that Sylder is John Wesley's father's killer. However, the reader might reasonably ask if the obscure style is justified by this, for it often becomes distracting and even frustrating.

Setting

The book is set in the period between the two World Wars in Red Branch, Tennessee, a small mountain community just outside of Knoxville. An important aspect of the story's historical situation is the Prohibition movement and the related alcohol-related laws that followed it. Government regulation of alcohol makes obtaining alcohol either difficult or impossible through legal means, and thus Sylder gets involved in bootlegging rings which pay him quite well. These laws are representative of the government intrusion into individual liberty that forms one of the book's crucial themes. McCarthy is not concerned simply with alcohol, but freedom in general. Indeed, Ownby's resistance to the government seems almost absurdly trivial: Though he hardly uses his land, he cannot stand the fact that the government keeps a tank (the purpose of which is unknown) on his property. He ritualistically defaces it with his shotgun, an act of defiance which ultimately leads to his arrest.

The setting of the book is also important to the final message of the book, in which McCarthy, through his narrator, laments the disappearance of the kind of people who lived in Red Branch. Like Ownby, he seems to long for the kind of simple and self-sufficient life that became impossible as government expanded and the economy made country life obsolete. This last point is hinted at by Ownby himself when he talks about how many ways there are for a young man to make money; in his day, he remarks, things were not so complicated, and he prefers it that way.



Language and Meaning

There is an obvious disparity between the narrator's language and the language of most of the book's characters. The narrator speaks grammatically and even with a sophisticated vocabulary. His sentence structure is not strictly conventional and he makes frequent use of sentence fragments for effect. Thus, for example, on page 61 he describes Mildred Rattner in the following way: "Deep hole between her neckcords, smokeblue. Laddered boneshapes under the paper skin like rows of welts descending into the bosom of her dress. Eyes lowered to her work, blink when she swallows like a toad's. Lids wrinkled like walnut hulls. Her grizzled hair gathered, tight, a helmet of zinc wire. Soft rocking, rocking. A looping drape of skirt slung in a curtain-fold down the side of the chair swept softly at the floor."

The dialogue of the characters, on the other hand, is meant to accurately portray Tennessean dialect from that time. As such, it can be sometimes difficult for a modern reader to understand exactly what is being said. For example, on pages 151-157, Arthur Ownby tells a story about catching a "painter" and, though the story makes it clear he is talking about some kind of wild cat, the reader might not be immediately aware that "painter" is a corruption of "panther." Likewise, the reader might miss the fact that "Ather" is a corruption of "Arthur" and may not immediately realize that "Uncle Ather" is the same person as Arthur Ownby.

Structure

The book is divided into four unequal parts. The divisions do not seem to be of great significance, though generally speaking more time seems to pass between the parts than between individual sections within the parts. Though the book follows several different storylines—most importantly the stories of Marion Sylder, John Wesley Rattner, and Arthur Ownby—McCarthy is almost obsessively chronological. He distinguishes events that happened prior to the "present" of the plot by the use of an italic typeface, a choice which is only slightly confusing since it is also used to denote a character's thoughts. The non-italic text of the story, however, is strictly chronological; he does not even narrate events that happen simultaneously. There is sometimes an overlap between two threads of a story. Thus, for example, the brief story of the cat is interwoven with the plot threads of Ownby, Mildred Rattner, and John Wesley, but, once again, strict chronology is maintained.

The book's ending seems to leave much unresolved, or at least unclear. The reader might reasonably have expected that the major irony—that Sylder killed John Wesley's father—would come to light in some dramatic fashion, yet if anything, the book's conclusion seems to make its revelation even less likely. Likewise, there is no obvious connection between two of book's major characters, Ownby and Sylder. They never even meet, and Ownby can barely even recall who he is. In order to understand this strange, and maybe dissatisfying conclusion, one must look for thematic explanations. The purpose of Sylder being Kenneth Rattner's killer was not to build up some dramatic



confrontation with his son, but rather to show the senselessness of revenge; if John Wesley knew Sylder killed his father, he would never have been able to develop a relationship with him. He might even have killed him. Ownby and Sylder are linked, not by anything directly in the plot, but rather by their parallel struggles with a government whose influence is gradually permeating their life. For Ownby, this intrusion is represented by the tank on his property. Sylder, on the other, makes his very living off of undermining the government's attempt to violate individual liberty by smuggling alcohol from one place to another.



Quotes

"Coming into Atlanta he saw at the top of a fence of signs one that said KNOXVILLE 197. The name of the town for which he was headed. Had he been asked his name he might have given any but Kenneth Rattner, which was his name." (10)

"Whether he fell forward or whether the man pulled them over he did not know. They were lying in the road, the man with his face in the dirt and Sylder on top of him, motionless for the moment as resting lovers." (38)

"Deep hole between her neckcords, smokeblue. Laddered boneshapes under the paper skin like rows of welts descending into the bosom of her dress. Eyes lowered to her work, blink when she swallows like a toad's. Lids wrinkled like walnut hulls. Her grizzled hair gathered, tight, a helmet of zinc wire. Soft rocking, rocking. A looping drape of skirt slung in a curtain-fold down the side of the chair swept softly at the floor." (61)

"They passed in an enormous shudder of sound and the buses came, laborious in low gear, churning out balls of hazy blue smoke, their windows alive with streamers, pennants, placards, small faces. Long paper banners ran the length of the buses proclaiming for Christ in tall red letters, and for sobriety, offering to vote against the devil when and wherever he ran for office." (80-81)

"There were twelves bright red waxed tubes in it and he set them out on the table one by one, their dull brass bases orange in the lampglow. He selected one and with the knife made a thin cut around the base of the paper there brass met. He examined it carefully, then deepened the cut, turning the shell against the blade. He checked it again, nodded to his nodding shadow and put the shell back in the box. He performed the same operation on the remaining eleven, putting each in turn in the box again. When he had finished he replaced the knife in the drawer and returned to the front room where he took them one by one, the twelve circumcised shotgun shells, and deposited them in the pocket of his coat." (94)

"Legwater, the county humane officer, finished now with his drink, sat leaning forward, hands palm-downward, sitting on his fingers—an attitude toadlike but for his thinness and the spindle legs dangling over the side of the box. He was swinging them out, banging his heels against the drink case. A longlegged and emaciated toad, then." (116)

"Night, Sylder said. The car pulled away trailing ropy plumes of smoke, the one red taillight bobbing. He turned toward the house, lightless and archaic among the crumbling oaks, crossed the frosted yard. His shadow swept upward to the lean-to roof, dangled from a limb, upward again, laced with branches, stood suddenly upon the roof. He slid downward over the eaves and disappeared in the black square of the gable window." (127)



"Scout was standing in snow to his belly, gazing out at the fantastic landscape with his bleary eyes. Across the yard, brilliant against the facade of pines beyond, a cardinal shot like a drop of blood." (133)

"He owned a lot of land in Knox County and when the war was over they took it away from him on account of him bein a Confederate. Granddaddy Pulliam says they wouldn't even let nobody vote ceptin niggers and yankees.

Why was that?

On account of back then this was the North I reckon." (145)

"Tell Ward good cars costs good money. Even at government auction. Or even if you done paid for em oncet." (165)

"With grass in his mouth the old man sat up and peered about him, heard the rain mendicant-voiced, soft chanting in that dark gramarye that summons the earth to bridehood." (184)

"They are gone now. Fled, banished in death of exile, lost, undone. Over the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses. No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust." (246)



Topics for Discussion

McCarthy's narrative style is often intentionally obscure, making it difficult for the reader to immediately identify which character is involved in a given scene. What is the purpose of this? Is this a good stylistic choice?

What is the significance of the voices John Wesley Rattner heard in the woods? What is the significance of the fact that he never fulfills his promise?

What is the significance of Ownby's phobia of cats? Why did it not seem to apply when he caught the "painter" when he was a younger man?

What is Ownby not named until late in the book, despite his importance throughout the story?

Why does Ownby deface the tank on his property?

What is the significance of Ownby's intention to move to Harrykin?

According to the book's final paragraphs, what exactly does McCarthy (or, at least, the narrator) believe has been lost?