

Suttree

by
Cormac McCarthy

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**First
Published**

1979

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By

Cormac McCarthy



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ANALYSIS

Suttree (1979)

Cormac McCarthy

(1933-)

“In 1979, he published his fourth novel, *Suttree*, on which he had worked on and off for almost twenty years. This was McCarthy’s ‘big’ book, the one some still consider his best. Set primarily in Knoxville in the early 1950s, the book details the events in the life of Cornelius Suttree, a young man from a prominent family who has chosen to live with the down-and-out in the McAnally Flats area of the city. While the story is based in experience—the characters, events and places often identifiable by local Knoxvilleians—the extent of its autobiographical nature is difficult to determine. As Guy Davenport wrote in the *National Review*, ‘there is something of a portrait of the artist as a young man about this book. Coming after three objective novels with no trace of a self-portrait, there is nothing here of the author digesting his adolescence. Instead, it would seem that the author has projected himself into a character he might have been were circumstances otherwise, or that he is being autobiographical in an obliquely symbolic way.’

The book hit close to home, resulting, according to the Knoxville *News-Sentinel*, in ‘more talk about town than any novel since James Agee’s *A Death in the Family*. The *Memphis Press-Scimitar* ran an angry review, ‘A Masterpiece of Filth’: Portrait of Knoxville Forgets to be Fair,’ to which the historian and novelist Shelby Foote, a long-time admirer of McCarthy, responded with a letter passionately defending the book. Other reviewers drew apt comparisons between McCarthy and Joyce, comparisons *Suttree* both invited and sustained.

The majority commented on the sprawling structure of the lengthy story, which spans a period of six years (1950-55), noting an overabundance of episodes and characters and sensations. ‘One gets the impression that McCarthy walks through the world cramming his brain with experience both actual and vicarious and then goes to work and gives everything back, scene upon scene, the devil take the hindmost,’ Walter Sullivan wrote in *Sewanee Review*. “McCarthy is certainly the most talented novelist of his generation. He is the only writer to emerge since World War II who can bear comparison to Faulkner.... But I, for one, can also deplore what seems to me to be a limited use of an enormous talent. In his almost exclusive concern with the grotesque McCarthy offers a distorted view of creation, fragmented and debauched though that creation now may be. I hope he will read Faulkner again and learn how to broaden his scope and enlarge his image.’

Still others celebrated that very scope and achievement. ‘The book comes at us like a horrifying flood. The language licks, batters, wounds—a poetic, troubled rush of debris. It is personal and touch, without that boring neatness and desire for resolution that you can get in any well-made novel,’ Anatole Broyard stated in the *New York Times*, while the novelist Nelson Algren proclaimed in the *Chicago Tribune Book World*, ‘This is a big, beautiful book, the best work of fiction to come along in years. It is as unique as the work of Dylan Thomas or Thomas Wolfe. It will be around for a long, long time.’

Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, eds.
Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy
(U Mississippi 1993) 8-9

Suttree (1979) is such a large book, so full of variety and richness and amazements, that to focus on any one element or them is to distort the overall achievement.... The chronology distinctly covers six years, from 1950 to 1955, and the narrative is replete with specific dates and holidays and days of the week as well as the passing seasons. The streets, buildings, markets of Knoxville are carefully mapped. There are over one hundred fifty named characters in the book, some of whom appear for one time only and others who weave in and out of the story. Some of them go by different names at different times... Suttree, himself goes by a variety of names: he is Bud or Buddy to his family, Sut or Suttree or Youngblood to his

companions, but never his given name of Cornelius. The question of identity and responsibility weighs heavily on his soul. McAnally Flats, 'a world within the world' with yet another world beneath it, is his own vestibule of hell.

As everyone notes, Suttree is McCarthy's most intellectual protagonist. He is, in fact, almost too aware, his self of self-horror often lapsing into self-pity. He is a fine example of what William James termed the 'divided self,' the person who strives with the 'sick soul' within: 'Back of everything is the great spectre of universal death'... One need only note the prevalence of watches and clocks, from the running wristwatch on the suicide fished out of the river to the sound of ticking at Mother She's to the nightmare of clocks that figure in Suttree's final delirium as he faces the 'galactic drainsuck' of death. The division within Suttree is further underscored by the many doubles who people the book, from the numerous sets of brothers (Suttree and his dead twin chief among them) to the contrasting yet allied characters (such as the religious goat man and the cynical ragman) who present different sides of dialectical arguments in their relationships with Suttree. In its broadest, most metaphysical sense, Suttree's divided self is expressed by what Suttree calls the 'antisuttree,' the term calling forth the idea of the Jungian double but also indicating the threat of negation and nothingness....

Suttree, here in the Dantesque 'obscure wood,' is very much like Culla Holme in his wish to avoid facing the dark figure of his guilt, and with it the possibility of his salvation—to be 'mended' or 'made whole,' the condition promised by the prophet in *Outer Dark*. Suttree is another of McCarthy's 'neutrals.' Like Lester, he has removed himself from the upper world, retreated to the lower slums of Knoxville's McAnally Flats. Like Culla, he has abandoned his own child and the mother of his child. As in *Outer Dark*, the child dies. Suttree's withdrawal is a form of spiritual despair and abasement. Sober, Suttree maintains an order and economy to his life, marked by cleanliness and concern and moderate responsibility. But drunk, he is filthy beyond words (almost): one of the grand artistries of this novel is McCarthy's brilliance in describing various states of befoulment.... 'My life is ghastly'....

Of the many scenes one could mention to illustrate Suttree's 'good heart,' the most extraordinary is his journey underground to rescue Gene Harrogate, a great comic character... Suttree's feelings for the boy are, I think, deepened by his own son's death. (Excluded from the funeral, Suttree later fills in the grave, but this is a fairly useless gesture. He seems sorer for himself at this point than for the lost child.) When Harrogate disappears into the caves underrunning Knoxville—off on his fantastic scheme to rob a bank by blasting into its vault—Suttree must go in after him. McCarthy presents it as a trip into the spiritual underworld. Harrogate is described as a...troll or demon cartographer in the hellish light...charting the progress of souls in the darkness below.' His name (there is a Harrogate, Tennessee) takes on a deeper meaning, for in one sense Suttree 'harrows' the 'gates' of hell to attempt the rescue, to retrieve Gene from the depths. We should remember that Suttree is a fisherman, although the river he fishes runs out of Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and he more often resembles the wounded Fisher King than, as here, the Christian fisher of men. He finds Harrogate in shock, covered with dried excrement (for he has burst a sewer main and been engulfed by the filth, another view of hell found in Dante)....

Indeed, it is difficult not to follow Suttree's movement as a religious or spiritual quest, even as he tries to deny exactly that aspect of it.... Religion, Faith, God, Death, Grace are constant topics of conversation between Suttree and such figures as the ragpicker, the goatman, Daddy Watson, the street evangelist and numerous strangers he encounters. Although Suttree denies he is 'saved,' declares himself a 'defrocked' Catholic, his struggle indicates otherwise. Early in the book he feels that 'even a false adumbration of the world of the spirit is better than none at all.' By the end he has entered that world of the spirit and has acknowledged its power.... Suttree attempts to excuse his failures by insisting on the insignificance and 'nothingness' of life.... Near death with typhoid fever, Suttree envisions a trial in which he is accused of 'squandering' his life. 'I was drunk,' is his first excuse, but when he regains consciousness and the attending priest asks, 'Would you like to confess?', his simple but all-inclusive answer is 'I did it.'

Thus, I find it difficult to read the end of the novel as anything but affirmative, although some critics find it much less convincing than I do. He leaves McAnally Flats...with a new sense of wholeness.... His avowal of God—'He is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving'—seems equally strong. Here the concept

of 'nothing' or 'No thing' is turned into 'All things'.... It is a state of rebirth, very much like that experienced by Lester Ballard when he reenters the world."

Edwin T. Arnold
"Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables"
Perspectives (1993) 55-59

"Suttree's aim...is to draw as close as possible to 'that still center where the living and the dead are one.' He wants to know the miracle by which the individual consciousness emerges out of the massive, impersonal process of the world'... His path there is not unlike Thoreau's. The idea is to reduce life 'to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience.' Like Thoreau too, Suttree's first task comes to be to demythologize reality, to free it from cultural deadlock... Suttree's choice of life on the river keeps the 'twinned' facts of life and death continually before him and ensures that he enact his own mortality in the most personalized terms. Living there he is conspicuously uninsulated by middling concerns with family, employment or career. Instead the core meaning of existence, with the death of his twin as its dramatic first moment, is continually made explicit in the complex beveling of natural fact and memory....

This preoccupation with time and mortality is one of the charges entered against Suttree at his dream-trial, when—in a scene that clearly recalls Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*—he stops in front of a clockshop, sees his face in the glass and notices that some of the clocks are stopping. When his grandfather dies, Suttree sees himself reflected in the dead man's spectacles. The image of Suttree's face reflected in the shop window or 'twinned and blown in the smoked glass of a blind man's spectacles' returns him to the contemplation of his doppelganger, the Antisuttree of his dead twin, who is a '[m]ore common visitor' to his dreams than even his grandfather. All this weight of memory is with Suttree in his skiff as he rocks gently and hears—in what is the working paradox of the novel—'the clocklike blade of the cradle'.... Lying in his houseboat at night, pondering simultaneously the sounds of fish sloshing in his skiff and the Catholic iconography of his youth, he decides 'that he might have been a fisher of men in another time but these fish now seemed task enough for him.' The facticity of the river is for him the symbolic equivalent of the world of spirit....

Suttree's acquaintance with the river follows [a] strict naturalistic bent, and he is forever seeking out mentors in its lore. One such figure is an Indian named Michael, a prodigy at Suttree's chosen trade, whom Suttree seeks out after seeing the eighty-seven pound catfish he has landed. They become friends.... Michael is a true avatar of the path Suttree is seeking to follow. As an Indian, he is by definition socially disenfranchised, the target of the white man's taunts and a likely candidate for his jails. His home is a cave across the river.... Michael provides Suttree with an amulet similarly suitable to the path his friend would travel.... This is the first of several such talismans Suttree receives in the novel that mark the direction of his personal journey. As it turns out, Suttree—however he may aspire to it—proves incapable of the kind of oneness with the river which Michael has attained....

In entering the wilderness Suttree becomes more than ever 'a hermetic figure....gaunted and sunken at the eyes.' He purposely loses himself in the wilderness... He consciously courts the more primitive realms of being he has sought also on the river, and after some weeks of privation he induces in himself that state of visionary power that allows him to see the world as it is. Some of what he sees is essentially what he already knows. He recognizes the fundamental indeterminacy of the universe, 'The cold indifferent dark, the blind stars beaded on their tracks and mitered satellites and geared and pinioned planets all reeling through the black of space'....

[However], he has 'begun to become accompanied'.... The immediate assumption is, of course, that the 'ghostly clone' involved here is the figure of Suttree's dead twin which McCarthy has carefully foregrounded in the book. In this chapter, however, the device of the dead twin falls away. What is left is a sense of doubleness that is more metaphorical, a way of explaining what seems to be the primary mechanism of Suttree's consciousness. His mental operations, in this chapter and frequently throughout the novel, typically involve the twinning of a discrete physical fact with an involuntary and often a logical or visionary blossoming of that fact. In the mountains, for example, Suttree crosses a stone bridge [and]...the scene is enough to trigger in Suttree, spontaneously it seems, its own native myth... The clash

of rain and lightning over the trees produces a vision of medieval merrymaking, the principals of which are figures out of some fantastic bestiary...

The irreducible self, which Suttree has so carefully coaxed forth in his flight from respectable society and now stripped in this chapter to its primal form, is still forever altering the fundamental terms of its existence. Suttree's evasion of cultural restraint and social responsibility does nothing to abrogate the observational and aesthetic privilege incumbent upon human life, which here increases rather than decreases in a state of nature. For a moment his 'old distaff Celt's blood,' or some other atavistic impulse, may make him feel one with the world, but the fundamental organization of human life precludes it from resuming its original place in the world of fact—as is apparent also in Arthur Ownby's assumption of the responsibilities of stewardship in *The Orchard Keeper*, and even in such...forms as Culla and Rinthy Holme in *Outer Dark*, Lester Ballard in *Child of God* and the kid in *Blood Meridian*.

With Suttree self-consciousness has reached acute levels. In part this is a function of his much-disdained education; he dislikes his McAnally friends' thinking he is one of those 'educated pisswillies' who has gone 'to college but...cant roll a newspaper.' Still, Suttree's education is everywhere apparent—in his status as observer, in the unattributed snippets from Auden, Frost, Cummings, and Faulkner. His assertion that 'From all old seamy throats of elders, musty books, I've salvaged not a word' is clearly self-deluding. The privilege of consciousness can emerge especially in his rather mannered responses to the natural experience he seeks.... Suttree's imagination is always doubling back upon pure perception in this way and obviating his entry into the world. His solipsism is apparent at times even to himself.... When his mother comes to visit him at Christmas in the workhouse—her only appearance in the novel—the son she addressed was hardly there at all,' although an abstract, decentralized imagining of the scene ('See the mother sorrowing') brings forth a paroxysm of grief. This sort of emotional dysfunction is also manifest in Suttree's actions when, during the fall of his first year on the river, his own son dies....

This child, who has been living with Suttree's 'abandoned wife' in west Tennessee, has appeared once before in the novel, in a dream Suttree recounts. A dark figure, which he takes to be his father, emerges from an alley and grasps Suttree's hand. 'Yet it was not my father but my son who accosted me with such rancorless intent.' The confusion of allegiances between father and son—and the replication of a kind of 'rancorless' betrayal from generation to generation—certainly suggests Suttree's feelings of guilt in having abandoned his son, as perhaps he feels himself to have been similarly forsaken. Having learned of the child's death, Suttree makes the overnight trip across the state, where he clashes violently with his ex-wife's hostile parents, attends the funeral services at a distance and—in a rush of insupportable grief—fills in the earth over the child's coffin before the hired gravediggers can finish the task. Later the same day he is peremptorily ushered out of town by the local sheriff.

But it is the thinking that Suttree does during the two days of this ordeal that is most revealing. Throughout the course of his trip across the state, Suttree keeps trying 'to see the child's face in his mind but he could not.' He can remember only the child's 'tiny hand in his as they went to the carnival fair and a fleeting image of elf's eyes wonderstruck at the wide world in its wheeling.' And this memory of the ferris wheel and skyrockets is a kind of generic one for Suttree, recurring at two other points in the novel. One such moment takes place while Suttree is in the workhouse and is detailed, with some other prisoners, to pick up trash at the fairgrounds.... The other is elicited later in the novel by Suttree's sadness at the demise of his relationship with the prostitute Joyce.... Neither of these two passages evokes Suttree's son as an object of recollection, both instead being given over to a collective memory of 'young girls' with 'wide child's eyes' and speculation upon whether Joyce could have ever been such a girl.... The one memory he can summon of his son is actually a memory of himself as a child. The child Suttree grieves is the emblem of his own irrecoverable innocence, not a flesh and blood son discrete in his own humanness; and in his solipsism the dead son becomes indistinguishable from the dead twin: both are simply facets of Suttree's own present self, lost possibilities buried beneath his current anomie.

Of his wife Suttree can recall only—as some Poe narrators can of their allegorical lost loves—that her hair in the morning was 'black, rampant, savage with loveliness,' something like that of the sable-tressed ballad-girl in the pool at Gatlinburg. When he calls the funeral home to learn where the burial will be, it is the phrase '*Suttree funeral*' that causes him to drop the telephone receiver from his ear. Standing on a hill

at some distance from the service, he hears not a word the preacher is saying 'until his own name was spoken. Then everything became quite clear. He turned and laid his head against the tree, choked with a sorrow he had never known.' The only sound that can penetrate the amnesic weatherlessness of his grief is that of his own name. The whole incident returns Suttree to the emotional ground of his dead twin, his other self. In both cases, he is able to rationalize the self-absorption of his sorrow by supposing that it is really the living who suffer death...

His self-involvement, which insulates him from any full recognition of familial responsibility, thus finds an ironic parallel in Culla Holme's abandonment of his son in *Outer Dark*. Suttree merely stands to Culla as the civilized man to the primitive, with both the development of his consciousness and the terms of his socialization correspondingly more complex.... Some of his finest moments occur as a result of his friendship with the black tavern-owner, Ab Jones, in his one-man campaign against the persecutions of the Knoxville Police Department. So deeply felt are Suttree's sympathies that they lead to his climactic act of civil disobedience in the novel—stealing a police patrol car and running it off into the river, an action which ultimately forces him to leave the city.

Suttree is also especially concerned with two of his nearest neighbors, a misanthropic old ragpicker who lives under a bridge and Daddy Watson, a retired railroader. He makes a practice of checking on the two old men whenever the weather turns inclement, and his solicitude for them seems genuine and deeply felt. It should be remembered, however, that the last time Suttree sees Daddy Watson—who turns up confined in the same mental institution as Suttree's Aunt Alice—he pretends not to know the old man. As with Aunt Alice's unspoken desire for visitors or an occasional ride outside the grounds, there are certain emotional encumbrances which Suttree feels incapable of undertaking, certain 'modes for which he had neither aptitude nor will'....

Suttree's most significant relationship among the McAnally rabble turns out, somewhat surprisingly, to be with the chronic and disaster-prone miscreant Gene Harrogate. Suttree first meets Harrogate in the workhouse, just after the eighteen-year-old youth has been brought up on charges of 'bestiality' with a field of watermelons.... He rigs a lightpole to electrocute pigeons, pilfers porch furniture and road lanterns, makes a boat from two welded car hoods. In all these enterprises gleams a certain primitive ingenuity—equal parts low cunning, unsinkable resilience and predisposition to catastrophe—which Suttree finds irresistible. When Harrogate is riding high—as he is, briefly, after plugging the coin returns of 286 Knoxville pay telephones—he is the picture of capitalistic success.... Against his better judgment, Suttree keeps finding himself involved in Harrogate's schemes. It is he who obtains the strychnine which Harrogate uses to poison the feeding bats—he shoots it up to them by slingshot—in an effort to collect the one-dollar Board of Health bounty. And Suttree involves himself in an even more addle-brained plot to enter a Knoxville bank vault by way of the extensive cave system underlying the city....

Like Harrogate, he is witness to an incident one morning in which a truck on a downtown street falls five feet through the pavement. Suttree's fascination is not just with the flimsiness of the urban edifice; it is with the cultural substrata of a modern city, the underlying increments by which 'civilized' life had evolved.... Harrogate's explorations...correlate with Suttree's own inquiries above ground—along the river and in the mountains at Gatlinburg.... In that primordial darkness the demarcations between human and inhuman, between nature and culture, are once again demolished. When Harrogate's light fails... This experience...is almost identical to the one Suttree has in the Gatlinburg woods... Suttree's disaffection from society runs both more deeply and more dangerously than does Harrogate's. In Harrogate's misdeeds there is always a buoyant innocence... In Gene Harrogate Suttree locates the amoral, acquisitive center of the human animal, prior to the development of a socially expedient moral sensibility.... In the end, of course, Harrogate disappears into this underground world and Suttree has to go in after him.... When Suttree comes face to face with his own prehistoric simulacrum, Harrogate is practically naked and covered with dried sewage: 'True news,' Suttree thinks, 'of man here below'....

Suttree's fascination with Gene Harrogate represents, then, a continuation of the direction he seeks in living on the river and wandering through the mountains. There is an elemental kind of knowledge here, evidence of the primal forces out of which both the human animal and his culture were originally organized.... Harrogate represents a part of Suttree now buried beneath the irreversible accession of culture

and consciousness—a part of himself also carried in the metaphor of the dead twin.... When he stands up for Harrogate against the workhouse bully Byrd Slusser, Suttree once again sees himself ‘twinned’ in Slusser’s eyes. Suttree’s defense of Harrogate’s innocence, his transparency and vulnerability, is a defense of both his dead brother and of what he thinks of as the ‘child buried within him’.... He comes to appreciate the Reese clan, scruffy as they are, as the natural heirs of this ‘older order’.... Suttree’s reconnection with the natural world includes...some awareness of how primal human bonds were forged in reaction against [the] world. His covenant with the ‘vanished race’ whose amulet he wears is not the same thing as the pantheistic immersion in the natural world to which they were so richly attuned....

Suttree’s entry into this expanded family [the Reeses] truly begins with his affair with Wanda. She is a vision of nascent sexuality.... Their passionate dalliance coincides with Suttree’s rediscovery of...‘the world’s body’.... She is reminiscent both of Suttree’s abandoned wife and the Gatlinburg ballad-girl he imagines in the pool.... His love for the girl frees him to love the world by releasing him from the burden of knowledge. For a while the two are one... Characteristically, however, once Suttree is invited to commit himself more fully, the impulse flees. Reese drops one none-too-subtle comment about how good a cook Wanda is, and by the next page Suttree is breaking things off. The lovers have one final, passionate rapprochement before tragedy strikes: the rain-soaked slate cliff above the campsite gives way one night, and Wanda is crushed to death beneath the debris....

These twins [Vernon and Fernon] challenge once again the notion of personal identity—or, more correctly, any definitions of humanness which would distinguish it from the unindividuated and unsigned proliferation of other life forms.... [Wanda] falls into the special vacuum of Suttree’s habitual conversion of experience into the language of thought.... Joyce [the prostitute] is...the only other character in the novel who approaches equal footing with Suttree both intellectually and verbally...while always secretly thumbing their noses at the respectable folk around them engaged in identical rites. Their romance is based upon an iconoclastic anti-romanticism.... He accedes unprotesting...to serving as something of a pimp for her, handling the proceeds of her business... In the beginning he can laugh with her at their pantomime of celluloid romantic wholesomeness.... He spends most of his days sitting in the apartment and drinking.... In the end, despite the anesthesia of one final gift—a Jaguar convertible—and a romantic taxi ride to Gatlinburg, Suttree’s catatonia destroys the relationship.... As with Wanda, the failure of love comes to turn upon the image of his own self in death.... Suttree falls victim more than ever ‘to a vast inertia’....

The resolution of the novel, given Suttree’s lack of real spiritual progress in it, remains problematical. The book’s last two major sections—Suttree’s visit with Mother She and his long, delirious bout with typhoid fever the following spring—make Suttree confront the key facts of his family past.... This sense of his own origins, as opposed to genealogical or theological models, restores the wonder of his life and validates the sacramental communion with pure experience as one’s highest priority.... His spiritual hunger, apparent in the novel’s rich but adumbrated Christology, can be satisfied by the things of this world. Thus, in the throes of his typhoid delirium, Suttree sees that...‘all souls are one and all souls are lonely.’ The assertion of the ultimate integrity and sufficiency of the self and of the value of a human community based on an affiliation of such selves is what Suttree—and McCarthy’s fiction in general—comes to affirm. The final pages of the novel, in which Suttree puts behind him the decaying shell of McAnally Flats, conclude things on a decidedly affirmative note....[with] his new resolution to find his brother among the living rather than the dead.... It seems reasonable to assume that the ‘vanity’ he is recanting is that of the artistic sensibility.”

Thomas D. Young, Jr.
“The Imprisonment of Sensibility: *Suttree*”
Perspectives (1993) 95-11

“He learns to accept what the rest of Knoxville, barring McAnally Flats, is engaged in denying: the flux at the heart of existence, to which we must simply adjust ourselves.... Harrogate represents a particularly virulent strain of naïve pastoralism: if modern environmentalists are ‘tree huggers,’ if Faulkner’s Ike Snopes falls in love with a cow, then McCarthy goes them all one better in his comic presentation of the ‘moonlight melonmounter,’ whose erotic encounters in the garden patch land him in the workhouse with Suttree. Upon his release the former ‘country mouse’ re-christens himself ‘city rat’ and travels to Knoxville, full of schemes for success....

He first ventured into McAnally, apparently, in search of a martyr's revenge on a meaningless world.... He attempts his own sad versions of ordinary middle-class stability: with the parody of domestic bliss he achieves with the whore Joyce, or with his halfhearted effort to make a fortune in mussel shells with the doomed Reese and his family. But of course all these efforts come to naught, ending in comic disappointment or blood tragedy; each time he returns to his houseboat on the river....

A line from Conrad comes to mind: 'The way is to the destructive element submit yourself'... Suttree's salvation, such as it is, comes when at last he recognizes this truth. Following a nearly fatal bout with typhoid fever, accompanied by a series of visionary hallucinations, Suttree is able to tell what he has learned: God, he explains to the priest who has come to administer last rites, 'is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving'.... Suttree manages, for a while longer at least, to keep up his end of the dialogue with death. This is all the deliverance that is available in McCarthy's world: deliverance from the pastoral delusions which have plagued his region—those represented by the ruined mansion, and also those represented by the expressway being built over the ruins of McAnally Flats as he takes his leave."

John M. Grammer
"A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail:
Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy's South"
Perspectives (1993) 39-41

"Suttree is not, as some critics have imagined, a 'dropout' from the planter aristocracy of an older South. The Knoxville area, for all its affluence and occasional pretensions to the contrary, is still Appalachia in attitude and ways, and Suttree is best seen as an East Tennessean who has repudiated all attempts by his peers to deny their fundamental kinship with the inhabitants, transient or otherwise, of the disreputable McAnally district along Knoxville's waterfront. His story, moreover, with its inconclusiveness (some have called it picaresque) makes it clear that the gestures toward resolution in the three works previously published were nothing more than that.

Suttree's world, wherever he may find himself, is always that of people like the elder Rattner, the Holmeses, and Lester Ballard; an indeterminate process the meaning of which, if there is one, is known only to whatever God may preside over it. One cannot legitimately characterize it absolutely as nihilistic. Love has somehow found its way there, and in it some people do love their neighbor, express concern for their children, cherish a friend, or care for an animal. Such concern persists, even if it does not prevail, along with the violence and amorality that McCarthy seems to suggest constitute the common ground for southerners as they do for people everywhere."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 221-22

"By *Suttree*, in 1979, the publicity blurbs are stumbling over themselves, so to speak. The *Washington Post* calls him perhaps 'the closest we have to a genuine heir to the Faulkner tradition. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* goes a step further, saying that *Suttree* 'invited comparison with Faulkner's best'—we assume the reviewer means *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom! Absalom!*, *Light in August* and *As I Lay Dying*, for starters. Anatole Broyard, in the *New York Times*, having this time possibly read the book he was reviewing, seemed fixated on the dead in McCarthy. After declaring that people do die, Broyard assures us that we won't escape the author's death, who will haunt us, 'which is what they are supposed to be.' The *St. Petersburg Times* reaches all the way, deeming *Suttree* to be 'unsurpassed in American literature.' Sorry, *Moby-Dick*."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 122-23

"[Note] the evolution of McCarthy's work: the shift from traditional pastoralism in *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) to the wilderness turn in *Child of God* (1973), and from the anti-pastoralism of *Outer Dark* (1968) to the negative biocentrism of *Blood Meridian* (1985) and finally to the ecopastoralism of the *Border Trilogy*.... All of the novels mentioned above are defined by the interaction of melancholy mood, allegorical style, and pastoral theme.... The one novel not mentioned, *Suttree* (1979), does not invite

inclusion into a pastoral review of McCarthy's work. It stands out because of its urban setting, and therefore contains few nature scenes that would validate a pastoral reading. It may, however, be used as the perfect introduction to McCarthy's style, being... McCarthy's longest novel and the most complex.... Among McCarthy's novels, *Suttree* is the only one with an intellectually active protagonist, while in all his novels the narrative perspective coincides with the protagonists' points of view. In a prototypical manner, *Suttree* shows how the protagonist's melancholia is indistinguishable from that of the narrative consciousness.... The use of the grotesque is as typical of McCarthy's style as the mannerism of the run-on sentences....

McCarthy began work on the novel in the early 1960s...and it reads like a debut novel: Dense description alternates with the lean prose of the plot action; loquacious monologues with idiomatic dialogue; isolated episodes with a vaguely linear story line; autobiographical hints with intertextual links. Then again, the book draws on the writing experience of the three foregoing novels. Like these it uses expository tableaux, scenes of violence, and episodic tangents to describe the protagonist's psyche.... *Suttree* is set in the Knoxville of the early 1950s, or, more precisely, in the urban wasteland of McAnally Flats, a depressed neighborhood adjacent to the Tennessee River and part of downtown Knoxville. The novel's wealth of authentic detail reflects the fact that McCarthy grew up and went to college in that town. The text introduces the district as 'a world within the world,' a microcosm of speakeasies, black shantytowns, and houseboats (one of which the protagonist Cornelius Suttree inhabits). The stark representation...from Suttree's point of view recalls the literary tradition of the gentleman observer mingling with the poorest of the poor. Coming from a bourgeois family background, this 'reprobate scion of doomed Saxon clans' has renounced his Catholic faith, social status, and career prospects to become a fisherman.

Among Suttree's pariah friends is young Gene Harrogate, one of McCarthy's likable but never-do-well picaro figures. At their first encounter in the workhouse, Harrogate is incarcerated for sexually abusing watermelons. All his schemes reveal similar maturity and resourcefulness, such as his plan to dynamite his way into a bank vault that results in breaching a sewer main instead. Along with the idiomatic banter, roughhousing, and tall tales, the humor of this picaresque story line constitutes a counter-discourse to the existential gloom of the novel's bulk. After two abortive romances, a pilgrimage into the Appalachians, and the discovery of a dead man in his own bed (suggesting he had survived his own death) Suttree eventually leaves the city and takes to the road. The novel ends with an image reminiscent of Dante's 'The Wood of the Suicides,' in which black hounds terrorize the souls.... [The] conclusion connects directly to a passage in the prologue in which, analogously, death is said to besiege the city; the references here are again to Dante, to Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death,' and to Melville's weaver god in *Moby-Dick*....

In short, *Suttree* combines a picaresque quest for survival with a modernist quest for truth, a baroque style with an existentialist despair. The novel sustains comparisons to Eliot's 'Waste Land' and Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), to Joyce's *Ulysses* (1918) and Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957), and to Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.... Melancholia appears in McCarthy's writings in the form of an obsession with death or mortality, as well as in a consistent maintenance of narrative distance. Such melancholy distancing, understood as a time-honored literary device, originates in the biblical image of the agonized prophet on the hill who watches the world from afar on its course toward ruin. In the novel at hand, this conceit is used, for instance, when Suttree associates the rubble of a riverside lot with the emblem used by the Puritans to invoke the divine sanction of their mission: '[A]ll this detritus slid from the city on the hill'....

Suttree's self-chosen outcast status is never fully explained beyond a deep-seated resentment of the bourgeois pattern of domesticity, prosperity, and morality. He has abandoned his wife but continues to be traumatized by losing first her and later his child, 'choked with a sorrow he had never known.' Yet his primitive life revolves around nothing at all, and its meaninglessness horrifies him just as much. In a scene reminiscent of mad King Lear on the heath, his quest for meaning takes a suicidal turn.... In the sense that plot and exposition are organized around the search for the meaning of life and death, *Suttree* parallels the part of Quentin Compson in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Both characters have an academic background; both are haunted by their families' past. Here, as there, suicidal neuroses articulate themselves in obsessions with time... Suttree's sensory spectrum is fine-tuned to aspects of morality. He provokes

life-threatening experiences as if to seek death, involving himself in brawls, contracting typhoid, sustaining severe injury, and starving himself during his hike into the Gatlinburg wilderness....

McCarthy's craftsmanship does not suggest that anything is left to chance or escapes narrative control even if his novels are not laid out to foreground plot progression, denouement, or character development. The plots progress, and the characters develop, to the degree that they serve to accumulate, rather than order, installments of a certain story as if to compete a mosaic of stills rather than to scroll a film in linear sequence.... The novel's prologue is all parable, explicitly establishing the textual setting as a stage. The baroque idea that the world represents a stage fronting for a higher form of being, and, inversely, that text and stage represent the world in microcosm, is the very presupposition of McCarthy's aesthetic....

[One] scene obviously refers to Southern pastoralism in the emblem of the ruined mansion and ruined garden as something so anachronistic that it has ceased to be an object even of nostalgia. In this sense the scene reduces literary back-references, such as to Sutpen's mansion in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), to the function of stage props and discourages any elegiac or tragic reading of the novel.... Suttree's mystification over Michael's teachings reflects the role of the Native American worldview as an ecological utopia.... McCarthy's ecopastoralism is ecopastoral not just because it respects the ecological equality of all creatures and favors undomesticated nature over agricultural land, but, moreover, because it equates the external wilderness of nature with the social wilderness of the city and the internal wilderness of the human mind."

Georg Guillemin
"Introduction: The Prototypical *Suttree*"
The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy
(Texas A&M U 2004) 3-17

"*Suttree* is monumental in scope and length as well as detailed in its treatment of the manners, speech patterns, and the personal idiosyncrasies of multiple characters. The protagonist is educated, a young man from a prominent Knoxville family who is alienated from his kinsmen at least in part as a matter of choice. But unlike *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, and *Child of God*, the novel is densely lyrical in style and unflinching in its bleak portrayal of the human scene this side of paradise. McCarthy's world remains the realm of the fallen, with elements of pathos and dark comedy blended with moments of unmediated horror and stark images of the grotesque. As with his previous novels, critical reception of the novel was seldom indifferent, with striking contrasts in perspective even in single reviews.

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Jerome Charyn writes that *Suttree* has a 'rude, startling power' and reads like 'a doomed Huckleberry Finn,' further claiming, 'The book comes at us like a horrifying flood.' Associating the novel with Twain's masterpiece makes sense given the setting and the central role of the river as symbol. But the tense ambivalence of this characterization of *Suttree* appears in other reviews as well. In the *Washington Post*, Edward Robinson pays particular attention to McCarthy's language, arguing that he indulges 'a verbal virtuosity that runs to bloated excess' with images that are sometimes 'tiresomely weighty.' However, he also claims that Cornelius Suttree's adventures are 'weighted with significance' since 'he moves in a world so violent it nearly becomes a parody of our darkest ends.' Robinson's tortured fascination with the language of *Suttree* blends with his equally reluctant acknowledgment of the novel's human texture, since amid the author's 'intoxication' with 'miasmatic language' (and partly as a result of it), the characters evoke a compelling sympathy: 'For every horror, there is a sensitive observation. For every violent dislocation, there is a subtly touching dialogue or gesture.'

But still it is language, style, and word choice that were a particular preoccupation among critics. In *Esquire*, referring to McCarthy's description of the windows in a Catholic church in Knoxville, Geoffrey Wolff claims that 'where words lead, McCarthy follows... McCarthy does not wish to show those windows...he likes the sound of the words he has strung together.' Conversely, in the *Sewanee Review*, Walter Sullivan makes a claim for language in the effective rendering of character and the world, arguing that 'McCarthy's prose is so sharp and lucid that only the most determined skeptic can remain unconvinced.' For Sullivan it is precisely this interest in words, phrases, and the lyrical quality of well-crafted sentences that softens the bleak content of McCarthy's novels and offers a compensation for the world as the author sometimes sees it. Sullivan further argues that 'McCarthy's Faulknerian prose achieves

a lyricism that touches the heart and a dignity which endows some of the ugliest aspects of creation with a certain beauty.' Again references to the Faulknerian influence remain, blended with praise for the sensitive and precise portrayal of the distinctive settings of the American South and the characters that bring those settings to life.

In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Sandra Salmans writes that '*Suttree* contains a humor that is Faulknerian in its gentle wryness, and a freakish imaginative flair reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor,' ending her review with a kind of sentimental whimsy, musing that 'although *Suttree's* eventual departure...is necessary, it is with a sense of regret that one watches him leave town.' For all the continued interest in McCarthy's language and his use of the southern grotesque, as well as with the influence of Faulkner, the most general preoccupation among initial critics appears to be the varied comic qualities of scenes and the psychological texture and sympathy of the novel's many characters. This is particularly noted by Anatole Broyard in the *New York Times*, who writes that 'his people are so vivid that they seem exotic, but this is just another way of saying that we tend to forget the range of human differences,' claiming finally even of McCarthy's treatment of corpses: 'you won't escape his dead either. They will haunt you, which is what they are supposed to do'....

In *Suttree*, McCarthy remains in home territory, along the base of the Appalachians and among the people who struggle to survive and make meaning under harsh and even horrific conditions, but his vision becomes more expansive in terms of social texture and human interchange, with the blending of the urban and the rural, the comic and the tragic. In all this he remains preoccupied with the vaguely discernable realms that transcend.

For all the breadth and scope of the novel, its structure is fairly conventional, with thirty-four unnumbered chapters broken only by periodic spaces between paragraphs. The novel opens, however, with an extended introduction in italics, written in epistolary form as a direct letter to the reader that at first belies the traditional structure that will follow. This opening deals with setting, particularly urban Knoxville of the early 1950s, during the period of McCarthy's own upbringing. At this time the city had undergone a significant social and physical transformation, partially under the influence of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), from a small semi-rural town to a comparatively large industrial urban center. McCarthy is unflinchingly precise in his use of the realist mode in description.... But this dreamlike treatment of the physical world blends a vivid realism with a surreal quality effectively rendered through a philosophically portentous biblical language.... This integration of the real and unreal is enhanced as he breaks the boundaries of time, weaving the present moment of the city's degeneration with the remote past, the age before recorded history.

The effect of this interweaving of past and present, image and idea, is to elevate setting to the level of symbol and to evoke the wasteland of medieval legend and more particularly the modern and urban 'Waste Land' of T. S. Eliot's poem. The epistolary address to the reader makes clear from the novel's inception the importance of place in the author's conception, as the surreal, the gothic, the grotesque, and the carnivalesque blend in a rich integration of formal motifs and allusions.

As the main narrative begins in 1951, readers are introduced to Cornelius Suttree, a willful outcast who makes a scant living as an itinerant fisherman on the Tennessee River. Partly as a result of a deep conflict with his father, having to do in part with his father's attitude to his mother's relations, he has broken with his well-placed and wealthy family, and having spent time in prison, he lives among the poor and displaced of McAnally Flats and other slum regions of the city. He is a loner of sorts, but at the same time he passively embraces the gestures of friendship offered by drunks, thieves, mussel hunters, prostitutes, transvestites, bar owners, and even a reputed witch. His most extended relationship is with a young man he encounters first in prison and later in Knoxville after they are released.

The pathetic and absurd Gene Harrogate has done time for masturbating with a farmer's watermelons and is comically referred to as 'the country rat,' 'the city rat,' and most humorously as the 'midnight melon monster.' *Suttree* continually rescues or counsels Harrogate through the effects of his misbegotten schemes: an attempt to collect a bounty for bags of potentially rabid bats, even a plan to tunnel underneath the city through viaducts and the sewage system to rob a bank, which ends in an explosion with Harrogate

pathetically mired in human waste. In all this, Suttree emerges as an unlikely paternal figure, the one human being these outcasts can turn to in moments of desperation. He reluctantly transgresses moral boundaries when the immediacy of human need calls for it; yet readers learn of his own guilt after abandoning his wife and child and being sent to prison. This becomes clear when he visits his estranged wife at the child's funeral and is repulsed by her family and sent away by the local sheriff.

The novel develops as a directionless journey through the external wasteland of urban Knoxville and the interior wasteland of Suttree's tortured consciousness, culminating finally in a dream vision under the effects of typhoid fever and his ultimate decision to leave the city behind. Again *Suttree* evokes elements of the southern gothic and grotesque, the American historical and metaphysical romance, and it recalls the essentially modern concerns and settings, even the formal structures of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a novel with which it has often been compared.

Unlike McCarthy's previous works, *Suttree* draws from the conventions of the American city novel, which emerged as a fully constituted subgenre in the later half of the nineteenth century. With its emphasis on economic scarcity, competition, social texture and density, as well as urban degradation, the novel recalls the realism of Rebecca Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills' (1861) and William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). More particularly and perhaps more plausibly, it derives in part from the naturalism of Stephen Crane's *Maggis: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), *An American Tragedy* (1925), and *The Financier* (1912), as well as the great urban novels of Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and the displaced southerner Thomas Wolfe. Available biographical information does not reveal specific evidence that McCarthy was steeped in these writers, but their works were highly respected and immensely popular in the eras just preceding McCarthy's emergence as a novelist, and the social texture and thematic preoccupations of *Suttree* suggest an influence.

In *Suttree*, as in all these urban novels, the city emerges as a subject of immense preoccupation, as the essential reality that defines the protagonist, conditions in part his identity, and circumscribes his range of choices both ethical and otherwise. Knoxville is darkly vivid...: 'In the rooms lie drunken homecome soldiers sprawled in painless crucifixion on the rumpled counterpanes and the whores are sleeping now.' Young Suttree is a part of this world, as he participates in the drunken routs of his dubious comrades, seeks with some desperation various ways to feed and clothe himself, and near the end finds brief emotional repose in a relationship with a prostitute who initially comforts him but eventually becomes emotionally unstable. Still, McCarthy's use of the various conventions of the city novel is blended with the formal features of the American romance in a richly lyrical language that is most often suggestive of unknowable realms beyond the social and the material.

This appears as he evokes the essential tensions of the American historical romance. Though *Suttree* was published in 1979 and is set less than thirty years earlier, the conflict between the forces of progress and reaction (a thematic strand in the historical romance from James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner and clearly seen in *The Orchard Keeper*) is central to the conditions young Suttree faces. In the context of the novel, the urban development projects of the Tennessee Valley Authority give rise to the modern city, transforming and at times destroying the rural landscape as well as the social institutions and traditions of the mountain communities. At the same time they initiate important and useful material developments, driving people like Gene Harrogate to the city to seek the opportunities provided there. Still, in the end these opportunities offer them only the degraded reality of McAnally Flats, the polluted river corrupted with industrial waste, floating condoms, and refuse in rich profusion, even the grotesque images of aborted fetuses and, in one instance (reminiscent of *Outer Dark*), the drifting body of a dead infant. Progress with all its dubious implications is presented in the light of a stark and garish reality.

Cornelius Suttree's wanderings involve a metaphysical quest with an intensely ethical dimension, and to orchestrate this pattern McCarthy makes use of overarching structural motifs drawn from the wasteland of Christian and medieval legend and the underworld journey of the ancient Greek, Roman, and medieval epics. These elaborate image systems enrich the stark Realism of the novel and blend with the more psychologically and philosophically textured elements of the American romance tradition. Suttree's alienation from family and self-understanding becomes simultaneously a removal from time, history, and the particular material preoccupations of the present, as he becomes, like all epic protagonists, a

representative man confronting the essential human condition, characterized by existential isolation and metaphysical dread. These are timeless concerns that take on a particular gravity in the twentieth century, during the Modernist period, and the images McCarthy evokes recall T. S. Eliot's pre-World War I London, as seen in book 2 of 'The Waste Land' (1922)....

It is a telling parallel that, like Suttree, the persona in this section of the poem, identifies himself as a fisherman, and in *Suttree*, this same urban decay and degradation is intensified.... But these images are heightened and contextualized through a biblical language imbued with an unmistakable mythic resonance. This appears in the lyrical arrangement of words and in images such as the 'puling waste' and the 'dark and leprous waters.' These combine to integrate reality and nightmare, as the waters of purification have become the carriers of disease, with the surrounding trees displaying the 'condoms dangling,' connoting displaced and unproductive desire and perverse and ill-gotten fulfillment. In all this the natural and generative order of nature has been corrupted by the forces of modern industrial 'progress.'

These images mirror the confusion and alienation of Cornelius Suttree himself. This appears as he makes direct contact with the city and the polluted environment that surrounds it, and as the scene blends with his own distorted perception and limited understanding:...'He had not known how hollow the city was.' The world he confronts becomes more than a material realm of degradation brought to bleak fruition by human avarice. It is that, most certainly, but it is also a complex emblem of an existential void, a hollow wilderness bereft of light and possibility.

Suttree's descent into darkness is intensified further as it displays the features of the underworld journey.... The Tennessee River itself—reminiscent of the River Styx in Greek mythology, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*—is lined in trees where 'bats hung in clusters'... Blending with this unambiguous underworld scene are features of the grotesque, as well as beautiful images of primordial nature transformed as if permanently into seemingly crystalline aesthetic objects...a context for a journey rife with confusion, dread, and gothic horror and at the same time replete with images of the sublime, with supernal beauty and transcendent mystery.... Lost and degraded as these characters are, they form an unlikely family, a jovial community of the fallen, and each of them clings to Suttree ('Sut,' as they often affectionately call him) as a means of grounding their desperate lives. Thus, the horror and hopeless dread of this urban underworld finds its counterpoint in the ever-present possibility of human connection and intimacy.

As the novel proceeds, this densely social realm is enriched by the interiors of Suttree's mind and the metaphysical dread and preoccupation implied in the wasteland and underworld iconography. After the departure of his prostitute lover, he is stricken with typhoid fever, and the novel reaches its penultimate phase in a lengthy dream both nightmarish and comic, carnivalesque in its imagery and starkly grotesque. He is found in a state of delirium by his friend J-Bone, and his carnival vision takes shape as he sees 'Father Bones,' who 'tilts out through saloon doors and is gone, old varnished funhouse skeleton.' With a touching concern for his highly contagious friend, J-Bone takes him to the hospital where his fevered dream is heightened by an injection of morphine, becoming a surreal and sometimes nightmarish encounter with a realm beyond the material world, 'a cold dimension without time without space and where all is motion'....

His vision deepens into a pure dream, void of present reality, and his tortured guilt, partly motivated by a latent sense of obligation to his family, leads to a brief comic trial and an oddly distanced encounter with his friends in McAnally Flats, which seems only to precede his descent through the 'gates of Hades'... He must live and cope with his own isolation, even as he courts the reality of metaphysical realms beyond the sensory. This becomes clear with the priest who offers to hear his confession. The priest gives him a drop of wine and says that God himself must have been watching over him, and Suttree responds, 'You would not believe what he watches'... The ragman is typical of many of McCarthy's peasant mystics, an old man tempered by the reality of his experiences, endowed with an oblique wisdom and repose that allows him to ponder the mysteries of the universe with a fearless blend of skepticism and reverence.... Suttree asks him what, if anything, happens beyond the grave, and the ragman responds, 'Don't nothin happen. You're dead'....

Here we find McCarthy, for all his interest in science, pondering the limitations of what he seemingly views as a naivete inherent in scientific positivism taken to the extreme. He also calls attention to the rigidly circumscribed limitations embedded in religious traditions. No quest for ultimate knowledge yields the complete answer because in a fundamental way the answer is unavailable. Materialist and positivist readings of the ragman's words are inadequate... McCarthy's skepticism is radical, deeper and more expansive, reminiscent of Herman Melville's skepticism.... McCarthy entertains something similar to a 'pantheist' worldview... It is quite similar to the Existential Christianity rooted in Soren Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, John Macquarrie, and even Fyodor Dostoyevsky....

'Pantheism' (defined in the *OED* as 'The theory or belief that God encompasses and interpenetrates the universe but at the same time is greater and independent of it')... In [a] Christian context, pantheism is attributed to Saint Paul in Acts 17:28, where God is seen as the one in whom 'we live and move and have our being.' This worldview posits the notion of the universe as a physical reality contained within the physical body of God, who is a fully constituted being present within the physical but in equal measure transcending it.... Any rejection of the divine implied in Suttree's penultimate reflection is firmly mitigated by the explicit metaphysical quality that defines the novel's conclusion. It is through the redemptive possibilities of the 'simple human heart' that the divine becomes incarnate, a theme more fully explored in later works, especially in the words of Black, the urban street preacher in *The Sunset Limited*. McCarthy darkens and alters this pantheist perspective into something distinctly his own, by concluding *Suttree* with the fearful image of the mysterious huntsman.... The huntsman's tireless hounds...transcend time and seek ravenously for the souls of all who live...

Beneficent pantheism is radically altered as the author foregrounds the reality of an evil that transcends and must be understood along with the good. But pure materialism disappears in an unambiguous emanation from beyond the physical world.... The many encounters and moments of intimacy in the novel are a testimony to the redemptive power of Suttree's heart, and his actions transform lives and provide a form of healing."

Steven Frye
Understanding Cormac McCarthy
(U South Carolina 2009) 49-65

"*Suttree* (1979) is anomalous among Cormac McCarthy's novels in two obvious respects. First, it is an urban novel, set in and around Knoxville, Tennessee, during the years 1950-1955. And second, in taking Cornelius Suttree as its protagonist, the book provides a texture of experience that is considerably more intricate and layered than elsewhere in McCarthy's work, Suttree having been the beneficiary of an affluent upbringing and a college education.... Knoxville in 1950 is an embryonic city, something like medieval London or Jerusalem at the time of Christ....

This primitive structure [early Knoxville] is a living record of that elemental and highly ambiguous activity of human 'settlement' which is essentially the subject of all McCarthy's fiction. Eventually it will lie concealed beneath the involutions of the modern city: by the end of the novel McAnally Flats, the particular Knoxville ghetto Suttree calls home, is being razed to facilitate the construction of an expressway. But for the moment Knoxville is another glimpse into what Conrad called 'the true world,' before it is 'buried under the growth of centuries'.... In some ways these misfits and human oddities are reminiscent of the fossilized forms Suttree keeps noticing embedded in the city's stonework architecture, the trilobites and 'vanished bivalves and delicate seaferns'.... Thus, *Suttree*, like McCarthy's other novels, is an account of the rise of this 'western world' of human culture as observed in dramatically ontogenetic terms. Here, as in the other works, the message is: '*Ruder forms survive*'....

Suttree has two sets of friends there. One is 'a collection of drunks' and borderline criminals—J. Bone and Junior Long, Red Callahan, Hoghead Henry—who carouse together and share their impoverished circumstances. The other, a group largely disdained even by this rabble, is the black population down along the river, among whom Suttree enjoys several warm friendships, most particularly with the tavern-keeper Abednego Jones. Together these friends constitute, in Suttree's view, a kind of 'fellowship' of the doomed. Where life pulsed obscenely fecund,' and Suttree's purposes among them are determinedly lowbrow and atavistic. He is at pains, in word and deed, to deny his intellectual and cultural endowments.

He shares with his friends the badge of a rebelliousness that borders on criminality: as the novel opens, Suttree has already had several brushes with the law on charges of vagrancy and public drunkenness; in 1950 he served seven months in the Knoxville workhouse for his role in the robbery of a drugstore. Following his release he has taken up residence on a ramshackle houseboat, where he makes a desultory living running trotlines on the Tennessee River.

The two 'anomalous' aspects of *Suttree* ultimately are aligned, then. The city as aberrant accretion of the pioneering impulse—aberrant because it rises from the need to check the very impulses that gave it being—is replicated in Suttree's unwelcome intellectuality. Similarly, his attempt to live simply on the river, to penetrate into ever more primitive realms of being, is the same as his other great quest in the novel: the attempts to understand his own past. The lineaments of the family drama, which hold for Suttree such elemental significance, are, for the reader, only imperfectly at hand. They must be pieced together from four elliptical and widely separated episodes in the novel: the appearance of the black sheep Uncle John at the houseboat early in the book; a Sunday afternoon visit Suttree makes to his Aunt Martha and Uncle Clayton's home downriver; and a trip to an insane asylum to interview his great-aunt Alice, which follows hard upon his paranormal experience with the black fortuneteller Mother She. From these four scenes the following account may be constructed.

It is Suttree's father who has been largely responsible for Suttree's self-exile in McAnally. He believes, according to his son, 'that the world is run by those willing to take the responsibility for the running of it.' In a last letter before the permanent rupture of their relationship, he has advised Suttree that 'If it is life that you feel you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow comprised of the helpless and impotent.' The aristocratic elder Suttree's contempt also apparently extends to the low breeding of his wife and her family, something he has remarked in both the alcoholic John and the near-alcoholic Suttree as well....

As if to validate this judgment, Suttree chooses to trace his own lineage primarily through his mother's family (both Aunt Martha and Aunt Alice are maternal relations), this 'Old distaff kin coughed up out of the vortex, thin and cracked and macled and a bit redundant.' His recollections of them, as is not uncommon in southern families, are especially attached to their deaths or funerals. His late Uncle Milo was lost off the coast of Chile with a boatload of guano. The death of the beatific Robert at age eighteen, apparently in the first World War, is crucial to Aunt Alice's family narrative... But Suttree's most conspicuous interest is trained upon his great-uncle Jeffrey, another of Alice's brothers, whom he knows to have been hanged in Rockcastle County, Kentucky, on 18 July 1884. Jeffrey represents the isomer of violence present in the family bloodlines...and it is his influence that Suttree is at pains to defend himself against in his delirious dream-trial.

The two deaths which Suttree can recall from his childhood with particular vividness—those of his grandfather and of his Aunt Elizabeth—have had a formative effect upon his consciousness. He can recall his grandfather saying goodbye to him from his deathbed... And looking at the grainy photograph of Elizabeth that he sees at Aunt Martha's house, he remembers the old woman in her casket... Such experiences are common enough, perhaps, among young children exposed to death for the first time. Suttree's fixation upon death, as it turns out, however, does not derive primarily from these two memories after all. They are merely masking memories of the true source of his obsession, later unlocked under the influence of Mother She's drugs. This ancient witch reputedly has the power to look into the future. Instead Suttree is whirled through a chaotic revisitation of his past. At the bottom of his remembrance he comes once again to the image of Aunt Elizabeth in her casket...

Suddenly, however, a deeper, more concealed memory rises to consciousness, a memory which cause Suttree to sit bolt upright on Mother She's cot: 'He saw in a small alcove among flowers the sleeping doll, the white bonnet, the lace, the candlelight.... In this primal memory, which has long lain dormant, the 'thing' the little girl takes from among the flowers is not a 'sleeping doll' at all but, as Suttree now realizes, a dead baby. It is the same image that he has encountered at Aunt Martha's, one of whose family photographs is of 'a fat dead baby' in a casket, 'garishly painted, bright fuchsia cheeks. Never ask whose.' Whoever the child in the funeral parlor may have been, there is no question with whom Suttree associates it: it calls to consciousness the key event of his mental life, as he believes, the stillbirth of his twin brother.

Suttree has first learned of this child's birth only because of a drunken lapse on the part of his Uncle John, and presumably he holds this concealment against his family as well. The child is buried in the Woodlawn cemetery, which Suttree on occasion drunkenly visits.... While he could still maintain the Catholic faith in which he was reared, Suttree prayed for his dead brother's soul.... 'He in the limbo of the Christless righteous, I in a terrestrial hell.' But with the loss of his religious faith Suttree's ruminations come to center around more fundamental questions of being. The existence of this spectral other—'Suttree and Antisuttree,' as he sometimes thinks of it—is the constant reminder of his own putative nonexistence.

The ambiguous circumstances of this twin's creation and disappearance seem, in fact, to have attenuated Suttree's own existence as well, reducing his status to that of mere imago. Suttree is lefthanded; the 'mauve halfmoon' he bears on the left side of his head is identical (he imagines) to the mark on his brother's right temple; Suttree is his brother's 'Mirror image. Gauche carbon.' Even his heart seems to have been displaced in this mirror reflection. He has been found to be a dextrocardiac, and it is the magnitude of feeling himself twinned with a creature consigned to the parallel universe of death that has made his heart '[w]eathershrunk and loveless'."

[I lost the source of this quotation and must apologize to the critic quoted. M.H.]

"The central character of *Suttree* is Cornelius Suttree, a man who has given up a life of privilege to inhabit a houseboat on the Tennessee River.... As a kind of adopted member of this community, Suttree finds himself a consultant for the others.... *Suttree* seems at times a double-barreled response, both to another river novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, and to the Kerouacian road novel. It is full of comic moments and lyrical passages, and is the most overtly Faulknerian of all of McCarthy's novels. These influences are more overt than the philosophical perspectives that inform the novel, and they are more formative too, though the influence of absurdist and existential philosophy are clearly there, as well as direct mention of 'Gnostic workmen'.... *Suttree* offers black comedy, rootlessness, and drunkenness. In fact, it is as if McCarthy has taken absurd philosophy and rendered it American. But this, of course, leads to a different kind of alienation, one in which we might detect the roots of hippy and beat culture. It is this use of Camus-esque absurdity, as much as any potential knowledge on McCarthy's part of the Beats, that gives this novel an affinity to the Kerouacian road novel....

The ending can equally be read as Suttree simply moving on laterally, wandering to the next situation, the next episode.... It is not that McCarthy is interested in developing a coherent philosophical statement or in expounding any single philosophy, but instead that he has a toolbox of philosophical ideas that he allows his characters to apply to the problems of living within an imperfect world."

Brian Evenson

"McCarthy and the Uses of Philosophy in the Tennessee Novels"
The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy, ed. Steven Frye
(U Cambridge 2013) 62-63

"McCarthy's final Appalachian novel, and his most autobiographical work, *Suttree* [1979] traces the wanderings of Cornelius Suttree around the McAnally Flats of Knoxville from 1951-1955. If *Child of God* is about the worse crimes of which human beings are capable, *Suttree* provides a contrast through its depictions of the best qualities of which human beings are capable, such as friendship, mercy, and forgiveness. These transcendent attributes, however, are subverted by dark gothic artifice, suggesting the impossibility of recognizing the one without the other.

At one point Suttree thinks that his stillborn twin brother may exist somewhere 'in the limbo of the Christless righteous,' but he himself is 'in a terrestrial tell.' However, *Suttree*'s hellacious material world is not merely a Gnostic depiction of the fundamental darkness of the sublunary realm. Instead, the novel shows the misshapen wastrels of this world able to create acts of kindness and companionship within the very 'slaverous' jaws of their spiritual opacity. *Suttree*'s hellish descriptions, then, reflect the medieval use of the grotesque in which images celebrating the carnal—the sexual and scatological—exist within and alongside the spiritual narrative 'without disrupting the organic unity of the story.' This medieval aesthetic explains the problematically profaned sacred imagery in the novel: *Suttree* is not interested in parsing the hideous from the holy, but in finding the holy within the hideous.

A direct contradiction to the orthodox conception of hell as the only space devoid of the presence of God or of grace, Suttree's 'terrestrial hell' is populated with his friends, the economically oppressed and the socially marginalized (former prison inmates, gay prostitutes, and so forth) whom he calls a 'fellowship of the doomed.' The idea of companionship is consistently affiliated with gothic images that emphasize decay, corruption, and ugliness while simultaneously evoking sacred imagery. For example, when Suttree and his friends get in a bar fight, they stagger around bleeding and defending each other 'like the damned in off the plains of Gomorrah,' an image that compares the men to the victims of the quintessential 'fire and brimstone' biblical story. But the group is earlier described using sacred, even Christological numerology: Suttree is surrounded by his faithful crew of 'twelve or more' drunks. Like the twelve apostles and Christ, these men practice impromptu salvations of each other and of strangers throughout their cynical and inebriated wanderings, healing the sick and granting significance, if not life, to the dead.

Finally, when Suttree's mental deficient protégé, Harrogate, tries to blow up a bank and explodes the limestone tunnel around him, Suttree, Christ-like, descends into the depths to seek out Harrogate. After three days and nights, '[o]n the fourth day [Suttree] f[inds] footprints in a patch of gray loam.' Suttree's descent into the pit to resurrect the malodorous and malicious boy is certainly a profane messianic image, and his salvation is likewise problematic; Harrogate is arrested and sent to prison shortly after his rescue. The insubstantial healings and resurrections practiced in the novel are absurd and transitory, but they are nevertheless transcendent.

Suttree's gothic and grotesque imagery suggest that pity and mercy are qualities that flourish within a squalid reality. At one point, Suttree goes to Market Street and sees the poverty-stricken inhabitants as a 'lazaret of comestibles and flora and maimed humanity,' their 'eyes rheumed and vacuous.' The conflation of material goods, the natural world, and human beings, all subjected to grotesque deformity and decay, suggests that those who embody vice the most blatantly are perhaps most capable of recognizing goodness when they see it. This view of the world runs counter to the official narrative of civilized life.

Suttree's successful father, for example, writes him a letter in which he claims that the world is run by civically responsible, affluent people, that outside of the courts, business, and the government is nothing 'but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent.' These 'rheumed and vacuous' eyes on Market Street may be incapable of seeing the physical realm clearly, but the symbolic cataracts that transform the streets of Knoxville into a freak show simultaneously reveal an essential truth about the human condition, a truth to which Suttree's father, with his ability to distinguish between power and failure, is blind. At one point, Suttree looks at grotesque statuary in a Catholic church and realizes that '[I]n the sculptor's art there always remains something unsaid, something waiting,' and that 'unsaid' thing is a terrifying 'kingdom of fear.' The novel's project, then, is to paint this 'unsaid' realm because only in that which is unsaid, in the fear arising from recognizing oneself in the face of the 'helpless and the impotent,' is genuine companionship possible.

Recognizing the parts of human nature that are psychologically scarring, then, permits the possibility of authentic relationships with others, an illusory but significant experience of 'home' in otherwise achingly lonely fictional worlds. In *Suttree's* preface, the narrator instructs readers to recognize that they are '*strangers in everyland.*' If the reader has any doubt of this, the novel's transmogrification of the real city into a mystical hellscape makes this realization inescapable. The reader's estrangement from the historically accurate world of the novel demonstrates the importance of the defamiliarization in McCarthy's Appalachian novels. In these novels, the sacred story is incomplete without the scatological and the profane. Holiness and horror coexist. There is furthermore no simplistic antidote to human evil, only the profound realization of its existence. At the same time, however, realizing that all individuals are alienated, lonely, and corrupted by this pernicious reality permits the reader to experience the elusive grace found in empathy, in creating bonds of understanding and compassion, however impermanent.

No one in McCarthy's Appalachian novels, from the corpse-rapist to the child-victim, is beyond the simple dignity of being empathetic subjects. Through grotesque images emerging from the southern gothic tradition that makes familiar people and places strange, McCarthy's novels gesture toward the only familiar thing left: the humanity in the face of the most hideous other."

Lydia R. Cooper

“McCarthy, Tennessee, and the Southern Gothic”
Cambridge Companion (2013) 48-50

Michael Hollister (2014)