

MADNESS, THE SUPERNATURAL,
AND CHILD MURDER
IN TRAGEDY

by

GENNIFER ARWEN HUTCHISON

DAVID DEUTSCH, COMMITTEE CHAIR
YOLANDA MANORA
WILLIAM ULMER
HILARY GREEN

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ABSTRACT

Child murder in modern American drama draws heavily from Greek tragic traditions, both stylistically and thematically. The number of playwrights (and authors) who have chosen to include infanticide in their works in both ancient Greece and modern America is larger than is to be expected of a topic considered taboo in both of these societies. The three great tragedians, Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus, each chose to include the act in at least one of their plays. Sam Shepard, Edward Albee, and Eugene O'Neill utilized the structure of Greek tragedy in their own plays, including child murder. This thesis will look into the connections between classical Greek tragedies—specifically those written by Euripides—that include filicide, madness, and the supernatural—and modern American literature and drama, including Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, and Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*. These plays and novels showcase an even balance between mothers committing the act of child murder and fathers committing the act of child murder. Furthermore, the works chosen demonstrate diversity of race, socio-economic positioning, geographic locale, and historical time. Of primary import, these connections will show recurring instances of the past haunting the present to create the future.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wonderfully supportive family. I could fill one hundred pages more naming all the ways that each of you helped me become the woman who I am today, the woman who wrote this thesis. Know that I am, and will forever be, so appreciative of all of you.

Jackson, thank you so much for being my rock now and always. I am lucky to have you in my life and I can not wait until May 20th. It will be my greatest joy to spend the rest of our lives together. *I love you.*

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I.

Introduction: Madness, the Supernatural, and Child Murder

“And the murderer won’t know / That his hands are stained by the blood of children / He bred from his own flesh—until in his breast the storm / Of my frenzy blows itself out.”

Madness, Euripides’ *Herakles*

Infanticide and filicide, the killing of one’s infant or child, have existed since the pre-history of mankind. In societies such as Sardinia, Syria, Egypt, and Carthage, the practice was not commonplace, but did occur with infants and children, specifically those of the elite, being ritualistically sacrificed to communal gods. According to Joseph Quinn, professor of ancient history at Oxford University, child sacrifice in the ancient world has often been “dismissed as black propaganda because in modern times people just didn’t want to believe it... But when you pull together all the evidence – archaeological, epigraphic, and literary – it is overwhelming and, we believe, conclusive: they [Carthaginians] did kill their children” (Kennedy). Additionally, “[c]hild skeletons with the marks of sacrifice have been found in Egypt dating 950-720 B.C.” (Tort 165). In 5th century B.C., Euripides takes the act of child sacrifice and places it on the stage for contemplation. It is during this time that he begins the tradition of using the conscious act of child murder, committed by a parent, as a tragic trope in literature in works like *Medea* and *Herakles*. The deaths of Medea’s sons and Herakles’ sons do not come about as a result of a sacrifice to the gods, at least not directly. Medea kills her children to save them from a life of

exile. Herakles kills his sons because he is possessed by an outside force. Both of these staged instances suggest a movement toward understanding the human condition. No longer was filicide solely part of daily ritual; Greek literature began to personalize the act. As such, Medea's choice became a topic for discussion. As orators considered her motives, child murder developed into an act worthy of judgment and condemnation. Euripides' *Medea* and *Herakles*, Sophocles' *Tereus*, and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy all include child murder.

The modern tragedy has grown out of this tradition. Playwrights such as Sam Shepard, Edward Albee, and Eugene O'Neill have followed suit by including infanticide or filicide in many of their plays. Most notably, the following plays of modernity include infanticide or filicide in some form: Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, Eugene O'Neill's *Abortion*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Strange Interlude*, and, finally, Edward Albee's *American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Classical influence does not end with its applicability to the dramatic stage only; modern, tragic novels have also been influenced by works of ancient Greece. George Elliot's *Adam Bede*, Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* all offer a rich field of investigative discovery when considering the topic of child murder in relation to the classics. While many critics have discussed the child murder which occurs in each of these plays and novels separately, few have attempted to tackle the question of why child murder is included so heavily in modern American novels and plays altogether. Interestingly, with the commonality of the inclusion of child murder in modern American drama, I, like critic Peter Hays, expected to discover a wide variety of critics attempting to explain the patterns of infanticide and filicide usage. Hays comments that in "[t]rying to find who might explain this pattern to [him], [he] found only one essay on the subject, John Ditsky's" (434). Oddly, John Ditsky and Peter Hays are the only two critics who

have attempted to delineate patterns in the inclusion of child murder in American dramatic plays as a whole, and neither spend time acknowledging the tradition by which these works were molded. While *Medea* is mentioned just once in Hays' piece and Euripides is not mentioned at all, Ditsky does not even mention Euripides or his plays.

By looking back to classics such as *Medea* and *Herakles*, we are better able to understand the psychology of child murder and madness in works like Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*—my selected works of exploration for this thesis. These works were chosen out of a diverse group based on specific criteria. I first wanted to ensure that I was balancing my explorations between plays and novels. Additionally, I limited my scope to works that included madness and the supernatural. I also wanted to explore diversity by choosing works that present characters of varying races and portray characters in dissimilar geographic settings who differ in educational and social status. In O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, a wife and mother is worked to death. As a result, her ghost returns to exact revenge by instigating the love affair that results in a child's conception and eventual murder. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* examines the literal and figurative haunting of a mother and the madness that she spirals into as a result of her inability to come to terms with the murder of her daughter, even though it prevents the family's return to slavery. Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* explores a family whose dark secret comes to the surface as a result of a dying man's hallucinations. Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* delves into the darkest recesses of the human mind with a character who unleashes punishment onto a community because he is unable to cope with the guilt of his own actions. All four of these works draw inspiration from Greek mythology in some way, yet they create a new tradition by building their own complex scenarios, created from modern dilemmas. While modern playwrights borrow

directly from ancient Greek tragedies through their use of similar literary devices, such as anagnorisis and peripeteia, the novelists are just as creative in their inclusion of Greek tragic elements, thus validating their inclusion in this analysis.

Within these works, each parent commits a crime that can be further categorized. These specific categories should be noted as unique from one another. For the purposes of this discourse, the terms infanticide, filicide, child-murder, and child-sacrifice will be used to describe the act of a parent killing his or her own child. These terms, however, are not interchangeable. While filicide functions as the general term used to refer to a parent killing his or her own child, infanticide specifies that the child victim is under the age of one, or in other words, an infant. By this logic, filicide refers specifically to the murder of a child over the age of one, or a child who is no longer an infant. Child murder, then, is the blanket term that will be used to refer to the crime when speaking about multiple works that contain either infanticide or filicide, but not strictly one or the other. Finally, child sacrifice is defined as the ritualistic killing of a child in order to please the gods or a supernatural force. It is important to understand that, while these terms may seemingly be used interchangeably, each term refers to a different version of a similar crime. In Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, the crime that the respective parents commit is labeled as infanticide, whereas in Euripides' *Medea* and *Herakles*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*, the crime is labeled filicide.

These modern works, as they relate to child murder and madness, draw a great deal from Euripides' interpretations of these myths. While Euripides' most renowned exploration of infanticide explores the death of children at the hands of their mother (*Medea*), he does not limit his treatment of child murder and madness strictly to women. The descent of a hero into filicidal

madness is the subject of Euripides' tragedy, *Herakles*. The work is "the only known tragedy devoted to the hero's madness" (Holmes 231). Euripides' sensibilities transform—some would say drastically—in the 15 years spanning *Medea* (431 B.C.) and *Herakles* (416 B.C.). While *Medea* is steeped with elements of Apollonian rationalism, *Herakles* abounds with Dionysian emotion. This is not to suggest that Dionysian impetuosity is absent from *Medea*, nor that Euripides abandons Apollonian reason in *Herakles*. What we do see, however, is a slight reversal of subject prominence in his explorations; this, in part, because of Euripides' innovation through literature in the fifth century. According to Brooke Holmes, symptoms, such as madness, "were contested sites of interpretation in the late fifth century, supporting both conventional narratives about human suffering and new stories advanced by contemporary medicine and ethics" (231). Exploring human suffering caused by a madness so extreme that it makes a man take the lives of his sons and his wife leads Euripides down a Dionysian path, one that humanizes his characters in ways not present in *Medea*. This observation is paramount when defending why these two, specific versions of the Medea and Hercules myths must be explored together in any argument concerning child murder and madness in classic literature. Their positions as opposites work to create a complete picture of the human condition: female / male, reason / madness, Apollonian / Dionysian. What makes Euripides' version of these myths so applicable to a discussion of child murder and madness is the fact that he goes against the grain of the true tragedy. Medea, a female, should not use reason to seek revenge (yet she does) and Herakles, one of the greatest of Greek heroes, should not be felled by madness (yet he is). These realizations force us to look more closely at the reasoning empowerment of the female in *Medea* and the maddening weakness of the male in *Herakles*.

II.

A Complementary Duo: A Look at Infanticide, Madness, and Reason in Euripides' *Herakles* and *Medea*

“Vain waste, your care of children.”

Chorus, Euripides' *Medea*

Before beginning an exploration of modern tragedies involving child murder, it is vital to understand the foundation of classical tragedy. While Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus reign supreme as the three great tragedians, Euripides is the first, and only, Greek tragedian playwright who deals with the theme of child murder committed by the father in one of his plays and child murder committed by the mother in another of his plays. While Sophocles is well-known for his controversial addition of filicide in *Tereus*, Jenny March has argued that Sophocles gained inspiration from Euripides' *Medea*. March calls on the following lines from *Medea* as support for her conclusion:

I have heard of one woman, only one of all that have lived, who put her hand to her own children: Ino, driven mad by the gods, when the wife of Zeus sent her forth from her home to wander in madness. The unhappy woman fell into the sea through the impious murder of her children; stepping over the sea's edge, she perished with her two sons. (123)

March argues that the fact that Euripides' chorus recalls only one other instance of filicide committed by a mother, Ino, suggests that Sophocles had yet to add Procne's crime to *Tereus* (134). In Sophocles' *Tereus*, Procne kills her son Itys and serves him to her husband Tereus—

Itys' father—for dinner as revenge for raping Philomela and cutting out her tongue. While this inclusion of filicide might be considered more flagrant than either of Euripides', Sophocles does not provide a counterpart for *Tereus* which involves an instance of a father committing filicide. Finally, Aeschylus only alludes to filicide, more specifically to the child sacrifice of Iphigenia, in the *Oresteia* trilogy. In the *Oresteia*, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia in order to appease Artemis, who controls the wind, so that he can sail to Troy; Clytemnestra, his wife, plans his murder in order to exact revenge. Each playwright deals with the subject in an individual way; however, Euripides is credited with starting the inclusion of calculated filicide to traditional myths.

As mentioned in the introduction, the positioning of Euripides' *Medea* and *Herakles* as opposites works to create a complete picture of the human condition. Looking separately at a mother's and father's instance of filicide in Greek tragedy, as well as rational and irrational instances, we are able to piece together an overview of the treatment of filicide in Greek tragedy. This allows Euripides' version of these myths to apply to a larger discussion of child murder. *Euripides*, the youngest of the three playwrights, has the largest extant oeuvre of plays. While Sophocles and Aeschylus both boast a total of seven well-received plays, Euripides is often derided among literary critics for his inconsistency among many different works. While August Wilhelm von Schlegel and Friedrich von Schlegel considered Sophocles' plays the perfect tragedies in their thematic clarity and "unity," Euripides' differing treatment of tragedy changes the definition of what a tragedy can be. While modern literary critics may sometimes disparage Euripides, his renown among fellow Athenians during his lifetime prove that he deserves positive consideration. The 1970s came to appreciate Euripides as a tragedian of his own class with some critics reevaluating the "centrifugal quality as integral to successful Euripidean rather

than failed Sophoclean drama and redefining what tragedy can be to encompass Euripides' contribution" (Mills n.p.). However, like August Wilhelm von Schlegel and Friedrich von Schlegel, Friedrich Nietzsche argues that Euripides' plays mark the end of Greek tragedy in its true form. Nietzsche goes on to augment the idea that a perfect balance between the Apollonian—rational—and the Dionysian—emotional—in human consciousness is one of the defining characteristics of the best of Greek tragedy; this yearning for Dionysian and Apollonian unity is found within August Wilhelm von Schlegel and Friedrich von Schlegel's criticism as well. Nietzsche, along with other modern critics, utilizes Euripides' unconventional application of the Apollonian and the Dionysian to discredit his work. However, as mentioned above, Euripides' uniqueness has begun to be appreciated again, as it was in his own time. "[H]is abiding fascination with controversial questions—social equality, the morality of war, nature versus nurture—and apparent interest in psychology have made him a favorite with modern audiences" (Mills n.p.). Euripides' plays mark the end of Aeschylan and Sophoclean-fashion dramas and the beginning of tragedies which favor either the Apollonian or the Dionysian, as opposed to a balance of each. Euripides' *Medea* does not commit filicide in a moment of madness. Conversely, while Euripides' *Herakles* is spurred on by madness, critics are split on the interpretations of his condition. These interpretations fall into one of two categories: either by privileging a divine interpretation above a secular/psychological motive or, more recently, a secular/psychological reading over the divine. In *Seneca's Herakles Furens*, John Fitch suggests that, "as often in classical literature, we find two levels of motivation: one divine and the other human, or one mythological and one psychological" (32). For the purposes of this thesis, I will argue that neither one nor the other interpretation is superior. Instead, a concurrent exploration of both prefigure the treatment of child murder and madness in modern, American tragedy.

In Euripides' *Medea*, the central character of Medea embraces the Apollonian but possesses traces of Dionysian sensibilities. Throughout the play, Medea openly struggles with the decision to kill her children *because* she attempts to rationalize the act of child-murder. Unlike Herakles, she is not possessed by a god when she consummates the act; instead, she reasons through committing this crime. She understands the consequences of her actions; she understands how much it will hurt not only Jason, whom she seeks revenge against, but also herself. It pains her to have to commit this act, yet she ultimately, as Christian Wildberg states, “makes a terrible choice in spite of herself” in order to exact revenge on Jason—her husband, who betrays her by secretly marrying a new woman and subsequently expecting her to accept it (28). In this play, Euripides favors the Apollonian elements over the Dionysian. His Medea carefully ponders her actions and struggles with what she feels she must do—kill her children. She states:

[...] Just for
This one short day be forgetful of your children,
Afterward weep; for even though you will kill them,
They were very dear—Oh I am an unhappy woman!
(*With a cry she rushes into the house*). (1247-1250)

With this final stage direction, Medea runs to commit the act of filicide. In this moment, we see her acknowledge the pain that this act will cause her. She attempts to prepare herself for the deed by convincing herself, for one day, that her children are not her own. Still, it should be noted that while Medea attempts to remove herself from her actions, she is still in control. Heartbreak has driven her mad, but unlike Herakles, she still makes this decision on her own; her hand is not forced by an external, divine power.

While Euripides' body of work suggests the contrary, it is difficult to avoid considering that Medea represents a strong, independent woman with whom other women can relate—child

murder aside. She is determined to commit an act that no other woman has committed before, except Ino—who was forced, like Herakles, by the gods. Though it may be tempting to think *Medea* promotes the rights of women, a closer inspection of her words proves that her independence is not to be admired. Her intelligence, cunning, and feelings of superiority prove to be her hamartia, or tragic flaw, as defined in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle describes his term in this way, "[t]here remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty" (XIII). These characteristics—which are the only acceptable traits for men in Euripides' time—skew Medea's perception and cause her unease and discontent, which ultimately leads to her banishment and the loss of her children. Medea recognizes and declares to the chorus of Corinth, "Of all things which are living and form judgement / We women are the most unfortunate creatures" (Euripides *Medea* 230-31). As she preaches to the chorus, she is accepted as a heroine and "becomes the voice of all women who suffer from maltreatment, and devises a careful plan to demand her rights" (Hadaegh 331). She laments her position as a woman, citing that marriage for a woman is comparable to taking on "a master" in the way that a dowry is paid to the husband in exchange for ownership of his wife's body (Euripides *Medea* 234). She takes issue with other aspects of marriage with this speech, including the fact that men are allowed to seek pleasure elsewhere if they are unhappy with their wives, "but [women] are forced to keep [their] eyes on one alone" (247). Medea's rage stems from this inequality; in her opinion, no woman *or* man should be permitted to violate marriage vows with impunity. Medea feels the stinging betrayal of her husband's affair; he seeks out love and marriage with another—presumably much younger—woman, therefore allowing Medea to fall by the wayside with no explanation.

In response to abandonment, Medea confines herself to bed and sobs. However, when the grief subsides, anger sets in and transforms her into a woman on a mission. We are not permitted to see or hear much of Medea's melancholy phase; instead, the text focuses primarily on her reaction after she composes herself. The Medea that we are presented with is a crafty woman who creates a detailed, brilliant and tragically-thorough plan. As Hadaegh states:

Medea can be seen as a character exhibiting rationality in that whatever she does is thought of and planned. She has a purpose in mind and does nothing out of blind passion. She has an aim—justice and heroism. To make her plans come true, she even does not allow maternal emotions to grasp her and give her cold feet. (332)

Medea comes to realize that Jason's suffering will be most painful if he remains alive, while everyone he cares about is murdered. This desperate compulsion to achieve the highest level of revenge possible does not cloud her senses. She states: "I know indeed what evil I intend to do / But stronger than all of my afterthoughts is my fury, / Fury that brings upon mortals the greatest of evils" (Euripides *Medea* 1078-80). Throughout the play, she is fully aware of her thoughts, feelings, and actions. The nurse demands of the children's tutor:

[K]eep them to themselves as much as possible.
Don't bring them near their mother in her angry mood.
For I've seen her already blazing her eyes at them.
As though she meant some mischief and I am sure that
She'll not stop raging until she has struck at someone. (90-94)

Commenting on Medea's fixated state, the nurse anticipates Medea's grave actions and does what is in her power to protect the children.

In the opening of the play, Medea vocally struggles with the decision multiple times, continually talking herself into the feat because she feels she must prove her control over a situation where she is otherwise helpless. As such, she attempts to rationalize the deed she is compelled to commit with her final declaration:

Women, my task is fixed: as quickly as I may
To kill my children, and start away from this land,
And not, by wasting time, to suffer my children
To be slain by another hand less kindly to them.
Force every way will habit they must die, and since
This must be so, then I, their mother, shall kill them. (1236-41)

At this moment, Medea convinces herself that she is doing her children a favor. She will end their misery quickly, as opposed to allowing their death to be caused by an enemy—an action she considers inevitable. Her stated motive is brought about by self-indoctrination. She loses her husband to a new woman. She also loses her home, her future, and the future well-being of her children who must now grow up in exile. The overwhelming and abrupt turn of events leaves her scrambling to generate a plan, a way for her to control the future. Here, a cornered Medea convinces herself she has no other option but to kill her own children. It is ultimately her oppression—the unequal treatment she receives in the eyes of her society’s law—and betrayal which motivates her and brings about a calculated disastrous end, for her children, herself, and for Jason.

Unlike the events that bring about filicide in *Medea*, Herakles' filicidal future is actually initiated at the moment of his birth, but does not come to fruition until he finishes his final labor. He seeks to punish Lykos and his men for sacking the city in his absence and making plans to kill Herakles' wife and sons. Hera, the great goddess of Olympus and wife of Zeus, however, despises Herakles because he is the illegitimate son of her husband, born of a human woman, Alcemen. In her jealousy, Hera seeks to destroy Herakles. To reach her goals, she directs Iris, self-proclaimed servant of the gods, to send Lyssa, Daughter of Night and the personification of Madness, to deceive Herakles into committing unspeakable acts. While Lyssa verbally resists this task, stating, “I’m doing what I do not wish to do” (Euripides *Herakles* 1104-5), she is bound by the will of the gods and must do as she is instructed. Lyssa slips inside Herakles, causing the

“whites of his eyes [to] / Roll up” and his breath to “pant hard” (1121-23). Unable to fight the madness inside of him, Herakles proceeds to violently kill all three of his sons, two with arrows and one with a club, before moving on to his wife. He then brings down the roof of his home around him. Athena eventually knocks him unconscious, lest he continue on his killing spree. His father ties him up, not to save his own life, but to prevent Herakles from adding “[t]he guilt of a father’s blood to the blood / He already owes the Furies” (1380-81). So begins the nightmare of a hero oft unappreciated by men and persecuted by gods.

At no point in Euripides’ play does Herakles consciously entertain the thought of sacrificing his wife and children. In fact, before he commits filicide, Herakles chides himself for leaving his family vulnerable to tyrants while he is away completing the labors sent to him by the gods. Herakles laments to his wife, Megara:

A man’s first obligation is to defend
His wife and children, his old father.
My labors and all I suffered—
the madness of it! (737-40)

Here, unaware of the horrors he will soon commit, Herakles speaks of madness and ironically predicts his downward turn of fortune when he, as the liberator of his family, will become their very destroyer. A few lines later, Herakles once again emphasizes an overwhelming desire to care for his children when he tells Amphitryon, “How could I not want / To take care of these boys?” (799-800) This refrain makes future events all the more tragic. When Herakles does slaughter his children, he does so without knowledge or reason; he reacts on a primal level. Madness reduces him to the basest of animal instincts. He becomes “[l]ike a bull about to charge” (1124). This alone, however, is not enough to make him kill those most dear to him. Lyssa must delude him before he carries out the deed by making him believe that he has stormed

Mycenae and is slaying the children of his enemy, King Eurystheus of Argos, who in Euripides' work, ordered the labours. Herakles:

[...] strings his bow
And nocks an arrow, ready to shoot down
His three little boys:
He thought they were
Eurystheus' sons. (1270-74)

Lyssa confounds Herakles' sense of his environment to accomplish her goals and his reason is surprisingly susceptible. Unlike Medea, Herakles allows an outside force to enter his body and guide his actions. The goddess' entrance into his body is even described in such a way that any modern literary critic would interpret as possession. Euripides writes:

his face contorts:
He looks...deranged. The whites of his eyeballs
Rolling up. Veins gorged and bloodshot.
Foaming at the mouth, slobber dripping down
his beard.
His laughter was twisted (1224-1229)

Because of Lyssa's "possession," Herakles commits the most unforgivable of crimes: filicide. Here, one of the most significant differences between the two plays arises. Medea needs no delusion to achieve her goals. When she murders her children, she appears to be in full control of her faculties. In contrast, Herakles does not. In consideration of this interpretation, while it appears modern literature may present itself as progressing leaps and bounds over its predecessors, in reality, not much has changed. When Toni Morrison's *Sethe*, matriarch of *Beloved*, slits the throat of her infant daughter, she does it with complete clarity of the horrors a future life of her child will hold, quite akin to Euripides' Medea. Herakles' clouded judgment also sets the stage for future works dealing with patriarchal filicide. This can be observed in Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*. While Culla does make the initial decision to leave his son in

the woods, he does not actually kill him until he is hounded into the act by the madness beset upon him by the specters who haunt his fractured mind.

The classic tragedy consistently reminds us that the Greeks used gods, goddesses and their retinue to explain their environment, their feelings, and what motivated people to act. For example: Why does Herakles kill his children and his wife? A Greek tragedy's answer: Because he was beset by Lyssa. She is a living, breathing entity who occupies his body and commits these heinous acts against his will, and her own. We see the same sort of possession or other-worldly influence in O'Neill's *Desire*, Morrison's *Beloved*, Shepard's *Buried Child* and McCarthy's *Outer Dark*. The spirit of O'Neill's Maw occupies the living room space and seems to possess those who enter. Morrison's *Beloved* haunts her mother's home and controls the actions of those who inhabit the house. Shepard's Dodge is so haunted by the ghost of the child buried in the yard that he goes half mad with remorse while McCarthy's Culla is pursued by mythological Furies across an unfriendly Appalachian landscape. Madness brought about by outside forces is real and frightening. They can also be understood and diagnosed.

This brings us to the secular/psychological school of thought on Herakles' "madness." The idea of him being possessed by Lyssa, the personification of Madness, is a metaphor for his human condition. He is a demigod, descended directly from Zeus, who inhabits the fleshly form. As such, he is subject to human emotions and afflictions. When Herakles murders his family, he does so under the influence of an outside agent, supposedly. Yet, there are indications early on that he suffers from an afflicting malady before the onset of full-blown madness. Herakles continuously talks of parents loving their family and protecting their children. However, as he emphasizes parents' love of their children, his pronouncements are unsettling. He drones on to his foster father:

Here, take my hands—
I'll be the ship that tows the smaller boats [his sons]
Into harbor.
How could I not want
To take care of these boys? Human beings
Are alike in this:
Whether we're powerful
Or not, whether our luck is good or bad,
We love our children—
Some poor—
But all of us love our children. (797-805)

Even if we are not aware that Herakles is about to slay his children and his wife, we are caught off guard by the somewhat excessive exaltations of love, especially when he asks himself how could he *not* want to take care of his sons, almost as if this is in question. This leads us to entertain the thought that the goddess Lyssa was not the sole cause of Herakles' horrific actions. Interestingly, modern psychology focuses on Medea's malady of psychosis as well. Early on in the play, her nurse notes that she is not feeling well. When describing Medea's current condition, the nurse states: "She lies without food and gives herself up to suffering, / Wasting away every moment of the day in tears" (Euripides *Medea* 24-25). An early assessment of Medea's condition dilutes a complete revenge theory of her motives. Her mental state is obviously affected early on in the play. Even later, we are told by Medea herself that she commits her act, not out of revenge, but out of a concern for a more horrific death her children might suffer. Today, in light of modern psychiatric views, Medea's condition is definable. She suffered from spouse (partner) revenge filicide. According to Susan Hatters Friedman, there are five categories of filicide: altruistic, acute psychosis, unwanted child, accident and spousal revenge. We see many of these, with the exception of the accidental filicide, in the modern works chosen specifically for this analysis. In O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* we can see a mixture of unwanted child and spousal revenge filicide. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, we see an altruistic filicide. In Shepard's

Buried Child we see another, more complex, case of the unwanted child. In McCarthy's *Outer Dark* we altruistic filicide, turned into unwanted child, turned into acute psychosis. Reading the works in light of a psychological diagnosis brings clarity to their motives. It also establishes their behavior as a truly human trait that has occurred with enough regularity to warrant the conducting of studies and the creation of medical terminology to explain the behavior.

III.

Reemergence of a Woman Scorned: A Study of Infanticide and Maternal Influence in *Desire Under the Elms*

“Waal, it'll be her'n, too—Abbie's—ye won't git 'round her—she knows yer tricks—she'll be too much fur ye—she wants the farm her'n—she was afeerd o' ye—she told me ye was sneakin' 'round tryin' t' make love t' her t' git her on yer side . . . ye . . . ye mad fool, ye!”

Ephraim Cabot, Eugene O'Neill's *Desire*

While Eugene O'Neill's play *Desire Under the Elms* showcases characters who participate in greed, incest, adultery, and secrecy, these traits work together to produce perhaps the most tragic element: infanticide. The play draws heavily from several tragic Greek myths, including *Oedipus*, *Hippolyta and Phaedra*, and *Medea*. Most notably, O'Neill utilizes Euripides' *Medea* as his source of inspiration for his inclusion of infanticide within the play—as other versions of the Medea myth do not include this largely unjustifiable “sin” in the same way. Emily McDermott delves into the incarnation of this inclusion stating “[t]here is no extant pre-Euripidean source which indicts the sorceress for the willful and unnatural murder of her own children” (10). Eumelus held that the death of Medea's children resulted from an accident (11). Creophylus blamed the children's murders on the citizens of Corinth (11). It was not until Euripides' work that Medea was portrayed as a woman who purposefully killed her children. While many critics speculate about Euripides' intentions for including infanticide in his re-articulation of the tragic Medea myth, Aristide Tessitore argues that “Euripides tries to expose

the terrible misfortunes of life rather than pleasing his audience” (601). Repeating this rationale, O’Neill’s *Desire* includes infanticide in much the same way; however, he attempts to expose the hypocrisy of puritanical New England. The evils of Puritanism pervade New England literature. While O’Neill’s work arrives a century later than Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, the message perseveres: Puritanism corrupts that which it declares holy. O’Neill’s play suggests that beliefs and actions do not necessarily correlate. The crux of my argument, as well as the difference between Greek and American tragedy, originates here. Medea’s motivations to kill her children, born of Jason, differ substantially from O’Neill’s Abbie’s reasoning to kill the child she bore from Eben. Yet, exploring the motivations of Medea in tandem with Abbie’s exposes a darker reality; their deeds are divided by a singular driving force: madness. Abbie’s character commits the act of infanticide in a moment of madness; orchestrated by the ghost of Maw, she acts in a desperate effort to exact revenge and save her relationship with Eben. Medea, however, acts rationally in order to protect her children—similarly to Sethe in *Beloved*.

Both women kill for revenge; however, one woman is scorned by love and the other believes she commits the act to solidify her love. Medea kills partially to exact revenge on Jason, but also to protect her children from exile. Abbie kills her child because she believes, in a deranged way, that it will exact revenge on Ephraim and secure her love with Eben. Peter Hays argues that Abbie commits this act honorably, stating “Abbie kills her and Eben's child to prove to Eben that she loves him by destroying the heir to the farm that would disinherit him, the infant's father” (436). Will Hodge believes that “instead of just evoking the Medea story with this murder-by-mother turn, O’Neill alters the motivations behind the decision by having Abbie commit the act, not out of revenge against the father, but in order to prove her love for the father” (33). While Medea’s actions are calculated, rationalized, and unavoidable in light of her

personality, Abbie acts quickly, thoughtlessly, and irrationally. Medea's character is comprised of the Apollonian element of reason. Alternatively, Abbie's characterization aligns with the Dionysian element of emotion. This powerful change speaks to the heart of O'Neill's ultimate critique of New England society in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As Travis Bogard states, and Mahfouz highlights, the play is "a God-oriented tragedy" as it "highlights the tragic consequences of violating religious doctrines" (Bogard 225, Mahfouz 5). O'Neill's alteration in the mother's treatment of infanticide critiques and signifies a society which has become disconnected from its religious roots and, instead, has placed the importance of carnal passion above all else.

The dualistic nature of these two opposing terms, Dionysian and Apollonian, leads us to question whether these two elements play out in a balanced way in Euripides' *Medea* and O'Neill's *Desire*. When taking into consideration the title of O'Neill's play, we are immediately met with the term "desire." This term is fraught with Dionysian elements and, after finishing the play, it becomes clear that O'Neill's work favors the Dionysian over the Apollonian. Travis Bogard states:

O'Neill had little interest in the joy of Apollonianism. He understood, however, the concept of the constant hostility between the two powers and agreed that "Where ever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollonian was routed and annihilated." In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill made anti-Dionysian force approximate to Puritan Christianity and he tied it in with a fundamentalist, Old-Testament deity, and with the rigorous representation of the flesh and subjugation of impulse to rock-hard will. (217)

For O'Neill, this play is about Dionysian desire. Thematically, the play is laden with greed that manifests in each character. Ephraim has an insatiable greed and a longing for the days of his sexual prime. This leads him to his mistake, marrying Abbie—who is after him for money. Abbie believes Ephraim's money is her key to stability—something she has sought for most of

her life. Eben is possessive of the farm land and jealous of his father's undeserved status. His desire is ultimately charged by the betrayal he feels when his father works his mother to death. As Bette Mandl writes, "[i]t is Eben, seeing himself as his mother's heir, who engages most fully in the struggle with the father for power and possession" (297). This brings about his mistake, having a quasi-incestuous affair with Abbie. Abbie, an orphan who previously married an unproductive, unkind man and had a child with him, is embittered by her prior experiences. When she loses her husband to sickness and her child to an unnamed cause, she feels relieved. She tells Eben: "I was glad sayin' now I'm free fur once, on'y I diskivered right away all I was free fur was t' wuk agen in other folks' hums, doin' other folks' wuk till I'd most give up hope o' ever doin' my own wuk in my own hum, an' then your Paw come" (O'Neill 1.4). She goes on to manipulate the men around her in order to secure a new, stable home where she will not have to work so hard for her living. Abbie desires stability, and moreover, becomes greedy when it comes to Ephraim's land and money. While her motivations are avaricious for most the play, her mistake is the only one that is *not* caused by greed. This mistake, the murder of her child, comes about with her renunciation of this greed in favor of her relationship with her step-son, Eben. As Yilmaz Madran eloquently states, "In the play the past controls the present and creates the future" (453). I will discuss Madran in further detail at a later point; however, these words highlight the cause for the tragic action in the play.

Unlike Abbie, Euripides' Medea visibly struggles with the decision she has made throughout the play *because* she attempts to rationalize the act of child-murder. As she rationalizes the act she is about to commit, she repetitively reminds herself of what she must do and the reasons why. She states first, "By Hell's avenging furies it shall not be— / This shall never be, that I should suffer my children / To be prey of my enemies' insolence. / Every way it

is fixed” (1060-1063). Like Sethe, she does not want to allow her children to be exposed to the hatred of her enemies. She repeats later:

Women, my task is fixed: as quickly as I may
To kill my children, and start away from this land,
And not, by wasting time, to suffer my children
To be slain by another hand less kindly to them.
Force every way will habit they must die, and since
This must be so, then I, their mother, shall kill them. (1236-41)

In this quote, she articulates that her children will meet a fate worse than death if they live and further rationalizes that, since she brought the children into this world, she must be responsible for killing them—by means of protection—as well. She tells them, with love and kindness, “I wish you happiness, but not here in this world. / What is here your father took” (1072-1073). The Apollonian element of reason is favored over the Dionysian in Euripides’ *Medea*.

Nietzsche argues that a balance between the Apollonian—rational—and the Dionysian—emotional—in human consciousness is one of the defining characteristics of the best of Greek tragedy. He goes on to augment the idea that Euripides’ plays mark the end of Greek Tragedy in its true form. His favoring of either the Apollonian *or* the Dionysian in his plays destroys the traditional balance. Hadaegh paraphrases Nietzsche’s critique of Euripides:

Euripides’ intention was to evade the primordial and pervasive Dionysian element and rebuild tragedy based on a non-Dionysiac art and world-view. He [...] became a mask through which neither Apollo nor Dionysus could speak. [...] However he failed in building tragedy upon Apollonian elements and as a result he was led towards an inartistic naturalism. (332)

Directly from the source, Nietzsche states, “[i]t was Euripides who fought this deathstruggle of tragedy; the later branch of art is known as the New Attic Comedy, in which tragedy lived on in degenerate form, as a monument to its own exceedingly laborious and violent demise” (55). This end of Aeschylan-fashion dramas marks the beginning of tragedies which favor the Apollonian

over the Dionysian. Euripides favors the Apollonian elements over the Dionysian in *Medea*, while O'Neill prefers the Dionysian in *Desire*. Medea calculates her actions, while Abbie acts out of emotion, killing her child to secure her relationship with Eben. Her professed justification to Eben underlines the Dionysian elements of the play:

I didn't want t' do it. I hated myself fur doin' it. I loved him. He was so purty—dead spit 'n' image o' yew. But I loved yew more—an' yew was goin' away—far off whar I'd never see ye agen, never kiss ye, never feel ye pressed agin me agen—an' ye said ye hated me fur havin' him—ye said ye hated him an' wished he was dead—ye said if it hadn't been fur him comin' it'd be the same's afore between us. (O'Neill 3.3)

Abbie's murder of her own child arises from her reckless love for Eben, a love that stems from the Dionysian. Abbie does not reason through her actions, she only acts. In fact, it is only after the murder of her child that she admits to Ephraim, "I hate the sight o' ye an' allus did! It's yew I should've murdered, if I'd had good sense! I hate ye! I love Eben. I did from the fust. An' he was Eben's son—mine an' Eben's—not your'n!" (3.4). In the aftermath of her child's death, Abbie's actions appear weak. She has acted from emotion and only considers the consequences after the fact.

Unlike Euripides' *Medea*, O'Neill's *Desire* includes a distracting off-stage, unseen, foreboding character, Maw. Yilmaz Madran states "[t]hroughout the play, we feel the dominance of Eben's mother, although she is not seen on the stage. At the outset of the play the existence of the elms in the figure of mother represents the dominance of mother over the play" (454). Critics diverge here, with one side believing Maw is a figment of the imagination, while the other side believes that her "ghostly" role carries the plot. However, critics do agree that, in whatever form she exists, her presence impacts the plot of the play. Jerry Stinnett explicitly expounds on Madran's thoughts and draws a compelling comparison between Maw in O'Neill's play and Lilith from Jewish folklore; however, he provides a narrow interpretation of the "sinister

maternity” of the elms at the beginning of the play. Stinnett argues, “[t]he two maternal elms dominate both the stage and the farm with the implication that the desires and motivations of those who inhabit these places are directed by the influence of the maternal spirit that hangs over them” (9). Madran and Stinnett suggest that these elms foreshadow the appearance of Maw, the ghostly character.

In the parlor scene, it might seem implausibly serendipitous that Maw’s wishes would align so neatly with Abbie’s; however, it is equally problematic to ignore O’Neill’s insistence upon Maw’s presence in this scene. Throughout the play, Maw is a judgmental force that seems to persist in the Cabot home. She is certainly a perceived presence in the house through Eben’s eyes. Her presence, or Abbie’s enactment of Maw’s presence, undoubtedly influences Eben. The manifestation of Maw, whether a supernatural apparition or a figment of the imagination, haunts Abbie and, eventually, drives her to commit the murder of her child in a moment of madness. During the parlor scene, evidence suggests that Abbie’s speech is compelled by Maw’s spirit. As the pair try to grapple with their current situation, their conversation is filled with echoed remarks that are spurred on by Maw’s spirit. After Abbie inquires “[t]ell me about yer Maw, Eben,” we are met with a repetitive conversation in which Abbie reiterates everything that Eben says (2.3). Eben remarks, “They hain’t nothin’ much. She was kind. She was good” to which Abbie states “I’ll be kind an’ good t’ ye!” (2.3). Further, he states, “Sometimes she used to sing fur me” and Abbie responds, “I’ll sing fur ye!” (2.3). Next, Eben declares, “This was her hum. This was her farm” (2.3). Abbie, compelled by the passion of Maw, responds, “This is my hum! This is my farm!” (2.3). While we could read this moment simply as Abbie’s reclamation of the property, it *actually* seems to be Maw’s own passionate declarations coming through. The conversation quickly progresses in solemnity. Eben states: “He couldn’t ‘preciate her,” and

Abbie replies, “He can’t ‘preciate me!” (2.3). Finally, we hear Eben state, “He murdered her with his hardness” (2.3). Abbie’s final reply is “He’s murderin’ me!” (2.3). This excessively cyclical and rhythmic conversation is orchestrated by Maw.

With this claim in mind, we must also consider the disturbing connotations that arise. If Maw *is* truly compelling Abbie to say what she says and do what she does in this scene, then we are dealing with a directly incestuous relationship between mother and son. Eben speaks “(to the presence he feels in the room) Maw! Maw! What d’ye want? What air ye tellin’ me?” (2.4).

Abbie states: “She’s tellin’ ye t’ love me. She knows I love ye an’ I’ll be good t’ ye. Can’t ye feel it? Don’t ye know? She’s tellin’ ye t’ love me, Eben” (2.4)! According to Peter L. Hays, in “Child Murder and Incest in the American Drama,” O’Neill insists on the incest motif:

(In spite of her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice—a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love.) Don’t cry, Eben!... I’ll kiss ye pure, Eben—same’s if I was Maw t’ ye—an’ ye can kiss me back’s if yew was my son... (They kiss in restrained fashion. Then suddenly wild passion overcomes her. She kisses him lustfully again and again and he flings his arms about her and returns her kisses.) (437)

Before this scene, Abbie’s character is *not* as agreeable as we see her here. This is not the first time that Abbie has attempted to seduce Eben but this is the first time that she does so by telling Eben exactly what he wants to hear. Prior to this moment, the two have flirted through heated arguments filled with sexual tension. This is the first time we see the two agree and it can not be a coincidence that Maw’s presence accomplishes this. She guides the pair and Eben correctly identifies *why* O’Neill’s Maw character is so determined to initiate this incestuous love affair. He states: “I see it! I see why. It’s her vengeance on him—so she kin rest quiet in her grave!” (2.4). Eben hears what he wants to hear (and what Maw wants him to hear) in this conversation, and so does Abbie. Maw takes advantage of the fact that, in this heated moment, the two are feeling lust

for each other. Eben acts not only out of lust for Abbie, but also out of desire to hurt Ephraim by reciprocating the betrayal Ephraim caused for him. Maw's "approval" gives him the justification he seeks to commit this unspeakable act. He impregnates his father's wife; this, for him, is the greatest source of revenge. However, he comes to regret his actions when his own child is being raised by the father he detests so much.

While Maw represents the past sinister maternity, which is haunting the present, Abbie functions as the present sinister maternity whose actions are a result of Maw's manipulation. Madran and Stinnett fail to acknowledge the *other*, more overt "sinister maternity" within the play. This phrase appears in O'Neill's opening description of the setting of the play. He states:

There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles. (O'Neill 2)

The description of these elms as having a "sinister maternity" also functions to directly foreshadow Abbie's subtle will and ultimate failure at mothering her own child. By the end of the play, at the fault of Maw and her own sexual desires, Abbie joins the long line of mothers and "exhausted women" who haunt these elms. There is no doubt that she wishes to take over the farm. When arriving at her new homestead, Abbie declares, "It's purty—purty! I can't b'lieve it's r'ally mine" (1.4). Yet, this declaration has nothing to do with her desire to supersede Maw as the matriarch of the home. Abbie's concerns are more concretized in the protection of her livelihood. She announces, "A woman's got t' hev a hum!" (1.4). Here, critics take two views of Abbie: she desires money or she desires safety and comfort. Critics can intuit Abbie's motives from the age difference between herself and her husband. The stage notes read:

Cabot is seventy-five, tall and gaunt, with great, wiry, concentrated power, but stoop-shouldered from toil. His face is as hard... , yet there is a weakness in it, a petty pride in its own narrow strength. Abbie is thirty-five, buxom, full of vitality. Her round face is pretty but marred by its rather gross sensuality. There is strength and obstinacy in her jaw, a hard determination in her eyes, and about her whole personality the same unsettled, untamed, desperate quality which is so apparent in Eben. (1.4)

Here, O'Neill provides a stark contrast between Abbie's appearance and Ephraim's which suggests that Ephraim did not secure this woman because of his own charm and good looks; instead, she settled for Ephraim because she was desperate to find a stable home. He also notes that both Eben and Abbie exude looks of desperation, a foreshadowing to their eventual sexual encounter and resulting romantic connection.

Even though Abbie is only seeking to secure a future bereft of poverty, it is difficult to sympathize with her after she commits infanticide. Mothers and fathers are often thought to innately feel compelled to protect their offspring. This is where the subject of infanticide becomes difficult to comprehend. A woman who is able to kill her own child will likely be judged by others as callous, unfeeling, sinful, and selfish. While these assumptions may sometimes be accurate, it is important to consider the situation which drove the mother to this heinous crime. In analyzing *Desire Under the Elms*, we are not dealing with a woman who has lost one child, but a woman who has lost two. As such, both scenes should be examined, even though the first infant's death does not *appear* to be infanticide. Additionally, to uncover the truth, an examination of the first infant's death could possibly shed light on the motive behind the death of Abbie's second child. For most the play, Abbie is considered by other characters to be a gold-digging wife. This aspect of Abbie appears to be a façade, as so much of her banter suggests. When she comes clean to Eben, a different side of Abbie comes through. She tells him, "I was a orphan early an' had t' wuk fur others in other folks' hums. Then I married an' he turned

out a drunken spreer” (1.4). We soon find out that “the baby die[d]” and that Abbie felt “free fur once” (1.4). Here, it is natural to look down on Abbie as an uncaring mother, just as it is easy to judge Medea; that sentiment is strengthened at the play’s conclusion when we are certain her second child dies by her hands. However, it is worth noting that other circumstances could have come into play in the first child’s death. The fact that her first husband is a drunk suggests a life of poverty, one that Abbie must have abhorred. This rings true in that she married a man three times her age to secure a “proper” home. Her talk with Eben also suggests that she is innocent about love. She has married to protect her livelihood, nothing more, in both instances. When she meets Eben and falls in love for the first time, her emotions blind her to the reality that exists around her. This appears to be the reason why she manipulates Eben into loving her, relying on encouragement from Maw, his deceased mother.

As Abbie is more in line with Aristotelian definitions of the tragic hero, it is conceivable that O’Neill’s Abbie is the tragic hero of the play. Even though she seems to be the antagonist of the play, her goals align with Eben’s and the two join forces. She enters the play with one goal only, to secure the family farm by manipulating Ephraim and his sons. She experiences a peripeteia when she falls in love with Eben and begins acting on her Dionysian desires. She is wrapped up in sensual pleasures and acts with little forethought because of her clouded vision. Her anagnorisis comes about when Eben reproaches her for killing their son. She realizes she has misunderstood his wishes and, ultimately, has made a huge mistake. While some argue that Ephraim is the tragic hero of the play, it may also be argued that Abbie is a competing alternative for the title. She seeks to dethrone Ephraim, yet as she struggles to achieve this end, she ultimately brings about her own demise, as well as Eben’s. The irony in Abbie’s situation in *Desire Under the Elms* compared to Medea’s in Euripides’ play is that Medea’s tragic situation

is brought about by her helplessness against the rules of the patriarchy, while Abbie displays a much greater sense of agency. She is, similarly, functioning under an oppressive patriarchy, yet she uses her feminine wiles to manipulate each of the men in the play seamlessly, and still fails, like Eben, to achieve her ends.

As mentioned previously, Medea's hamartia is her strong-willed independence, which brings about her own demise in a patriarchal society; Abbie's hamartia, however, is her obsession with Ephraim's home and other material possessions. In other words, she is overwhelmed with greed. As many critics have noted, O'Neill "concedes that New England was far from being stereotyped as the new Eden for the puritans, but rather it was disapprovingly depicted as a land of hypocritical faith and greed for property" (Mahfouz 13). Both Abbie and Eben are far too wrapped up in their Dionysian desire for sexual pleasure and material possessions to achieve their end goal. Ironically, their obsession with the very thing they wish to attain holds them back. They join each other, sexually and emotionally, in the goal of overtaking Ephraim's farm and become too entrenched in their own relationship to remember the task at hand. Abbie and Eben hope to live happily ever after, but it becomes painfully apparent that this is not doable with Ephraim around. The two lack the Apollonian element of reason which would be required to act rationally. Instead of killing Ephraim, which would have been the more logical solution to solve the lover's spat, Abbie thinks—out of sheer desperation—that killing her son is the only way to prove to Eben that she is not manipulating him the way she is manipulating Ephraim. She believes that if she sacrifices her son, the male heir that will hopefully claim the farm, that Eben will believe she truly loves him. Her mistake, however, is believing that killing Eben's son would *ever* make him happy. When he finds out, he reacts in this way: "(falls to his knees as if he'd been struck—his voice trembling with horror) Oh God A'mighty! A'mighty

God! Maw, whar was ye, why didn't ye stop her" (3.3)? Abbie "simply" remarks, "She went back t' her grave that night we fust done it, remember? I hain't felt her about since" (O'Neill 3.3). She then proceeds to describe the child's death. Her ability to speak so disjointedly about the murder of her child suggests that Abbie has not bonded with him in the normative manner.

Abbie has little emotional connection with her son, favoring her lustful relationship with Eben over her duty as a mother. The audience is not allowed to see if Abbie struggles with the decision to kill her baby until *after* it has already happened. In her crazed state, after the fact, she claims that it was difficult for her; however, her motivations are wildly irrational and driven completely by emotions. In other words, she was overcome by madness. It only occurs to her as an afterthought that killing Ephraim might have been the more successful way to achieve her goal. When Eben believes she has killed Ephraim, she corrects him, saying "No! No! Not him! (*laughing distractedly*) But what's what I ought t' done, hain't it? I ouhghter killin him instead! Why didn't ye tell me" (3.3)? This is the sinister maternity O'Neill is speaking of at the opening of his tragedy. As Madran observes "[t]he past in [*Desire*] determines and controls the tragic action" (453). Abbie, who has filled Maw's shoes, is now acting in accordance with Maw's guiding hand. The play begins—with the sinister elms—and ends with references to Maw's influence on the lives of this family. This is in fact *her* farm. Everyone else is simply enacting *her* vision of what should be. Abbie is so distracted by her desire for Eben, and for the stability Ephraim's money provides, that she fails to protect her young from her own careless hand.

Eben's ability to forgive Abbie has been read as a play on Adam and Eve's resolution after Eve eats the forbidden fruit, then gives some of it to Adam. Bogard writes, "As Adam accepted Eve's sin, Eben must accept Abbie's, for what is left to them cannot lie beyond themselves" (25). In turning back to Abbie, after his violent rejection of her strange act of faith,

Eben reestablishes their love so that they need to rely on nothing outward. As the biblical pair give in to their desires, so do Eben and Abbie. Stinnett alludes to this argument when he says “[c]ertainly the dynamics of the Old Testament creation story and that of the Fall of Adam and Eve find their reflection in the dynamics at work in *Desire* both leading up to and including the famous seduction scene of part 2” (15). This brings us back to O’Neill’s insertion of religious undertones in the work. For the entirety of the play, the characters have been acting in line with their own desires, the Dionysian half of their consciousness. It is only after their ultimate demise—after the death of the child and the police call—which occurs because of their inability to resist carnal passions that the two realize the mistakes they *both* have made to lead them to this point. Once he has accepted responsibility for the part he played in causing the situation, Eben is able to forgive Abbie. It can not be reversed, but the two can live on knowing that they have each other to ease their persisting misery. At the play’s end, Eben states:

I got t’ pay fur my part o’ the sin! An’ I’d suffer wuss leavin’ ye,
goin’ West thinkin’ o’ ye day an’ night, bein’ out when yew was
in—‘R bein’ alive when yew was dead. I want to share with ye,
Abbie—prison ‘r death ‘r hell ‘r anythin’! If I’m sharin’ with ye,
I won’t feel lonesome, leastaways. (O’Neill 3.4)

In response, Abbie states, “Eben! I won’t let ye!! I can’t let ye!” (3.4). When he remarks that he has her “beat fur once,” she states “I hain’t beat—s’long’s I got ye” (3.4). Like Adam and Eve, the two prepare to endure their punishment together, but the burden will be lessened knowing they have the love of one another.

Abbie’s initial desire for money and stability transforms, with the guidance of Maw’s intervention, into love for Eben. Eventually, she feels the only way she can retain their love is to sacrifice their child to hurt Ephraim and remove the barrier—created by Ephraim’s ego due to his belief that Abbie’s child is his own—between herself and Eben. Abbie and Eben’s similar

distaste for Ephraim provides Maw an easy path to usurping what is rightfully hers—the land and money—and exacting revenge. Maw, from her foreboding introduction in the opening as a spirit of “sinister maternity” in the elms, is the maestro of the chaos in the play. The role her beloved son, Eben, plays is the only aspect over which she does not have full control. Maw initially encourages Eben’s lust for Abbie, but his lust turns into true devotion to Abbie. In the end, Eben admits guilt along with her and they both pile into police cars where they will be taken to serve their respective jail sentences. While all three characters—Maw, Eben, and Abbie—manage to destroy Ephraim’s happiness through their acts, they all lose something unexpected along the way. Eben loses his son due to Abbie’s misguided actions, Maw loses her son to prison because his dedication to Abbie is too strong to let her take the fall alone, and Abbie loses her money and stability. While Abbie is emotional about the fact that she is directly responsible for the death of their child, this is not what causes most of her grief. She is most afraid of losing Eben; once he declares his love for her, she is satisfied. In both O’Neill and Euripides’ plays, the matriarchs have been relegated to a helpless role in which they feel their only form of power or control over the men in their lives is to do what may hurt them the most: kill their own children. In *Medea*, we see a woman driven to desperate means because she is powerless in every other aspect of life beyond a mother’s capacity. *Desire Under the Elms* follows in the footsteps of *Medea* up until a certain point, and then diverges in order to achieve a different end. While Medea attempts to regain control of her life with the only tool in her possession, the ability to destroy the object which a male-dominated society created through her, Abbie destroys her offspring because she believes it will bring her *closer* to her male counterpart. Regardless of the women’s motivations, they are both driven by desperation.

IV.

Resurrection of the Past: An Exploration of Filicide and Redemption in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

“‘I stopped him,’ she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. ‘I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.’”

Sethe, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Infanticide extends into the America dramatic novel as well, appearing in a Nobel Prize-winning piece of literature that addresses a woman's horrific choice when faced with giving her child freedom through death or allowing her child to be enslaved. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* explores filicide in a way not addressed in the other works explored in this thesis: O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (infanticide for personal gain and revenge), Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (infanticide to hide incest) or Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* (filicide to hide incest). Instead, the novel explores a mother's act of filicide as one of exceeding love. Since its publication, Morrison's novel has been besieged with controversy. “Modern critics have diagnosed *Beloved* as a melodramatic ghost story or historical slave narrative akin to Uncle Tom's Cabin” (Cowan-Barbetti n.p.). According to Stanley Crouch, “*Beloved* fails to rise to tragedy because it shows no sense of the timeless and unpredictable manifestations of evil that preceded and followed American slavery” (68). Crouch goes on to say that, instead, Morrison “only asks that her readers tally up the sins committed against the darker people and feel sorry for them, not experience the horrors of slavery as they do” (68). Jennifer A. Williamson disagrees, stating:

When the experience of slavery is so horrific as to have traumatized generations of families; to have perpetuated countless rapes, physical assaults, and murders; to have resulted in war, and cultural beliefs that are based on centuries-old racial stereotypes; how is a text to make a contemporary reader, more than one hundred years removed, “experience the horrors of slavery”? (148)

Claire Cowan-Barbetti is of a similar mindset. She offers that Crouch, and other critics, are focusing on the wrong aspects of the novel and, therefore, are missing the larger point. She writes, “*Beloved* is about slavery. Its focus, however, is not on the sociopolitical dimension; rather, it enters into a realm of the spirit where the heart, not the intellect, must make sense of the painful past” (n.p). Crouch’s argument is accurate in the strictest sense, but limited in other ways. While *Beloved* is not a tragedy in the classic sense, Morrison’s novel does contain elements of tragedy as we can not help but be reminded of Euripides’ *Medea*. Sethe and *Medea* share a great deal in that both kill their children to protect them from what the women perceive will be an existence worse than death. And, while Cowan-Barbetti sees the need for more heart in making sense of the scenes, the story is more complex than one that you experience with heart alone. A combination of heart and head is necessary to interpret the past and one’s sense of self and place within a social framework.

In the case of *Beloved*, the filicide that occurs forces us to confront, both emotionally and logically, a very real, very hostile history. Sethe’s character inherits an ugly tradition from her mother: child murder. Sethe’s mother commits infanticide after giving birth to the product of rape committed by white crew members. She commits infanticide multiple times after that each time she becomes pregnant with a white man’s child. When reading other accounts of infanticide in the novel, we are reminded that this tradition is one that spans the history of slavery and its practice was commonplace. This issue is often swept under the rug, however, because the implications are sometimes too difficult to consider. What comment does it make on the nature

of humanity and motherhood? Sethe argues that her daughter is so beloved unto her that she takes her life to set her free. Although Sethe does not talk about the Misery (her killing of Beloved) openly, when she offers herself in payment to have “Beloved” carved on the tombstone, Sethe literally names the act of filicide and, in doing so, brings it into the light. What Sethe and the community do with the knowledge is the primary subject of this analysis. Sethe also kills her daughter so as not to be burdened mentally by the child’s almost certain future under slavery. Although Sethe is plagued by shame and guilt since committing the Misery, she is able to persevere, in a somewhat diminished manner, in mothering her remaining children. This suggests that the guilt resulting from allowing her children to return to slavery would be unbearable. Despite whether we agree with her actions or condemn them, the bottom line is that she does succeed. Her two sons, Beloved, Denver and herself certainly would have been returned to slavery had Sethe not killed Beloved. And while this is true, it is secondary to a larger purpose. Beloved’s murder symbolizes the fragmentation of an individual, as well as a community, that occurs during times of crisis. Sethe’s murder of her daughter, the subsequent haunting, and the communal exorcism heals a community that is haunted by a past that most refuse to remember. They learn that it is only by revisiting painful sites of memory and owning them as part of the rich and often excruciating tapestry of history can an individual and a community be healed and made whole.

As previously mentioned, some critics have accused *Beloved* as being nothing more than a ghost story. While many of Toni Morrison’s novels, like *Beloved*, are rich with supernatural phenomena, the inclusion of a ghost for the sake of creating a supernatural tale is not Morrison’s primary intent, although Morrison freely admits that ghosts have always intrigued her. In the *Foreword* of *Beloved*, Morrison explains her inspiration. As she was editing a collection, *The*

Black Book, for Random house in the 1970s, she read a newspaper clipping about an 1856 incident involving a woman who escaped slavery, Margaret Garner.¹ When the young mother was cornered by officers of the law and slave-hunters, she made the decision to kill her children and herself rather than be returned to the owner's plantation. She successfully killed one child, a two-year-old-daughter, and tried to kill the others. In defense of her actions, Garner states, "I would much rather kill them at once and thus end their sufferings than have them taken back to slavery and be murdered by piece meal" (Kigel n.p.). Morrison tells her readers that the woman became a "cause célèbre in the fight against the Fugitive Slave laws [catching] the attention of Abolitionists as well as newspapers" (Morrison *Beloved* 2). The story was sensationalized by the media for the wrong reasons; as such, underlying issues of slaves as property and filicide were displaced. Margaret's persona was portrayed in newspapers in little more than caricature and her dead child as little more than front page fodder; few seemed concerned with the fact that a child had been murdered. Abolitionists fought to have Garner tried for the murder of her child. This would have given them more ammunition to assert the rights of slaves as human beings, not property. Their endeavors unfortunately failed. The issue of filicide never arose in the court proceedings. Eventually, Garner was convicted of property destruction (the child being the plantation owner's property) and was returned to slavery. Morrison wanted her novel to blossom into something more than a retelling of this woman's life. She sat down to "invent [Margaret's] thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's 'place'" (2). Enter *Beloved*. Morrison's Sethe "represents the unapologetic acceptance of shame

¹ For more information on Margaret Garner's life and the circumstances surrounding her case, refer to Nikki M. Taylor's 2016 book titled *Driven By Madness*.

and terror” (2). She is an amalgamation of Baby Suggs’ embarrassed pride and the community’s inability to accept the atrocities they have had to commit to survive.

In the other works discussed in this thesis, the moral ambiguity of infanticide and filicide is addressed, but none with more social consciousness than *Beloved*. Sethe feels forced to commit this unthinkable act because of her helpless situation. Killing her children is the only way she feels capable of making a difference; this is her only means of control. A modern psychiatric term for Sethe’s action is altruistic filicide. According to Susan Hatters Friedman, “Altruistic filicide is described as ‘murder out of child love’” (789). A parent “may perceive the act of killing their child as the ‘lesser of evils’ if they believe their child is experiencing a fate worse than death” (789). Like Garner, Morrison’s Sethe does not attempt to kill her children out of malice. She does so out of exceeding love and has every intention of killing herself after she succeeds in their deaths. When she sees schoolteacher approaching her mother-in-law’s home after Sethe has run from Sweet Home—the plantation schoolteacher oversees—she reacts reflexively: “Little hummingbirds stuck their needled beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew” (Morrison 162). This reference to hummingbirds and flying can equate to freedom. With the death of each child, their souls will fly away to a safer place. Sethe tells Paul D, a slave who also toiled at Sweet Home, “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (163). It is important to note that Sethe has every intention of killing all of her children, as well as herself. Sethe acknowledges, “My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is” (203). Accepting Sethe’s admission as truthful makes her plight more empathetic than other characters this thesis explores in that the act is selfless; she gains nothing from it. In killing the entire family, she keeps the entire family intact in the afterlife. This scene draws heavily from

biographical accounts of Margaret Garner. When Baptist Minister P.S. Bassett interviews Margaret Garner about the murder of her daughter, “[s]he alludes to the child killed as being free from all trouble and sorrow with a degree of satisfaction that almost chills the blood in one’s veins. Yet, she evidently possesses all the passionate tenderness of a mother’s love” (Kigel n.p.). The tenderness Sethe displays toward her children is evident in the care she takes to keep Denver safe when making her way to 124 Bluestone Road, after her escape from Sweet Home.

Sethe’s act immediately calls to mind Euripides’ tragic mother, Medea. While Sethe does share some similarities with Euripides’ Medea, Sethe’s goal is single-sighted—save her children—while Medea’s is not. Medea’s goal is two-fold. She does kill her children because she worries about the future they will have to face as fugitives. If this were the only reason for killing her children, the term “altruistic filicide” would be an apt fit. However, unlike Garner and her fictional counterpart, Sethe, Medea also kills her children because she wishes to hurt their father. This type of child murder is referred to as spouse revenge filicide. “Spouse (partner) revenge filicide, also known as the Medea syndrome [occurs when] an angry, vindictive parent kills one or more children to cause the other parent extreme psychological pain” (Friedman et al 789). Sethe, unlike Medea, has no thoughts of her husband, Halle, who has done no wrong against her except not arrive at his mother’s home, when she commits her grievous act. She thinks only of her children’s future. When schoolteacher opens the door to the shed he sees, “[i]nside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (Morrison 148). One can imagine this is the site the slave master encountered when he came upon Garner and her living children and the dead two-year-old. Morrison’s story then veers from Sethe’s real-life counterpart. Schoolteacher spits, replaces his hat and leaves, seeing that “there was nothing there left to

claim. [...] The whole lot was lost now” (149). Sethe goes to jail for a few months, with the living infant daughter in tow, but she is not returned to slavery. Instead, she is released to live out her own personal hell at the scene of the crime. Morrison’s divergence is intentional, as her fiction strives to reach another goal. She explains:

Fiction, by definition, is distinct from fact. Presumably it’s the product of imagination—invention—and it claims the freedom to dispense with “what really happened” [...]. The crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot. (Morrison “The Site” 93)

This statement explains why Morrison wished to write a book where reality is just as questionable as the imaginary, because reality is not always truthful. Morrison returns Sethe to 124 Bluestone Road so “that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive” (Morrison *Beloved* 2). In doing this, *Beloved* grows beyond a story of altruistic filicide; it tells the story of a mother and a community striving to heal its past.

When Sethe commits filicide in the novel, it is not an original act, but harks back to other instances of maternal infanticide. When we finally discover that Sethe has killed her two-year-old daughter, we already know that Sethe’s own mother threw her children—of white paternity—overboard during her crossing of the Middle Passage. Nan, a Sweet Home slave of Sethe’s youth, tells Sethe of her mother:

She threw them all way but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she always threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe. (62)

Sethe admits that “[w]hat Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that

was and had been there all along” (62). This process of “rememory” will prove important later in this exploration. The realization that Beloved is not the first to die at the hands of a mother is paramount to an examination of infanticide and filicide in the work. Multiple instances of infanticide and filicide, outside of the murder of Morrison’s titular character, elevate the theme; the act is not meant to merely shock and awe the audience. Exploring child murder in *Beloved* does not so much determine why Sethe kills a child to “protect” her offspring from a future more horrific than death, but rather explores why a community accepts infanticide or filicide in one instance, but not in another. Ella tells Stamp Paid, “I ain’t got no friends take a handsaw to their children” (187) and spends the majority of *Beloved* marginalizing Sethe for her actions. Yet, Ella allows her own infant, the product of rape by a white man and his son, to die because she refuses to nurse it. Morrison writes, “[s]he had delivered but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by the lowest yet. It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working” (258). The difference between the two acts is that the community silently accepts Ella’s infanticide because the infant in question was a child of a white man, but does not accept filicide in Sethe’s case because the father is a black man, one of their own. So why does Sethe’s child return to haunt her while the others remain dead? If so many slaves before Sethe have killed their offspring, why are there not several ghosts haunting the pages of the novel? Morrison’s semi-omniscient characters provide clarity to this ambiguity through broken thoughts and conversations of atrocities that they can not bring themselves to discuss fully. The presence of Sethe’s “haint” (14) allows Morrison to explore shame, guilt and repression in ways that basing the novel solely against a historical context would not allow. Beloved’s possession of 124 Bluestone Road forces the community to face a past that literally haunts them. Paternity is important here. The fact that Beloved is born from members of their

own community gives them a history of their own, outside of white control. It is their past that they must make peace with, not the past of the white slave masters.

Part of the healing that comes with facing the past often involves having to answer to the one(s) you have harmed. Sethe must do that with Beloved. When asked by Bill Moyers if Morrison would make the same decision as Sethe when faced with such a dilemma, she states that “the character of Beloved enters because I couldn’t answer that” (“Toni”). She goes on to explain:

[T]he only person I felt who had the right to ask her that question was the child [Sethe] killed. [...] And she can ask her: “What did you do that for? Who are you talking about? This is better? What do you know?” Because I just—it was, for me, an impossible decision. Someone gave me the line for it at one time, which I have found useful, is that it was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it. (“Toni”)

Morrison bravely explores an action that no other human should have the right to judge unless he or she has lived through the same situation. Truly, Beloved is the only entity that should have a right to judge, since she is the sole victim. Even though Sethe asserts that these actions were done out of love and that “her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side forever” (Morrison *Beloved* 241), no character in the book has taken pity on her for the last eighteen years, and they do judge her, quite harshly. When Paul D finally discovers Sethe’s dark past, his condemnation is severe. Sethe attempts to justify the extremity of her actions:

No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, feetless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter’s private parts, soiled her daughter’s thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon. (261)

Sethe has experienced and witnessed unimaginable horrors. As such, she sees her actions as keeping her children safe, which emphasizes once again that she believes there are fates worse than death. At the time, Paul D can not understand because he can not fact his own troubled past.

Although Morrison admits she can not condemn or confirm Sethe's decision, she is fascinated with an incident that seems to her, "at least on the surface, very noble, you know, in that old fashioned sense, noble things, generous, wide-spirited, love beyond the call of" a traditional type of female (Taylor-Guthrie 208). In an interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison states: "That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied. She would not see them suffer" (207). Sethe explains that, "if I hadn't killed her [Beloved] she should have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (Morrison *Beloved* 200). Her statement conveys profound meaning and offers the best defense to Sethe's seemingly depraved act. There is a difference between dying a physical death—the blessing she believes she was able to bequeath to her daughter—and remaining alive in body to die figuratively in the soul—something that would have happened if her family had returned to Sweet Home, something that we see happen to Baby Suggs. Nevertheless, Paul D leaves her, telling her that her "love is too thick," that "[w]hat she did was wrong" and that "[t]here must have been some other way" (164, 168, 203). Many in the community agree with Paul D and condemn Sethe for her actions. Ella, once Sethe's liberator, now shuns her, like the rest of the community, even though she has committed infanticide herself. Morrison sheds light on the reaction of the community in a 2012 talk entitled, "Goodness, Altruism, and the Literary Imagination," she gave at Harvard University. The talk responded to the Pennsylvania shooting of five female students by Charles Roberts. Her comments fittingly describe the community's response to Sethe's actions in *Beloved*. "What

intrigues [Morrison]—as it has intrigued many others—is the community’s response, which was characterized by both silence and, in Morrison’s words, ‘the shock of forgiveness’” (Pederson 71). Forgiveness does not come easy for this community, nor for Sethe herself. After she commits her crime she does not ask for forgiveness and does not appear to be outwardly repentant of her actions. By not acknowledging Sethe’s crime, or her existence for that matter, the community’s purpose is two-fold. First, they do not have to choose to forgive a prideful woman; second, and more importantly, they do not have to recognize the action, which could force them to recognize their own past. This seems to be the same reason Sethe does not ask for their forgiveness. To ask would be to accept her actions as a wrong-doing and that is not something she is willing to do. As such, the goal of keeping the past buried is a communal endeavor. Before healing occurs they must work together to bring the past to light so they can exorcise it and move forward.

This act of not wanting to remember is prevalent in *Beloved*. Sethe continually speaks of her “rememory” and of things she has forgotten and/or does not want to remember. Now that her sons have run away, Baby Suggs has died, and her husband has never arrived, Sethe makes it her life’s mission to care for her one remaining child, Denver. The bulk of that responsibility requires her to protect Denver from her past. Morrison writes, “[a]s for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (Morrison *Beloved* 41). When memories attempt to overtake her, she pleads with them to stay away. Sethe “shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you?” (70). Baby Suggs, like Sethe flees from thoughts of the past. Baby Suggs’ hardships have turned her into a cynic with no

desire to reminisce about all that she has lost, including all but one of her children. “What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (23). At one point, she attempts to heal the collective community in the Clearing by urging them to love every piece of their bodies. Her efforts essentially fail, however, because she does not urge them to connect with a past that connects them, only with their present, individual selves. “Unfortunately, she cannot imagine a communal love. [...] Unable to combine the possibilities of the human soul, the harmful and the loving, the suffering and the joyful, into a whole meaning, she finally surrenders to the lure of fragmentation” (Cowan-Barbetti n.p). She eventually takes to bed and succumbs to death because she can not accept the white man’s ability to “come into her yard” and take everything, nor can she condone or condemn Sethe’s “rough choice” (Morrison *Beloved* 180). “Baby Suggs cannot imagine using the sorrow of her people to guide them to a spiritual freedom. She lies dying, distracted only by gazing at pieces of color, abstract color without meaning and applied to no living thing” (Cowan-Barbetti n.p). Her demise symbolizes the slow death of the human spirit that occurs when past traumas consume the imagination and creative possibility of the present.

Like Sethe and Baby Suggs, Paul D also refuses to deal with a past that haunts him. He repeatedly returns to the “tobacco tin lodged in his chest” to lock away memories that he has no intention of verbally sharing with another soul (Morrison *Beloved* 113). Because of his experiences, he has turned into a hardened man by the time he reunites with Sethe:

It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open. (113)

The assertion that nothing would pry open his tin heart suggests a secrecy of the past, an unwillingness to address it, and a simultaneous, almost subconscious, unwillingness to let it go. Unfortunately, for the characters in *Beloved*, this inability to face the past prevents them from allowing any hope for a stable future. Sethe explains, “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (42). This constant fight to allow the past to spill over into the present stagnates the present and prevents any character’s happiness. Because Paul D is not able to come to terms with what he perceives to be the wrongness of her decision, he abandons Sethe, like the rest of the community. It could be argued that Baby Suggs, Ella, Stamps Paid and Paul D project the horrors of their past onto Sethe and allow her to carry the burden alone. By confining her to her home with no friends and little family, they protect themselves from a past that they have compartmentalized inside themselves to survive. Morrison states, “There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course remembering it in a manner than can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 248). Morrison’s characters suppress discussions of the past which prevents healing in the present. She explains:

They don’t want to talk, they don’t want to remember, they don’t want to say it because they are afraid of it—which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they’re two, and three, and four [...]. The collective sharing of that information heals the individual—and the collective. (248)

Until they are able to forgive Sethe for her transgression, which means having open and honest conversations about the past, they will remain divided and infirm. The return of *Beloved*, however, reminds them that the past creates the present. They are connected to their past and to others who share a common past in ways that control their present sense of self and community.

Before the community is able to heal, they must accept Sethe’s past actions, as she herself must also accept them, and stop withholding forgiveness. The problem is, as Morrison

suggests, that the community might agree that killing Beloved was “the right thing to do, but [Sethe] had no right to do it” (“Toni”). Ella tells Stamp Paid, “What’s fair ain’t necessarily right. You can’t up and kill your child” (256). While we may be able to look at the treatment Sethe experienced at Sweet Home and understand why she thought death for her children may have been more loving than having them face the punishment befitting a runaway, one must also keep in mind that Paul D, Baby Suggs, Nan, Hallie, Sixo and Ella all experienced horrors of their own. Baby Suggs is repeatedly knocked to the ground in front of her children, once so hard it fractures her hip; she never walks without difficulty again. Paul D is forced to wear an iron collar, with three protruding spikes so he can not lay down. His hands bound behind his back and a bolt of iron is secured inside his mouth like a horse bit so he can not swallow. Paul D notes that even the rooster at Sweet Home has more dignity than a man enduring a slave’s life. Nan, a slave who is missing a portion of her arm for hellish reasons unknown, is forced to nurse white children before she feeds her own and other black slave children. Sixo’s feet are set on fire in an attempt to burn him alive before he is eventually shot. Ella’s “puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by a father and son, who she called “the lowest yet” (255). Ultimately, this brings her to adopting the motto of do not love “anything too much” (Morrison). *All* of them “understood Sethe’s rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it” (256). Yet, Ella speaks for the community when she labels Sethe’s actions as “prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself too complicated” (256). Morrison explains the community’s reactions:

They abandon her because of what they felt was her pride. Her statement about what is valuable to her—in a sense it damns what they think is valuable to them. They have had losses too. In her unwillingness to apologize or bend.... She would kill her child again is what they know. This is what separates her from the rest of the community. (Taylor-Guthrie 252)

If, at any time, Sethe had asked the community for help, her current circumstances would have been different. Even Denver, Sethe's last remaining child, is afraid of her own mother because she believes that Sethe feels she has a right to decide which child lives and dies. She states, "All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. [...] Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children" (Morrison 205). The fact that Denver, in her innocence, wonders why Sethe thinks it is "all right" for mothers to kill their children suggests a deep-seated communal fear that every former slave teeters on a madness that could mean life and death for others around them.

Ultimately, judgement is cast by the very daughter who succumbed to death at the hand of her mother. Beloved haunts Sethe initially in spirit and, eventually, fights her way back from the grave to reclaim corporeal form to make her mother "pay for it" (250). Beloved steps back into Sethe's life as Sethe is walking home from the carnival with Paul D and Denver. The trio sees a woman sitting on a stump, fittingly dressed in all black, the color of mourning. "When Beloved's flesh-and-blood manifestation shows up at Sethe's house one day—no lines on her palms and no history to speak of—her presence seems as ordinary as an afternoon visit from the local preacher" (Taylor-Guthrie 242). The fact that she has "no history to speak of" suggests that Beloved is more than a young woman with a singular history; she functions on multiple levels, as a child who seeks to understand her death and as a symbol of a community who can not come to terms with the horrors of their own pasts. Her past is their past. She "has come back as a young woman looking to reclaim her past" (Taylor-Guthrie 242). As she is synonymous with community, her healing will bring about their healing, including Sethe's. Sethe does not immediately accept Beloved as her dead child returned-to-life on a conscious level, however, evidence does exist that she has some awareness of the nature of Beloved's true existence. When

Sethe first encounters the woman, her “bladder was filled to capacity” (Morrison 50). Her need to relieve herself is so sudden and overwhelming that she does not make it to the outhouse, instead she relieves herself in the yard. Although Sethe’s cognition does not outwardly accept this woman as her dead daughter, her body, on some level, does and it reacts with all the shock that one might experience upon seeing her child returned from the dead. To Paul D’s surprise, Sethe allows Beloved to move into her home without question. We eventually come to see this act as a step in Sethe’s healing process. She must accept her past actions and the repercussions of those actions before having any sort of meaningful relationship with the living.

We see similar strategies taken by other authors who incorporate specters to ask questions of the living and force them to face past transgressions of infanticide and filicide in other American works. As previously discussed, in *Desire Under the Elms*, Eugene O’Neill’s ethereal character Maw convinces Eben and his stepmother, Abbie, to commit their sin as pay back to Ephraim for the life he forced upon her. In each instance, an outside, supernatural force, must intervene to expose the horror of the crime. In Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark*, which I will address later in this thesis, three ghostly marauders relentlessly pursue the protagonist, Culla Holme, in efforts to force him to accept responsibility and face retribution for the attempted murder of his son. In Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*, also to be discussed, evidence alludes to Vince’s ethereal nature. Ignored by the entire family until the conclusion, Vince functions to ask questions, to find out what has occurred, and finally to uncover an infant’s murder.

The past haunts the future literally and figuratively in *Beloved*, as it does in all works in this thesis. Morrison’s writes of this occurrence, “[t]he past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again” (qtd. In Taylor-Guthrie 241). As such,

“the purpose of making [Beloved] real is making history possible, making memory real—somebody walks in the door and sits down at the table so you have to think about it, whatever they may be” (249). Beloved’s presence eventually brings peace to Sethe and unites a community. This only occurs after Beloved physically attempts to strangle her mother and, when unsuccessful at that, drives her mother to the brink of insanity. While Beloved returns to claim a mother’s love that was lost when Sethe takes her life, she also harbors a great deal of resentment toward the woman who took her life. We must remember that Beloved is herself fractured and tormented. “[A] passage in which she plucks a tooth from her mouth and feels as if her head, arms, legs will ‘fly apart’ portrays a fractured entity” (Cowan-Barbetti n.p.). At times Beloved is the loving daughter, at others she is a vengeful terror. The body of the Beloved that returns eighteen years after her murder is that of a young woman, but the mind that inhabits the body is that of a two-year-old. Like any two-year-old, Beloved experiences temper tantrums and she lashes out. Her maturity of body now affords her the strength to protect herself, as well as seek vengeance, against the woman who victimized her previous incarnation, that of a defenseless child. Her presence also functions to punish Sethe. Sethe almost loses her life and her sanity during the punishment phase of her relationship with Beloved; yet, it is necessary if she is to move forward. Beloved’s return allows Sethe to fully experience the guilt she has harbored since the Misery. Her inability to address her actions or deal with her feelings in a healthy manner has isolated the family, has driven her sons from home, has caused, in part, Baby Suggs’ premature death—she does kill Baby Suggs’ granddaughter—and has quarantined the only living daughter she has remaining. Beloved’s return gives Sethe the opportunity to come to terms with all of the things that went wrong after her escape from Sweet Home and to make peace with a past that destroyed her chances of happiness in the present.

Beloved explores, then, the fracturing of a community *and* the path taken to heal it. The story offers “hope for a new community, in which all stories of its people unite in song to raise them out of an infernal, fractured world” (Cowan-Barbetti n.p.). Paul D’s chain-gang image functions well here as an adequate metaphor for the need for communal remembrance. The men’s effort to free themselves from the mud is a group endeavor, no man can free himself alone because he shares a literal, and figurative, bond with the man next to him. Morrison writes, “[f]or one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none” (Morrison 110). Claire

Cowan-Barbetti notes:

This image reveals that the experiences of suffering and slavery—the chain that binds Sethe and the community of blacks around her— must be used, transformed by the imagination into meaningful story, if they are to be spiritually free. If, however, the chain becomes fragmented, its links broken, if memories are refused form in the scope of community—as *Beloved*'s spectral presence portends— then the vision of true freedom cannot be realized. (n.p.)

These men find a path for escape *together* only then to be locked inside a mental prison of their own making. The goal then is not only to free oneself physically, but to free one’s self mentally as well. This freedom of body and spirit is not just for the benefit of the individual, but also for the well-being of the community as a whole.

In the final scenes, Sethe receives redemption, along with the community. Ella realizes that while she can not undo the past, it a burden to leave “to leave behind” but should be remembered (Morrison 256). She travels to Sethe’s house with other women from the community—the same women who failed to sound the alarm of the four, white horsemen eighteen years earlier—to help with the exorcism of the haunting (256). “As they arrive at 124, the women witness an image of themselves eighteen years in the past at the jubilant feast Baby Suggs had the day before the Misery. [...] At this moment, however, a moment bearing witness

for both past and present, they sound the warning” (Cowan-Barbetti n.p.). Here, like the men on the chain-gang, these women find freedom together; they are healed together.

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

Sethe has been reborn and is given a second opportunity to make the appropriate decision. She realizes that her protective actions should have been directed toward schoolteacher, the persecutor, not her children, the persecuted. When she mistakes Mr. Bodkin on his wagon for schoolteacher, she rushes from the porch and attempts to stab *him*, not her children, with an icepick. In witnessing this scene of matriarchal protection, Beloved finds assurance that she is loved. Morrison describes, “[s]tanding alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling” (262). She then disappears. A little boy later reports seeing a nude female in the woods, with fish in her hair. This illusion suggests that Beloved has returned to the waters which initially gave birth to her reanimated self; the past returns to the deep waters of memory. Sethe is finally able to grieve for the daughter, husband, mother-in-law and sons that she has lost through the years. “Sethe is left with a broad expanse of the deep waters of her psyche sounded and open to her. She must now make sense of her thoughts and her memories, give them a rhythm and a tide, so she may be whole again—not empty” (Cowan-Barbetti n.p.). Even Paul D returns to Sethe’s home to nurse her through her grief, a symbol of communal reunification. He seeks “to put his story next to hers” (Morrison 273). Finally, the man who has spent much of his life being homeless finds a home at 124 Bluestone Road. While Beloved *is* Sethe’s deceased daughter, she is more. She represents a past that will not die until it is acknowledged. When Paul D asks Denver, “[y]ou

think she sure 'nough your sister?" Denver responds, "At times. At times I think she was—
more" (266). Truly, Beloved is more than a two-year-old grieving child who has returned to her
mother. She is a vessel of the town's collective memory and communal healing.

V.

Return of Repressed Culpability: An Investigation of Infanticide and Hallucination in Sam
Shepard's *Buried Child*

“We might end up crazy. Like my husband. You can see it in his eyes. You can see the madness almost oozing out.”

Halie, Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

In 1984, John Ditsky worked to clear a space in literary criticism for the study of child murder in modern drama. His brief essay covers a wide variety of dramas that deal with the theme of child murder. In the final pages of this piece, Ditsky makes a sweeping declaration that “[c]learly, child-sacrifice is the measure of the extremity of the situation the dramatic parents find themselves in, and of the need for a radical excision of all chance for some sort of futurity for their relationship in favour of achieving reconciliation in the here and now” (Ditsky 9). Since its publication, Ditsky's claim has been exposed to harsh criticism. Peter Hays responds to John Ditsky's work about child sacrifice in modern drama with apprehension. Hays' piece examines the relationship between the usage of child murder and incest as tropes within a play and popular culture. He aptly concludes that Edward Albee, Eugene O'Neill, and Sam Shepard “have used child murder and incest to reach us through drama, the literary medium that depends on public exposure, to show us the perversion of our values, how we kill what is best in us, and thus destroy our future” (Hays 447). In Hays' piece, he also interprets the claim of Ditsky's essay “that characters in drama sacrifice their children, their future, in an attempt to preserve their

present” (Hays 434). While this is an oversimplification of Ditsky’s thoughts, Hays does pinpoint a vital flaw in Ditsky’s argument. Hays states, “[b]y trying to fit all Western drama into his schema, Ditsky creates a Procrustean bed that holds some truth but cuts off more” (434). By quickly placing all modern dramas in one category, the meanings that can be derived from these works are extremely limited.

To further Hays’ point, not only is it limiting to try and fit all child-murder into this narrow category, it is also impractical. For example, in *Beloved* it is nonsensical to suggest that Sethe killed her child to preserve her present; her present is forever altered after this impassioned maternal decision. Sethe commits this act to prevent her daughter from dealing with the same fate that she has endured. This, as I have argued, is an altruistic filicide. In many ways, O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* shows that Ditsky’s main claim has long been unfounded. While Abbie does think that ridding herself of the child will convince Eben to stay with her—or preserve her present—we must not forget that she also does so to exact revenge on Ephraim. I provide these two examples to show that it is simplistic to suggest that characters who kill their children in modern dramas do so only to preserve their present. Ditsky’s claim, however, can be applied generally to both Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* and Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*. As explored earlier, Culla attempts to passively allow his child to die to preserve his present. He fears what society will think of his relationship with Rinthy. He acts out of distress, in a desperate attempt to maintain his and Rinthy’s façade of normalcy. More extensively, in Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*, a play in which the child *seems* to live, the motivations and actions of the characters are unclear. Did Dodge kill Tilden and Halie’s son, so many years prior to the events of this play, to preserve his idea of normalcy—a life where his wife and his son are loyal to him? At the onset of the play, Shepard’s Dodge struggles with alcoholism, terminal sickness, and sleep deprivation.

The narration is unreliable among all characters because the events in the play are filtered through Dodge's mind. I will argue that Vince—like Beloved, Maw, and the Marauders—is a specter. His existence, along with Shelly's, is rooted only in the hallucination of an old, dying, guilty man's dreaming mind.

While the characters in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* are filtered through Dodge's dreaming mind, the first act presents a Dodge who is still slightly aware of his surroundings. Dodge appears to float in and out of consciousness, providing us with a distorted view of reality that makes it difficult to discern what is real from what is fake. Dodge is essentially an unreliable narrator. As the play commences, Shepard describes Dodge as a "very thin and sickly looking" man "in his late seventies" (Shepard 1.1). Dodge seems disoriented; as he and Halie talk, it is apparent that he has forgotten many key details of his current situation. He struggles, off and on, with "coughing [that] gradually builds" (1.1). He is a prideful man who attempts to keep these coughing fits, signs of his frailty, hidden from his wife, Halie. When she hears Dodge's coughing fits, she nags him and encourages him to take a pill. While he refuses to take these pills, he *is* willing to drink heavily. The drinking, on top of his serious illness, seem to be the source of Dodge's confusion. He is completely unaware that his son, Tilden, has moved back home due to trouble in New Mexico. When Tilden appears, the two get into a multitude of inane arguments. Amid these arguments, Dodge begins telling a nonsensical story about Pee Wee Reese and he begins to nod off. This is a key moment in the play, signaled by peculiar stage directions. Here, the stage directions state "*Dodge falls into a deep sleep, snoring. Tilden just sits staring at him for a while. Slowly he leans toward the sofa, checking to see if Dodge is well asleep*" (1.1). To test this, Tilden begins to pile the very corn husks that he and his father have been arguing about on top of the old man. This signals just how deep of a sleep Dodge has fallen into. To emphasize

this, Bradley then comes in and gives Dodge the haircut he has been dreading. The stage directions for Act Two state, “[Dodge’s] hair is cut extremely short and in places the scalp is cut and bleeding” (1.1). Dodge has slept through the violent haircut Bradley has given him. It is important to keep in mind how adamantly against this haircut Dodge seems to be before he dozes off. He scorns Halie, “[y]ou tell Bradley that if he shows up here with those clippers, I’ll separate him from his manhood!” (1.1) When she does not acknowledge him, he again says “[y]ou tell him! Last time he left me near bald! And I wasn’t even awake!” (1.1) This not only indicates that Dodge must have been in a level of sleep that is atypical for a healthy person, but also that this type of deep sleep is a common occurrence for him now that he is sick. Viewers must question what is real and what is false beginning from the moment Dodge “wakes up” at the beginning of Act Two; the sequence of events that follows act one can only be reasonably explained by the hallucinations of a dying man.

The first act is the *only* piece of the play that can be considered in the realm of the real; albeit, the events must still be heavily filtered through Dodge’s ailing mind. In the second act, Dodge’s alleged grandson, Vince, appears as if out of nowhere with his girlfriend Shelley. These two characters are complete fabrications of Dodge’s disintegrating mind; while the other characters in the play—Halie, Tilden, and Dewis—do exist and are likely interacting with Dodge in some way that is spurring his perceived reality during the events of the play. The interactions between those characters that *do* exist are filtered through Dodge’s mind, while the interactions between those characters that do not exist are hallucinated entirely. The hallucinations that Dodge experiences throughout the rest of the play connect with many of the insecurities viewers are bombarded with in Act One. While this seems to be a unique way to interpret the play, in terms of novelty to literary criticism, it seems Shepard begs us to consider that Dodge is

fabricating the events that occur after Act One. According to Ditsky, this tactic is commonly used in modern drama. He states, “[i]n any event, children in modern drama generally — as well as older theatre — often do not truly exist except as a dramatization of the relationship between their parents, or between the ultimate significances of their parents' existences” (Ditsky 4). The events that occur seem to be nebulous; each character is confused and this creates a disorienting effect on the audience. For this reason, I will suggest that Dodge imagines that he hears and sees Vince and Shelly. Further, Vince *is* the buried child that Dodge drowned so many years ago. The consequences of this reading are monumental because this changes the way we experience the play. If Dodge truly did drown his grandson in the backyard, and Vince is simply a hallucination of an old man’s dying mind, then the sin of child murder is coming back to haunt him in the form of a realistic pair of specters.

Shepard indicates that Dodge has conjured Vince in his hallucinatory state because as Dodge disintegrates mentally, so does Vince, linking the two intently together. At first, Vince is excited to see his family after a lengthy amount of time. He seems like a normal adult with a healthy relationship. By the end of the play, he has begun drinking just like his grandfather, Dodge. Vince reflects Dodge and the meaning of this is two-fold. First, Dodge imagines Vince as a happy, normal individual who spirals into a wretched man by the end because he believes this is the impact he had on his grandchild—one so negative that Vince deteriorates in front of Dodge’s very eyes. This is a symbolic manifestation of the harm Dodge has inflicted upon his family, flashing before his eyes at the end of his life. The second piece to this dual meaning hallucination is Dodge’s own deterioration. Vince also reflects Dodge’s worsening state. As Dodge’s drinking gets worse, so does Vince’s behavior. His mental state has deteriorated to a point where he is no longer concerned with filtering his thoughts as they come out of his mouth.

Typically, he avoids the subject of the sin he committed. The entire family does. However, when he wakes up in the second act with these hallucinations that are manifesting from his guilt, he finds that he can not keep his secrets bottled up anymore. He eventually states, after Tilden draws it out of him: “I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it. There was no struggle. No noise. Life just left it” (2.1). Whether Tilden truly continues to incessantly bring up the murdered child, or Dodge hallucinates Tilden’s fixation on the murdered child, is beside the point in this instance. Either way, Tilden—or the idea of Tilden—has caused Dodge to admit to his crime.

Benjamin Oipari, alternatively, argues that the abstruse nature of the events in the play can be explained by Halie. Oipari’s explanation begins with a focus on each character’s description of Ansel—Halie and Doge’s late son. Oipari acknowledges “the discrepancy among family members over Ansel’s legacy” and suggests that, because of this, “we cannot be sure of Halie’s truthfulness” (Oipari 128). His overall claim, that “even as the system crumbles, Halie tries desperately to perpetuate the myth of a healthy family,” ties in with Ditsky’s claim that characters in modern drama strive to preserve their present. However, this claim singularly solves the issue of Halie’s “myth” (128). It does not provide a solution to the key dilemma: we can not be sure of *anyone’s* truthfulness in this play. For this reason, we must think of a solution which explains the dreamlike confusion and strange behaviors *each* character enacts during the second and third act. Focusing on Halie alone assumes that Tilden, Vince, Shelly, Dewis, and Dodge are simply reacting to her strange behavior. This is too simple, as each character, except Shelly and Dewis, presents instances of madness. Considering Dodge’s waning mental state as a filter for these perplexing scenes provides a panacea.

Opipari relies heavily on one particular quote from Halie to support his argument that she is fabricating the past to maintain the façade of a normal family. In the final act, Halie states:

[t]here wasn't a mean bone in his body. Everybody loved Vincent. Everyone. He was the perfect baby. So pink and perfect. [...] He used to sing in his sleep. He'd sing. In the middle of the night. The sweetest voice. Like an angel. (*She stops for a moment.*) I used to lie awake listening to it. I used to lie awake thinking it was all right if I died. Because Vincent was an angel. A guardian angel. He'd watch over us. He'd watch over all of us. He would see to it that no harm would come. (3.1)

Opipari's dependence on Halie's only description of Ansel as proof is problematic because, by focusing only on this one passage, he ignores the evidence that the rest of the play has to offer. Here, Halie remembers Vince as an innocent child who resembles, in voice and conduct, "an angel" (3.1). Halie's comparison, in this moment of vulnerable reminiscence, is laden with sad terms and past tense verbs. Using an overwhelming amount of past tense words and phrases including "wasn't," "was," "loved," and "used to" suggests she is referring to a person who has passed away. Further, her statement that "Vincent was an angel. A guardian angel" who would "watch over all of [the family]" and "see to it that no harm would come" suggests, at the very least, that she believes he is now in heaven (3.1). Immediately prior to Halie's proclamation of Vincent's innocence included above, she states "He was the sweetest little boy! There was no indication" just before the following stage direction provides a break in her comment: "*(Dewis drops the roses beside the wooden leg at the foot of the staircase then escorts Halie quickly up the stairs. Halie keeps looking back at Vince as they climb the stairs)*" (3.1). This break, like an enjambment, forces us to focus on Halie's ambiguous phrase "There was no indication" (3.1). She picks up again with the proclamation detailed above, beginning with "There wasn't a mean bone in his body" (3.1). While it might seem as if she is referring to Vince's angry mental state at this current moment in the play once she begins speaking again, this is difficult to

comprehend. Instead, her comment that “[t]here was no indication” might refer to Dodge’s sin. She believes there was no indication why he would commit such a heinous act on an innocent child. He does this because of the betrayal he feels from his wife’s incestuous relationship with their son; however, she is in denial about her own sin.

As I have mentioned, Halie is not the only one with a conflicting memory of Vince. It seems that none of Vince’s family can remember him. At least, one character does not seem to remember him at the same time as another character. Tilden’s memory of his own son is intermittent and, like Halie, the language he uses to reflect on his son is burdened with sadness. He never acknowledges Vince as the son that Dodge drowned and buried, he simply remarks that Vince’s face looks familiar. Instead, when Vince first sees his father, he asks, “Dad? What’re you doing there?” (2.1) Shelly and Dodge both chime in before Vince speaks again to his father, who has not replied. He states: “I’m Vince. I’m Vince.” The stage direction following the delivery of this line reads “(*Tilden stares at Vince then looks at Dodge then turns to Shelly*)” (2.1) Tilden is confused; in this moment, he does not remember Vince. This is because Vince never existed in this mature form. Tilden shakes off Vince’s remarks and states, after a pause, “I picked these carrots. If anybody wants any carrots, I picked ‘em” (2.1). Here, he comments on the only thing he feels he has control over in this situation. When Shelly asks if he is Vince’s father, Tilden replies “Vince?” (2.1). Shelly gets frustrated and screams, “[t]his is supposed to be your son! Is he your son? DO you recognize him? I’m just along for the ride here. I thought everybody knew each other!” (2.1) In this moment, Tilden speaks the powerful truth: “I had a son once but we buried him” (2.1). Dodge yells, “You shut up about that! You don’t know anything about that!” (2.1) Each and every time that Tilden approaches the subject of his child’s murder, Dodge attacks him. Later in act two, when Shelly asks again, “You really don’t

recognize him? Either one of you?” (2.1). Tilden finally admits, “I thought I recognized him. I thought I recognized something about him” (2.1). This is the *only* moment in the entire play that Tilden provides even the slightest inkling of recognition regarding Vince. Still, his words are haunting and seem to harken back to the dead child. When Shelly, with surprise, responds “[y]ou did?,” Tilden states, “I thought I saw a face inside his face” (2.1). This brings us to draw yet another connection between Vince and Tilden’s dead child. Shelly only emphasizes this point when she says “[w]ell it was probably that you saw what he used to look like. You haven’t seen him for six years” (2.1). While she is off on the timeline, his confused response, “I haven’t?” shows that this does not ring a bell for Tilden at all.

Tilden’s characterization appears to fit that of a man who is still broken from the loss of his son and the rejection of his mother’s, albeit inappropriate, love. Tilden’s disturbing behavior is consistent through all acts of the play, even the first act, which, as noted, presented events that were closely linked with reality. Tilden’s hopeless behavior in the final two acts, then, is a projection of Dodge’s perception of Tilden. In Act Two, Tilden begins rambling about a “[l]ittle baby. [...] So small that nobody could find it” (2.1). He alludes to the “cops” who apparently did get involved in the case of this missing child, yet they were never able to find “it” (2.1). The stage directions indicate that Dodge is fighting to stop Tilden from admitting the truth here. Dodge is in the middle of the coughing fit because he is getting worked up; he becomes increasingly weaker as Tilden gets closer to telling the truth. At one point, Dodge falls to the floor and Shelly stands up to help him. Tilden “*firmly push[es] her back down on the stool*” and says “Don’t touch him” (2.1). Tilden is determined; Dodge’s guilt is manifesting and he can not keep his secrets bottled up anymore. However, he still projects this involved scene where Tilden is to blame for divulging the information. Interestingly, Dodge’s biggest concern in this scene

surfaces when he yells “Tilden! Don’t tell her anything! She’s an outsider!” (2.1). It seems that Dodge is most ashamed of what this secret will do to his family’s image, instead of the sin itself. Returning to Ditsky’s claim, then, we must determine both the playwright’s motivation for the inclusion of this act and what the playwright perceives as Dodge’s motivation for this sinful act. When a father kills his grandson—a child made from an incestuous relationship between his wife and his son—the possible motivations for the act are interminable. Revenge, jealousy, betrayal, and shame are just a few of the many options. In this instance, the motivation does not seem to be a culmination of each of those feelings, instead, Dodge’s decision is rooted in his fear of shame. He must uphold the family’s name and not let it be smeared in the mud. Dodge does not show sadness, remorse, or anger when speaking about the child’s death. In the admission of his guilt, he simply states “I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it. There was no struggle. No noise. Life just left it” (2.1). When he likens the murder of his own grandson to killing the “runt of a litter,” he shows just how little emotion was involved in his decision (2.1).

Ditsky investigates the decision on the playwright’s part to include this act. He states, “[t]he child cannot carry the message very well, but the child can be the message — sometimes tellingly, often incomparably, even when (as is more usual) not in fact literally present” (Ditsky

4). Regarding Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*, Ditsky observes that:

the child is not "seen" until the last chilling moments of the play, when it is carried, a corpse, on — and offstage by Tilden; and yet prior allusions have established the child's significance clearly enough by then — a significance large enough to occupy the position of source of the drama's title. (4)

As mentioned previously, Ditsky’s overarching argument suggests that the inclusion of this child sacrifice serves as a symbolic representation of the parent’s wish to preserve his or her present.

At a cursory glance, that argument seems fitting in this scenario. Yet, as Hays points out when criticizing Ditsky's sweeping statement, Ditsky does fail to consider the other possible motivations for the inclusion of child-sacrifice. Dodge's projected shame, as it relates to this terrible secret, suggests that he longs for a life where he can at least pretend his wife and son are loyal to him. As Ditsky states:

Clearly, child-sacrifice is the measure of the extremity of the situation the dramatic parents find themselves in, and of the need for a radical excision of all chance for some sort of futurity for their relationship in favour of achieving reconciliation in the here and now. (9)

The plot of the tragedy relies on Dodge's unwillingness to share his shameful story with outsiders; his wish to keep the family's shameful sin a secret has caused the deterioration he is envisioning now.

In this familial drama, two characters stand out as the outsiders from whom Dodge wishes to keep this terrible secret. Father Dewis and Shelly are simply observers of the disturbing domestic situation at play. Shelly is introduced, at least physically, prior to Father Dewis. The stage directions describe Shelly as a girl of "*about nineteen, black hair, very beautiful*" (1.1). She is dressed starkly different from Vince, who is wearing cowboy boots and a plaid shirt; Shelly has on "*tight jeans, high heels, purple T-shirt and a short rabbit fur coat. Her makeup is exaggerated and her hair has been curled*" (1.1). This contrast illustrates that Vince's clothing choice is in line with his farming-class family, who live out in "[t]he Boondocks" (1.1). Shelly is perpetually confused by the selective memory of Vince's family members; at some moments, especially in Act Three once Vince has spun into what appears to be insanity, Tilden, Bradley, and Halie *do* acknowledge Vince. Shelly, an outsider looking in on this strange family dynamic, attempts to make sense of what is happening. Her presence acts as a projection of

Dodge's perception of how others outside of this town view him and his family, while Father Dewis provides Dodge's perception of how those in this town view the family's situation. When Shelly and Vince arrive, Halie has just left to eat lunch with Father Dewis. When he and Halie arrive back home, they join the family at an awkward and confusing moment; the key conversation of this scene, as it relates to Dodge's perception of how others view him, occurs between Shelly and Dewis—our only two outsiders. At the culmination of their argument, these two discuss hallucinations, which prompts the audience to recall that this entire play derives from a dying man's hallucinations. As Shelly panics about everyone's refusal to come to terms on *one* reality, Dewis states "[t]here's nothing to be afraid of. They're all good people. All righteous souls" (3.1). Shelly retorts "I'm not afraid!," as Dewis reminds her "[b]ut this is not your house. You have to have some respect" (3.1). Shelly states, with no exclamation, "[y]ou're the strangers here, not me," seemingly referring to their behavior as strange. Halie is fed up with Shelly once and for all, but Dewis begs her, "Halie, please. Let me handle this. I've had some experience" (3.1). The interaction that ensues between Dewis and Shelley marks the only meaningful interaction between these two outsiders. While Dewis is simply an outsider residing in town, Shelley has never experienced the town's oddities. As a resident, Dewis would be aware of the rumors swirling around about Dodge and Halie's family; however, Shelley previously had no idea. In their conversation, Dewis speaks from a place of prior knowledge and defense and Shelley speaks from a place of objectivity.

While Shelly's words and actions are manifestations of Dodge's hallucinations, she does appear to be the voice of reason in the play, as we find out from her significant conversation with Dewis. Her memory, as it relates to the events in the play, is never distorted. Shelly, who

becomes so frustrated that she is about to leave Vince here alone, comments one last time on the confusing nature of the day's events. She states:

You all say you don't remember Vince, okay, maybe you don't. [...] I really believed that when I walked through that door that the people who lived here would turn out to be the same people in my imagination. [...] But I don't recognize any of you. [...] Not even the slightest resemblance. (3.1)

Dewis' response to Shelly's outburst is chilling. He states, "[w]ell you can hardly blame others for not fulfilling your hallucination" (3.1). The possibility of hallucinations is introduced by one of the characters within the play. Shelly, who we have established as the voice of reason, states "[i]t was no hallucination! It was more like a prophecy" (3.1). Here, Shelly claims that her expectations of Vince's family came from Vince himself. Her usage of the term "prophecy" triggers the tenets of Greek Tragedy, wherein a tragic hero, who wishes to achieve some lofty goal, meets and is limited by human frailty, intervention of the gods (through oracles and prophets), or nature. In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, it might be difficult to pinpoint the tragic hero simply because the most obvious choice, Vince, might not actually exist. However, for the purposes of the prophecy Shelly speaks about, it seems that the prophecy for Vince's family has been altered in some way, by some external force, namely Dodge's madness.

Dodge's madness is creating a prophecy that is not in line with reality. As the hallucination begins to shatter at the end of the play, with Dodge's mind and body weakening further and further, Shelly continuously spits out phrases which relate to death and non-existence in a way that is unsettling. She screams at Halie "Don't you wanna know who I am? Don't you wanna know what I'm doing here! Standing in the middle of your house. I'm not dead!" After a bit more banter, Halie looks at Dewis and exclaims "Surprises, surprises! Did you have any idea we'd be returning to this?" Dewis's response suggests the possibility that he, also, had an idea, or

a “prophecy,” about the night’s events. He states, “Well, actually—,” and this response leads the audience to believe that he is about to say that he *did* have an idea that they would be returning to such a chaotic scene. Shelly responds, “I came here with your grandson for a little visit! A little innocent friendly visit.” To which Halie replies, with confusion, “My grandson? [...] This is getting a little far-fetched.” This almost comedic commentary taunts the audience with the notion that none of the events in the play are truly happening—at least not exactly how they are being presented. Later, Vince brings in the same strange diction that Shelly previously uses. In a fit of anger, after Halie remarks that his noisy destruction made everyone think a murderer was outside of the house, Vince yells “[a] murderer? No, no, no! How could I be a murderer when I don’t exist? A murderer is a living breathing person who takes the life and breath away from another living breathing person. That’s a murderer. You’ve got me mixed up with someone else” (3.1). The use of these phrases and definitions is useful when trying to identify the irony of this situation. Vince truly does not exist and he himself is commenting on that at this very moment. He defines what a person must be and reasons that he does not fit the bill, that he does not exist, that he is not living and breathing. Further, he insinuates with his final phrase that someone else in the house is a murderer. Considering that Vince’s actions are hallucinated by Dodge’s guilty mind, this is a form of self-accusation on Dodge’s part. Vince’s angry ramblings begins to confuse Dodge and his delusions begin falling apart at the seams quickly.

Dodge’s madness is creating a prophecy that is not in line with reality; he is unable to reconcile his own hallucinations with the present. This leads to the dream-like state of the chaotic world that continuously, and with increasing rapidity, depreciates around him. Halie states, in a moment that might reflect Dodge’s own hopelessness, “[w]hen you see the way things deteriorate before your very eyes. Everything running down the hill. It’s kind of silly to even

think about youth” (3.1). Dodge recalls of his deceased grandson, “[i]t wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be part of us” (2.1). This acknowledgement of the child’s wishes suggests that the reason for his hallucinations of Shelly and Vince provide a vision of the future that the child may have wanted but never could have. Shelly, acknowledging that the prophecy did not come true, confirms the miserable reality of the situation. Dodge further states, “[Halie] wanted me to believe in it. Even when everyone around us knew. Everyone. All our boys knew. Tilden knew.” Dodge could not indulge the wishes of Halie and Tilden because of his fear of embarrassment. He does not kill the child out of rage, betrayal, or revenge; he kills the child to hide the secret in hopes of maintaining normalcy. Bradley and Dodge similarly agree that they “don’t want the police in here. This is our home” (3.1). This mentality is the cause for the child’s death. Shelly harshly judges Bradley, and the entire family, when she states “Don’t you usually settle your affairs in private? Don’t you usually take them out in the dark? Out in the back?” (3.1). Once again, she is the voice of truth and reason. Dodge deals with his issues by disposing of them, and so does Bradley. Bradley, the reflection of Dodge’s true personality, the one with whom Dodge argues the most and the one whom he respects for staying around to take care of him, is the son that will carry on this tradition of secrecy to protect the family reputation. Shameful secrets, if they exist, will inevitably drive Bradley mad as well. In the end, Dodge’s madness and delusions subside with the occurrence of his death. His death is unnoticed by all characters, who are still arguing. Vince states, “Grandpa? Grandpa? When did you die?” (3.1). This seems to indicate that Vince, a character hallucinated by Dodge’s mind, has now begun to exist autonomously. However, the stage directions signal that, immediately after Dodge’s death is noticed by Vince, the lights begin to “fade imperceptibly” as occurs when one falls asleep or passes away (3.1). The final few exchanges

exist as Dodge's mind slowly passes into expiry. Vince's insanity, projected by Dodge, ends along with Dodge's life. The ending is hopeful, with crops beginning to grow again. The family's awful secret has been purged, albeit to characters who might have been existing only in the mind of a dying old man. The madness has perished.

VI.

A Trio of Guilt: An Examination of Child Murder and Damnation in Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*

"I wouldn't name him because if you cain't name something you cain't claim it. You cain't talk about it even. You cain't say what it is."

The Man in Black, Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*

American novelist Cormac McCarthy published his second novel, *Outer Dark*, in 1968 to critical acclaim *and* confusion. Some critics deem McCarthy's work nihilistic, while others fault him "for his increasingly dense style and sometimes arcane vocabulary" often accusing him of being a poor man's Faulkner (Arnold and Luce 4). William F. Shafer, however, praises the complexity of *Outer Dark* and asserts that it imaginatively "explores wide possibilities of human and natural evil, the perversity of social and individual psychology, the tension between the human mind and the natural world" (105). I agree with Shafer's analysis. What many critics deem as weakness in McCarthy's style can be viewed as innovation when exploring the text as something other than plot-driven prose. The vagueness of time, place, and dialect in McCarthy's Appalachian South is not accidental. Abstraction of these typical foundations of the novel suggest that meaning and purpose arise elsewhere. James R. Giles asserts, "*Outer Dark* seems to take place in some ambiguous physical-social space devoid of history" (21). His characters give the "impression of a universality"; they transcend the "intractable reality that surrounds us" (21).

In this regard, ending this thesis with a discussion of *Outer Dark*, infanticide and universality is appropriate. As we have seen in the previous works, women and men alike commit infanticide/filicide, people of different races commit infanticide/filicide, people of different socio-economic backgrounds commit infanticide/filicide; it is not an act that is relegated to a specific “type” of person or group. We have also seen that no matter an offender’s background, extreme guilt follows the act. No perpetrator escapes unscathed after he or she commits the act of child murder. In this thesis, guilt manifests in the form of madness and the appearance of the supernatural. Both of these features overtake the protagonist of *Outer Dark* in full force.

What stands out in *Outer Dark* more prominently than instances of infanticide and/or filicide in preceding works is the malevolence of the supernatural force that relentlessly pursues Culla and other characters in the text. Even in *Beloved*, when Sethe’s dead daughter attempts to strangle her, starve, her and drive her mad, we do not see the same level of terror that the ghostly “grim triune” elicits in the hearts of any man unfortunate enough to cross their path. This threesome appears at critical junctures in the text with the purpose of underscoring the extremity of consequence that occurs when a man refuses to accept the attempted murder of his child. As in previous works, *Outer Dark* does explore the role child murder plays in a family and community setting. Yet, no other work explores the fracturing of the psyche, as a result of the act, in such an extreme degree as McCarthy. Some critics assert that the marauders who pursue Culla are a manifestation of his fractured mind, as will be discussed in the next paragraph. I agree and want to push the implications of the interpretation further. When Culla loses his sense of self as a result of guilt, he unleashes a blight upon the community that forces others to pay for his crime. Because Culla is unable to accept or even acknowledge what he has done, he loses touch with reality and becomes the manifestation of the guilt he himself should feel. As such, he creates the

illusion of the trio of men pursuing him in his mind, when in reality, *he* is the one who hunts down and kills any man unlucky enough to cross his path and ask about his past.

The guilt that drives the narrative stems from Culla Holme's relationship with his sister. *Outer Dark* tells the story of Culla and Rinthy, siblings who have lost their parents for reasons unknown, who subsist on each other's companionship. At the outset, we discover that Rinthy carries "a nameless weight in her belly" (McCarthy 5). Because Rinthy awakens Culla from a nightmare in a bed they share, we assume he is the father. For several pages, the knowledge that they are related does not present an issue. Not until Culla speaks with the tinker does the truth of the situation come to light. When the tinker asks if one of Culla's "youngerns" is sick, Culla responds, "No. My sister" (2). The dialect, the poor nature of Culla and Rinthy's habitat, along with Culla's admission, "I ain't got no money" (7) immediately bring to mind stereotypes of uneducated, southern folk inbreeding. This novel, however, is not about inbreeding, nor is it about the Appalachian poor, it is about attempted infanticide and the consequences that accompany the decision to violate one's parental role. Once Culla returns to the shack, his sister asks, "[t]hat pedlar have ary cocoa? [...] I sure would admire to have me a cup of cocoa" (9). There is no anger about her pregnancy; there is only an innocent request for an indulgent treat. This suggests that no rape has been committed. The two have been thrust into a situation of mutual dependency; proximity has brought about this situation. Whatever has led to their coupling does not appear to be the point of the novel *or* the source of Culla's guilt.

Once Rinthy gives birth, Culla leaves his offspring in the woods to succumb to the elements because he fears a backlash. Culla believes that if news of their coupling becomes public knowledge, they could be hanged. Just as she took no issue with her pregnancy, Rinthy takes no issue with the parentage of her "chap." This again reminds us that incest is not of

primary significance in the novel. Rinthy tells the doctor, “I wasn’t ashamed” (161). She only takes issue with Culla once she learns that her child is not dead and that Culla has traded the child to the tinker (or so she believes). Culla’s fears that their lives will be in serious danger if anyone discovers their secret drives his actions and turns him into a somewhat callous individual. We first see this before Rinthy gives birth when she urges Culla to “fetch” the midwife. Culla responds, “I cain’t. She’d tell” (10). This forces Rinthy to give birth to the child without medical attention or comfort. While we may be tempted to accuse Culla of inhumanity here, we must remember that more than once in the novel, we come across men who have been hanged for lesser crimes. In fact, various townspeople talk about the meanness of the world. When the bee catcher learns that Culla is from Johnson County, he remarks “[t]hat’s supposed to be a mean place” (88). Culla’s fear of outsider reaction to their sin is understandable, albeit not forgivable. Several critics agree that, “Culla’s act is reprehensible, but his need to deny the child is understandable” (Arnold 47). Even the tinker, a man who, like Culla and Rinthy, exists in base conditions, refuses to accept that the child he has saved is the product of incest. When Rinthy tells him the truth, he is morally outraged and calls her a “Goddamn lyin bitch” (McCarthy 200). Even in a world full of murdering, grave-robbing, lynching, and boot-stealing, incest ranks among the worst of sins. The only thing worse than incest in McCarthy’s world appears to be murdering the product of an incestuous union—Culla’s crime. Culla’s act causes him to leave his home and wander the country-side, supposedly looking for his sister. We know this is not true since he leaves the homestead before his sister. In truth, Culla leaves because he can not endure knowing that he has killed his son. He also can not live with the fact that he has hurt the one person who has dependably offered him companionship throughout his life, something he seeks

but does not find in the rest of the novel. Once Culla leaves home, a seemingly maniacal force catches his scent and seeks to make his existence hell on earth.

This maniacal force takes the form of the “grim triune” and, in most scenes, damnation breaks loose when they are present. Of note, they always follow the path of Culla’s footsteps and arrive shortly after he has left a location. At first, their arrival can be difficult to place—because they are never formally introduced—until you understand McCarthy’s signal: italics. The use of italics in conjunction with their appearance occurs only when Culla is not present in the scene. Since the story is told from Culla and Rinthy’s points-of-view, these italicized scenes are beneficial to us. The scenes give insight into the action occurring after Culla’s departure. When Culla physically encounters the trio, which he does on two separate occasions, normal font ensues. This recognition is critical in formulating meaning. Why write about the threesome one way in Culla’s presence and another in his absence? Georg Guillemin “argues for a psychological reading whereby the events of *Outer Dark* are projections of Culla’s guilty conscience” (54). If we go with Guillemin’s psychological estimation, then the band of marauders do not exist on any physical plane of reality; rather, they are manifestations created and projected as flesh-and-blood entities by Culla’s fractured mind. They represent Culla’s constant guilt and torment him relentlessly. The fracture, of course, stems from the attempted murder of his nameless son. This interpretation has convincing merit; yet, we can not forget that this “force” causes great harm to many characters—even death to some. This suggests that the marauders are more than figments of Culla’s guilt; they must exist on some level of reality to inflict material harm. McCarthy labels his trio a “consubstantial monstrosity” and a “grim triune” (134). Such depictions signify that whatever they are and from wherever they hail, their presence

in and around Johnson County is far from positive. What their presence and meaning suggests is a topic for fierce debate among critics. Joshua Pederson notes:

In the roughly four-and-a-half decades since the book's publication, critics have come to no reliable consensus on the identity of the three killers who haunt the italicized portions of the text [...]. For Vereen Bell, they are "evil Magi." James Giles hedges, suggesting they seem "something other than human." William Schafer recalls Greek myth in naming them "crazed furies." Farrell O'Gorman calls them both "unholy" and "seemingly supernatural" but nonetheless links them to what he identifies as McCarthy's ongoing concern with prophetic messengers. Steven Frye sees them as "avatars of Satan". (104-105)

While evidence exists to support any one of these interpretations, my conclusion works the best within the framework of a discussion of child murder. The triune is a physical manifestation of Culla's guilt. Like Morrison's Sethe, Culla's guilt gives birth to this trio. He must exorcise them or forever be haunted. Before connecting this interpretation with a discussion of the other works in this thesis, however, exploring other possible interpretations of the trio as "avatars of Satan" and as "crazed furies" will work to strengthen my conclusion.

We are first introduced to the vigilantes on the opening page as they traverse the landscape in the afternoon sun, "their shadows" moving along the river as they stand in "silhouette against the sun" (McCarthy 1). They then drop "into a fold of blue shadow" until the sun sets as they continue to move "in shadow altogether which suited them very well" (1). As they set up camp, "their shapes [move] in a nameless black ballet" (1). McCarthy's opening description of this group consists of no less than five references to "shadow," "shape" and "silhouette." These intangible features emphasize the nameless and faceless aspect of the entities being described. This suggests an ever-present, immortal quality. McCarthy's language lends credence to this theory. Their duffels are "rugged," suggesting they've been travelling for some time. They cook with "whatever it was they had," suggesting they own few, if any, personal

belongings. They sleep “sprawled on the packed mud full clothed with their mouths gaped to the stars,” suggesting that nature provides their bedding and oversees their slumber. When they wake, they move “west along the river” (1). Of note, their rising in the east and travelling toward the west, simulates a movement toward death. This foreshadows their future actions. This group seems aimless and, at the same time, fixed on a destination. From this portrayal, one might surmise they exist on the fringes of the human imagination, becoming incarnate only when called forth by human depravity. In *Outer Dark*, it is Culla who opens this Pandora’s Box of sorts and unleashes a deadly gang of Nature’s soldiers to wreak havoc on the living.

When viewing the trio’s presence from Steven Frye’s perspective, strong evidence suggests that Culla’s sin has unleashed Satan’s evil onto the inhabitants of Johnson County and the surrounding areas. The leader of the group is partially clothed as a minister; however, something about his description appears to be askew. “He wore a shapeless and dusty suit of black linen that was small on him and his beard and hair were long and black and tangled” (99). Even though he “wore neither shirt nor collar,” this bearded man has a memorizing power over the crowd and is able to persuade them to “find the man that done it” (99). Here, “it” is the killing of old man Salter, an act we know has been committed by the very man who is inspiring the townspeople to find and lynch the killer. Furthermore, when the snake charmer hears a knock on his door and looks out, he wonders, “*And who is there? A minister?*” (134). Significantly, earlier that day, the old man tells Culla twice that he “wouldn’t turn Satan away for a drink” (122). Even as he is being disemboweled, the snake charmer appears to be stunned that a minister has committed such a crime. He articulates his final utterance as a confused question: “*Minister?*” (134). Later, when the trio comes across the tinker, the tinker is confused by their somewhat supernatural appearance. “The three men when they came might have risen from the

ground. The tinker could not account for them” (237). When Culla sits with the trio, the bearded man’s boot is described as “cleft from tongue and toe like a hoof” (182). The fire is described as a “single cleft and yellow serpent tongue of flame” (187). Both references call to mind classic literary descriptions of Satan.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that this trio are “avatars of Satan” arises in the final pages. Culla crosses paths again with a blind man. Culla asks the man why he has never asked God to heal his sight. The blind man explains to Culla that such a request would be a sin and then goes on to tell Culla the story of a “healin preacher” he once encountered (250). The blind man suggests that this preacher was not of God. He says, “they’s darksome ways afoot in this world and it may be he weren’t no true preacher” (250). This brings to mind the image of the bearded man who has wreaked havoc across the landscape, garbed in black vestments of the cloth. If we accept that the trio represents Satan, we can accept the havoc that accompanies the group. Such an interpretation would also shed light on the opening scene. These henchmen of Satan begin to track Culla the moment he places his son in the glade to die. They are the “darksome ways” that are “afoot in the world” (250) and they pursue him relentlessly in retribution. The bearded man appears to be incensed that Culla is not able to complete the job the first time because of the tinker’s intervention. As such, the trio first hunts down the tinker and hangs him. They then wait for Culla, around a campfire, to admonish him to take responsibility for his heinous attempt to kill his child. If he refuses, as he does, they will force him to carry out the act in its entirety.

Considering Culla once attempted to kill his child, it should be of no surprise that he does not feel relief in finding his son still alive when he comes across the trio a second, and final, time. Culla has the opportunity to redeem himself here by taking responsibility for the parentage

of his son, but only halfheartedly tells the bearded man that his sister would care for the child. In a Peter-like fashion of denial, Culla thrice asserts that “he [the child] ain’t nothing to me” (241-242). The bearded man asks Culla to give him the baby. Culla wants to be rid of the evidence of his crime, yet, as we have seen, he can not directly commit murder. As such, offering the child over to a man who can accomplish the act allows him to commit filicide without bloodying his own hands. This act seems more reprehensible and flies in the face of mythological tragedies that precede the work. In Euripides’ *Heracles*, Lykos, a marauder not much unlike the bearded man, orders Amphitryon to bring his daughter-in-law, Megara, before him to die: “Go into the house and bring her out” (Euripides *Herakles* 927). Amphitryon refuses and responds, “[t]hat would make me an accomplice to her murder” (928). Unlike Amphitryon, Culla does not protect his kin; instead, he “picks up the child and hands him to the bearded man” (McCarthy 243). The bearded man takes the child from Culla and asks its name. Culla responds, “[h]e ain’t got nary’n” (243). The bearded man notes, “[t]hey say people in hell ain’t got names. But they had to be called something to get sent there. Didn’t they” (244). Here, the bearded man seems to speak with supernatural knowledge. Reminiscent of Dante’s *Inferno*, this unbaptized child will spend eternity in Limbo because of his father’s sins. The bearded man is also referring to Culla’s unnamed sin. Culla’s refusal to acknowledge his incestuous act and the attempted murder of his son condemns him to punishment. His handing over the child brings the act of filicide to fruition and cements Culla’s place in the biblical hell. This is the final time we meet the trio, as their presence is no longer needed; they have accomplished their goal. The concluding lines of the novel suggest that Culla has been carried away to his own hell. “Late in the day the road brought him to a swamp. And that was all. Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitude of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the

damned” (251). The swamp of course, with its “naked trees,” brings us back to the scene of the crime. It is a nightmare inverse of the glade in which he once left his son to die. The punishment for Culla is not peaceful sleep in death, but rather perpetual, mindless wandering. We are left with the impression that Culla will return again and again to this desolate swamp as eternal punishment.

Steven Frye’s interpretation of *Outer Dark*, that has Culla Holme hunted by agents of Satan, compliments William Schafer’s identification of the trio as “crazed furies.” Culla is pursued across an apocalyptic landscape by the three dark figures, a mythological allusion to the three furies. These figures are personifications of curses cast upon a guilty party. They not only enforce Culla’s sentence but also prevent harm from befalling him so that he can continue to suffer during his wanderings. In mythology,

The Erinyes (Furies) were three goddesses of vengeance and retribution who punished men for crimes against the natural order. [...] The wrath of the Erinyes manifested itself in a number of ways. The most severe of these was the tormenting madness inflicted upon a patricide or matricide [or infanticide]. (Atsma n.p.)

For much of the novel, the “grim triune” follow one step behind Culla, killing people who have helped him or conversed with him in some way. For instance, Culla makes the decision to leave Rinty to go in search of work. A country squire offers him supper and a half dollar to cut up a fallen tree. Culla accepts, but after he receives the half dollar for his work he does not stay for dinner. Instead, he steals the squire’s boots and begins travelling. This act brings about the squire’s death. In searching for Culla and the stolen boots, the squire encounters the bearded man in black and his disciples, Harmon and a nameless, witless mute. This group severs the squire’s spine and causes his death. The squire is murdered through no actions of his own. He is an innocent bystander whose misfortune causes him to cross paths with a marked man.

Additionally, Clarke, the man who offers to pay Culla to dig two graves behind the church, is lynched. The snake charmer is disemboweled. The pig drover is driven over a cliff by swine. The tinker is hung. Culla's son's throat is slit. Culla's sin follows him and creates chaos in his wake and the death toll mounts as he travels. His ordeal is reminiscent of an adulterated, biblical Cain, a man forced to wander the earth, toiling for his survival after killing his brother. Like Cain, no man appears to be able to lay a hand on Culla, which allows his suffering to endure.

Culla repeatedly flees from danger without much incident; yet, those he leaves behind are punished in his stead. Had Culla accepted responsibility for his actions and faced the consequences, he alone would have been punished. In his inability to do either of these things, the blood of others is now on his hands. These deaths also make it impossible for him to settle in one spot as suspicion follows him everywhere. The teamster in town tells Culla, "I just thought you looked like you'd had some kind of trouble or something" (McCarthy 140). Only moments later, another man at the general store sees Culla spitting chewed corn from the railing and accuses him of having cholera. When Rinthy finally speaks to the tinker and tells him that it was her brother who disposed of the baby, the tinker responds: "He's the one would of laid it to early rest save my being there. Cause I knowed. Sickness. He's got a sickness" (199). Culla is a marked man; he was marked the moment he made the decision to bring about the death of his child. The supernatural force that pursues him appears to torture him, and to protect him for future torture. At times, Culla seems aware that he is being followed by an unknown presence. As Culla hides in darkness from the townsfolk who seek to lynch him, he senses an unseen presence: "Something had passed on the road and he lay huddled against the chill of pending dawn with his arms crossed on his chest in that attitude the living inflict upon their dead... There was something fearful about (150). Later, as Culla passes through a field, again attempting to

escape a second attempt to capture him, he is surrounded by “[r]ank weeds that heeled with harsh dip and clash under the wind as if fled through by something unseen” (202). Whether Satanic, mythical or natural, the forces that haunt Culla at every turn have a supernatural quality.

This brings us once again to Euripides’ *Herakles*. Being pursued by vigilante furies connects Culla with Greek tragedy. The Greeks used gods, goddesses, and the retinue to explain their environment. For instance, if one were to ask, “why does Herakles kill his children and his wife?” In Greek tradition, the answer would be: He was beset by the fury of Madness—a living, breathing entity who occupies his body, unbeknownst to him—and commits the heinous act of filicide under her possession. While Herakles is unaware of his actions, it is paramount to remember that he is still the one physically committing the acts. As such, he is must be punished, not Lyssa, the personification of Madness. Herakles openly accepts responsibility even though his actions are manipulated by an outside force. The guilt he feels makes him feel unworthy to be in the site of another human being; he even contemplates killing himself. Culla, like Herakles, is similarly possessed by madness; however, it is not a force that is sent to molest him by a god, goddess, or other entity, human or otherwise. Culla brings this madness upon himself once he consciously commits to leaving his child in the wilderness. Culla departs from the herculean myth in that he does not accept his crime and refuses to be punished. Still, in mythological fashion, his malignancy gives birth to the “grim triune,” a force that is not quite human, but not quite imaginary.

The trio’s repeated description as “shadows” sheds light on their illusory nature and directly links them to the probability that they arise as a display of Culla’s guilt. When Culla abandons his son in the swampy wood, he stands with “shadow pooled at his feet” (17). Arnold and Luce suggest that the shadow signifies “that archetypal dark side of the self deriving from

the collective unconscious that complements yet is not acknowledged by the ego” (76). *Outer Dark*, then, explores the yearnings and impulses that the ego can not acknowledge. Edwin T. Arnold proposes, “[i]t is as if his [Culla’s] own guilt—or his denial of his own guilt—has called these figures forth” (49). Culla’s denial forces him from his home, creates an overwhelming sense of paranoia and prevents him from finding food and shelter without drudgery. The band’s introduction in the text before Culla leaves his son in the woods suggests that madness has been lurking inside Culla Holme for some time, waiting to venture forth. The text supports an analysis of the marauders as a ghoulish symptom of Culla’s fractured self. There is no evidence that any other person, except Culla, sees the bearded man and his assistants. Each time that we are told of a killing, the information is not provided from a first-hand account, but as an aside, after Culla has left the scene. Also, the text of the killing is set off by italics. There is little proof that these individuals actually exist outside of Culla’s mind. This does not make them any less deadly, however, because we know that Culla perceives them to be real. The bearded man, then, is an aspect of Culla Holme himself. The trio that Culla perceives as something other than self is actually his fractured mind dealing with the submerged guilt that he refuses to acknowledge. Yet, he can not keep it down and it bubbles to this surface in hideous fashion. Like the possession of Herakles by Lyssa (i.e. Madness), Culla is likewise possessed by this “consubstantial monstrosity” and the result is the same. Just as Herakles kills his children and wife, so does Culla kill the squire, the snake charmer, the migrant mill hands hanging from the trees, the tinker and, ultimately, his child. Culla, of course, is unaware of the alternate personality that has arisen from his fragmented psyche, just as Herakles was unaware of the actions he committed while killing his family.

Interestingly, Culla does not find it suspicious that the trio knows things about him that he has shared with no one. This evidence suggests that when Culla is speaking to the trio, he is actually speaking to another aspect of self. This is because he is afraid to venture into his own mind to ask these questions of himself. The trio handily asks him things that he wants to know of himself and attempt to make him see the reality of what he has done. When Culla encounters the tinker and his son at novel's end, his mind will not allow him to believe that his son did not die in the glade, even though he knows that Rinthy is searching for the tinker because she believes him to be in possession of her child. To protect his remembrance of the past, Culla kills the tinker then conjures fourth the marauders to ask: "Whose youngern?" (McCarthy 240). Here, Culla still will not verbally acknowledge parentage. In response, "Harmon guffawed and slapped his thigh" (240). Harmon laughs because this aspect of Culla knows that there is no deluding the self; eventually the truth comes to light, even for those who refuse to see. When Culla comments on the child's missing eye, the bearded man responds, "[s]ome folks has two and cain't see" (240). This is a direct comment on Culla's refusal to accept responsibility for his actions. This reference to sight comes up again a few days later when Culla meets the blind man—an allusion to the mythological Tiresias—on the road. Ironically, the blind prophet causes Culla to think: "Someone should tell a blind man before setting him out" toward a murky and perilous swamp (252). Culla is blind to his own blindness, as he aimlessly wanders a landscape that grows more barren each year. After all that has transpired, he still skirts any acknowledgement of his sin and responsibility in the atrocities that have occurred to all those who have suffered as a result.

McCarthy's *Outer Dark* is the only novel of the ones explored in this thesis that include infanticide and filicide, as such, it is particularly complex. It might also seem like the most difficult to explore because of its lack of specificity of time and locale. Interestingly, it is this

characteristic that makes the novel such a prime candidate for an examination of child murder. Often the minutiae of the plot opens avenues of study that take an investigator off topic. *Outer Dark* lacks a linear plot. This allows focus to fall directly on the guilt that plagues Culla after he believes that he has killed his child, and the manifestation of his guilt: the “grim triune.” In following their travels, we are forced to concede that they are either pawns of Satan, a modern version of mythological furies or Culla himself, in fractured form. For the purpose of this thesis, the latter interpretation is the most appropriate. Culla’s deed calls up supernatural forces of his own creation. Like Morrison’s Sethe, he is haunted by a past he can not accept. Unlike Sethe, however, instead of locking himself in his home and quietly suffering his sin, he projects his wrong-doing onto the community. In doing this, he is able to punish the crime without directly punishing himself. This ultimately traps Culla in a nightmarish landscape of madness where he “don’t need nothing” (248). Yet, the very thing that Culla needs to receive salvation is the very thing he refuses to admit. Until he is able to admit to the murder of his child, he has sentenced himself to wander alone, devoid of meaningful, human contact.

VII.

Conclusion: Madness Re-envisioned

"The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind."

Ella, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

While child murder is not something that most individuals feel comfortable discussing socially, it is a popular subject in literature, both in classical and in modern genres. Motives for committing such a seemingly reprehensible act run the gambit and do not appear limited to a specific gender, race or creed. Initially, when I chose these four texts for my analysis, the location of the filicide was less important than the balance between male and female characters and a variety of motivations. However, I do understand the necessity of varying the demographic to solidify my point—child murder in American literature is not relegated to a particular locale. *Desire Under the Elms* is set in a New England farmhouse around the time of the California Gold Rush, *Beloved* is set shortly after the American Civil War in southern Kentucky. *Buried Child* takes place during 1978 in the midwest, specifically an Illinois farmhouse. *Outer Dark* is set against the backdrop of Appalachia around the turn of the 20th century. This exploration of child murder spans 150 years of American history from east coast to west. My research also explores different socio-economic levels. Medea, a woman of wealth and privilege, commits filicide to save her children and torment her husband. Herakles, a hero and son of a god, kills his children because his mind is temporarily overcome by Lyssa, a mythological fury who has been

sent by Hera to manipulate him into committing the most heinous of crimes. O'Neill's Abbie, an underprivileged adulterer, suffocates her infant in an attempt to get revenge on Ephraim and return to her old way of life. Morrison's Sethe, a runaway slave, commits filicide to save her daughter from the horrors of enslavement. Shepard's Dodge, an aging alcoholic, kills his wife's infant to hide the possibility that it was most likely fathered by his own son. Culla Holme, an Appalachian-breed countryman, attempts and finally succeeds in killing his son to hide his own incestuous act from the community. While each of these characters murder their children for individual reasons, they are all bound collectively by their acts of child murder.

These individuals can not be grouped by sex, time, place, or locale. Their motivation unites them. Medea and Sethe have been beaten into a helpless role in which they feel their only form of power or control is to do what may hurt them the most: kill their own children. While the implied or inferred motivation behind the murders guides each woman differently, the overarching theme that brings about the action in the first place is the same: subjugation. These women have been placed in inferior roles with no options. In *Medea* readers see a woman driven to desperate means because she is powerless in every other aspect of life beyond a mother's capacity. Morrison's Sethe follows closely in the footsteps of Medea. Neither Medea nor Sethe believe that society has given them an alternative. Through this singular action, they gain the empowerment society denies. Not only do the women in these tales feel helpless, they also feel that their actions will save their children from a misery worse than death. Ultimately, these women attempt to regain control of their lives with the only tool in their possession, destroying the object which a male-dominated society created through them. Suppression at the hands of the patriarch has corrupted the nature of these women until they strike back against nature itself. Regardless of the women's motivation, readers can agree that they are driven by sheer

desperation. While O'Neill's Abbie is a mother, who also murders her child, she does not quite fit with these women. The infanticide she commits can be labeled, psychologically, as both unwanted child and spousal revenge filicide. Abbie's character enjoys more empowerment than Medea and Sethe. Her overt sexuality, along with her title as Ephraim's wife, allows her to have a sway over the men in her life. It is for this reason that her motivations can not be considered in the same way as Medea and Sethe's. She seeks stability through money and land ownership until she falls for her husband's son. Abbie's decision to kill her child is reprehensible and pitiful at the same time. Her act does seem to be desperate, but not because the livelihood of her child is at stake. In fact, there is no thought of the child at all. She thinks only of the life that she has lost with the birth of Eben's child. What we must remember, however, is that Abbie has experienced tragedies of her own that has created within her a desire to seek stability. Therefore, it could be said that she removes the thing that she sees as an obstacle to obtaining the life she has always desired.

The men discussed in this thesis are equally as difficult to classify. While Culla verges on altruistic infanticide—because he doesn't want his sister to come to harm or his child to grow up labeled as a product of his incest—the label of unwanted child infanticide is more fitting, considering his motives. He even, as the most complex perpetrators of filicide, eventually moves to the acute psychosis phase when he allows his guilt to overtake him and cause harm to his community. Even though they come from different locales and exist in different eras, Culla and Dodge's actions are similar. Culla's character seems to suffer from acute psychosis from the start—although his motivations are initially hidden by an outward desire to protect his sister. Sam Shepard's Dodge, however, does not begin to lose his wits until many years after he has committed the infanticide. It would seem that Dodge's character might fall neatly into the

category of acute psychosis, since “you can see the madness almost oozing out” of Dodge’s eyeballs at his current age. However, since the act of infanticide is committed prior to the action in the play, we must try to determine Dodge’s motivations from what we are given (Shepard 3.1). It is important to note that the infanticide is not what drives Dodge crazy; instead, Dodge, like Culla, eventually loses his mind due to his repression of this dark secret. This is indicated by Dodge’s sensitivity to the subject and its constant resurfacing in the plot’s progression. Because of this, Dodge’s act of infanticide is difficult to define, as we are not provided with concrete details about Dodge’s motivations at the time of the murder. The events of Shepard’s play are distorted by Dodge’s own disintegrating mind. From what we are told, he did not kill the child out of rage, madness, or jealousy. However, we do know for certain that Dodge fixates over his family’s reputation. It is for this reason that we can assume Dodge kills the child in a moment of clarity in his youth. He does not develop a distorted sense of reality, including hallucinations and nonsensical conversations, until much later. Dodge’s infanticide, then, is a complex case of an unwanted child.

Ultimately, child murder is a taboo topic that modern drama goes to great lengths to discuss. Yet, with the exception of Ditsky and Hays, critics have not spent time analyzing the patterns and connections among these literary instances of child murder. As my thesis shows, there is no lack of critics discussing child murder in specific works; instead, there is a lack of critics who should be looking at the bigger picture of the inclusion of this trope. There is a significant amount of work still to be done in this arena of literary criticism. I have drawn connections among four American literary works—two plays and two novels—that include madness and the supernatural. I also pay homage to the great Greek tragedies that precede them. Nevertheless, more in-depth analyses of the way that, and the amount that, child murder is

included in modern American works are needed. It is paramount that future critics begin to consider a wider variety of works including this trope together, and in relation to the classics and I hope that, with this thesis, I am able to draw attention to this commonly ignored avenue of literary criticism. Infanticide and filicide are certainly, albeit tragic, pertinent in modern American literature and modern American life.

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