

AN EXISTENTIALISTIC EXPLORATION OF CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *SUTTREE*

by

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DEDICATION

To mom and dad: my existential cause and foundation.

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ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* explores the existential problem of life's meaning with astonishing depth. Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of bad faith, Albert Camus's absurdism, and Martin Heidegger's ethic of care provide insight into Cornelius Suttree's struggle to realize his identity and live a fulfilling life. Their philosophies are crucial to understanding Suttree's evolution from an individual without meaning to a member of society with a sense of purpose.

I. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is to human life what the quality of water is to fish. It is immediately experienced yet difficult to approach as an area of thought. This is due to the complexity and mundanity of these questions: what are the fundamental modes of human existence? what is the meaning of life? how should one live? Cormac McCarthy's novel *Suttree* examines these questions within the particular situation of a poor fisherman living on the edge of Knoxville, Tennessee. Cornelius Suttree lives aimlessly and lacks the sense of responsibility that binds one to a community, cause, or set of values. In fact, Suttree's values are at first glance non-existent. However, the story instantly reveals that death is of the utmost concern to Suttree, and his deceased twin and son prove to be haunting and oppressive reminders of his own eventual extinguishment, the absurdity of life, and the limits of human connection. Nevertheless, death's ubiquity throughout the novel suggests that life's evanescence demands one to reflect upon one's true identity, take advantage of limited opportunities, and engage with other human beings on the basis of a genuine concern for our shared mortality.

In addition to *Suttree's* value as a work of existential insight, the novel is a prime model for the marriage of literature and philosophy. It explores one man's juggling of various approaches to moral behavior and displays the complexity and ambiguity of morality in general. It exposes the reader to situations in which what is right or wrong is unclear and can only be sorted by considering multiple points of view and aiming to, at least, an understanding of the protagonist's circumstances and tendencies. Above all, *Suttree's* story makes available unique performance of a universal predicament: the quest for meaning in a meaningless world.

II. “SOT’S SKULL SUBSIDING, SWEET NOTHINGNESS BETIDE ME”:

SUTTREE AND SARTRIAN BAD FAITH

The alternative is to literally give myself up to them, my memories, to let them pull me down into their toxic, high-test, 180-proof bitch’s brew of incoherent distress, to let them ring bells-within-bells within me down to that stunned, blank polarity where words face off with nothingness and thoughts go by at a frequency so high they hurt but can’t be heard.

—Dave Hickey, “An Essay on Style”

In Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree*, the eponymous protagonist Cornelius Suttree roams the 1950s Knoxville, Tennessee, as an itinerant soul plagued with guilt, loss, death, and the fruitless project to live a meaningful existence in a seemingly purposeless universe.¹ Suttree fails at first to construct meaning and values in his life and instead over-identifies with individual parts of himself—such as his loss, his inevitable death, his material body, and his existence as perceived by others—as if these parts did not form webs of interdependencies and contribute to a holistic identity. Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of bad faith provides insight into how Suttree struggles to realize his identity as a cohesion of complementary parts, a realization that would let him decide to continue his life in an existentially responsible manner, remaining true to his past and dedicated to the continual formation of the person he strives to be. Suttree’s ever-present cognizance of the tragedies that were his twin’s stillbirth and his son’s childhood death perpetuates his paralyzing guilt and prevents him from overcoming his bad faith and constructing himself according to the vision he has of his life and of all humanity. As a result of his obsession with his many losses, he directs his consciousness and his actions toward projecting loss and death rather than creating a productive and meaningful life. This perversion of his state of existence disrupts his experiences by convincing him he belongs to the dead

instead of belonging to his own life. Bad faith is a mode of existence that Sartre claims is part of human existence. Suttree's eventual resolution of this inner conflict of bad faith demonstrates a unique way of overcoming the tendency to be what one is not and instead forge the future of one's life toward a positive and worthwhile end.

Suttree fails at first to establish meaning for his life and thus lives in despair as he roams Knoxville in purposelessness and works a minimalistic job that keeps him stationary and afloat in a murky Tennessee river. Without the integrity to resist the void of meaninglessness into which he sinks, he is burdened with the idea that pains him the most: death. The possibility of dying now and the certainty of dying at some point in time are tyrannical imaginings to which Suttree subjects himself, depriving his consciousness of the freedom to live positively. His obsession with death seeps into his accompanying mirror image—the Othersuttree or Antisuttree—and becomes his way of defining himself negatively in the form of death, rather than positively in the form of life. Sartre's existentialism illustrates that one is responsible for resisting defining oneself negatively. According to him, one must affirm one's life and assert one's freedom by filling the blank slate of oneself through every action. He maintains that "existence precedes essence," by which he means that one exists as a living human being without values or certainties and only by acting does one acquire values and knowledge. He states that "man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself.... [A]t first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be" (345). Due to one's initial nothingness,² Sartre proposes that "man is condemned to be free" and that "once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" ("Existentialism" 350). Existentialism is an attitude the central value

of which is freedom. Suttree constricts his freedom to live his life in a meaningful way when he forfeits himself to his past and his visions of death.

Early in the novel, before Suttree is enlightened to his need to reform himself, he takes responsibility for certain events, yet his feeling of responsibility is excessive to the point of becoming, instead, an overwhelming guilt. Rather than taking a positive, productive approach to responsibility by forming commitments to improve himself, he takes a negative, unproductive approach by dwelling on the things for which he blames himself. He paralyzes his motivation to form new actions by fixating on the failure of his past actions. He blames himself for his twin brother's stillbirth, since he was the one who survived; he feels responsible for his son's death, being the father who abandoned him; and he is haunted by the crime that sentenced him to the workhouse and therefore made him absent from his son and wife. Instead of taking his responsibility in a positive direction, Suttree looks into the past and finds all the faults with which he identifies. Rather than defining himself as a person determined to change, he dwells on the past and defines himself according to his mistakes. He is at first unable to form a new path for himself and thus remains in a figurative room of the past in which everything is gloomy and absent.

Suttree is experiencing, in various and unique ways, "bad faith." Bad faith, as Sartre presents it, is a mode of self-deception in which one is both deceiver and deceived, believer and non-believer in the truth hidden. Sartre presents several modes of bad faith, each of which involves the belief that one is constituted by something that one is not or that one is not constituted by something that one is. From Sartre's examples, it is the situation of the woman on a first date who is responsible for making a decision on

whether they have sex, yet denies her responsibility and postpones this decision, reducing their interactions to the immediate present and isolating their behaviors from the context they inhabit; bad faith characterizes the café waiter who limits himself to the functions and mannerisms of a waiter and denies that he is in fact only a representation of a waiter; it is the situation of the pederast who does not admit he is a pederast, guiltily conscious of the implications of his behavior yet unwilling to assume that portion of his identity; and bad faith is the situation of the critic who denies the pederast the freedom to not be a pederast and reduces him to an object fixed in a permanent state (*Being and Nothingness* 96-109).

In all these examples, the agents are not being true to themselves, or are not letting other persons be true to themselves. There is no limit to the possible forms of bad faith, and *Suttree* is a novel that captures a vast array of these possibilities of existence. Encompassing a mere five years of Suttree's life, the novel unveils his cognitive tensions and displays his many forms of bad faith in all their astonishing and agonizing complexity.

Material Bad Faith

Suttree suspends his responsibility to choose himself and his future similarly to how the woman on a first date suspends her responsibility. The woman, in an attempt to delay her decision, acts as if she and her date are objects existing without the emotional and cognitive context of their situation. She reduces their interactions to “what is in the present” and “to being only what they are”: material objects frozen in position like a table and a chair. She extracts the qualities of the man's character from their situation as if he is in essence a nice man rather than what is probably true instead, that he is being nice in

order to have sex with her. She “does not want to realize the urgency” of her situation because doing so will force her to decide something she is unable, or not ready, to decide (*Being and Nothingness* 96-97). Like the woman who knows “it will be necessary sooner or later for her to make a decision,” Suttree is aware of his responsibility, yet continues to roam Knoxville in purposelessness. He denies himself any concrete direction and, instead, remains revolving around his past misfortunes and his present, local itineracy.

Suttree’s occupation as fisherman inspissates his passivity, trapping him in a sterile economic cycle contingent upon a stagnant, waste-ridden river. Vereen M. Bell notes that Suttree commits little effort or resources to fishing, yet he interprets Suttree’s “lack of volition” as “a form of receptiveness” in which he “[puts] life to the test, requiring, or allowing, it to prove its worth on its own terms.” Rather than taking the first move, what he fears may be a wrong move, in deciding his life’s significance, he chooses to see what significance it already possesses. Bell posits that in Suttree’s quest to discover “what his life is fundamentally and whether in the midst of death there can be life to be affirmed,” Suttree exercises a “negative capability” to resist affirming life before seeing whether, or to what extent, it affirms itself (72-73). Just as the objectifying woman may discover during her prolonged interstice a telling sign of her date’s true self, Suttree also waits for the appropriate moment to seize his life when he is familiar with the nature of life.

William Prather views Suttree’s passivity differently, stating that it is a form of commitment. Prather believes that “Suttree is making a commitment simply by not committing himself: a continuing lack of commitment is a form of commitment” (111). Suttree seeks to know the person at the core of his existence, as Prather argues. In order

to uncover his internal identity, he must cast off the layers of identity laid upon him by society.

In addition to delaying his responsibility, Suttree buries his responsibility in the material body's demands and the material landscape's daunting density. Sartre's objectifying woman identifies with her "inert presence as a passive object" as she perceives her and her date's bodies to be subject-less and without significance to their situation or their feelings (*Being and Nothingness* 100). She pretends not to notice his holding her hand, resisting association with her body and emotions while drawing their attention to her sudden strand of thoughts. She renders her body an object that does not belong to the self that she is. Suttree also conceives of himself as an object, yet with a hedonistic devotion to satisfying his bodily desires rather than dissociating from the body, as the objectifying woman does. Through his constant drinking, he lives with excessive attention to the physical pleasures of life to the extent that these pleasures damage his responsibility further. He bases a significant portion of his happiness on sexual fulfillment, as when he is living with Joyce and they constantly have intercourse until he lies in bed as a "depleted potentate" (390). Alcohol and sex diminish his identity to a body driven by other physical objects and chemicals until the corresponding diminishment of consciousness. Thus, it is in his moments of drunken misery that he is most like a "passive object" being controlled, damaged, and weakened by the poisons he has chosen.

Suttree associates excessively with materiality to the point of being lost within the materiality of his environment. As he rowed through a flooded river riddled with garbage, a dead pig, and even a dead baby,³ "he felt little more than yet another artifact

leached out of the earth and washed along” (306). Suttree’s past nightmares become intermixed with the landscape of Knoxville, perpetuating his bad faith by leading him to focus his life on the past failures instead of his present responsibility to create himself. As David Holloway observes, “the commodity landscapes of Knoxville...[are] the material source for those death visions that haunt the protagonist” (116). Holloway focuses on “commodities” as they present the threat of objectifying experience “by the unprecedented extension of exchange value into all areas of human life” (117).

Everywhere Suttree goes he encounters death and decay within the commodity landscape and the material landscape in general. On Market Street, he enters an atmosphere of “putrefaction and decay,” and he walks through the markethouse “where brick the color of dried blood rose...in demented accretion”; he perceives the market as a “lazaret of comestibles and flora and maimed humanity”; it is a place where the faces are “goitered, twisted, tubered with some excrescence” and the people have “[t]eeth black with rot, eyes rheumed and vacuous”; along the meat venders, “a calf’s head rested pink and scalded on a tray” on “meatcounters shuffling up flies out of the bloodstained sawdust” and “[g]reat cleavers and bonesaws hung overhead and truncate beeves in stark abattoir by cambreled hams blueflocked with mold” (66-67).

His nightmares plague him not only through the commodity landscape but also through the material environment in general. He sees that out of the earth, “rhomboid and volute shapes of limestone juttred all brindled with mud like great bones washed out” (9); in his own room, “the candled woodknots shone blood red and incandescent like the eyes of watching fiends” (16); and his friend Jimmy Smith is death personified, the “slack yellow skin of his shoulders and chest so bloodless and lined that he appears patched up

out of odd scraps and remnants of flesh” (21); he cannot help but see a group of poker players killing time as they wait for death, “posting time at cards prevenient of their dimly augured doom” (22); he has a dream in which his brother approaches him with a knife in the street at night, saying “I have been looking for you” and holding onto Suttree with “his bone grip” (28); at the bus station, where he ironically goes to a purgatorial “waiting room,” “[h]e marches darkly toward his darkly marching shape in the glass of the depot door” and sees his reflection as “[h]is fetch come up from life’s other side like an autoscopic hallucination” (28). Throughout the novel, he refers to his reflections and shadows as the “Antisuttree,” which is the self he believes should have died at his brother’s death and the self he foresees dying. On workhouse duty cleaning the fairgrounds, Suttree sees “the stark skeletons of amusement rides against a gray and barren sky” (50); death watches him as when he shaves at the warehouse’s spigot and “the cracked red clay lay shaped in a basin centered by a dark ochereous eye where the water dripped” (64).

Suttree is unable to escape his nightmares as long as he cannot transcend the material landscape in which he is fixed. According to Holloway, it is up to Suttree to solve the problem of being consumed by the commodity landscape in which “the existential fate of the self is to be immersed in a realm where the lines dividing human being from a world of animate and inanimate objects become blurred” (117). Suttree’s “existential gaze” eventually allows him to solve this problem, and he is “saved from entrapment within the inertia of the commodity landscape” (117). Suttree transcends the material world as his existential gaze “asserts the fragility of that commodity world,

effecting what Sartre would call an existential ‘going beyond’ of the inertia in which matter traps human praxis” (120).

Not only is Suttree faced with the difficulty of transcending the commodity landscape, but he is also confronted with the problem of how, being caught up in a market economy, he objectifies and monetizes himself and those around him. As Lydia R. Cooper suggests, in Suttree’s constant exposure to the ceaseless activity of commerce, “the physicality of the body becomes a consistent visualization that emphasizes...the quality of commerce” (193). To extend this argument using the theory of bad faith, Suttree is motivated by his environment to adopt a conception of himself and humanity saturated by monetary value. This perception of the self furthers Suttree’s over-identification with the self as an object rather than a subject. In Sartre’s terms, Suttree’s understanding of himself emphasized the in-itself—non-conscious, physical being—and excludes the for-itself—consciousness free to consider possibilities and negate current situations. As a result, Suttree becomes an object to be bought and sold, as when he becomes a possession of Joyce and when he and his work as a fisherman are circulated through the town’s market exchange. In order to live a meaningful and autonomous existence, Suttree must either reconcile his existential freedom with the material, deterministic system of Knoxville’s market economy or assert his freedom by leaving the town altogether.

One’s existence differs from the existence of objects in that one is conscious. Consciousness cannot be located as can a box of matches or a table. Therefore, the existentialist concludes, “I can not say either that I *am* here or that I *am* not here” (*Being and Nothingness* 103). To say that an individual is an extension of a certain place is to

restrict one's freedom and deny oneself the possibility of being elsewhere. Suttree denies himself the possibility of place as he chooses to dwell in Knoxville where he is glued to his nightmares and is unable to transcend his unhappiness. He perpetuates his obsession with his place by visiting certain locations that resurrect fond memories. He visits the train yard, "remembering his grandfather stepping down to the platform among the wheeltrucks and the steam" and remembers "[t]he old man's cheeks new shaven and the fine red veins like the lines in banknote paper. His hat. His stogie." The inexistence of his grandfather and the past they shared is represented by the long closed station with its "abandoned coaches" and waiting rooms turned storage houses (367). Suttree's sense of loss is inextricable from the condition of his surroundings, and his redemption depends on his vacating Knoxville for a place in which he can create new and happier memories.

What saves Suttree from an unproductive passivity in which he evades the responsibility to create himself is his realization that he is beyond the material world and more than just an inevitable addition to the inanimate matter of the earth. He begins to see himself as a subjectivity rather than another object and therefore regains his will power and confidence in his own agency. As Holloway articulates Suttree's newfound ability to shape himself, "Suttree's own alienation [his sense of not belonging to the living world or to his own responsibility] within the practico-inert...ceases to be something that merely happens and becomes instead the very proof of human praxis in the world at large" (123).

Functional Bad Faith

Suttree is like Sartre's waiter who will always "limit himself to his function," his obligations, and his rights rather than expanding his conception of himself to include

aspects outside of his occupation (*Being and Nothingness* 102). Suttree defines himself as a fisherman and is likewise labeled by others as a fisherman. He endures others' attempts to further limit his identity to a catfisherman: "When are you going to bring me some of them little channel cats?" "How come you aint never got no catfish" (68, 69)? By reducing his identity to one trade, he is denying the possibilities that he has of doing something else to make money or go someplace else to better pursue his happiness. Existentialism, in its belief in the freedom of the self to transcend what is fixed and unmalleable, states "I am never any one of my attitudes, any one of my actions" (*Being and Nothingness* 103). [His actions as fisherman.]

Temporal Bad Faith and Bad Faith Imposed by Other

Suttree is like the pederast who claims that his "mistakes are all in the past" and who ignores the evidence presented to prove him a pederast. Suttree is not a pederast, but he engages in a type of self-denial that is similar. Like the pederast denies his past, Suttree denies his own past with his family and lives as though he does not belong to them anymore.

Bad faith is also possible in the dynamic between living as oneself and living as perceived by another human being. Sartre speaks of "a perpetual game of escape from the for-itself to the for-others and from the for-others to the for-itself" (*BN* 100). In the former, one is affirming one's existence as formed by the Other, and in the latter, one is affirming one's existence as formed by oneself while denying the Other's perceptions. When Suttree is living with Joyce, he forfeits his freedom to form himself in exchange for the support of Joyce. She provides him with a place to stay, pretty car, new clothes, and fancy outings, all of which are made possible by her extravagant earnings from

prostitution. Suttree takes this unstable lifestyle as his life's foundation and deprives himself of the ability to support himself. He is resting his identity in someone else rather than providing himself a foundation for his own existence.

Suttree's rejection of family relations is also a form of bad faith. He has retained minimal ties with Uncle John, Aunt Martha, and his mother, the only family members with whom he interacts in the entire novel. When Uncle John comes to visit him at his riverside boathouse, he struggles to acknowledge his desertion of the family and is resentful when Uncle John tries to remind Suttree of the characteristics he shares with other members. He claims he is a person independent of the influence of other family members and denies the part of himself that was born from those who raised him: "I'm not like you. I'm not like him. I'm not like Carl. I'm like me. Don't tell me who I'm like" (18). Similar to an actor who only identifies with one of his characters, Suttree only identifies with the aspects of himself that he desires and dismisses the aspects of himself associated with his family. However, as Richard Marius argues, "[h]is passion for independence from his family is in itself a kind of bondage, for he can neither satisfy these expectations, accept family ties nor live truly indifferent to them as long as he remains in Knoxville" (8). Thus, Suttree's rejection of his family becomes a commitment that binds him to an active resistance of, and a contradictory concern for, those he wishes to remove from his life.

Attempts at Responsibility

After a spell of delirious intoxication, Suttree has back-to-back dreams: in one, "a window full of glass somewhere collapsed in a crash" and he "heard pistolshots," a memory of his own involvement in the robbery that earned him workhouse time; the

other is “[a] dream of shriving” in which “[h]e knelt on the cold stone flags at a chancel gate where the winey light of votive candles cast his querulous shadow behind him,” and he “bent in tears until his forehead touched the stone” (78). Here, Suttree is lamenting his past mistakes. His shadow is at once the Antisuttree that constantly reminds him of his death, his brother’s absence, and his son’s early decease.

Suttree cannot tolerate the unbearable weight of responsibility he feels for his son’s death and the misery with which his wife is left forever. He is eager to both claim full responsibility and relieve his guilt. After he hears of his son’s death he goes to the son’s family where he is met by his “abandoned wife,” who is “grief-stunned,” a “wooden pieta of perpetual doom”; his mother-in-law, a “demented harridan” with an “axemark for a mouth and eyes crazed with hatred”; and his father-in-law, “coming from the house loading a shotgun as he ran” (150-151). To Suttree’s one question “[w]hen is the funeral,” the family rejects his involvement in his son’s burial and denies him the opportunity to claim responsibility for his death and all their misfortune.

Despite being prohibited from the funeral, Suttree forces his presence, and as he looks on to the casket and the preacher, he “stood by a tree but no one noticed him” (153). After the funeral, he takes a shovel and fills the grave himself, despite being told by workers “[w]e got a tractor here to do that with” (155). By filling the grave, Suttree is taking responsibility for his son’s death, burying his guilt, and creating the bridge by which he will be able to cross the murky waters of his past. This moment is crucial in Suttree’s formation of the self in that it begins his realization that the past cannot be used as the primary material for the self. Suttree must learn to perceive his loss as a hole that he is responsible for filling. In addition to burying the history that was Suttree’s son,

Suttree is also burying his own childhood. As Linda Woodson suggests, “it may be that Suttree’s mourning is for two dead children, both the son and the child-self” (187). She recalls how when walking to the funeral, he feels an anxiety similar to one experienced during his own past with his father: “The dread in his heart was a thing he’d not felt since he feared his father in the aftermath of some child’s transgression” (*Suttree* 152).

From Negation to Affirmation

The life existentialism promotes is a life of addition wherein a person is constantly creating himself with every action. Due to Suttree’s fixating thoughts of death, he is living a life of subtraction in which his brother’s absence deprives Suttree of the wholeness he needs. After he dreams of his grandfather, he ponders whether the dead can be spoken to and in what language. Suttree lacks the means to communicate with his grandfather or brother and he is bereft of the language the dead speak. He calls his brother the “[m]ore common visitor” and proceeds to recreate the image of his brother with “thin and brindled bones,” a “bulbous skull,” and “[o]n the right temple a mauve halfmoon.” Suttree names the void left by his brother with identities such as “[t]he ordinary of the second son,” “[m]irror image,” “[g]auché carbon,” “the child with whom you shared your mother’s belly,” and “[b]orn dead and witless” (14). Suttree grasps for some way to be in touch with his brother even if by his own imaginings. His mental reach toward death displays his longing to understand death and fit it into the narrative of life.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses the reality of absent objects as they exist in the form of non-beings. He provides an example in which he is to meet with Pierre in a café at four o’clock. Sartre arrives late and does not see Pierre. Thus, Sartre’s expectation of meeting with Pierre “has caused the absence of Pierre *to happen* as a real

event” (42). Pierre’s absence is a nothingness that is present in Sartre’s consciousness, a negation of his expectations, and a void that he instead intended to be the presence of Pierre. Sartre constructs the idea of Pierre being absent, and this image engages in what he calls a double negation: “it is the nihilation of the world (since the world is not offering the imagined object as an actual object of perception)” and it is “the nihilation of the object of the image,” since the Pierre imagined is not the actual Pierre (62).

In the same way Pierre exists as a negation, Suttree’s brother exists as a negation. He expects that his brother should be with him as he yearns for his presence and grieves his absence. To compensate for this absence, Suttree crafts his brother’s presence through his thoughts and his dreams of “his brother in swaddling, hands outheld, a scent of myrrh and lilies”⁴ (113). It is by this act of consciousness that death is “what the living carry with them.” Suttree keeps with him his brother’s non-existence and reflects on his death despite its painful reality. The “state of dread” Suttree experiences is perpetuated but not relieved by imagining his brother (153). Vereen M. Bell articulates Suttree’s recreation of his brother as “positing death as a vaguely existent entity ruling a dream world that is different from ours but also always present in it” (91). Consciousness is the point through which death and the dream world it rules can access Suttree’s thoughts, but Suttree in part chooses to sustain the contact between the realm of the imagined dead and the realm of the living.

To alleviate the pain from thoughts of death, Suttree must learn to control his deathly visions of his brother and others so these imaginings do not interfere with his self-creation. He must prevent the imagined dead from inspiring a paralyzing dread of his own death. Matthew Guinn perceives that Suttree’s obsession with his dead brother

“hinders his ability to achieve any sort of transcendence,” and that “it is only by resolving his ‘subtle obsession with uniqueness’ that Suttree can produce meaning within his atavistic surroundings”⁵ (112). Suttree’s existential project of “transcending death” (69), as Bell puts it, and transcending the “struggle with nihilism” (112), as Guinn states, depends upon his ability to incorporate these visions into an understanding of death’s relationship to life and their mutual fulfillment.

As Guinn suggests, the attitude of nihilism weighs on Suttree throughout his hardships, convincing him of the emptiness of life, the meaninglessness of existence. Bad faith is again the root of the problem as Suttree believes in the negation of life and the nullification of himself rather than the blank slate of potential self-authoring. When talking with the sheriff after Suttree’s son’s funeral, Suttree claims “[n]o one cares. It’s not important” (157). On returning to camp after he and Reese got lost he proclaims “[m]y life is ghastly” (348). Vereen M. Bell notes how “McCarthy’s metaphysic” consists of “no first principles, no foundational truth” (“The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy” 32), which naturally leads to either the perception that nothing matters or that everything is possible. Bell argues that, although Suttree realizes “the true horror of death; the sure corruption and end of all friends, all love, all singular, cherishable things; the impersonal relentlessness of time; the cruel absence of God from the world,” Suttree still decides that “*a* Suttree of the many possible in a world of antiform must be made to be” (40). Thus, when confronted with nihilism as represented by the ragman’s death, Suttree sees the ragman’s despair locked in a statuesque memorial to the negation of life, which leads him to reject the nihilist and his disintegrating

attitude: "You have no right to represent people this way, he said. A man is all men. You have no right to your wretchedness" (*Suttree* 422).

Edwin T. Arnold also sees Suttree's later actions as affirmations of life.

According to Arnold, Suttree's statements that "there is one Suttree and one Suttree only" and that "[n]othing ever stops moving" (461) are ways of asserting "[a]ll things exist and have meaning" (Arnold 61). Arnold concludes that Suttree "has entered [the] world of the spirit and has acknowledged its power" and "has lost the terrible, incapacitating fear of death" (60, 61).

Although Arnold's position that Suttree has transcended death is true for a certain period of Suttree's life, it is unlikely that Suttree has conquered his fear in a final, determinate way. Since existentialism holds that the individual's every action shapes who he is, Suttree must maintain his transcendence throughout every day, and every action of every day, and so on. Suttree has learned that he is the captain of his own attitude and that there are certain attitudes that favor his well-being and others that hinder his ability to live a fulfilling existence. The adoption of a nihilistic attitude is a choice to conform to the seemingly meaningless world in which one lives. Thus, the attitude forms an identity continuous with the condition of the world rather than being independent of such limitations. The existential mindset does not prefer a particular means of choosing one's identity over another means. However, the mindset Suttree assumes when departing Knoxville is an attitude seeking a unique identity that affirms its individuality and denies the negating forces of nihilism. Thus, Suttree's progress is not due to losing the fear of death as much as it is due to what Woodson suggests, which is that Suttree has stored "some of the images of his past in ways that will permit their recall without the intense

accompanying pain of overwhelming emotion.” She claims that “he is enabled to issue a dark warning to himself and to the reader because the fearful memory always comes unbidden in dreams” (189). In this way, Suttree has preserved his past and stayed true to his narrative history without being consumed by the negating power of his loss.

Responsible Self-creation

Phase one of Suttree’s recovery from the internal slum of his non-responsibility and emptiness of self is his rediscovery of work. After parting with the prostitute with whom he made a temporary life until her mental breakdown and loss of patience, he returned to his houseboat where it “lay half sunken by one corner and the windows were stoned out and the front door was gone altogether.” He cleaned the place, piecing glass for new windows and fitting a new door to re-establish his modest home. Finally, to restore the picture of his past, he places himself back in his practice as a modest yet stable fisherman:

He bought three five hundred yard spools of nylon trotline and spent two days piecing them with their droppers and leads and hooks. The third day he put out his lines and that night in his shanty with the oil lamp lit and his supper eaten he sat in the chair listening to the river, the newspaper open across his lap, and an uneasy peace came over him, a strange kind of contentment. Small graylooking moths orbited the hot cone of glass before him. He set back the plate with the dimestore silver and folded his hands on the table. (413-414)

Suttree’s newfound contentment issues from his reunion with his project of self-creation. He reclaims his title as author of himself and sets to work defining his life according to his work. No longer does he identify with the nothingnesses of the past. Instead, he aims

his attention and efforts toward the occupation that will sustain his own life and the hobby that relieves the pains of existence. Life is restored its light, and despite the death inherent in the meeting of moth and flame, Suttree's self is alive, orbiting that into which he was thrown and of which he is an active creator. His hands and his will power sit above the wood of the world, folded one on the other as if to say "I have made myself."

His ensuing dialogue with himself raises the question "[o]f what would you repent," to which he answers "[o]ne thing. I spoke with bitterness about my life and I said that I would take my own part against the slander of oblivion and against the monstrous facelessness of it and that I would stand a stone in the very void where all would read my name. Of that vanity I recant all" (414). John Lewis Longley Jr., in "Suttree and the Metaphysics of Death," suggests that Suttree's answer to the question of his regrets is "the definitive statement of the Existential consciousness" (82). To expand upon Longley's idea, the "attitude" of existentialism, as Sartre refers to it as, is an attitude of self-progression rather than self-pity or regret. Suttree is accepting his past including all failures and misfortunes as essential to his unique history. Upon this history he will build the remainder of his life.

Suttree also accepts the parts of himself he finds grotesque. As Lydia R. Cooper suggests, throughout the novel Suttree "externalizes himself through self-infantilizing imagery and self-referentiality" as he imagines himself as a child and has visions of the Othersuttree (195). The Othersuttree partly refers to his dead twin but also refers to himself as he exists in the realm of the dead. Suttree uses on himself a "dismembering gaze" that externalizes the aspects of himself that he is pained to accept. At the end of the novel, when he asserts "there is one Suttree and one Suttree only," he has come to the

conclusion that the parts of himself with which he was afraid to identify—his dead brother and his own eventual death—are in fact essential components of his identity that when externalized change the self into what it is not (461). After Suttree’s conversation with his double toward the end of the novel, he looks at the image and erases it: “Suttree’s cameo visage in the black glass watched him across his lamplit shoulder. He leaned and blew away the flame, his double, the image overhead” (414). In extinguishing his double, he is incorporating it into the unity of his self and denying that it is separate from who he is. He realizes, as Cooper suggests, that “horror is necessary to a life made ‘important’” (197). In order to live meaningfully, Suttree must include all forms of himself in the coherent picture of his identity.

Suttree comes full circle and meets again the pigeons beneath the bridge from the beginning of the story: “He sat in back of the skiff and sculled it slowly down beneath the bridge. As he passed under he raised his head and howled at the high black nave and pigeons unfolded fanwise from the arches and clattered toward the sun” (415). Suttree’s voice is newly born in an uproar for his own existence, and he lets loose the flock of freedom within himself and again sends it toward the light of life.

Phase two of Suttree’s repossession of self-creation is his cathartic purging of past nightmares under Mother She’s hallucinogenics. The geechee witch prepares concoctions and unguents, pulling her supplies out of an “ageblackened box of boardhard leather” compared to a priest’s “deathbed kit.” He consults the witch for insight into his near future, but instead receives the answer “[t]o know what will come is the same as to make it so,” harmonious with the existential approach of creating one’s own future. To Suttree’s question “[s]hould I go home” the witch answers “[i]t don’t make no difference

where you go,” since where he should go is a lesser concern than who he should be. After the witch feeds him the prepared mystical recipe, “a door closed on all that he had been” and Suttree begins a sequence of dreams reaching into his past and highlighting the feelings he had in his family’s Victorian style home in which “he knew...some soul lay dying” (427). Suttree wanders unstably home and finally, in his bed, “[h]e lay with his feet together and his arms at his sides like a dead king on an altar.” Suttree laid his past nightmares down to die and made space within himself to form a new self. In his newly available and empty self, he is “floating like the first germ of life adrift on the earth’s cooling sea, formless vacule of plasm trapped in a vapor drop and all creation yet to come.” He has reverted back to a state of existence that precedes the essence he will form. As Bell notes, Suttree undergoes a filtering process in which he is “unmanned and dehumanized.” Under the spells of Mother She, “[h]is body has been taken and rearranged; his self remains” (*The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* 96).

Suttree’s miserable bout of Typhoid fever causes him nightmares that lead him to realize his life is unique and that he is responsible for evading death’s reach. He parts with his Antisuttree in his declaration that “I am no otherbody.” In his sick dreams, he meets the dead with whom he is “going out of the world” (452); he is at a courthouse on trial, accused of causing disorder in a clock shop, killing the shop’s bird Tweetiepie, committing lycanthropy, and “[squandering] several ensuing years in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants,” and other unvirtuous individuals; he comes across a turtle hunter in a forest path who stops Suttree, at which time Suttree realizes the turtles in his sack “are not turtles,” but instead, humans; he sees a deathcart coming to pick him up; he

sees God “unlocking with enormous keys the gates of Hades” and releasing “a floodtide of screaming fiends and assassins” (457).

The ultimate realization that results from his dreams and delusions is the knowledge that “there is one Suttree and one Suttree only.” His near-death experience makes him aware that his belief in the Othersuttree he thought necessary for the completion of his identity is false: it is merely a mental construct that reflects his fear of death rather than a dead form parallel to his living self. Matthew Guinn notices that Suttree’s affirmation of his singularity is a “refutation of the abstract construct that Suttree has sustained” and argues that this refutation allows him to “focus on the imminent instead of the abstract” (113-114). Through his reevaluation and projection of himself, Suttree learns that the real self is comprised of his physical body, his situation, and the decisions he makes. Suttree did not choose to be beaten down by Typhoid fever, but he chose to emerge from his sickness with the will to recognize his uniqueness and focus on who he truly is.

Suttree’s bad faith extends to his over-identification with the place in which he enjoys residing. McAnally Flats has provided him a supportive community, but it is a community that has occupied his time and governed the person he was to be. The destruction of McAnally Flats to build an expressway saddens Suttree, yet inspires him to move on to a different place. He observes the destruction of the flats as if some creature too big for its own good were being killed and torn open to reveal “[b]rickwork of dried bloodcakes in flemish bond crumbling in a cloud of dust” and “dead mortar,” with “steel and pipes and old conduits reared out of the ground in clusters of agonized ganglia,” leaving nothing but rubble, “rows of doors,” and a “stairwell to nowhere” (464). The

death of McAnally Flats leaves another hole in Suttree's life that he must fill by seeking a new place to live and starting again the project of himself.^{6, 7}

Suttree's rebirth is grotesquely yet artfully continued with his discovery of a dead body resting in his home upon his return from the hospital. When he sees the man in his bed, he thinks a derelict slept in this home, believing it was unoccupied. Suttree takes the covers off the sleeping person and discovers a "foul deathshad bald with rot, flyblown and eyeless" (465). Suttree does not even attempt to rid the place of the dead body to restore his home to normal. Instead, he interprets the moment as the appropriate time to resettle elsewhere. The death further causes Suttree's dissociation with his home and motivates him to relocate and therefore reform his own identity. The death in his bed is like the death of the old Suttree and the closure of his home.⁸

We find Suttree at the end of the story exiting Knoxville and saying goodbye to his home, his friends, and his past self. He left everything he owned in a secret spot and took only "the simple human heart within him." In taking with him only his body, "there was nothing left of him to shed," and he departs on his journey like the Giacometti sculpture *L'Homme qui marche I*, which displays a tall, slender man seemingly made of the earth itself and defined by no features except its own extension of limbs, head, and the will to walk. He waited on the highway for a passerby to pick him up, and he watched a construction site nearby, a reflection of his own newly begun process of self-construction. When the construction crew's water boy comes over to Suttree to give him a drink, Suttree looks into the boy's eyes, in which he "beheld himself in wells of smoking cobalt, twinned and dark and deep in child's eyes, blue eyes with no bottoms like the sea"⁹ (471). This is the last reflection of himself that Suttree encounters in the

story, and instead of the deathly reflections he faced previously, now he sees unlimited, oceanic possibilities for a new self.

When a car picks him up, Suttree takes one last look behind him and sees that “the city lay smoking, the sad purlieus of the dead immured with the bones of friends and forebears.” What Suttree once knew is now a pile of dead matter that he has transcended. He denied the paralyzing grip of grief over lost loved ones and chose instead to reach for new relationships and occupations. He looks at the expressway under construction “where the ramp curved out into empty air and hung truncate with iron rods bristling among the vectors of nowhere,” a structure similar to his own self, the making of which has just resumed.

Suttree sees that where he previously stood hitchhiking on the highway was now “[a]n enormous lank hound,” the companion of whom is the huntsman, Death, whose “work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not.” Suttree’s dreams contained these hounds, “slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world.” He dismisses the hound with the imperative “[f]ly them,” and with his fleeing he claims his freedom from death and his resistance to evade its nullifying presence and reminders.

Suttree is conscious that he is a representative of all humanity in his sufferings, labors, and moments of transcendence. By choosing to come to terms with his past and move on to another part of the world, he is asserting his view of what a human should be: resilient, determined, and above the past. Sartre’s existential attitude not only posits that “man is responsible for himself” but also argues that “he is responsible for all men” (“Existentialism” 346). Suttree’s self-reconstructive actions are aimed at reconfiguring his conception of his own future, his conception of humanity, and his notion of how he

fits inside the web of others' lives. He recognizes what Sartre poses when stating "in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be" ("Existentialism" 346). Suttree has chosen his values and the values he thinks best for humanity, as Sartre maintains that "[t]o choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose" ("Existentialism" 346). When he speaks over the dead ragpicker's body "[a] man is all men. You have no right to your wretchedness" (422), he recognizes that humanity as represented by the ragpicker is far worse off than the humanity represented by Suttree's actions.

Suttree's example is not restricted to the world within the novel. Rather, as Martha C. Nussbaum suggests in her argument that literature contains moral value, Suttree's self-affirmation and self-creation exemplify the way to live when in similar circumstances. Nussbaum claims that "a responsible action...is a highly context-specific and nuanced and responsive thing whose rightness could not be captured in a description that fell short of the artistic" ("Literature and the Moral Imagination" 154). She offers that by reading with "moral attention," readers "become more responsive to [their] own life's adventure, more willing to see and to be touched by life" ("Literature and the Moral Imagination" 162). Her argument, in essence, is that literature speaks to us: "It speaks *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections" ("Perceptive Equilibrium" 171). William Prather considers *Suttree* a novel of moral value, stating it "is a novel about learning how to stay afloat, a metaphysical manual describing how to live in the river of life" (106). Richard Marius extends this argument, offering that Suttree's story exemplifies the human effort to

transcend death while still alive: “[t]o transcend death, we must meet it head-on, savor all its horrors, understand its finality, and live our lives in that understanding.” He continues, “[t]he names we find in McCarthy’s pages are like epitaphs, tombstones to dead times” (5).

Furthermore, it is Sartre’s conception of literature—specifically prose—that “the writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been laid bare” (15). In Suttree’s case, the object laid bare is life itself, and what is found in this revelation is life’s dual character of meaninglessness and utter responsibility to fill the void of meaning for oneself. As Marius asserts, “the seriousness of life has no final meaning, no ultimate, transcendent goal. For McCarthy meaning exists day by day by the fact that we keep on living. If we choose to live, that choice in itself is our meaning” (15). In Suttree’s progression from local derelict to departing artist, he exemplifies for readers and all humans the fortitude to take control of one’s life and lead oneself in the direction of full responsibility and potential.

While *Suttree* is a novel with moral value, Albert Camus potentially undermines this moral value by arguing that human life is meaningless and absurd. However, Camus’s insistence that a person rebel against the absurdity of life by living to one’s fullest capacity and taking advantage of the greatest quantity of opportunities creates an opening for a certain type of existential meaning. Therefore, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Sartre’s existentialism and argument for the urgent creation of oneself is compatible with Camus’s view of human existence and resulting ethic.

III. “NOTHINGNESS IS NOT A CURSE”: SUTTREE’S ABSURD REVOLT

And where did all these sages get the idea that man needs some normal, some virtuous wanting? What made them necessarily imagine that what man needs is necessarily a reasonably profitable wanting? Man needs only *independent* wanting, whatever this independence may cost and wherever it may lead.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*

On a night in the mountains of Gatlinburg, Cornelius Suttree makes a fire under a shelf of rock in the forest while a storm releases its mayhem over him, “a silver storm blowing down the eaves of the world” (284). After it passes, he lies on the ground, looking at the sky, the “cold indifferent dark, the blind stars beaded on their tracks and mitered satellites and geared and pinioned planets all reeling through the black of space” (284). The arena of all existence whirls and carries him as a speck through a miniature route of the galaxy to a destination within the barriers of earth’s aimless orbit and without the universe’s remote possibility of a plan. Suttree’s fire and chestnut add a glimmer to the landscape unseen by anyone but himself, yet to him they are just as necessary as the sun’s burning and the bird’s flight. His fire means warmth and power in a place that steals warmth and dominates creatures with a swift detachment. Suttree’s flame is inconsequential and may just as well be extinguished; Sisyphus’s rock would be just as well in eternal stasis, untouched and never seen. But something about Suttree’s and Sisyphus’s actions inject their immediate places with color and disturb the fugue of causation with the atonality of consciousness. The fire-maker and rock-bearer are accessories to the world. Suttree, Sisyphus, and Camus know the meaning of insignificance. The story of Suttree is one of revolt against the implications of insignificance, implications that have led some to destroy themselves and others to live in resignation. Suttree, on the other hand, will not leave the stage until he has exhausted his

voice, body, and mind. He takes after the stars' illumination and shoots his light through the dark void. He takes after the storm and screams into the emptiness of space and the fullness of matter. He makes what nothing else has made and what nothing else can imitate, configuring the unsolvable puzzle Robert L. Jarrett hints at in his view of the novel's fundamental problem: "Suttree's dilemma is our own: how to live authentically within the absurdist world in which he finds himself" (50).

Albert Camus's Philosophy of Absurdity

Camus's philosophy of absurdity outlines the absurd as "the confrontation of this irrational [world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (21). Similar to how an absurd argument results from contradictory premises and conclusions, absurd human life results from the contradictory need for significance in a universe where there is none. Sartre gives his own articulation of the absurd as follows:

Primary absurdity manifests a cleavage, the cleavage between man's aspirations to unity and the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature, between man's drive toward the eternal and the finite character of his existence, between the "concern" which constitutes his very essence and the vanity of his efforts. Chance, death, the irreducible pluralism of life and of truth, the unintelligibility of the real—all these are extremes of the absurd. ("An Explication of *The Stranger*")

Absurd existence, according to Camus, implies "a total absence of hope," whether it is the hope for an afterlife, for the achievement of one's ambitions, or for the importance of one's life and work. Absurdity implies "a continual rejection" of illusory beliefs that distract one from the reality of the universe and cover up absurdity with religion, ambition, or other forms of assigning meaning to life. "[A] conscious dissatisfaction"

with the insignificance of existence is essential to one's consciousness of the absurd since what keeps the absurd alive is the desire for a rational and significant universe (31).

McCarthy's works consistently portray the indifference of the universe toward human hope and the cleavage between the human mind and nature. In his short story "Wake for Susan," as Wes walks through the woods, he hears these words from "trees that spoke in behalf of the silent stars": "[t]he branching creek-rooted cottonwood cares not for the trees that sucked at this damp earth before its birth, but only for the earth, and the sunwarmth, and the seed. You walk here. Moonwarmed and wind-kissed, you walk here...for awhile" (4). In *The Orchard Keeper*, humanity is represented by "the green cadaver grin sealed in the murky waters of the peach pit, slimegreen skull with newts coiled in the eyesockets and a wig of moss" (224). In *Outer Dark*, Culla, her child, and the tinker take a walk in the dark, "stepping softly and soft their voices over the sandy road in shadows so foreshortened they seemed sprung and frenzied with a violence in which their creators moved with dreamy disconcert" (23). In *Child of God*, Lester Ballard "cast about among the stars for some kind of guidance but the heavens wore a different look that Ballard did not trust" (181). In *The Gardener's Son*, Martha indicates the disconnect between human values and the material world: "Once people are dead they're not good nor bad. They're just dead" (94). In *Blood Meridian*, the judge tells of how "the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there.... For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others" (256). In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole lives in a world that "seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the

dead” (301). In *The Crossing*, when Billy Parham looks into the wolf’s eyes, he sees a “world burning on the shore of an unknowable void. A world construed out of blood...it was that nothing save blood had power to resonate against that void which threatened hourly to devour it” (74). In *Cities of the Plain*, Eduardo tells John Grady that people “have in their minds a picture of how the world will be.... The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of” (135). In *The Stonemason*, Ben reflects on his father’s hands and how his work was Sisyphean work in a universe indifferent to human creation: “[H]ands I never tired to look at. Shaped in the image of God. To make the world. To make it again and again. To make it in the very maelstrom of its undoing” (133). In *No Country for Old Men*, Chigurh explains that the world is indifferent to human decisions: “A person’s path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning” (259). In *The Road*, the father

walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. (130)

In *The Sunset Limited*, White believes that “[s]uffering and human destiny are the same thing. Each is a description of the other” (55), and the story ends with Black asking God why he was meant to be in White’s life, a question that is followed by God’s silence.

In his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus highlights three main consequences of living in full awareness of life’s absurdity: revolt, freedom, and passion. Revolt is at once a rebellion against the negating force of absurdity and against the opportunity to

escape absurdity, but it is also a vehement disgust with the irrational. Camus calls this revolt “a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity” (54). While being conscious of the disconnect between human reason and the indifferent universe, the absurd individual refuses to be nullified by life’s utter lack of meaning yet also refuses to fill the void of meaninglessness. Revolt is ultimately “the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it” (54).

Absurd life gives birth to existential freedom by eliminating the limits imposed on the individual by an all-powerful god, “a concern for the future,” and “the demands of a purpose” (56-58). Since there is no god, there is no divine fate and, thus, humanity is not determined to live a certain way under certain rules. Furthermore, since there is no afterlife, one is free from the pressures of attaining passage to that future. The only thing that exists for the individual is the sequence of nows that lead to one’s death. One is free to live the now however one pleases. Camus claims that, “turned toward death...the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him” (59). This passionate attention is consciousness in its freshly discovered liberation from restraint. One realizes that the nearness of death prompts the unfolding of life into all corners of experience: thus, “death and the absurd are here the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live” (60).

In a universe without meaning or binding values, what gives the absurd man reason to live is passion. Absurd living, according to Camus, means “[n]othing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given” (60). With life’s impending cessation, one must take advantage of the pleasures of life and the opportunities available, as many as one possibly can. Camus insists that if

“freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then...what counts is not the best living but the most living” (61).

Suttree’s Revolt

McCarthy presents Suttree as a character fully aware of the absurdity of existence. The unbearable weight of a painful and insignificant existence feeds his longing to die. On a night wandering through an apple orchard, natural forces beat down upon him until he cries for them to go ahead and defeat him. As “lightning marked him out” and “trees reared like horses” with their “screaming leaves” and “fruit fell hard to the ground like the disordered clop of hooves,” Suttree stood among the mayhem and “pointed out the darkened heart within him and cried for light” (366); the light he wanted, however, was not the light of life and wisdom, but the lightning strike of instantaneous death. He calls out in his suffering “[i]f there be any art in the weathers of this earth. Or char these bones to coal” (366), a reasoning that requests a scheme to life’s darkness and pain or else an end to his meaningless suffering.

In the middle of his debacle of depravity with Joyce, she is arrested and returns from her captivity with more weight on her body. His depression deepens as his once object of desire grows grotesque and his life enters a new level of boredom. Without the pleasures that had distracted him from the void of meaningless existence, he again faces the bare ugliness of living and looks at himself in the mirror as something not far from the possibility of death: “[h]e surveyed the mirror, letting the jaw go slack, eyes vacant. How would he look in death? For there were days this man so wanted for some end to things that he’d have taken up his membership among the dead, all souls that ever were, eyes bound with night” (405).

One symptom of absurd existence is yearning for relief from life's intolerable chaos, a feeling upon which Anne Sexton reflects in her poem "Wanting to Die." Sexton relates her experience with suicide, admitting that it is a "lust" (142) like all other desires, which attract one to their needle and drug, yet reduce the body and mind to nothing at the fulfillment of desire. Suicide, according to Sexton, waits for her, and when she is willing to die, it offers its medicine to cure her life's pain:

Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say,

and yet she waits for me, year after year,

to so delicately undo an old wound,

to empty my breath from its bad prison. (143)

Suttree's old wounds are several, and his perpetual consciousness of his misfortune makes the thought of suicide a popular guest to his mind. However, Suttree does not allow his cognizance of life's absurdity to diminish his will to live. He takes his breath and manages his bad prison in spite of death's eventual triumph. Frank W. Shelton observes that another aspect of Suttree's avoidance of suicide is his lack of commitment: "The act of suicide, paradoxically, involves a commitment, and Suttree is not capable of any kind of commitment" (156). Shelton reasons that "[m]any of his acts, however, are in essence invitations to death. So while not consciously willing or able to kill himself, certainly he subconsciously seeks death by immersing himself in the destructive element,¹⁰ in a city where death is ever present and, in Alvarez's words, 'a random happening'" (156).

Shelton also mentions how Suttree's trip to Gatlinburg is another form of suicide. Shelton argues that "it is reasonable to assume on one level that he is attempting to purify himself through contact with nature." However, as Shelton demonstrates, "[i]n McCarthy's cosmology...nature is not benevolent, and this trip too becomes a form of suicide" (156). Rather than integrating himself in the scheme of nature, Suttree takes a beating from nature and rediscovers all of the ways he does not belong. In Bell's words, Suttree undergoes a "surrender to self-annihilation" when in the mountains of Gatlinburg (*The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* 90). It is as though Suttree must reduce himself to nothing in order to begin reassembling his life.

Despite the close resemblance of Suttree's actions to self-annihilation, Suttree rejects suicide as an option for his life. When he discovers that the ragman has killed himself, he is ashamed of the ragpicker's decision, appalled that he would represent humanity with an act of self-destruction. Suttree reads in the act of suicide a blatant claim to defeat and impotence that is too embarrassing for his psyche. As an alternative to thoughts of suicide, Suttree identifies with, as Shelton notes, the "process" of life rather than the end it approaches. Shelton posits that "[h]e sees that the universe is not a fixed thing which one can ever expect to comprehend logically; it is a process. In order to be a part of that process, Suttree must accept the necessity of choice, but a choice now for life instead of death" (158).

Peter Josyph, on the other hand, is not satisfied with the conclusion that Suttree rejects death altogether. Rather, Josyph asserts that death's choosing Suttree still matters. Josyph takes the suicide's watch at the beginning and makes an objective correlative of it. Josyph imagines that

Suttree himself is a dead man's wristwatch—worn, naturally, on the inside of the wrist where a man's pulse is taken, signifying, along with everything else in this novel, not just that one can be dead and alive at the same time, but that one *must* be so. (8)

In this case, Suttree's revolt against the indifference of the universe and the inevitability of death makes a difference only insofar as life, the other wing of existence, is kept elevated and in motion, in balance with the wing of death. So, while Suttree's choice is a crucial determinant in extending the duration of his flight, the destination remains in sight and ever approaching.

In his consciousness of life's absurdity, Suttree lives in close parallel to Camus's Sisyphus. Sisyphus, punished by the gods for various immoral actions,¹¹ is sentenced to an eternity of rolling an enormous stone to the top of a mountain only to have it roll to the bottom for him to repeat drudgingly the meaningless labor ad infinitum. Sisyphus's "scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life" earn him his eternal punishment and render him an "absurd hero" (120). Despite his unendurable penalty, "in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing" (120), Sisyphus revolts against the annihilating force of his fate by maintaining a willingness to carry on and making his work the activity that defines his strength of body and consciousness. He is "the master of his days" (123), the negation of the gods, the supplier of his own values, which, in an absurd universe, are only freedom and the choice to live in awareness of absurdity.

Similarly, for the character who navigates the waste-filled river and moves across its murky filth where life is smothered under garbage and dead matter, work as fisherman

is “futile and hopeless labor” (“The Myth of Sisyphus” 119). The Tennessee River shares the same condition as that of the Thames in T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*: “The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights” (177-179). Similarly, Suttree’s river is more human trash than it is water:

He watched idly surface phenomena, gouts of sewage faintly working, gray clots of nameless waste and yellow condoms roiling slowly out of the murk like some giant form of fluke or tapeworm. The watcher’s face rode beside the boat, a sepia visage yawning in the scum, eyes veering and watery grimace. A welt curled sluggishly on the river’s surface as if something unseen had stirred in the deeps and small bubbles of gas erupted in oily spectra. (7)

The invasion of muck and waste into the habitat in which Suttree’s prey resides is hardly encouraging for his work. This garbage pool is not only a formidable workplace but also an uninviting home and a poor sight to see every day of Suttree’s life in Knoxville.

And yet he persists, and, after each episode of his life, he returns to his home on the river and casts his fishing nets. Suttree makes his home inside the act of fishing, which is a search for life at its very roots in the place of all creatures’ origin: water. Recognizing the sign of faith in the fish, Suttree reflects on his own lack of faith, claiming “he might have been a fisher of men in another time but these fish seemed task enough for him” (14). His occupation is at once an affirmation of his energy and existence and a negation of the Catholic god of his childhood, whose illusion dissipated and gave way to a clear view of hell on earth.

Suttree revolts against the status passed down to him by his family and instead takes root in the slums of Knoxville and the waste river. Shelton proposes that Suttree's choice of residence reflects his willingness to live in full consciousness of life's absurdity:

If, as Camus maintains, in an absurd universe all usual codes lack meaning, no locale would better mirror that situation than the chaotic slums of the modern city. By living in McAnally Flats, Suttree makes an effort to confront a social and philosophical reality to which those living respectable lives blind themselves.¹²

(56)

Josyph counters this notion of Suttree's choice to live in the slums, offering instead that Suttree's nature requires abandonment of the alternative life of economic pursuit and adoption of the only other option available to him:

I would ask you not to dismiss Suttree's often seedy situation as *a choice he has made*, and to warn you off defining his or anybody's limits of endurance. True, here is a man who, built to last like a Roman road, is so inured to swallowing shit that he has to go into the mountains to starve, freeze, break down and flounder around in order to re-recognize its taste. But a man who can endure being smashed into pieces might be broken irreparably by allegedly more gainful employment. (Josyph 18)

If Suttree's residence and employment on the river is not a choice, it at least is a compliance with the necessity of his situation. Rather than kill himself, he takes the only alternative left, which is to live in life's lowest stratum of quality. He will, however, compensate for this quality by means of passion.

Suttree is not McCarthy's only work that scholars have blended with the philosophy propounded in Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus." Mark Busby examines how the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* "is a parable in which the digger is the embodiment of Camus' Sisyphus, who achieves spirit by will in contrast to those around who live inauthentic lives" (94). The epilogue of *Blood Meridian* tracks a team of workers in repetitive labor, digging holes until they are reduced by the absurdity of their lives to "mechanisms":

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (351)

Minus the God who has put the rock there, this epilogue illustrates another Sisyphean scenario. The laborer, like *Suttree*, is an absurd hero who strikes the fire of life in the face

of life's absurdity and shouts into the void of nihilism for the sake of hearing his own voice against that dark and numbing threat to existence. Busby elucidates the role of Camus's Sisyphus in *Blood Meridian*:

Blood Meridian, perhaps more than any other McCarthy text, examines the condition that existentialists refer to as the absurd—a violent world without God marked by death, conflict, chance, suffering, and guilt, where the single individual is on his own, often at the mercy of large forces beyond his control. (94)

This violent world is the same world Suttree inhabits, a world in which sewers cave in, precipices of the earth fall, and storms percuss down on humans with no halt. Busby concludes that

Camus' respect for the myth of Sisyphus is an antidote to pessimism by declaring that the single individual can assert his consciousness over despair and through an act of will achieve a humanity seemingly denied by a mere consideration of fact.

Roll the rock, dig the hole, strike the fire—essence transcends existence. (95)

Similarly, Suttree achieves an essence that is unique and that, like Sisyphus's resilience, glides over the gradient of annihilating pessimism and escapes the binding materiality of the world.

Suttree's Freedom

Suttree, McCarthy's absurd hero of Knoxville, Tennessee, lives in existential freedom from the restricting, deceitful control of the Catholic church. After he helps Leonard throw Leonard's dead father in the river, Suttree visits the Church of the Immaculate Conception, where he and his family attended Mass when he was young. He contemplates the statues of Christ,¹³ “[a]gonized beneath his muricate crown,” and Mary,

“Mater alchimia,” reflecting upon how “[t]his statuary will pass” and how “[t]his kingdom of fear and ashes” will likewise come to an end (253). He sees the idols of this church as accurate representations of decaying human life rather than the exemplars of eternal life they were intended to be. He remembers how “[a] thousand hours or more he’s spent in this sad chapel,” “so many black Fridays in terror of his sins,” “[v]iceridden child, heart rotten with fear” (253). For Suttree, being Catholic means being deceived by the illusion of transcending death and being limited by preposterous expectations that target the passions of existence and forbid their enjoyments. With a similar doubt in the existence of God as Dostoevsky’s Kirilov, who proclaimed “[m]an has done nothing but invent God so as to go on living, and not kill himself” (812), Suttree understands what God’s absence entails. Despite this grim understanding, Suttree recognizes, as Robert L. Jarrett points out, that “[t]o retain faith is to live inauthentically in the past” (46). Jarrett further explicates that McCarthy’s positioning of Suttree among the religious architecture of his past achieves what Andrew Bartlett calls a “discourse of archeology,” which “positions itself at a distance from any authoritative pretensions to transcending suffering or mortality by attachment to allegorical theology or to conventional traditions of decency” (Bartlett 9).

Suttree sees through the guise of the church’s promise of eternal life, recognizing instead the ultimate fate of humanity: death, needless of the weekly ceremony invented to transcend its enveloping grasp. He remembers hearing about “[l]ives proscribed and doom in store,” and deciphering existence’s gloom in the elements of Mass: “doom’s adumbration in the smoky censer, the faint creak of the tabernacle door, the tasteless bread and draining the last of the wine from the cruet in a corner and counting the money

in the box” (254). The Catholic church, to Suttree, is a place where bourgeois men and women act out their supposed grief and together illustrate the afterlife for which they share a foundational hope. He recalls “men rich with vitality,” “enjoying the respite from their black clad keepers with their neat little boots, their spectacles, the deathreek of the dark and half scorched muslin that they wore” (254). He reflected how, unfailingly, they would come equipped with their learned faithfulness and commitment to continuing Christ’s legacy: “[f]illed with tales of sin and unrepentant deaths and visions of hell and stories of levitation and possession and dogmas of semitic damnation for the tacking up of the paraclete” (254).

The priest who interrupts the sleep following Suttree’s recollections proclaims “God’s house is not exactly the place to take a nap,” to which Suttree boldly replied “It’s not God’s house” (255). His declaration is all at once a rejection of the notion that the Catholic church knows and offers God’s counsel, a denial of God’s presence in the world, and an expression of unbelief in the existence of God. Furthermore, Suttree’s announcement affirms the notion that a church should be humanity’s house, open to the roaming and shelter-less suffering, available to lost souls such as himself.

Edwin T. Arnold gathers that “[a]lthough Suttree denies he is ‘saved’ (122), declares himself a ‘defrocked’ Catholic (191), his struggle indicates otherwise.” Arnold continues, reminding how Suttree feels that “even a false adumbration of the world of the spirit is better than none at all” (*Suttree* 21). Arnold concludes that “[b]y the end he has entered that world of the spirit and has acknowledged its power” (Arnold 60). Although Arnold makes an important observation of Suttree’s enlightenment at the end of the

novel, Suttree's transformation is more of a realization of himself and his freedom to act than it is a connection with a spirit world.

Having denied religion, Suttree lives an existence that is groundless and without a guiding ethic. As his bouts of alcoholism and participation in his friends' misdeeds suggest, Suttree lives as if, like Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov proclaims, "everything is permitted" (*The Brothers Karamazov* 263). Arnold explains that "Suttree attempts to excuse his failures by insisting on the insignificance and 'nothingness' of life" (60), as when he is talking with the sheriff after his son's funeral and says "[n]o one cares. It's not important" (*Suttree* 157). Suttree's unlawful acts include consuming alcohol during prohibition; feeding the economic system of prostitution; assisting Leonard in hiding his father's dead body so that Leonard can continue collecting his unemployment checks (241-252); driving a police car into the river (440-442); and, more of an instance of absurd immorality, being drunk-asleep in a van while his friends robbed a drugstore, which earned him time in the workhouse (321).

Despite Suttree's frequent episodes of immorality, he is nevertheless a consistent point of moral guidance for his friends. Rather than thriving on the void of morality, Suttree falters in its antigravity and strives to make his friends aware of when they are upside-down and out of contact with the ground of human decency. Adherents to Camus's absurdism, like Sartrean existentialism, do not rejoice in the non-existence of a sacred ethic; rather, they are discomforted by this hollow absence. Camus admits that "the certainty of a God giving a meaning to life far surpasses in attractiveness the ability to behave badly with impunity" (67). Similarly, Sartre asserts "[t]he existentialist...thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a

heaven of ideas disappears along with Him” (349). Nevertheless, Suttree enjoys the freedom and passion Camus prescribes to the absurd man.

Suttree’s Passion

Beneath the surface of Suttree’s laborious despair of living in purposelessness and pain, beneath his constant consciousness of his uniqueness and utter responsibility for the entirety of his existence, beneath all of this including the dread of death is the will to stack up pleasures and the knowledge of how to do so. Suttree’s passion for life is, all at once, an escape from life’s pains, a revolt against insignificance’s annihilating abyss, and an affirmation of the only Suttree in history. He pushes his limits with alcohol, takes advantage of the nearest prostitute, spoils his and others’ money on luxuries, and enjoys all pleasures to the point of shameless depravity. Nevertheless, Suttree’s commitment to satisfying his bodily appetites is a way of reconciling the absurdity of existence and choosing to keep that absurdity alive.

In an absurd world, according to Camus, “[t]here can be no question of holding forth on ethics” (66). With actions seemingly moral and actions seemingly immoral, “[t]he absurd merely confers an equivalence on the consequences of those actions” (67). Suttree’s hedonistic behavior is not followed with negative consequences, nor is his praiseworthy behavior followed by positive consequences. Suttree’s selfishness is obvious when shortly after denying the derelict Smokehouse a coin, claiming “[m]ine’s the greater need” (245), he goes to the B & J to spend his money on alcohol and a prostitute. The intensity of his passion is such that he moves quickly from place to place, accompanying his stranger-lover in a drunken stupor, progressing with her through every

sexual stage until his body has had enough and “[h]e [falls] asleep sprawled against her” (247).

Suttree’s limitless nights often end in hazy consciousness, if not total loss thereof, and the lack of memory the following morning. This absence of concern with excessive pleasure is the approach to living absurdly that Camus terms “Don Juanism” (69). Camus explains that Don Juan lives according to an “ethic of quantity” in which the aim of life is to collect as many experiences as possible, and in his case, as many women as possible. Whereas Don Juan focuses on maximizing quantity and variety of loves, Suttree is concerned with maximizing all pleasures. In contrast with an ethic of quality, which strives to build the individual’s moral character, an ethic of quantity strives to equip the individual with as many experiences as possible, ultimately compiling the individual into a collection of experiences such that there is nothing left to his/her core identity except the subjectivity stringing all experiences together. The loss of identity, rather than being a detriment to the individual’s existence, is actually an advantage to his/her freedom and passion: “Quite a different love disturbs Don Juan, and this one is liberating. It brings with it all the faces in the world, and its tremor comes from the fact that it knows itself to be mortal. Don Juan has chosen to be nothing” (73). Passion becomes more appealing than substantive selfhood, and the nothingness of oneself allows Don Juan and Suttree to approach each moment of life with spontaneity and strength. In a sense, through an ethic of quantity, Suttree and Don Juan can become more than they are by increasing themselves as they increase their number of pleasures. Rather than remaining a unity of character developed by an ethic of quality, the absurd heroes opt for the multiplication of the self: “The absurd man multiplies here again what he cannot unify. Thus he discovers

a new way of being which liberates him at least as much as it liberates those who approach him” (74). Through absurd living, one can live a life no one else has, comprised of a unique and never-before-felt sequence of experiences.

Suttree exercises his adventurous pursuit of pleasure with his friends J-Bone, Richard, Ethel, and Callahan in a bar-hop starting at the B & J. Suttree and his gang, on the way to the next tavern, pass through an alley “where a man naked to the waist palmed to them a pint bottle in a paper bag” (75). At the tavern, “Suttree became enamored of a ripe young thing with black hair who wrought on the dance floor an obscene poem, her full pale thighs shining in the dim light where she whirled” (76). In his indulgence of sexual longing and alcohol, “[h]e began to grow queasy,” and “[t]he seeping roachstained walls spun past in a wretched carousel” (77). Suttree pushes the limits of his pleasures to the point of absurdity in which he approaches the elimination of himself, the vanishing of the pleasure-seeker. He passes in and out of dreams, between which he sweeps from room to room of the tavern in an attempt to escape his sickness, but he runs out of time and “[h]is gorge gave way and the foul liquors in his stomach welled and spewed” (78). Suttree’s longing is to consume everything possible before the end of life so that death has not deprived him of much more than he has already experienced.

Suttree’s alcoholism, however, is indicative of not only his passionate revolt against absurd life, but also his desire to escape that absurdity. Frank W. Shelton realizes that Suttree’s “drinking and mindless fighting are attempts to blot out consciousness, which in its ultimate form could be accomplished only by death itself” (156). Shelton continues, diagramming how this impulse to end his existence combined with his goal to live a fulfilling life is proof of Suttree’s inherent dissonance of consciousness: “[h]is

search for both heightened reality and escape from reality is yet another indication of the ambiguity and uncertainty in which he lives” (156). Suttree’s inconsistent attitude is both a consequence of the absurdity of the universe and an indication of consciousness’s freedom. At the heart of absurdism is the dichotomy of a universe bound by determinism and a consciousness whose string is attached to that determinism but whose kite sails above it in free flight. *Suttree*, arguably a work of absurdist literature, demonstrates this dichotomy in its phenomenological prose and its promotion of absurd revolt.

***Suttree* as the Absurd Work of Art**

Camus’s philosophy of absurdity not only characterizes the content of McCarthy’s *Suttree* but also the form of the novel. Camus’s concept of a person consists of nothing but the individual’s present subjectivity. *Suttree* instills that subjectivity in the reader, making felt the emotions, thoughts, and perceptions of the protagonist. McCarthy writes in hyper-realistic descriptions. Vereen M. Bell describes McCarthy’s style as “photorealistic in its precision” and “charismatically rich” (*The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* xii), and Peter Josyph complicatedly and comically remarks that “McCarthy has turned the trick of making objects that look as if they don’t want to be there look as if they do want to be there; want to be there, that is, looking as if they don’t” (12). McCarthy’s prose is as omnirhythmic and dodecaphonic as Bill Evans’s jazz piano solos.¹⁴ This style dominates the narrative’s progression and perceives the world through the eyes and interpretive gaze of Suttree. The details of every scene are lush yet overwhelming, carnivalesque yet grotesque in their specificity. Surroundings are built completely with words, and actions are constructed often movement by movement. The character’s subjectivity merges with the reader’s subjectivity as hardly anything is left out

of each experience and stream of consciousness. Suttree is primarily a being that experiences, and he is present to his situation as a neutral perceiver. As Camus presents his notion of experiencing, “[f]or the absurd man it is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing. Everything begins with lucid indifference” (94).

Scenes like this one, of Suttree making dinner in his room, demonstrate the precision of McCarthy’s imagism in which he meticulously invents a stage of infinite uniqueness:

Inside Suttree lit a lamp and adjusted the wick. With the same match he lit the burners of the little kerosene stove, two rosettes of pale blue teeth in the gloom. He set a saucepan of beans to warm and got down his skillet and sliced onions into it. He unwrapped a packet of hamburger. Small moths kept crossing the mouth of the lamp chimney and spinning burntwinged into the hot grease. He picked them out on the tines of the brass fork with which he tended the cookery and flipped them against the wall. When all was ready he scraped the food from the pans onto a plate and took it together with the lamp to the small table by the window and laid everything out on the oilcloth and sat and ate leisurely. A barge passed upriver and he watched through the cracked glass the dip and flicker of her spotlight negotiating the narrows beneath the bridge, the long white taper shifting in quick sidelong sweeps, the shape of the beam breaking upriver over the trees with incredible speed and crossing the water like a comet. A white glare flooded the cabin and passed on. Suttree blinked. The dim shape of the barge came hovering. He watched the red lights slide in the dark. The houseboat rocked easy in

the wake, the drums mumbling under the floor and the skiff sidling and bumping outside in the night. Suttree wiped his plate with a piece of bread and sat back. He fell to studying the variety of moths pressed to the glass, resting his elbows on the sill and his chin on the back of his hand. Supplicants of light. Here one tinted easter pink along the edges of his white fur belly and wings. Eyes black, triangular, a robber's mask. Furred and wizened face not unlike a monkey's and wearing a windswept ermine shako. Suttree bent to see him better. What do you want? (89)

The reader almost smells the onions and hamburger, hears the scraping of the pan, squints at the barge's beam flooding the cabin, moves with Suttree across the floor, bends down with him to magnify the moth's face. Each sentence of McCarthy's illustration is like a stop motion frame fastidiously arranged and fluidly linked with every moment before and after. Suttree's seamless subjectivity plays in the reader's mind like a strip of film. Its thorough chronicle of minutia is akin to the attention of Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," who, "nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (10), and whose collection of phenomena at once propounds the immensity of his environment and reduces his subjectivity to a mere perceiver.

In addition to the descriptive writing that mirrors the absurd man's subjectivity, the fragmented narrative also reflects absurd existence's meaningless sequence of experiences. Although the novel's sections are laid out for the most part chronologically, each section does not rely on the events from surrounding sections to fulfill its own unity and completion. One can enter the story from anywhere as if into an episode from a television show with independent plots. Bell reflects on how *Suttree* is structured to

reflect the chaotic nature of the universe: “Where all of life is motion, rich episodes follow upon one another with chaotic improvidence, the time-spans between them—their temporal relationships unmarked” (“The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy” 34).

A further qualification of Camus’s absurd work of art is that the work must remain faithful to portraying human life as absurd. It must refrain from appealing to any hope, since hope would only be an illusion distracting one from life’s absurdity. In establishing the requirements for an absurd work, Camus asserts that “[i]f the commandments of the absurd are not respected, if the work does not illustrate divorce and revolt, if it sacrifices to illusions and arouses hope, it ceases to be gratuitous” (102). *Suttree* depicts the divorce between the universe’s silence and the human need for meaning but still incorporates illusions and hopes into its narrative. Despite these attempts to disfigure life’s absurdity for the benefit of the suffering, these attempts at illusion and hope are either integrated into life’s absurdity or rendered useless.

One theme that might be mistaken as a positive conclusion about life’s meaning is the hope that human compassion and the mutual support of a community will ease a person’s suffering and provide a haven from the absurdity of existence. *Suttree* resolves that “even the damned in hell have the community of their suffering” (464), which is his way of accepting his loneliness, lack of family, homelessness, and criminality. However, shared suffering fails to provide meaning to his life, and, furthermore, it fails to allow him to escape absurdity. In fact, communal suffering, and mutual support throughout that suffering, reinforces his life’s absurdity, solidifying the absurd as an inherent property of human existence and maintaining the absurd as the reason for which he and others commune.

Despite communality's failure to provide meaning, Suttree is still able to understand himself better by identifying with all of humanity. William Prather suggests that Suttree achieves a "growing sense of humanity, his growing realization that the aspects of life that are of key importance tend to unite members of humankind, rather than dividing or isolating them in pockets or strata of exclusivity" (111). Life, death, family, friends, love, and fear are a few things through which Suttree unites with others. Rather than treading through existence in solitary suffering, he steps aboard the lives of others so the journey will not be intolerable. Robert L. Jarrett similarly poses that "in the 'fellowship of the doomed' of McAnally Flats, Suttree finds a paradoxical affirmation of life lacking in his former, respectable existence as upper-class scion, undergraduate, and father" (38). This affirmation of life is compatible with absurdity in that it designates absurdity as the basis of fellowship. In knowing what challenges humans face, the community of sufferers and the fellowship of the doomed can unite and face that absurdity in all directions, leaving no gap unseen.

Suttree's departure from Knoxville in the final scene is proof of the inadequacy of communal support to alleviate suffering and provide meaning to Suttree's life. Although he is happy interacting with his friends and is sorry to say goodbye to them, he envisions a life for himself separate from these friends. Suttree is constantly rediscovering his solitude, as shown by his deserting his family, Reese's family, his hometown, and Joyce. He highlights the impermanence of himself and the places he inhabits by moving from place to place, forming limited connections with the people and the environment. He derives happiness from forming familial bonds with others to fill the emptiness created by his abandoning his family, as when he and Reese's family "sat for dinner it was a tight

fit and Suttree looking around the table couldnt (sic) help smiling” (*Suttree* 312).

However, bonds such as this one are short lived. Absurdity returns dissatisfaction to Suttree’s life every moment that he begins to feel as if he belongs in the life of someone else. Wanda’s death, Joyce’s outburst, Leonard’s mission, Suttree’s uncle’s visit, Harrogate’s criminal schemes, Ab Jones’s final battle with the police¹⁵—all of these events sever the ties between Suttree and them, leaving him alone again to proceed with his own absurd existence until the next partner is found.

Until then, Suttree is happy knowing he has himself, and he leaves Knoxville, taking nothing except “the simple human heart within him” (468). He invites into his days the happiness that comes from living in-itself, as does Camus’s Meursault, who is sentenced to death for a murder even he does not understand. Meursault, listening to the sounds outside of his cell for signs of the prison guard’s and death’s final coming, is relieved at dawn’s appearance:

Maman used to say that you can always find something to be happy about. In my prison, when the sky turned red and a new day slipped into my cell, I found out that she was right. Because I might just as easily have heard footsteps and my heart could have burst. Even though I would rush to the door at the slightest shuffle, even though, with my ear pressed to the wood, I would wait frantically until I heard the sound of my own breathing, terrified to find it so hoarse, like a dog’s panting, my heart would not burst after all, and I would have gained another twenty-four hours. (*The Stranger* 113)

The footsteps of death also haunt Suttree,¹⁶ and his only answer to them is to make a dialogue of them with his own footsteps, magnifying his will to walk and further create his life in a place not so painted with his past and death's million faces.

Departing from Knoxville, Suttree feels, as Meursault feels at the end of his life, that he can live life again without any discouragement from knowing the universe's indifference, death's certainty, and life's meaninglessness. We can easily imagine Meursault's final thoughts running through Suttree's head:

And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again.

(The Stranger 122-123)

Meursault's departure from life ends his story as if on a page mid-way through a book. Similarly, the story of Suttree's life is inconclusive, but in this case it is the reader who longs to see his life's continuation and is deprived of that vision. One of the several questions to be asked is whether Suttree moves on in hope of a more fulfilling life than we have witnessed. Or, from the reader's perspective, what exactly do we hope for Suttree's future? Camus has taught that hope is unnecessary because it is futile and, furthermore, metaphysical suicide. What is necessary for the individual to live in fulfillment of his own life is to live with passion, as Meursault and Suttree have done.

Despite the many existential and absurdist analyses of *Suttree*, the novel is neither an affirmation of existentialism or absurdism, nor a novel exploring the possibilities of either philosophy. As Sartre mentions when analyzing Camus's *The Stranger*, the novel

is not an explanation or a justification of the theory of absurdity. Sartre admits that “the absurdity of the human condition is its sole theme,” but argues that the novel itself contains only “the theory of the novel of absurdity,” rather than the theory of absurdity. It is a work of art that stems from its creator’s thoughts and is “a work detached from a life, unjustified and unjustifiable, sterile, momentary, already forsaken by its author, abandoned for other present things. And that is how we must accept it, as a brief communion between two men, the author and the reader, beyond reason, in the realm of the absurd.” *The Stranger* and *Suttree*, once written and read, become part of the world and share that world’s indifference to humanity. They are stories that record the progression of a few characters throughout their lives. But, just as history becomes frozen in its place, left still to be observed by passersby, so too do these stories remain on display for the living to ask whether they have felt, what Meursault and Suttree felt, that “nothingness is not a curse” (*Suttree* 153).

Much of my discussion of *Suttree* and existentialism has focused on Suttree as an individual; however, human existence is nothing without other humans. The application of Sartre’s existentialism and Camus’s absurdism to Suttree’s story benefits significantly from the addition of Martin Heidegger’s ethic of care, which I will incorporate into the existential examination of *Suttree* in the next chapter. Suttree’s hyper-isolation prevents him from engaging with other humans and the world. His progression from feeling lost in the world to feeling grounded in his existence demonstrates the relevance of Heidegger’s ethic of care to Suttree’s story and to human existence in general.

IV. “HE SCARCE COULD TELL WHERE HIS BEING ENDED OR THE WORLD BEGAN”: SUTTREE AND MARTIN HEIDEGGER’S ETHIC OF CARE

Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree* is, at heart, the story of one man’s search for his life’s meaning. If the meaning of life according to Jean-Paul Sartre is to act and the meaning of life according to Albert Camus is to revolt, then the meaning of life according to Martin Heidegger is “care,” which means engaging with the world, other people, and oneself with authentic concern. These existentialists’ perspectives can be illustrated by the following ideas from philosopher Jeffrey Gordon’s essay on the meaning of life:

We are mistakenly led to think of the meaning of life as a datum, a fact, a possible object of knowledge. Yet meaningfulness in relation to life connotes not a propositional content, but *a manner of being*....

Investing our life once again with our passion, we no longer have a motive to raise the question of its meaning. For the investment of passion is its meaningfulness....

Our engagement in life always dances astride the abyss of our possible fall.

Meaning is a kind of grace. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the question. (Gordon 29)

Life’s meaning as a “manner of being” is what Sartre strives to articulate when proposing that acting defines being. The “investment of passion” is what Camus promotes when arguing that one must live as many experiences as possible in spite of the absurd. And “a kind of grace” is what Heidegger intends to reveal in disclosing that the meaning of

human existence is embedded in the way we connect with ourselves and others in everyday situations and interactions.

Life's meaning is crafted through associations between oneself and one's world. The dissociation of people and their environment ruptures meaning, leaving individuals alienated and without purpose. Suttree, in an attempt to separate himself from his family and the institutions into which they ushered him, largely removes himself from society and, thereby, undermines the significance of his existence. His reclusive lifestyle prevents him from forming meaningful relationships with others—beyond a few friends—and from realizing his identity in the context of society. Martin Heidegger proposes that the meaning of existence is found in everyday concern for, and engagement with, the immediate environment that one considers one's world. Suttree's everyday engagement with his work, friends, and those whose suffering is similar to his reveals Suttree's potential for developing richly meaningful connections with his world. His wide array of experiences from college dropout to fisherman, from inmate to white pal of the black community during racial segregation in the early 1950s presents a story to which many can relate, a story that invites the reader to examine the way in which he/she engages with the world and what else can be done to feel deeply about something worthwhile.

Martin Heidegger's Theory of the Meaning of Being

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger pursues a phenomenological investigation of what it means to be human. He refers to the Being, or existence, of humans as "Dasein." Heidegger argues that the meaning of Dasein is care, which to Heidegger, means concern for, and engagement with, objects and people in the world. The ways in

which one engages with the world defines, characterizes, and particularizes one's own existence and care.

When a person lives in the mode of carrying out the usual, necessary tasks of the day, one engages with the world in the mode of "everydayness." This mode of living requires minimal conscious thought. In everydayness, one lives in "inauthenticity" since all other people share the activities without much differentiation. A person feels everydayness and inauthenticity when driving a car, standing in line at the grocery store, digging a hole, brushing one's teeth, going to the restroom, and climbing stairs. None of these activities requires much thought, and they all are actions that many people either perform daily or have an intuitive sense of how to perform.

Heidegger also calls the inauthentic mode of existing "falling." He describes that, in falling, "Dasein is proximally and for the most part *alongside* the 'world' of its concern" (*Being and Time* 220). By "concern," Heidegger is referring to care, and he expands the definition of care by anchoring it in the mode of living in which a person is immersed in the environment one knows as one's world. Heidegger argues that falling is a state of absorption in the world that involves "Being-lost in the publicness of the 'they'" (*Being and Time* 220). When an individual experiences life in the mode of "they," uniqueness and particularity give way to a more universal and general experience as shared by humankind. Living as "they" places a person in an inauthentic mode of existence that "is completely fascinated by the 'world' and by the Dasein-with of Others in the 'they'" (*Being and Time* 220). By "fascinated," Heidegger means that a person living in inauthenticity is engrossed by the setting in which he/she resides and consumed in the activity of the world and other humans. Heidegger calls inauthenticity a sort of

“*not-Being*,” which is the “kind of being which is closest to Dasein and in which Dasein maintains itself for the most part” (*Being and Time* 220).

In contrast with inauthenticity, one engages with the world *authentically* when a person turns his/her attention within oneself, questioning the meaning of his/her life as an independent, unique existence. In this introspection, “anxiety,”—or, as some scholars translate Heidegger’s German, “Angst,”—brings a person out of the mode of everydayness and into a mode in which one questions one’s existence. In anxiety, a person realizes a disconnect between oneself and the world in which he or she lives. As Heidegger states, a person experiencing anxiety is unable to identify the significance of things in the world or his/her connection with those things:

Here the totality of involvements of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand discovered within-the-world, is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance. In anxiety one does not encounter this thing or that thing which, as something threatening, must have an involvement. (*Being and Time* 231)

Since, in anxiety, a person senses that the world is insignificant, the feeling of being threatened is not directly caused by the world. As Heidegger claims, “[t]hat in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is *nowhere*” (*Being and Time* 231).

Charles E. Scott explains that anxiety is, as Heidegger presents it, “something like a haunted spirit that seems to whisper, as though to itself, ‘better take care...it’s coming to pass...you come from nowhere...where are you headed...who are you’” (Scott 65)? Anxiety is being preoccupied with one’s situation as a mortal being who feels lost in an

insignificant world. Heidegger proposes that “as Dasein falls, anxiety brings it back from its absorption in the ‘world.’ Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein has been individualized, but individualized *as* Being-in-the-world. Being-in enters into the existential ‘mode’ of the ‘*not-at-home*’” (*Being and Time* 233). Homelessness, as Heidegger presents it, is a feeling of discomfort and instability at the realization that one’s existence is incomplete and one’s relation to the world is uncertain.

In the mode of anxiety, homelessness, and uncertainty, a person approaches authenticity by realizing that he/she is separate from the world and other people. Charles E. Scott states that authenticity, for Heidegger, means “Dasein’s insistent inclination to its own way of occurring in the midst of people’s ordinary concerns and distractions” (Scott 64). That from which Dasein is ultimately distracted is death. Heidegger argues that authenticity occurs when one is able to acknowledge the eventuality of death and realize the particularity and uniqueness of one’s potential for living and dying. Heidegger explains that authentic anticipation of death allows one’s disillusionment with the “they” to dissipate:

*[A]nticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned **freedom towards death**—a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the “they”, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious. (*Being and Time* 311)*

In authenticity, one is anxious to live and act while conscious of the reality of mortality and while distinguishing one’s existence from other people. Scott interprets authenticity as the “ability to die and affirmatively relate to it [dying] in the ways they connect with

the world and themselves” (63). Scott continues, explaining how “[a]n authentic way of existing is one that requires individuals to take responsibility for their attitudes and actions,” shifting the responsibility from “they” to the self (63).

Heidegger’s ethic of care is grounded in an awareness of others as related beings with whom one identifies and shares the experience of human existence. Instead of seeing other human beings as objects or foreign beings, Heidegger poses that others are understood as people of whom an individual is a part. This foundation for his ethic avoids the problem of solipsism, which isolates the individual and questions the existence and significance of other supposed human beings. Heidegger explains that “[b]y ‘Others’ we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the ‘I’ stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too” (*Being and Time* 154). By arguing that an individual is a part of “Others,” Heidegger establishes a basis on which the relationship, both metaphysical and ethical, between an individual and others functions. He calls being with others “mitsein.”

Heidegger terms the care one feels for other people “solicitude.” He explains that solicitude occurs when an individual shares common concerns with others and is involved with others regarding those concerns:

Solicitude proves to be a state of Dasein’s Being—one which, in accordance with its different possibilities, is bound up with its Being towards the world of its concern, and likewise with its authentic Being towards itself. Being with one another is based proximally and often exclusively upon what is a matter of common concern in such Being. (*Being and Time* 159)

Heidegger distinguishes between two types of solicitude: “that which leaps in and dominates, and that which leaps forth and liberates” (159). This choice between domination and liberation is at the center of the ethical relationship between an individual and other people.

In *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics*, Frederick A. Olafson outlines Heidegger’s ethics and explains that responsible action requires the individual to consider whether his actions are compatible with others’ interests:

To summarize, unless a fully authentic choice could have any content at all, it will unavoidably express the interests, however construed, of the human being who makes it. These interests, in turn, will stand in some relation to the interests of others; and any meaningful form of responsibility will have to take those into account. (53)

The initial awareness of other people as beings who share the same nature as oneself allows one to realize that others’ interests are equally important as one’s own. To relate this idea to liberation and domination, when people take into account the interests of others, they are liberating others by freeing the way for others’ interests and care. On the other hand, when people do not take into account others’ interests, they are dominating others by hindering others’ care and interests.

Olafson notes that actions, according to Heidegger, are disclosed cooperatively, similar to how things in the world are disclosed cooperatively. Olafson claims that “our *Mitsein* [being with others] commits us, in the field of action, to an attitude toward others that is in its essentials comparable to that toward our partners in the search for truth” (55). While an individual discloses objects and their functions in the world in the midst of the

same disclosure by other people, one discloses actions in a similar cooperation. Olafson describes how actions are disclosed by a person as follows:

When it is a possible action that is under consideration, the consequences of that action will differ widely from one person to another. But if it can be shown to be preferable to any other in terms of the way it affects people's lives, then there is a sense in which these consequences will be the same for all; and in that respect it will be like truth. (55)

In the same way that the truth of a situation or the truth of an object's nature is disclosed by several people's experience with that situation or object, the truth of an action is disclosed by the consequences that action has on several people's lives.

Heidegger's ethic of care provides a foundation for examining Suttree's evolution from a character with little regard for others to a character who is compassionate and who realizes the community of sufferers like himself. In order to enrich his existence of care, Suttree must progress through the modes of inauthenticity and authenticity, thereby binding his reflective individuality with his commonplace interconnection with his environment and community.

Suttree's Everydayness and Inauthenticity

Martin Heidegger stresses that an individual is closest to the meaning of existence in the mode of everydayness. In this state of inauthenticity, the individual experiences an immediate and habitual concern for him/herself, the environment, and other people. McCarthy's depiction of Suttree's mundane work as a fisherman exemplifies Heidegger's concept of everydayness and inauthenticity by demonstrating Suttree's deep engagement

with his environment. In the following passage, McCarthy illustrates Suttree's process of running his trotlines:

Below the bridge he eased himself erect, took up the oars and began to row toward the south bank. There he brought the skiff about, swinging the stern into a clump of willows, and going aft he raised up a heavy cord that ran into the water from an iron pipe driven into the mud of the bank. This he relayed through an open oarlock mounted on the skiff's transom. Now he set out again, rowing slowly, the cord coming up wet and smooth through the lock and dipping into the river again. When he was some thirty feet from shore the first dropper came up, doubling the line until he reached and cast it off. He went on, the skiff lightly quartered against the river's drift, the hooks riding up one by one into the oarlock with their leached and tattered gobbets of flesh. When he felt the weight of the first fish he shipped the dripping oars and took hold of the line and brought it in by hand. A large carp broke water, a coarse mailed flank dull bronze and glinting. He braced himself with one knee and hefted it into the boat and cut the line and tied on a fresh hook with a chunk of cutbait and dropped it over the side and went on, sculling with one oar, the carp warping heavily against the floorboards. (7-8)

McCarthy's hyperrealistic imagery simulates Suttree's focused attention to, and complete engagement with, the act of fishing. In Suttree's every action, he unites himself with his surroundings and the activity of fishing. By committing his entire attention and efforts to the work of fishing, he becomes the "they" that encompasses all fishermen. He enters an engaged and "concernful" relationship with his environment and actualizes his existential care.

As Richard Marius points out, McCarthy's novels place work at the center of characters' lives, and their work serves as a foundational element to their progress. Marius states that the "struggle for existence is one of McCarthy's most persistent themes." He continues, stating that "[i]n many novels characters have jobs, but the life of the novel usually takes place after work, or the job itself seems only a frame for the action. But in McCarthy's novels, work rises to stage center of our attention" (11). Seeing how characters' work is important to understanding their inner lives and how they make efforts to survive. Throughout the novel, fishing provides Suttree a primal connection with his existence and the world. He returns to his houseboat on the river several times after multiple misadventures, such as when he abandons Reese's family after Wanda's death. Fishing, therefore, serves as a method for Suttree's existential re-grounding. After being undermined by unsettling events such as Wanda's death, he returns to an occupation in which he feels grounded in his own existence and seamlessly involved with the environment's flow, which in this case is the river's life.¹⁷

Heidegger characterizes everydayness with other people as "guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity" (*Being and Time* 220). Suttree experiences this everydayness with others when he seeks the company of his friends. Toward the beginning of the novel, Suttree goes to Jimmy Smith's bar to immerse himself in the company and casual conversation of his friends J-Bone and Bobbyjohn. Surrounded by people like himself who suffer poverty yet alleviate their pain with drink and conversation, Suttree feels at home:

In this tall room, the cracked plaster sootstreaked with the shapes of laths beneath, this barrenness, this fellowship of the doomed. Where life pulsed obscenely

fecund. In the drift of voices and the laughter and the reek of stale beer the Sunday loneliness seeped away. (23)

As Suttree is welcomed into the communion of his friends, isolation gives way to a feeling of belonging. Through his connection with others, Suttree encounters what Heidegger presents as the fundamental quality and meaning of human existence: care. By engaging with his friends in an exchange of news and good-natured jabs, Suttree settles within the identity of “they” and temporarily inactivates his hyper-self-consciousness.

When Suttree seeks Howard Clevinger’s store stove for heat in the winter, he takes communion with his poverty-stricken peers Oceanfrog, Bungalow, and Jabbo. It is Thanksgiving, and Suttree’s friends harass him to drink with them, but, to their disappointment, he firmly resists. This iconic sharing of a fire is ubiquitous throughout the novel, and it represents that which Heidegger refers to as a mode of being with others.¹⁸ Suttree takes company with other refugees through the unifying circumstance of the freezing weather. By occupying the same space for the same purpose, he exits his individuality and enters a common state of existence marked by everydayness and inauthenticity (*Suttree* 164-168).

Suttree’s Anxiety and Authenticity

Heidegger argues that anxiety about death and one’s sense of homelessness wrenches one from the mode of everydayness and inauthenticity. Anxiety leads an individual to reflect upon one’s life as it is apart from other people and the environment. Suttree often experiences this isolation and sense of not belonging when he confronts the idea of his own death. When he returns to the house on Grand street after hiking and

getting lost in the mountains of Gatlinburg, he feels alone and touched by the cold hand of death:

All day the house was empty. She'd come at noon and fix him soup and a sandwich until he felt like a child in some winter illness. Recurrences of dreams he'd had in the mountains came and went and the second night he woke from uneasy sleep and lay in the world alone. A dark hand had scooped the spirit from his breast and a cold wind circled in the hollow there. He sat up. Even the community of the dead had disbanded into ashes, those shapes wheeling in the earth's crust through a nameless ether no more men than were the ruins of any other thing once living. Suttree felt the terror coming through the walls. He was seized with a thing he'd never known, a sudden understanding of the mathematical certainty of death. He felt his heart pumping down there under the palm of his hand. Who tells it so? Could a whole man not author his own death with a thought? Shut down the ventricle like the closing of an eye? (295)

Whereas in Gatlinburg he was in the company of the creatures he hallucinated, now he is not even accompanied by the dead, to whom he can relate most at this moment. He realizes that the dead do not exist except in how they blend with the material of the earth. Suttree sees what his own death would mean: the utter extinguishment of his existence. He is unsettled by the possibility of this total loss of self and wonders what it would be like to die by a willful thought alone.

Shortly after Joyce's raging fit, Suttree leaves her. He returns to his houseboat on the river and fixes it up for himself. Suttree lies on his bed and looks up at the ceiling,

imagining that the lamplight's figure on the ceiling asks him questions. He reflects upon his death and his regret of ever wanting to die prematurely:

Supposing there be any soul to listen and you died tonight?

They'd listen to my death.

No final word?

Last words are only words.

You can tell me, paradigm of your sinister genesis construed by a flame in a glass bell.

I'd say I was not unhappy.

You have nothing.

It may be the last shall be first.

Do you believe that?

No.

What do you believe?

I believe that the last and the first suffer equally. *Pari passu*.

Equally?

It is not alone in the dark of death that all souls are one soul.

Of what would you repent?

Nothing.

Nothing?

One thing. I spoke with bitterness about my life and I said that I would take my own part against the slander of oblivion and against the monstrous facelessness of

it and that I would stand a stone in the very void where all would read my name.

Of that vanity I recant all. (414)

In this dialogue with his mirrored self, Suttree removes himself from everydayness and inauthenticity by focusing on his individuality. He is in a mode of anxiety that causes him to perceive the reality of his mortality. Suttree achieves what Heidegger calls “freedom towards death” in that he acknowledges his eventual death and adopts an accepting and resolved attitude toward death. He places himself among all of humanity by announcing his equal suffering yet separates himself from all of humanity by referring to his own, particular life and death as events to be fulfilled only by him.

Suttree and the Ethic of Care

The existential philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger all claim that the individual transcends any permanence of identity. The individual is constantly in a process of becoming, and therefore, he/she is never fixed in a particular mode. Furthermore, the individual is never purely moral or immoral, never purely societal or solitary. Rather, a person’s actions may be considered moral or immoral, and an individual’s actions may be considered to have or not have a social context, but not the individual person overall. Suttree’s moments of immorality and solitude may exceed his moments of morality and communality, but both types of actions and modes of living offer significant insight into Suttree’s fundamental struggle with living ethically and socially. The issue at the heart of both struggles is that Suttree lacks the foundation of a community previously found in his family before he abandoned them. His hyperconsciousness furthers this isolation by removing him from what Heidegger calls the mode of everydayness and inauthenticity. The resulting mode of anxiety and

self-consciousness hinders his ability to engage with others on the basis of care and concern. Later in the novel, Suttree realizes that the community in which he belongs is that of people like himself who are poor and living in unstable conditions.

Throughout the novel, Suttree struggles to exit his private individuality in order to connect with other people. Thomas D. Young, Jr. notices how Suttree's reservation lies in a combination of factors from his obsession with his dead twin—and with death in general—to his engrossing activity of perceiving and reflecting intellectually upon his environment. For Suttree, the over-workings of subjectivity hinder intersubjectivity, and his training as a student has empowered his imagination at the same time as it has removed him from his immediate surroundings. In reflecting on how Suttree crafts a story out of his surroundings by the river in Gatlinburg, Young states that “Suttree's imagination is always doubling back upon pure perception in this way and obviating his entry into the world” (108). Young notes how Suttree's literary education overwhelmingly supplements his perceptions, such as when the texts of W. H. Auden (175), Robert Frost (179), e. e. cummings (195), and William Faulkner (453-454) intrude on his observations (Young 108).

Young also recognizes how Suttree's hyperactive imagination obscures his relationships by integrating into them his abundant reflections and overpowering the facticity of other people. Often, what are integrated into his relationships are anxieties about death and his dead family members such as his dead twin and son. For Suttree, other people remind him of the ubiquity of death and the threat of his own mortality. Young observes how, just as Suttree tends to convert his material environment into an internal, subjective phenomenon, “[t]he tragedy of his life is the inevitability with which

his living relationships are likewise so converted” (108). Young further explains that the people to whom Suttree is closest “[fall] into the special vacuum of Suttree’s habitual conversion of experience into the language of thought.” He continues that “[t]he possibility of true outwardness, of the unfettered life of the instincts, is for him always retained within the all-comprehensive brackets of the self” (117). Thus, Suttree’s life’s challenge is to transcend the brackets of the self and dissolve the barrier between himself and other humans in order to be an agent in the system of ethics and a responsible member of society.

When Suttree visits Ab Jones and assures him “[i]f you need anything I can get it for you,” Ab Jones indirectly points out Suttree’s tendency to live in isolation and without commitment to those who care about him. Jones acknowledges Suttree’s kindness yet tells him to “[l]ook out for you own,” to which Suttree replies “I don’t have any own.” Jones argues that Suttree does have companions: they are all the people who have ever done Suttree favors and taken him into their company. Jones relates his own experience with people who do not acknowledge their friends as follows:

Let me tell you about some people, he said. Some people aint worth a shit rich or poor and that’s all you can say about em. But I never knowed a man that had it all but what he didnt forget where he come from. I dont know what it does. I had a friend in this town I stood up for him when he got married. I’d give him money when he was comin up. Used to take him to the wrestlin matches, he was just a kid. He’s a big man now. Drives a Cadillac. He dont know me. I got no use for a man piss backwards on his friends. (203)

The list of people who Suttree abandoned is a long one. He cut ties with his birth family, his wife, and several of his friends including Reese, the Native American turtle hunter, and to a certain extent Harrogate. He left some people due to disagreeing with their way of life, and he left others due to his solitary tendencies.

However, Suttree's solitude does not remove him from a system of society and ethics. Heidegger discusses the nature of *mitsein* [being with others] when there is no one around. He claims that an individual is always in the mode of being with others even when one is alone:

Being-with is an existential characteristic of Dasein even when factually no Other is present-at-hand or perceived. Even Dasein's Being-alone is Being-with in the world. The Other can *be missing* only *in* and *for* a Being-with. Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with; its very possibility is the proof of this. (*Being and Time* 157)

Suttree's solitude is a form of being with others, but it is a form that is actualized by the lack of others at that moment and in Suttree's location. His isolation creates a spot in the realm of society where he can come and go into and out of the circle of his friends as he desires and return to a private place. Suttree's separateness is his way of being present to society, and he shares this ambiguous form of presence and absence with all the other derelicts and impoverished people of Knoxville and the world. He is alone in the sense that there is hardly anyone around him, but he shares the community of all those who have suffered and lived alone in poverty like he has.

Suttree realizes that he is not alone toward the end of the novel when he lies on his bed on Grand Street and reflects on the destruction of McAnally Flats and the pain he shares with all of humanity:

At night in the iron bed high in the old house on Grand he'd lie awake and hear the sirens, lonely sound in the city, in the empty streets. He lay in his chrysalis of gloom and made no sound, share by share sharing his pain with those who lay in their blood by the highwayside or in the floors of glass strewn taverns or manacled in jail. He said that even the damned in hell have the community of their suffering and he thought that he'd guessed out likewise for the living a nominal grief like a grange from which disaster and ruin are proportioned by laws of equity too subtle for divining. (464)

In his silent grief, he shares the everyday suffering of all homeless people, drunkards, and criminals. They are like family to him since they are people to whom he can relate. This sense of understanding is something he lacked in his relationship with his family members, who were too wealthy to understand the suffering of people living in the streets.

Suttree discovers care and concern for others in the transition from subjectivity to intersubjectivity. He learns to relate to others, even those whom he does not know. In dissolving his hyper-self-consciousness, he is able to connect with humanity as a whole. This type of compassion for others whom one has never known is a similar compassion found in the character Wes in McCarthy's short story "Wake for Susan." Wes looks at the gravestone of a young girl named Susan Ledbetter who died in 1834, long before Wes's time, at seventeen years old. He imagines the heartbreaking story of a young girl whose

love affair and happiness were cut short due to circumstances Wes cannot even imagine: “He threw his arms around the unyielding stone and wept for lost Susan, for all the lost Susans, for all the people; so beautiful, so pathetic, so lost and wasted and ungrieved” (6). Like Wes, Suttree develops a sense of connectedness with beings like himself who have lived and suffered just as he has. This recognition of the reality and likeness of others is what Vereen M. Bell claims is essential for McCarthy’s characters to live responsibly: “[f]or McCarthy a belief in the reality of other people is the first principle of responsible existence” (114).

Suttree is able to relate to others through the poverty he shares with them and the resources he offers them. His meager income and minimal property place him among a diverse community of caring individuals who understand what it is like to suffer. Louis H. Palmer III notes how Suttree forms a bond with his community that he lacked with his family:

Suttree’s desire to divest is balanced in the economy of the Flats by a kind of contingent communism represented by his gifts of fish to various people, by his reluctant participation in Harrogate’s Ben-Franklin schemes, and by his solicitude for the older members of the community. In McAnally they share what little they have, as part of a “fellowship of the doomed.” (155)

He not only offers his work’s product to his fellow acquaintances but also offers his company and concern to them. By identifying with this crowd of sufferers, Suttree transcends his hyper-self-consciousness and blends with his environment, as Palmer suggests in the following passage: “For Suttree it is difficult to claim self-interest. Most of his actions seem to be based on a code of honor that is not *quid pro quo*.... The

gestures that Suttree makes...seem to be aimed at the goal of erasing his individuality, going to where ‘all souls are one soul’” (156). Thomas D. Young, Jr. qualifies this judgment, stating “[t]he assertion of the ultimate integrity and sufficiency of the self and of the value of a human community based on an affiliation of such selves is what Suttree—and McCarthy’s fiction in general—comes to affirm” (120). Thus, in order to fully connect with others, Suttree must realize his own value and apply this power of individuality to each member of the community. So, when Suttree is acting selflessly, he is entering the mode of everydayness and inauthenticity, in which his and others’ interests are all aimed at the good of the collective and no single person’s welfare dominates another’s. In this mode of existence, Suttree’s care and concern are at their greatest and he lives with authentic anxiety for the lives of others.

It is also through Suttree’s hyperconsciousness of death that he is able to connect with others. His extreme concern with death allows him to relate to others and express the same concern for their lives and potential deaths. Lydia R. Cooper states that “[i]t is only as Suttree descends into the physical and metaphysical abyss of the fear of death that he finds an affective experience of the mysterious interconnection of human beings, an experience that provides an ephemeral yet profound sense of communal comfort” (191). Yet, Suttree’s capacity to, through the fear of death, feel integrated with the community and overcome the defeating thoughts of his dead son and twin depends upon his active relating with the living rather than the dead. As Young notices, when Suttree encounters his reflection in the waterboy’s eyes at the end of the novel, he enacts a “new resolution to find his brother among the living rather than the dead” (120).

Suttree's life continues into uncertainty as he leaves Knoxville, but his struggle to discover the meaning of his existence is resolved when he understands that his life's meaning is intertwined with others' lives. As Martin Heidegger argues, a person is closest to the meaning of existence when the person is living in everydayness and inauthenticity among other people. Thus, life's meaning is, in essence, coexistence with others. Jeffrey Gordon ends his essay on the meaning of life by stating that "[o]ur engagement in life always dances astride the abyss of our possible fall. Meaning is a kind of grace. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the question" (Gordon 29). In everydayness and authenticity, this question indeed disappears, leaving one engaged with one's life and others at a primary level.

V. CONCLUSION

Existentialism—whether it is Sartre’s, Camus’s, or Heidegger’s—describes the human condition and prescribes a specific form of responsibility. For Sartre, people are responsible for choosing their actions, values, and character. For Camus, they are responsible for recognizing the absurdity of life and enduring through their projects in the face of that absurdity. For Heidegger, they are responsible for connecting with others and engaging with the world while maintaining an authentic awareness of, and concern for, death. Suttree, within the first few pages, evinces his self-authority by engaging in his autonomous occupation close to his solitary property. He recalls his choice to abandon his birth family, and his memories of their wealth and ignorance demonstrate his values are polar to theirs. Furthermore, the narrative is sprinkled with modest yet potent frames of existential stasis in which Suttree realizes the absurdity of existence yet persists in his work, relationships—however few they are—and progress toward a meaningful existence. Additionally, Suttree grounds himself in the company of his community of sufferers and shares with them a despair and consciousness of death, coupled with a wonder and appreciation for the glimpse of life and love. The question to be asked now is are these three philosophies of existentialism compatible, and if so, how does Suttree exemplify their compatibility?

Each version of existentialism informs the others, filling in their holes and providing them with further dimension. Sartre makes imperatives of Camus’s absurdism and Heidegger’s ethic of care by requiring the individual to choose one’s identity within the reality of absurdity and within the sphere of others’ existence. Camus’s absurdism sets limits to Sartre’s identity-forming actions and further defines the situation we share

with others through care. Heidegger's ethic of care expands the identity of the individual to include being with others and prevents Camus's absurdism from becoming solipsistic. Suttree's unique circumstances and choices blend these patterns of existence and prove that human existence is multifaceted and cannot be mapped and dissected by only a few theories. He discovers that responsibility comes from more places than family and institutions of power: they come from the blank slate of the self, the urgency of mortality, and the need to recognize and care for others. Suttree demonstrates a few ways to approach responsibility—both through rejecting and accepting it—and is a potential prompter toward the reader's own need to confront responsibility.

NOTES

1. Richard Marius proposes that the name Cornelius Suttree “combines associations of Roman stoicism and the nineteenth-century East Tennessee humorous Sut Lovingood and the word ‘tree’ that implies the reaching towards life and sunshine” (4).

2. Vereen M. Bell, in analyzing the world of *Suttree*, succinctly summarizes the concepts of nothingness and existentialism by defining human as “part nothing—identified with matter and death, known only to a reptilian eye-brain—and part human; and the human part is real only to the extent that it is contrived” (*The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* 83).

3. This scene recalls McCarthy’s short story “A Drowning Incident,” in which a boy looks into the river and sees his baby pups floating dead in a sack, supposedly drowned by his father due to their inability to support more animals:

Then with the gentle current drifted from beneath the bridge a small puppy, rolling and bumping along the bottom of the creek, turning weightlessly in the slow water. He watched uncomprehendingly. It spun slowly to stare at him with sightless eyes, turning its white belly to the softly diffused sunlight, its legs stiff and straight in an attitude of perpetual resistance. (3)

4. The scent of lilies recalls the same scent associated with Suttree’s grandfather in a memory of him on his deathbed (*Suttree* 13).

5. Guinn argues that *Suttree* and other of McCarthy’s novels promote the conception of humanity as atavistic in nature, preserving an essential primitivism and depravity through all of time regardless of differing eras or cultures.

6. Robert L. Jarrett argues that McAnally Flats is “the novel’s objective correlative for Suttree’s psyche,” suggesting that its destruction is the birth of the reconstruction of Suttree’s psyche (54).

7. Peter Josyph posits, similarly to Robert L. Jarrett, that the destruction occurring in Knoxville is the same destruction occurring in Suttree. Josyph offers that when McCarthy tells Suttree “Uneasy sleeper you will live to see the city of your birth pulled down to the last stone” (188), “he is talking about the cavernous city of Suttree himself” (9).

8. Longley claims that this scene means “death has come for Suttree and has found someone else instead” (89). I believe that if Death is a force with a “mathematical certainty,” (*Suttree* 295) then it makes no mistakes. It knows who it comes for, where they are to be found, and for whom it is time to die. This scene represents death as it functions in Suttree’s rebirth rather than in his missed death.

9. Bell explains how this water-bearer recalls the water-bearer earlier in the novel for whom Suttree imagines the men at a past banquet wait (*Suttree* 136).

10. Suttree also consciously reflects on the human ability of deciding to commit and actually committing suicide when he feels “a sudden understanding of the mathematical certainty of death. He felt his heart pumping down there under the palm of his hand. Who tells it so? Could a whole man not author his own death with a thought? Shut down the ventricle like the closing of an eye” (295)?

11. Camus notes that some of these immoral actions include stealing from travelers, stealing the gods’ secrets, putting Death in chains, unfairly testing his wife’s love, and extending his pleasures in the realm of the living without the permission of the gods.

12. Dianne C. Luce explains that many scholars mistake McAnally Flats as Suttree's principal location:

Perhaps because of Suttree's interest in the destruction of McAnally Flats near the end of the novel and his thought that 'he knew another McAnally, good to last a thousand years,' it is a common misconception appearing in many studies of *Suttree* that the riverfront area where Suttree, Ab Jones, Harrogate, and Rufus live is in McAnally Flats and that the novel is principally set in McAnally. Actually only a few scenes are set there, the most important of which is Suttree's winter retreat from the river to a cellar apartment in that neighborhood. (286)

13. Camus argues that Jesus was also an absurd hero, having sacrificed himself for nothing.

14. One passage that demonstrates the omnirhythmic, dodecaphonic nature of Cormac McCarthy's writing is a scene from Suttree's adventure in the mountains of Gatlinburg:

Illbedowered harlots were calling from small porches in the night, in their gaudy rags like dolls panoplied out of a dirty dream. And along the little ways in the rain and lightning came a troupe of squalid merrymakers bearing a caged wyvern on shoulderpoles and other alchemical game, chimeras and cacodemons skewered up on boarspears and a pharmacopoeia of hellish condiments adorning a trestle and toted by trolls with an eldern gnome for guidon who shouted foul oaths from his mouthhole and a piper who piped a pipe of ploverbone and wore on his hip a glass flasket of some smoking fuel that yawed within viscid as quicksilver. A mesosaur followed above on a string like a fourlegged garfish heliumfilled. A tattered gonfalon embroidered with stars now extinct. Nemoral halfworld inhabitants,

figures in buffoon's motley, a gross and blueblack foetus clopping along in brogues and toga. (287-288)

15. Frank W. Shelton discusses how Ab Jones's death may be "a form of suicide, for in essence he persists in his way of life knowing full well the result will be fatal" (Shelton 156). As he persistently asserts himself as a human equal to all others, the police harass him until he finally dies at their hands.

16. Footsteps are mentioned often to remind Suttree of death's pursuit, as when he is at the bus station and "footfalls come back like laughter" (28), and when Harrogate is imprisoned for melon-mounting, "the guard's footsteps receded in the corridor" (39).

17. Other examples of Heideggerian everydayness in work include the ragman's work (*Suttree* 256) and Harrogate's work (260).

18. Fire is a prevalent image in several of McCarthy's works. The importance of fire to the author as a positive symbol is ironic given that a fire destroyed his childhood home, which the *The Canadian Press* reported happened during the week of Jan. 28th, 2009.

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