In their quests, both discover grotesquely fallen worlds, haunted by poverty, ignorance, and sheer malice. Bell describes Outer Dark as being “as brutally nihilistic as any serious novel written in this century in this nihilistic country” (34). Refuting Bell, Edwin T. Arnold asserts that a redemptive moral center underlies Outer Dark and all of McCarthy’s fiction, including Blood Meridian, with its unrelenting evocations of social, rather than strictly individual, acts of violence: “While I recognize and appreciate the postmodern celebration of McCarthy’s exuberant violence, his astonishing approximation of chaos, his grand evocation of the mystery of the world, there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious. There is, in addition, always the possibility of grace and redemption even in the darkest of his tales, although that redemption may require more of his characters than they are ultimately willing to give” (46).

Nihilism and something like religious affirmation are at war throughout McCarthy’s novel. In this context, it is significant that the space through which Rinthy travels is more conventionally mimetic and more accepting than the dark and deadly landscape Culla encounters. Arnold perceptively analyzes Culla’s descent into something that seems a great deal like both Christian and Sartrean imaginings of hell as resulting from a failure of courage, an attempt to flee from sin. That Culla’s journey is at least as much a psychological and a spiritual experience as an actual exploration of mimetic space is foreshadowed by a horrific nightmare that opens the novel and haunts him for the remainder of the text:

There was a prophet standing in the square with arms upheld in exhortation to the beggared multitude gathered there. A delegation of human ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores. . . . It grew cold and more black and silent and some began to cry out and some despaired but the sun did not return. Now the dreamer grew fearful. Voices were being raised against him. He was caught up in the crowd and the stink of their rags filled his nostrils. They grew seething and more mutinous and he tried to hide among them but they knew him even in that pit of hopeless dark and fell upon him with howls of outrage. (6)

Now Culla has been transformed into something closer to a Cain than an Adam figure. He has been banished and set apart from the rest of humanity.

This introductory nightmare functions as a metaphoric introduction of the remainder of the novel. The pornography-selling tinker was merely the first of the ominous prophets Culla will encounter as he travels among “the beggared multitude.” To some degree, the emphasis on the stinking “rags” of “the human ruin” evokes the more real or mimetic landscape of soul-killing poverty through which he will travel. It also alludes to the sinfulness and viciousness in which Culla finds human beings clothed and to his own sin, already that of incest and soon to be of child abandonment as well. Like Hawthorne’s young Goodman Brown, Culla undertakes a journey in which physical space, psychological guilt, and spiritual despair merge so completely as to become indistinguishable.

Shortly after the scenes of birth and abandonment, the novel depicts an incident that reoccurs in different forms throughout McCarthy’s fiction.

On a Sunday, Culla goes to the nearest store to buy some food for the weakened Rinthy. Inevitably he finds the store closed and hears a voice calling down at him “from an upper window”: “We still christians here” (26). As indicated by the deliberate withholding of the uppercase C from “christians,” the scene constitutes, on one level, condemnation of a southern Christian fundamentalism that denies support to those who exist outside it.