In a preview of the novel’s denouement, the satanic presence then insists that Culla partake of some almost inedible and never identified meat that the trio is cooking. Subsequently an ominous discussion of names ensues. Indicating one of the other two men, the leader and spokesman of the deadly trio says: “That’n ain’t got a name. . . . He wanted me to give him one but I wouldn’t do it. He don’t need nary. you ever seen a man with no name afore?” (174).6 The leader is identifying himself as the namegiver who possesses the power to withhold or bestow identity upon others and has thus assumed Culla’s role as an Adam figure. He then proceeds to tease Culla with the mystery of his own name: “I expect they’s lots would like to know that” (173–74). In part, the leader is playing a role derived from such popular-culture genres as the Western of the unnamed and thus doubly terrifying villain. More significantly, he is identifying himself with some force too powerful to be named, an Old Testament god of vengeance.7 With Culla and his transgressions clearly in mind, the leader next observes that “some things is best not named.” Because it so threatens the social order, incest has traditionally been a sin too fundamentally unsettling to be acknowledged. The reference to things best left unnamed seems intended as a reminder to Culla of the infant he has abandoned and thereby caused to be abducted by the peddler. In this context, he later mocks Culla in a speech that appears to refer to his nameless companion but actually seems intended to evoke the child: “I wouldn’t name him because if you cain’t name somethin you cain’t claim it. you cain’t talk about it even. you cain’t say 119 what it is” (177). The words are apparently a reminder to Culla that he has forfeited any right to the child, and they also reveal an awareness that the young man’s concern for the lost infant is pretended. Certainly in contrast to Rinthy’s, Culla’s search is, at best, halfhearted. Reinforcing his satanic role, the leader comments, “I like to keep the fire up. . . . They might be somebody coming” (175). He is thus identifying himself as the guardian of the fires of hell, as the enforcer of eternal punishment, perpetually on the lookout for sinners like Culla.

The multileveled nature of the trio’s identity becomes manifest in this scene. On a strictly mimetic level, they are a savage gang of roving outlaws who assault the community out of sheer malevolence. But the several metaphoric levels on which they exist are more important. They are simultaneously “proletarian” warriors and agents of a vengeful god. In this context, it is significant that they execute the peddler after taking the infant from him. Their chosen mode of execution is lynching, an act that evokes the history of southern violence and injustice as well as the fate that Culla almost experiences at the hands of the charlatan minister and the simple-minded drovers. Moreover, they are projections of Culla’s subconscious guilt, representatives of his sin and self-condemnation, a self-judgment that, as Arnold observes, he is too cowardly to acknowledge publicly. But they also embody a capacity for excessive evil that places them outside human comprehension. It is as if they are committed to violating all behavioral taboos, as if they are engaged in a prolonged assault on the order that is essential to preserving human community. Besides the several horrendous murders of which they are guilty, they unearth the dead, stealing the clothes of corpses and leaving them in positions that mock homosexual embrace.

Girard points out that social taboos emerge out of a need to maintain order and that the ultimate threat to such order is death. Through their grave-robbing, the grim triune make this threat overt. It is hardly irrelevant that Culla is accused of the violation of the corpses, since in the course of the novel he is accused of virtually everything else. He has, in fact, violated those taboos that the three outlaws, existing outside any communal structure that includes women, have no opportunity to violate.

The full metaphoric role of the trio is not revealed until their last, climactic encounter with Culla. When he comes upon them this time, the child, now hideously disfigured, is with them: “It had a healed burn all down one side of it and the skin was papery and wrinkled like an old man’s. It was naked and half coated with dust so that it seemed lightly furred and when it turned to look up at him [Culla] . . . saw one eyeless and angry red socket like a stokehole to a brain in flames” (231).

Perhaps not fully human themselves, the three have dehumanized the child, transforming it into something monstrous. Moreover, the leader continues the harsh questioning of Culla that he began in the earlier scene, again seeming possessed of some kind of supernatural insight. He knows, for instance, that the tinker stole a child from Culla and asserts that the child was Culla’s as the result of an incestuous act. Twice, in what Arnold sees as the young man’s culminating moment of cowardice, Culla denies the accusation and any responsibility for the child: “He ain’t nothin to me” (235).

Subsequently, in an action that echoes Girard’s description of the ritual sacrifice of the scapegoat in Violence and the Sacred, the leader holds the mutilated child over a burning fire and slits its throat with a knife. In committing incest, Culla violated one of the most basic of cultural taboos and thus instigated a sacrificial crisis that profoundly threatens the social order. As Girard explains, the sacrifice of an innocent is necessary to restore the order that Culla’s acts of incest and child abandonment have endangered. Girard further specifies that, in order to prevent a destructive cycle of retributive violence, the victim should be powerless, with no ties to the individual whose violations of taboo have brought on the crisis. Above all, such cyclical violence is to be avoided:

Vengeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal. The crime to which the vengeance addresses itself is never an unprecedented offense; in almost every case it has been committed in revenge for some prior crime. Vengeance, then, is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process. Every time it turns up in some part of the community, it threatens to involve the whole social body. There is the risk that the act of vengeance will initiate a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal to any society of modest size. The multiplication of reprisals instantaneously puts the very existence of society in jeopardy, and that is why it is universally proscribed. (14–15)

The leader’s sacrifice of the unnamed child both clarifies and complicates the role of the grim triune as agents of retribution. Obviously, the infant, the very product of Culla’s sin, is not an arbitrarily chosen victim with no connection to the original violation of taboo. It could, though, hardly be more powerless, since it has been abandoned and remains nameless. The leader slits its throat only after Culla again denies responsibility for it. In the several brutal murders they commit, the triune seem to be agents of retributive vengeance, punishers of unnamed crimes, devoted above all to putting the communal order at risk. An example of McCarthy’s calculated narrative excess is evident in the remainder of this grim scene: “The child made no sound. It hung there with its one eye glazing over like a wet stone and the black blood pumping down its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. He was drooling and making little whimpering noises in his throat.

He knelt with his hands outstretched and his nostrils rimpled delicately.