

# prairiema

An eclectic blog on which appears daily one-thousand word essays on somethingorother.



Friday, March 22, 2013

## AMERICAN GOTHIC MAINSTREAM FICTION

It was all very unexpected and unpredictable that suddenly a man named **Subhasis Chattopadhyay**, who according to Google is an Assistant Professor of English <http://www.academicroom.com/users/cshubho> posted a message to the Westlit acadenuc listserv. "I am currently on PhD completion sabbatical provided by the Government of India. I am working on the problem of evil, the sovereignty of the good and millennial concerns in the works of **Stephen King** and **Cormac McCarthy**. I hold a First Masters in English from the University of Calcutta. I have also earned a Post Graduate Diploma in Biblical Studies from the Pontifical Athaenuem, Banaglore; also having separately trained there to become a spiritual counsellor." But he confides on an email, "In person, I am a lazy music listening, reading and theological fellow. Not religious though." I take that to mean he is not conventionally religious in the sense of observant and that I would get along with him just fine. I also find his insights valuable enough to quote.

Here is his thesis title: "*Revisiting the American Western and the Thriller with special reference to Cormac McCarthy and Stephen King.*"

This is his idea, mercilessly edited by myself:

"Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy are not usually studied together. . . . Their critical receptions have been very different: King has been rejected as being "a writer of penny dreadfuls" (Bloom *n.pag.*) for writing "socially marginal money-making pulp" (Ingebretsen 105) unworthy of the National Book Foundation's annual award for 'distinguished contribution to American letters' [awarded to King in 2003] while Cormac McCarthy has been praised by the same **Harold Bloom** as an heir to **Herman Melville**."

. . . Both Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy, though committing themselves to different genres, have the same aim: they subvert their chosen genres and engage with horror and violence not for the sake of horror and violence but for the sake of critiquing society. . . .

One of the ideological issues that both King and McCarthy engage with is the problem of evil. Their portrayal of violence goes beyond surface gore questioning the meanings of both good and evil, for "a fundamental religious and moral question has to do with goodness amid . . . evil. Still, in the configurational act of understanding, "world" comes to some meaningfulness, whether good or evil. This is not a creation ex nihilo since the fundamental fact of our existence is that we find ourselves in a world to which we respond. . . .

. . . Like **Emmanuel Kant** (1724 – 1804) they are "haunted by a sense of cosmic mystery" (Greene 92). It has been remarked recently that "some of the most stirring affirmations of Christian faith can be found in the chilling stories of King" (Blake *n. pag.*) and Cormac McCarthy's novels have been seen as allegories of spiritual survival, suggesting "religious themes centering around suffering and a hope for answers, if not redemption" (Rothfork 285).

. . . An "apocalyptic tone" (Derrida, *Apocalyptic Tone* 3-37) provides them the necessary intellectual space required to study Christian theology and theodicy [if God is omnipotent and good, why does he make us suffer?] in terms of the thriller and the Western. Both Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy *make explicit* the risks of "doing theology" (Hopkins 136) within the parameters of their fictions and this is of concern in this study.

...where did Evil go? And the answer is: everywhere ...In a society which seeks ...to concern itself solely ... with the discourse of

### SEARCH THIS BLOG

 Search

### clustrmaps

### Blog Archive

- ▶ 2017 (159)
- ▶ 2016 (408)
- ▶ 2015 (389)
- ▶ 2014 (373)
- ▼ 2013 (380)
  - ▶ December (32)
  - ▶ November (33)
  - ▶ October (33)
  - ▶ September (30)
  - ▶ August (33)

- ▶ July (33)
- ▶ June (32)
- ▶ May (32)
- ▶ April (31)

#### ▼ March (31)

- THE EASTER OVUM
- KNOTTING A SHAWL FOR A PLANET
- LOVE AND MARRIAGE
- AN ACTING ROLE MODEL
- THE ECOLOGY OF CHARITY
- THE TRIUNE BRAIN
- OUT ON THE EDGE
- THREE SOURCES OF MORALITY
- HEROES IN OUR MIDST
- AMERICAN GOTHIC MAINSTREAM FICTION
- "LIVWASTERNE"- "THE PROTECTORS"
- RE-CRIMINALIZING CONDOMS
- THE MOUNTAIN MAN

the Good, in a society where it is no longer possible to speak Evil, Evil has metamorphosed into all the viral and terroristic forms that obsess us. (Baudrillard 81)

There are two traditional interpretations of the dominant mode of American literature, especially its fiction – the mode of romance, and the mode of the Gothic which is a variant of the romance, emphasizing its darker aspects (Miller 241-78) . . . Throughout the works of King and McCarthy we encounter instances of clinical insanity. The theme of insanity which runs through Gothic literature including bestsellers is relevant to our discussion since the content of both King's and McCarthy's works, including the former's short stories deal with issues within clinical psychology and psychiatry.

. . . While American literature has been an unabashed investigation into the underbelly of lived experience, nonetheless "critics have made every effort to hide this fact" (Goddu 267).

. . . *Suttree* [by McCarthy] specifically deals with alienation which may be seen for our purpose here, to re-enact the Crucifixion loneliness of Jesus. When Christ felt abandoned by His Father, He became the type for all who were abject before Him, and also crucially, of all who are to experience abjection after the Christ-event (this is the field of *kenotic theology*). *Suttree*, in this sense is a theological tale of men alienated from all others. . . He is doomed to failure.

. . . From the discussion above it is now evident that both Stephen King and Cormac McCarthy have extended the unique American literary syndrome of constructing the Gothic to the realm of popular culture. And thereby they have revised American horror and western literature into vehicles of theodicy, theology and apocalyptic meditation. They are our neo-evangelists.

---

To me, religious concepts as expressed by formal philosophers and institutions begin within the assumptions identified in this paper: good and evil, self and other, and even binaries like beginning and end. My own thoughts have run quite a different way, trying to get under these binaries by going to *felt* rather than *defined* concepts.

Thus, I begin with Eliade's "*The Sacred and the Profane*" and an ecological "web" paradigm. That is, I look for the assumptions that our experience teaches us, and that are normally stored unconsciously. So I will say that one can feel direct contact with "*the mysterium tremendum and fascinans*" and that this is the true source of the Holy, truly "Other." It is as scary as the night sky. Dark, hallucinatory – and therefore Gothic.

Professor Chattopadhyay points out that the sources of uncanniness and horror in these two "pop" writers are ordinary and within our experience, even the ghastly violence in McCarthy which seems not to concern most readers. I hardly know King's work. It soon becomes apparent, reading this paper, that it deals with white mainstream assumptions as suggested. I would suggest that the underlying Gothic horror is slavery and the holocaust of the American Indian. Native American "religion" is entirely experience-based, ecologically sourced, and rarely teleological though there is usually a genesis story – not always. Maybe this is why the apocalypse of the European invasion took them so much by surprise.

To the white mainstream Euro, a population rapidly draining off to the Right, the Devil is the Dark Man as in McCarthy. King seems to be reacting to the ghastly wilderness of the human interior and the uncertainty whether one is dealing with reality. Recently a third source of the Gothic dark and uncanny has been the explosion of vampire romance, which some take to be an account of the HIV-AIDS epidemic and others take to be about the discovery that same-sex-desiring people are everywhere among us. Once one admits these out-groups, the whole issue of what is good versus what is evil is called into question.

The relevance of the Western is partly that the "other" is so present (Indians, Mexicans, Asians) and partly that the ecologies of such a wide land throw the focus back on the tension between the loner and the group when both struggle to survive. It is also a place where time is brought up to consciousness again and again because so much irresolvable and evil history still lingers. In fact, I think our reluctance to give up this "story" is at the heart of our meddling in the Middle East. Some explicitly WANT the apocalypse to come in order to end the horror of ambiguity.

**"And thereby they have revised American horror and western literature into vehicles of theodicy, theology and apocalyptic meditation. They are our neo-evangelists."** This is very valuable, and the more it is brought to consciousness the better. The approach will re-dignify "the people's stories" and increase our honesty about what we're doing.

---

If you wish to contact Professor Chattopadhyay or to get the full document I quote above, you could contact me for help.

Posted by [Mary Strachan Scriver](#) at 3:10 AM   
Labels: [American lit](#), [Theology](#)

No comments:

[Post a Comment](#)

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

THE MAGNIFICATION OF EVERYTHING

ATTACHMENT THEORY

EXPECTATIONS SHAPE POPE FRANCIS

MARCH IN MONTANA: Remarks

THREESOME

More Thoughts about "An Unquenchable Thirst"

WATCHING ALVINA KRAUSE TEACH ACTING

"GROWING UP IN GLACIER PARK" Review

DATA IN A WORLD OF HURT

"THE UNQUENCHABLE THIRST" BY Mary Johnson

FAMILY BRANCHES

FEELINGS MATTER

"NAPI'S LOOKOUT: THE STORY OF WILLOW ROUNDS"

CELEBRATING CELIBACY

"BONK" by Mary Roach: A Review

RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

MINISTERIAL BATSHIT

TRIBAL COHERENCE AMONG THE BLOODS

HIV/SDD/HCV COUNSELING, TESTING AND REFERRAL TRAIN...

► [February \(28\)](#)

► [January \(32\)](#)

► [2012 \(372\)](#)

► [2011 \(345\)](#)

► [2010 \(369\)](#)

► [2009 \(356\)](#)

► [2008 \(315\)](#)

► [2007 \(289\)](#)

► [2006 \(222\)](#)

► [2005 \(157\)](#)

Simple theme. Powered by [Blogger](#).