Harry Crews and the Myths of the American South

A study of *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes*

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1. Introduction

Since his literary debut in 1968, Harry Crews (1935-2012) has never been an acclaimed writer. Lingering in the margins of the literary field, the results of his prolific writing were read only by a small number of literature adepts. Yet this restricted group of readers commonly received his novels and essays with passionate enthusiasm, lifting Crews up to the status of a cult figure – even though the writer himself would state rather eloquently that he did not “give a rat’s ass for the word cult” (Ring 21). Inspiring other writers and musical artists among his fan club, Harry Crews made undoubtedly an important contribution to America’s literary heritage. Nevertheless, his presence in academic writing is marginal. Apart from a handful of thematic analyses of his novels and an essay collection edited by Erik Bledsoe titled Perspectives on Harry Crews (2001), the academic publications on Crews’ work are sparse. For that reason I decided to devote my thesis to two novels by Crews, a small attempt to close the gap between his literary work and wide academic recognition. These two novels in question are his debut The Gospel Singer (1968) and A Feast of Snakes (1976), my first encounter with Harry Crews’ oeuvre.

What characterizes Harry Crews is the fact that he was a genuine southerner (Bledsoe 1999, 65). Born in Georgia and living in Florida for most of his life, he felt a lifelong connection to the land he walked upon and the people among whom he lived (Crews 1993, 22). Consequently, Crews’ self-identification with his environment – or his “home place” as they call it in Bacon County, Georgia (A Childhood 31) – largely influenced his stories, which are almost always set in a small community in one of the southern states of America. As a result his fiction is often labeled as ‘southern’ (Bledsoe 1999, 3). For that reason I selected southern studies, particularly the field specialized in mythology and southern identity, as the theoretical framework for my literary analysis. Intriguingly, it is assumed among these scholars of southern studies that the South and its assumed uniqueness is not so much a product of mere geographical or historical distinctiveness. The conception of the South is probably due to a particular “cultural imagery that came to represent the region’s values and worldviews, nurturing a sense of difference between the South and other American places” (Wilson 1). In that way, “the South’s perception of itself and the nation’s perception of the South, has always been an important element in the actual distinctiveness of the region” (Roland 189). In other words, the cultural identity of the South was and will be distinctive as long as people imagine some things as typically southern, as long as there are culturally determined narrative constructs or myths, about what the South is and who southerners are
(Wilson 159). These conceptions of what characterizes the region and its people already have their origins in the early ages of the southern frontier and they still exist today, albeit changed through time and experience (Wilson 1-3).

Literature by and/or about southerners has often built on these myths of the South, thereby affirming old images and (co-)constructing new ones. In this thesis, I will argue that Harry Crews’ fiction creates a new image of the South by reshaping southern stereotypes. In his stories Crews elevates these clichés to a universal level, suggesting that they are rather representative of the human condition than that they are defined by regional singularity. I will prove my point by analyzing features of various myths of the South in two novels, The Gospel Singer and A Feast of Snakes, focusing on both their stereotypical and their universal quality. In that way Crews places himself, willingly or unwillingly, in the tradition of southern literature, contributing in his unique way to the imagery of the South that lingers in the mind of both Southerners and non-Southern people. Since the scope of a thesis is limited, I chose The Gospel Singer and A Feast of Snakes on the basis of personal preference, but in fact each fictional work by Crews would have done well, as all of his novels and short fiction offer a dark, edgy and haunting fictional portrait of Southern community life.

I will first introduce six main myths of the past or the contemporary South. These images are largely based upon historical events, and as far as possible they will be discussed in chronological order: from the southern Frontier and the Old South with its white mansions, plantations and slaves, to the Bible Belt with its fundamentalist Protestant denominations. Next, a limited introduction to Crews’ literary work in general will be presented, followed by an analysis of the two novels. First I will look into The Gospel Singer, focusing on elements drawn from the six southern myths, most importantly religion, sex and gender, individualism, racism and freaks. Second, A Feast of Snakes will be analyzed by paying special attention to the themes of localism, determinism, violence, and sex and gender. Eventually these two analyses will be put together in a general conclusion on Crews’ image of the South in the two novels, arguing that his South is not merely rough and dark, but that his depiction of the region also constitutes a refreshing approach to southern mythology. Instead of defining the clichés of southern identity that arose in the course of the past centuries as being regionally unique, Crews crosses the regional border and connects ‘southerness’ to universal humanness.
2. Myths of the South

As indicated before, we can concisely say that “[t]he South occupies a central place in the American imagination” (Wilson xvii) and that this may be due to a range of mythological representations of the region. Before we take a closer look at these various myths, it may be relevant to explain briefly their origins and their importance for the southerners’ self-identification in general.

The South’s regional identity was basically formed by its historical events and institutions, often related to its characteristics of geography, climate and resources (Wilson 125-126). Certain images of the South were constructed for either romantic, political or economic reasons as a result of which those historical events and geographical elements were deleted, highlighted or changed. Eventually these distorted images acquired the status of reality in the minds of the people, becoming stereotypes or “‘pictures in our head’ that have more to do with preconceptions than with reality” (Wilson 126). These are the myths of the South that “created, shaped and nurtured” regional identity, for they constructed “a complex set of attitudes and affinities, assumptions and instincts” to which people relate in order to define themselves as southern (Rubin 17). As a result, scholars of southern studies find it difficult to define the term ‘southern’ or ‘the South’ since it is considered to be a mental construct instead of a geographically or historically defined one. Meanwhile it is assumed that “maybe the best way to define the South is with what Hamilton Horton calls the ‘Hell, yes’ line: you know you are in the South if that’s what people say when you ask if they are southerners” (Reed 2003, 11).

The various myths of the South, however, are less difficult to identify. In what follows, the six most famous of these ‘Souths’ will be described according to their exclusive features. As will be pointed out, they are all based upon the region’s main historical events and geographical changes, and they have left their mark on the intricate identity of the South today. The mythological images in question are the Southern Frontier, the Old South, the Solid South, the Sun Belt, the Benighted South and the Bible Belt.

2.1. The Southern Frontier

After the first European settlements in the eastern coastal area of the contemporary United States were established, various settlers explored the unknown western regions. Their westward expansion spread all over the continent, simultaneously constructing new societies on strange territory. This geographical zone in which Americans moved westward from
Atlantic to Pacific is also known as the Anglo-American frontier (Billington & Ridge 2-3). Generally the frontier area is typified as sparsely populated by people whose individual skills were necessary to exploit “the unusually abundant natural resources” of the wilderness (Billington & Ridge 3). The assault on nature for socioeconomic means was mostly begun by fur traders, who were later accompanied by cattle traders, trappers, herders, miners and eventually by the frontier farmers who had to labor arduously to cultivate the rude land. After a while, small towns arose on the frontier, approaching the socioeconomic needs of the growing mining and farming industry, and attracting wealth seekers from the east, thus creating an urban frontier (Billington & Ridge 3-7).

From the 17th century onwards the southern region was roamed by European settlers who explored the lands of Virginia, North and South Carolina and Georgia (Cash 18-19). Among them were groups of Puritans who had brought their precious bibles and religious ideology from across the Atlantic, and consequently had a considerable influence on southern mythmaking. They had arrived with the religious and mythological imagination of that time and age, so that “whether articulated in verse, fiction, or sermons, or borne ultimately at unconscious levels, myth pictured the region as a new Garden of Eden” (Wilson 160). Observing the South’s abundance of natural sources and beauty, these Puritans thought they had regained their paradise lost and subsequently the southern areas were mythologized as the promised land, as ‘the new Canaan’ graced by God. Thus from the arrival of the Puritans onwards a “religious substructure” was established within southern culture (Wilson 160) which would still evolve in the course of the following centuries.¹

Most of these earliest Puritan settlers never went more southward than the Virginian borders though; nor did the other early settlers. “Two hundred years had run since John Smith has saved Jamestown,” W.J. Cash wrote about the South at the close of the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), “but the land which was to become the cotton kingdom was still more wilderness than not” (Cash 18-19). Apart from the societal organization and tobacco plantations in the seaboard countries of Virginia etc., the rest of the southern areas were still in (semi-)frontier stage. As mentioned before, the common tale of the frontier area tells us that the pioneers in the vast backcountry wrestled with nature’s wilderness in order to grow crops and to survive. Moreover, roughness and masculinity set the tone, as from the moment “life had but ceased to be a business of Indian fighting, [i]t was still largely a matter of coon-hunting, of ‘painter’ tales and hard drinking” (Cash 23). For these people the southern region

¹ See chapter 2.6 on the Bible Belt for further illustration.
was less a Garden of Eden than a death trap, which only the fittest survived. As a consequence “the essential frontier process of wresting a stable foothold from a hostile environment” (Cash 24-25) encouraged an individualistic mindset, a self-asserting attitude in the people working on these frontier lands.

These settlers’ individualism would persist through the next generations who attributed the success of their ancestors to their individualistic attitude and hard work (Cash 44). However this kind of individualism is not to be interpreted as “freethinking nonconformity”, but as a belief that one must be “responsible for the welfare of you and yours” (Reed 2003, 23). As a result, anti-institutionalism – a belief that one should not be dependent on society, including government, church, law court or labor union for welfare - lives on in the South today. It is not merely present in country songs, but it is also reflected in the South’s tendency towards economic libertarianism, politics that argue for a maximum of individual rights and a minimum of intervention by the state. Individualism also echoes through southern localism2 (Reed 2003, 24-25).

In short, the myth of the southern frontier was built on images created by the Puritans and generations of settlers. It gave the South its first interpretation as a region in which religion exists as a prevailing force, and it connected southern identity to a general inclination towards the individualistic. Moreover, religion and individualism are still current in southern society today (Reed 2003, 24-25).

2.2. The Old South

Eventually the confinement of the plantations within the coastlines and tobacco belt dissolved with the invention of the cotton gin (Cash 23-24). “Cotton would end stagnation, beat back the wilderness, mow the forest, pour black men and plows and mules along the Yazoo and the Arkansas, spin out the railroad, freight the yellow waters of the Mississippi with panting stern-wheelers – in brief, create the great South” (Cash 23). By the 1820s the cotton plantation was fully on the march, and it developed for the next decades until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 (Cash 24). From this antebellum history of the South, the post-war generations would construct the beloved myth of the Old South. In its essence, the myth banks on the plantation myth, “a body of tales, legends, and folklore defining the antebellum plantation” (Wilson 139), as the plantation plays the leading role in the story of the Old South.

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2 See 2.6 on the Bible Belt
Specific for the plantation system was its hierarchical order in which “the patriarchal family is the central defining device and metaphor” (Wilson 139). At the top towered the rich and well-born plantation owner and his sons. Wife and daughters stood beneath them, followed by their children, while white dependents and black slaves lingered at the bottom. Moreover, the slave’s order was hierarchically structured and familial as well. House servants were higher in rank than plantation workers, as craftsmen and fairer blacks were rated higher than unskilled and dark slaves respectively (Wilson 139-140). However it is noteworthy that, although this image represented the entire southern region according to plantation mythology, it was mostly in the richest areas of the Tidewater of Virginia and South Carolina that these mighty plantation families existed. In most southern communities a local version or model was used, nevertheless taking the grand families and their hierarchical system as an example. As a result, in these areas “slaveholders dominate[d] whites without slaves [and] whites and males prevail[ed] over blacks and women” (Wilson 140-141).

When the southern states were defeated by the abolitionist Northern states in the Civil War in 1865, the white southerners felt the need to romanticize their old plantation system which had become illegal according to Northern law. In order to comprehend and live through their radically altered situation the former Confederates created in the 1880s and 1890s a “legendary chivalric past” situated on the plantations. Within this romantic past the plantation’s hierarchical structure became an ideal and the plantation owner was attributed with a noblesse, goodness and chivalric values that were explicitly linked to the English Cavalier tradition (Wilson 139-141). An object of these men’s courtesy then was the white woman, or the southern belle, who stood as “the asexual paragon of virtue” (Wilson 165). To justify their defeat, the southerners’ romantic plantation myth argued that “prewar society was too noble, good, and bright to survive the onslaughts of industrial, middle-class capitalism from the North”, and consequently the antebellum South was doomed to bite the dust against the Northern armies (Wilson 141).

In that way the romantic plantation myth of the Old South fitted within the myth of the Lost Cause, the white southerners’ memorialization and ritualization of the Confederate’s defeat. Attempting to interpret the white South’s role in the Civil War as guiltless, the myth of the Lost Cause argued that not slavery but the North’s strive for constitutionalism initiated the war. It also found no fault with the southern soldiers or their disunity, but with the North’s devastating numbers and resources: “Defeat therefore became the inevitable result of northern

3 See chapter 2.3 on the Solid South for further illustration.
power, not a judgment on the South. God allowed it, white southerners believed, only to prepare the South for an eventual triumph through a vindication of its principles” (Wilson 240). To prove their argument, the mythmakers of the Lost Cause praised the support of the white women and blacks during wartime, and they celebrated the heroic and loyal southern soldier. Evidently the myth of the Lost Cause became massively popular among the white southern population during the late 19th century, so that the Lost Cause even had its influence on the 20th century representations of the South. Yet not many of these beliefs remain at the dawn of the 21st century (Wilson 240-242).

The “defeat-generated mythologizing” of the romantic Old South and the Lost Cause lasted from the 1880s to the dawn of World War II when southern writers like William Faulkner and W.J. Cash tried to “exorcise the plantation ghosts” (Wilson 141). Until then the romantic image of the Old South with its beautiful landscapes, courteous men and virtuous women was immensely influential for the conception of southern history. Besides, the myth of the Old South and its literature was appealing not only to the southerners themselves. The North too was entranced by the nostalgic image of the South’s Golden Age when the moonlight was rich and mellow and the magnolias were ever in bloom. Consequently, the nostalgic image of the antebellum South spread across the nation and lived in the American people for half a century (Wilson 246). This was largely due to writers who reinforced the popularity of the Old South myth with nostalgic romances, like Thomas Nelson Page, who “prosper[ed] as an Old South sentimentalist” and whose personages were only “courtly-but-tragic ol’ gemun, dashing beaux, beauteous belles, and loving, loyal darkies” (Kirby 39-41). Also the film industry exploited the success of the Old South myth and evoked nostalgia for the antebellum era with box office hits like Gone with the Wind, an adaption of Margaret Mitchell’s best-selling novel (Kirby 72). But, in the words of Jack Kirby:

“No doubt there were real antebellum white people to substantiate the characters of Scarlett, Rhett, Melanie, and Ashley [cf. Gone with the Wind]. Novel readers and movie goers may, but probably do not, thoughtfully contemplate the use of stereotypes. They are entertained and go on their way, never tidily segregating history from vivid written and/or pictorial imagery” (Kirby 72-73).

As Kirby formulates, these popular stories are a danger for historical accuracy.

Yet however dominant the myth of the Old South used to be, there is not much left of its credibility today. From the 1930s onwards, the myth has become “an object of parody and advertising gimmick” (Wilson 247). Both southerners and non-southerners have changed their views on the South’s antebellum history in the course of time, and other images of the South
have arisen, some of them as explicit reactions against the dominant myth of the Old South. Nevertheless this myth had an undoubtable historical importance for the creation of a cohesive southern identity during its heydays, which explicitly differentiated itself from the North (Wilson 141). Moreover, the paternalistic ideal of the plantation still echoes through the southerners attachment to traditional family life (Wilson 60). In short, the myth of Old South still has its value for southern identity today, even though most contemporary southerners do not relate to it for its historical value. Yet the fact that they do define themselves as southerners has its roots in the popularity of the Old South’s image, which constituted an identity differing from the Northern states of America (Wilson 141).

2.3. The Solid South

While the southern post-Civil-war generation invented the myth of the Old South to deal with its forlorn past, that same generation of white southerners created yet another image of their region anticipating its contemporary situation. As a reaction against Northern rule the southern states united into one politically and ideologically “solid” South. For almost a century, all southern states voted Democratic in contrast to the Republican North and followed a racist doctrine of white supremacy (Rubin 10).

However, this political and ideological cohesiveness was the result of another mythological image of the postwar South: the Reconstruction myth. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Republican leaders of the North radically changed, or reconstructed, southern society and politics. Slavery was abolished and made way for racial equality. Plus, in order to preserve the former slaves’ freedom, a Freedmen’s Bureau was established “that would supervise a new free labor system in the South” (Wilson 152). By the votes of those freed blacks, the Republicans achieved electoral majorities in the southern states for the first years after 1865, so that egalitarian federal laws and constitutional amendments passed through. This period of Republican rule until 1877 was named ‘Reconstruction’ by southern white conservatives, who imagined within these changes a demonic dimension. Creating typologies of mythic “bad” characters like the ‘scalawags’, traitorous southern collaborators with the northern Yankees, or the ‘carpetbaggers’, Yankees exploiting the poor southerners with inhuman fees and taxes, the white southern political elite carved into southern popular culture the conception of an evil North whose rule had to be fought with political and violent means (Wilson 152-153).
As a result, that white elite quickly superseded the Republicans in the South. From the 1880s onwards the southern states were ruled by “conservatives who saw control by the ‘white supremacy Democrats’ as the only road to salvation for their society” (Wilson 152). Every attempt at political revolt, e.g. by Populism or Progressivism (Roland 94), was demolished, as it prompted the Democratic party to remind the people and Congress of the evils of Reconstruction and how a solid democratic South was the only way to avoid a new similar scenario (Wilson 152). The Democrats’ influence was also “accompanied by an intense historical didacticism directed to the nation”, strengthened by the media of film and literature, among which Griffith’s epical film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) achieved an unequalled success (Kirby 6-7). The film brought the Reconstruction myth on screen, thereby reaching multitudes of southern people who did not read history books, but who learned their history by entertaining sources like films and novels. Box office hits like *Birth of a Nation* also had influence over a large period of time, as the film and its maker “began to assume a sort of hallowed status which lasted until well after World War II” (Kirby 8).

Unsurprisingly, the paramount issue in southern postwar politics was race. From the beginning of their political rule in the South, the Democratic party succeeded in undoing the Republican’s innovations during the Reconstruction period. As a result “blacks were excluded from party leadership and their interests largely ignored in party policy” up until the 1950s (Roland 95). This boycott of blacks’ political significance resulted from the ex-slaves’ new status since Reconstruction. Blacks were regarded as a threat to the existence of the old familiar white civilization (Wilson 89), so that white Democrats, averse to a smooth change of society’s structure, willingly used and justified every means to end ‘Negro rule’ in the South, either by political exclusion and large-scale electoral corruption or by political violence. “Initially through secret organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and later more openly, as with Wade Hampton’s ‘Red Shirts’ in South Carolina, the Democrats resorted to beatings, assassinations, and armed bands of horsemen at the polls” (Wilson 152-153). However these violent racist groupings did not represent all white southerners, who mostly supported white supremacy but among whom “a significant number preferred [it] without vigilante violence (Waldrep 141).

Eventually the Democrats’ racist politics culminated in legal racial segregation. In 1896 the Supreme Court accepted apartheid between blacks and whites in public institutions as constitutional, using the “separate-but-equal”-principle as a critical argument (Havard 40; Wilson 153). As a consequence the solid South became innately linked to explicit, steadfast racism. Accordingly the solidity of Southern politics showed its first cracks when white
sentiment gradually opposed racial injustice, though rarely openly perceivable, during the 1930s, reaching its pinnacle in 1954. In that year the U.S. Supreme Court declared school segregation by race unconstitutional in the ‘Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka’-case. Quickly afterwards, bus boycotts and sit-ins by black southerners and the popular figure of Martin Luther King arose, forcing an end to overt racism. These events ultimately led to the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, “which outlawed racial discrimination in all walks of life” (Rubin 15-16). Moreover, toward the end of the sixties, television recorded the racist reactions in the North against King and his fellow civil rights activists; hence the image of a racist America instead of a racist South started to predominate. In addition, in the academic year of 1970-1971 the southern schools were known to be the most unsegregated of the nation (Kirby 134).

Evidently, the southern people did not continue to vote Democratic, as attitudinal changes towards blacks, together with other developments like urbanization, industrialization and an increase of literacy forced the structure of southern politics to reshape itself (Roland 78). As a result, the image of the South as a solid ideological political entity became history. Nonetheless, remains of the solid South are still present in southern society today, both in its attitude to blacks and in its politics. While overt racist expression indeed became prohibited, covert negative attitudes towards blacks have kept on evolving. “There is much evidence to show that these attitudes have in some measure merely gone underground. Their presence is still revealed in private conversations, snide allusions, small-group confrontations, and such literary media as hate mail and toilet stall doors” (Wilson 150). Although these racial attitudes are not only present in the South, the region has had its specific history in which racism was “peculiar” in its “virulence, saliency, [and] pervasiveness”, so that its long and deeply embedded racial attitudes will probably persist for a long time (Wilson 151). Also the conservatism that has been linked to southern politics, including emphasis on regional issues, less taxation and less welfare spending, can be traced back to anti-constitutionalist Democratic politics during the high tide of the solid South (Roland 71).

2.4. The Sun Belt

While the solid South dealt with the postwar changes from a conservative political point of view, there was also a tendency among southerners to look forward from an innovative
economic angle. To various southerners the South’s “only way to retrieve its fortunes was to throw off the habits and attitudes of the defeated past and set out to pursue commerce, industry and the almighty dollar with the same avidity and finesse as the victorious North” (Rubin 6). Thus, during the last decades of the 19th century, the common southerner believed with vibrant optimism in the emergence of a “New South” characterized by bustling cities and booming manufactures, where financial prospects were high (Rubin 6; Tindall 173). However, this optimistic image of the South did not resemble anything close to reality until the dawn of the 20th century. Before then, the new manufactures were minor and unimportant, while farmers remained poor, most of them having to mortgage their farm or work on shares (Rubin 6). Indeed when Wall Street crashed in 1929, “bringing the nation down almost in the dust, it found the South waiting there, already on familiar terms with history’s great negative lessons of poverty, failure, defeat and guilt,” which the Civil War had already taught southerners5 (Minter 204).

Things changed with the federally administered economic reforms of Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s. Though the New Deal program aimed to elevate the American economy in general, most reformation took place in the South because it was believed to be the poorest region at the time. Therefore, agencies like the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (among many others) were founded, together with an accelerated “integration into [the] country’s version of the modern world” (Minter 204). As a result, the South was quickly transformed from a dispersed agricultural economy into an “industrial, commercial, and centralized economy” (Minter 204), showing its benefits in higher wages, a wider press circulation, promising public health reports and larger state budgets for education and welfare (Rubin 26). Consequently the South acquired “economic maturity” after a few more decades of industrial growth, so that the region was spoken of as the Sun Belt, America’s most burgeoning industrial area, in the 1970s (Tindall 171).

These Sun Belt’s profits notwithstanding, some of the new federal programs did not reach their goal and failed badly, especially among the neediest of citizens. Also, the rapid transformation of the South’s agricultural landscape and society awoke distrust and a sense of betrayal among various southerners (Minter 204). Subsequently, a cultural convergence of the South and the Northern mainstream did not ensue; only a decrease of the most dramatic economic and demographical differences. In order to preserve “the autonomy of Southern culture,” “cultural differences […] stubbornly reasserted themselves” (Rubin 27&171), two of

5 See chapter 2.5 on the Benighted South for further information on the first decades of the twentieth century.
which were particularly enduring: the quality and intensity of religion\textsuperscript{6} and the attachment to local communities (Rubin 30).

Interestingly, the tendency to prefer one’s own community in contrast to others, often called ‘localism’, became more prominent in the industrialized and urbanized South (Rubin 30-32). As a result, southern identity is often connected to a ‘sense of place’, which can be regarded as a sensitivity to unique aspects of one’s local society and an awareness of a network of friends and family in this community that cannot be replaced elsewhere (Rubin 32-33). The conception of ‘community’ may take various forms, though. A community could evolve around local institutions like the courthouse square, beauty parlor, barber shop or pool hall. More broadly, smaller rural neighborhoods or villages constituted a local community, as did the county, the political and administrative grouping of small rural areas (Wilson 39-40). Harry Crews, for instance, felt himself closely tied to the land and people of his county of birth, Bacon County in Georgia, as will be discussed in the analysis of two of his novels (A Childhood, 22). Furthermore, religious and racial groupings could be regarded as communities, as well as city neighborhoods. Attempting to adapt to contemporary changes, white southerners searched “the regional ideal of community” in the suburb, so that “a small-town southern ideal surviv[ed] in the context of big-city living” (Wilson 40-42).

Additionally a similar but more extreme form of opposition against the emergence of the Sun Belt appeared in the middle 1920s from a scholarly and literary angle known as Agrarianism. The Agrarians, centered in Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, were chiefly writers and philosophers who formulated a radical and intellectual resistance against industrial progress and 20\textsuperscript{th} century materialism, rooting their global philosophical conservatism in the Southern attachment to local community life. In their manifesto I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (1930), the Agrarians called for a return to the South’s small town and rural tradition, arguing for its integrity and harmony with nature in contrast to the corruption of industrial capitalism and urban life. Yet their highly intellectual and literary approach did not reach a large audience. Agrarianism’s lack of concrete economic insight and programmatic action did not stir the southern people and became a dead letter (Rubin 11-13).

In brief, the image of the Sun Belt emerged from an optimistic approach towards industrial growth and commercial success in the southern states of America, but the development of the Sun Belt created a dichotomy in southerners’ stance towards these

\textsuperscript{6} See 2.6 The Bible Belt
structural and ideological changes in the region. On the one hand the South became a model of commercial capitalism, but on the other hand a communal inclination towards the local and agricultural remained and even reinforced itself, which had its strongest advocates in the Agrarians of Vanderbilt University. As a result the image of the South as an area in which the geographical dichotomy between the urban and the rural is strongly present, still circulates within the collective mind of both southern and non-southern people.

2.5. The Benighted South

Despite the rise of an industrially burgeoning South since the 1930s, the conception of the South still invokes the image of a poor and benighted area. “Intellectual sterility”, “racism”, “religious barbarism”, “poverty” and “sloth” used to be associated with the Savage South, most vividly in the 1920s, and these popular attributes to southern culture have had effects on contemporary imagery (Wilson 27-29).

Similar to the rise of the Sun Belt’s image, the myth of a ‘Benighted South’ evolved from a strong reaction against the popularity of the Old South myth in the early twentieth century. To be sure, it already had its roots in nineteenth century literature as northern novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe had painted a grim portrait of the southern region and its inhabitants. Yet the main origins of the Benighted South lie in a national anti-romantic movement in the 1920s that focused its attention on actual ‘dark’ events occurring in the contemporary South (Wilson 27). Outbreaks of racial injustice and lynching extravaganzas by the Ku Klux Klan, fundamentalist campaigns of religious intolerance, violent strikes by poor factory workers and the infamous Scopes Trial are merely some examples (Wilson 27). As a result, “these events drew the attention of national journalists […] prominent magazines […] and of social scientists […]” who carried out a “Yankee crusade against the romantic southern image” (Wilson 27). Their influential writings were reinforced by southern journalists and literary figures who wrote from their own experiences on southern racism and intellectual sterility (Wilson 28). Of all essays on the infamous Benighted South, journalist and satirist H.L. Mencken’s essay “The Sahara of the Bozart” was probably the most significant. “A magnificent blast at Dixie’s pretentiousness, it proclaimed the region as a sterile desert of the

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7 Formally known as ‘The State of Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes’, the legal case evolved around a heightened evolution-creation controversy. High school teacher John Scopes was tried for violating the Butler Act which forbid evolution theory to be taught in the state of Tennessee. The jury’s verdict sided with the Butler law (“The Monkey Trial”).

8 Dixie is a nickname for the South.
beaux arts”, subsequently reinforcing the national attack on southern poverty and ignorance (Kirby 65-66).

However the greatest contribution to the Benighted South’s widespread image came from an artistic angle. Even though the nature idylls à la Thomas Nelson Page continued to be written, the rise of Dixie poverty in the media was mirrored in a new literary tradition which Ellen Glasgow would define in 1935 as the “Southern Gothic School” (Kirby 49). Author T.S. Stribling, for instance, gained national popularity with novels ridiculing southern violence, fundamentalism and ignorance. Moreover, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for the first volume of his “Alabama trilogy” in which he combined the sentimentalist tradition of Page to write on war and reconstruction with heaps of sex and sensationalism (Kirby 49). Erskine Caldwell was undoubtedly the greatest writing celebrity of his time and is up until today considered to be “the most influential communicator about the American South” (Kirby 52). Having sold more than 40 million copies of his novels and short stories between 1932 and 1967, Caldwell’s poor white southern personages were imprinted in the minds of his southern and non-southern readers (Kirby 51-52). For, interpreted by critics as a realist, Caldwell’s South was assumed to portray actuality (Kirby 55). Nonetheless these days the names of Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner are the best-known. Wolfe based his southern settings on his hometown Asheville, spatting upon its lack of spirituality and intellect, but “[i]f Wolfe’s South was intellectually barren and culturally sterile, that of William Faulkner was downright frightening” (Wilson 28). Between 1929 and 1936, Faulkner published a series of novels on the South’s “decaying gentry, idiocy, religious fanaticism, murder, rape and suicide”, hence reinforcing the worst images of southern degradation that the journalists of the 1920s had put forward (Wilson 28).

Evidently these authors’ depictions of the South would not have been regarded as representative of actual southern life, if similar depictions were not provided via other means. As discussed before, actual events that fitted within the myth of a Benighted South frequently occurred and were put in the spotlight by the media. Next, documentary books with photographic portraits of poor white southerners emerged and were massively popular, to which Margaret Bourke-White (a.k.a. Mrs. Caldwell) made a viable contribution. Also federal studies were set up and they defined the region as America’s primary economic problem in 1938 (Kirby 54-55). As a result, Roosevelt proclaimed that the South was in need of financial and structural help, setting up the New Deal program⁹. Nevertheless the image of a “savage”

⁹ See 2.4 The Sun Belt
Dixie “out of touch with modern civilization” remained during the 1950s and 1960s as new events attracted negative media attention and kept the myth of the Benighted South alive (Wilson 29).

“Only with the end of the civil rights movement – and the rise of the Sunbelt in the 1970s – did the image of the Benighted South begin to fade” (Wilson 29). By the rise of industrialism and general welfare and the decline of racial injustice, the myth of the Benighted South gradually lost its vigor. Yet through the presence of fundamentalist religious groups, the persistence of rural poverty and numerous instances of racial violence in the southern region, the myth often makes its resurgence in media or literature (Wilson 29).

2.6. The Bible Belt

Apart from the myths of the South that arose during or after political, economic or social changes, there is one factor that set the South irrefutably apart from the rest of the country: religion. Influencing southern life in all its aspects from national politics to family life, it has shaped southern culture in such a way that it is now seen as a reality that religion “rests at the heart of southern culture and what it means to be a southerner” – a view that even the most demanding critics endorse (Wilson 158). Although religion has been assigned an important role in American culture in general, southern religion is known to be unique in its intensity and in its distinctive ways of spiritual experience (Roland 119). For that reason the southern states are identified as America’s Bible Belt (Wilson 158).

From its earliest beginnings the South’s history was laden with religious meaning. Initially religion entered the southern area with the coming of the Puritans, as the earlier chapter on the southern frontier already illustrated. Subsequently, an amalgam of settlers planted themselves in the southern colonies, nurturing their sense of the South with the Puritans’ religious and mythical attitudes towards the land as a paradise regained. Later, the purpose of slavery was given holy proportions by the white southerners’ belief that it was their duty to “serve as stewards and moral conservators” of blacks (Wilson 160). Since these people from African origins were the descendants from Ham, it was God’s will to enslave them. Consequently the Civil War was mythologized as a holy war with the divine purpose of defending God’s law of slavery, reinforcing the image of the South as the superior, heroic party in the conflict, which the chapter on the Old South and the Lost Cause already concisely demonstrated. In short, a continuous religious, or more precisely Protestant, undercurrent
flows throughout the history of the South and religious imagery is most present in southern mythology, thereby contributing to the myths’ content and fortitude (Wilson 160-161).

As Protestantism became thus ingrained in the history of the South, it also became inseparable from contemporary southern culture. Merely a decade ago, ninety percent of all southerners still identified themselves as low-church Protestant, mostly Baptist, Methodist or Presbyterian (Wilson 158). Poll data from the 1970s, when both *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes* were written, show that white southerners were twice more likely to go to church than non-southern Protestants and in contrast to the rest of the country the largest group of these southern churchgoers consisted of educated business and professional people (Reed 1979, 31). Moreover, Protestants in the South were “less likely than Protestants elsewhere to feel that religion is irrelevant to the modern world, and they [were] more likely to feel that their churches are satisfactory as they are” (Reed 1979, 31). Also for Afro-Americans, the other largest ethnic group in the South, religion was still a vital part of life, and black Protestant worship was even said to be more emotional and invigorating (Roland 132). In other words, religious orthodoxy endured in the southern region, affirming the South’s mythological status of ‘the Bible Belt’ in the 1970s (Roland 119).

As a result, religious doctrines had an important impact on the southern moral and social code. In the 1970s the fortitude of southern religion showed itself for instance in daily conversations by a higher usage of biblical expressions and in the common southerner’s weekly routine of churchgoing since it is a southern conviction that a good Christian should do so. Southern people were also more likely to define sin as “a violation of God’s will rather than as ‘antisocial conduct’ produced by ignorance or an unfavorable environment” (Roland 125). Exemplary for more drastic consequences of religious orthodoxy then was a greater tendency among southerners than other Americans to rely on religion instead of technology to solve contemporary problems, e.g. to protect themselves against tornadoes (Roland 126). On a less personal level, the Churches had been involved with local and regional politics and had used their political influence for social reforms like prohibition, improved working conditions for laborers, women and children, and the foundation of orphanages, hospitals, schools, etcetera (Roland 126).

Accordingly, the South’s characterization as having “an abiding sense of religiosity” generated the mythological image of a fundamentalist South and resultant cultural conservatism (Wilson 158). Yet recent revisionist critics have argued that although a touch of fundamentalism is an intrinsic part of southern culture, fundamentalist Christianity is “rather a recent social phenomenon in the designed fabric of southern life” (Wilson 158). Commitment
to evangelization, for instance, a thorough compliance to doctrine, or a focus on local church autonomy have been significant elements in southern religious culture, but “only within the past quarter century or so has the fundamentalist ‘reputation’ of the South been solidified within American culture” (Wilson 159). Since the 1970s, southern fundamentalist movements have undergirded nationalist fundamentalist organizations such as the national Religious Right and “its political agent” the Republican party, consequently attracting national attention and laying the foundation for the myth of the fundamentalist South. In that way these southerners tore down the original unity of the religious denominations (Wilson 159).

Although the myth of the fundamentalist South depicts religions’ role disproportionately, we can maintain that the South’s representation as the Bible Belt highlights important aspects of Southern life, for religion affected and still affects the daily life and ideology of the average southerner. Protestantism is interwoven with the South’s past and present, and its enduring intensity is a crucial preservative of regional distinctiveness (Roland 136). Consequently the image of the common southerner is innately interwoven with a tendency towards religious orthodoxy (Wilson 162).

3. **Harry Crews**

So I have generally outlined the six main mythological representations of the South. Their features will provide a guideline through the analysis of Harry Crews’ novels *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes*. However, before my study of these two works is presented, a brief introduction to the writer Harry Crews himself is indispensable for a correct understanding of his literary work.

Born on June 7, 1935 in Bacon County, Georgia, Harry Eugene Crews grew up among white yeoman farmers and sharecroppers in a land of hills, swamps and Baptist churches (Bledsoe 1999, 6). His family was poor and after his father’s untimely death when Crews was only two years old, poverty struck his family even harder, a situation that would endure for the rest of his youth. Consequently, his childhood memories as a poor white farmer’s son to whom violence, sickness and death were already familiar from infancy, combined with the pressing feeling of emptiness which his father’s death left behind, resulted in his most lauded work, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (1978), which is a moving memoir of the first six years of his life. Most interestingly, Harry Crews asserted in this memoir, and also repeatedly in his essays and interviews, that these first six years formed the keystone of his whole existence:
“I come from people who believe the home place is as vital and as necessary as the beating of your own heart. It is that single house where you were born, where you lived out your childhood, where you grew into young manhood. It is your anchor in the world, that place, along with the memory of your kinsmen at the long supper table every night and the knowledge that it would always exist, if nowhere but in memory.”

(A Childhood 31)

That is why Crews bluntly and repeatedly identified himself as a genuine southerner whose ties with his youth were so deeply rooted that he could not disentangle himself from his home place, not even if he had wanted to (Foata 35).

As a consequence, his fiction consistently drew upon his southern roots. Even though it took various travels and a training at the Marine Corps outside Georgia to understand the beauty of his place of birth, Crews returned to live nearby Bacon County, in Gainesville, Florida, “just far enough away from the only place that was ever [his] to still see it [and] not be too close to it to use it” (“Why I Live Where I Live” 9-10). There he wrote stories generated from the southern conditions he saw around him: the weather, the language and the people (Bellamy 65). Subsequently, Crews has often been portrayed as a writer of the South, but he certainly did not consciously aspire to be one. More precisely, Crews wanted to be a traditional storyteller who happened to live in a certain place and who gathered his material out of the immediate reality surrounding him (Watson 55). In that way, Crews’ fiction brought a breath of fresh air to southern literature. Whereas O’Connor, Caldwell and Faulkner, practitioners of the Southern Gothic, were upper- or middle class, white authors writing on the southern poor, Crews’ literary voice stemmed from within the poor white class in the South (Bledsoe 1999, 4-5).

Thus, Crews worked from his southern roots to create his stories, but he did not merely write about southerners and their ‘southerness’. Most importantly, Crews’ characters are essentially people, and the South as it is depicted in his novels can be read as an archetype of a more general, contemporary world (Foata 33). More than anything, Crews’ personages are simply human, which he put into words as follows:

“I know that the people living in Manhattan, or in France, or anywhere else have by and large to deal with the same things that I deal with, obviously, but the land that I know there in Georgia, and the people I know, who are all fond of the land, somehow their struggles with the things that every man must struggle with are simplified, made stark and vivid and immediate.” (Foata 37)
In his essays and interviews Crews’ elaborately explained what his conception of humanity and his worldview actually entailed, and how these are intertwined with his literary works. Two focal points are to be discerned, and they will be crucial to the literary analysis of The Gospel Singer and A Feast of Snakes.

First, Harry Crews had an outspoken view on art’s - or literature’s- purpose. Growing up as a boy in whose house and neighborhood books were absent except for the Bible, stories were nevertheless an essential part of his childhood. “When I was a boy, stories were conversation and conversation was stories,” wrote Crews in his memoir, and violence, sickness and death would play the leading parts (A Childhood 101). Crews soon learned through these stories that “every single thing in the world was full of mystery and awesome power” and that all those stories were a means to an end: not to understand the world’s complexity, but “to live with it” (A Childhood 97-98). As a result, Crews later asserted in an interview that this also accounts for literature and art in general:

“If you want social reform, then you ought to stand for public office, and if you want to preach, then take a pulpit, and if you want to send messages, use Western Union. I mean, that’s not what Art’s about. For the very simple reason that man is a complex, mysterious, unknowable thing, and to reduce that thing to some kind of a simplistic notion of what society ought to be, or economy, I just can’t get into that, as a writer” (Foata 37).

In short, literature according to Crews copes with life’s mysteries by showing them instead of solving them. Crews’ fiction is therefore a celebration of life’s dualities and mysteries. It argues that there is more humanity in an acceptance of these complexities than in a vain attempt to eliminate all that does not fit into the perfect picture.

Second, the celebration of life’s complexity has its influence on Crews’ view on mankind. According to Crews, not only the world but also mankind itself has an intricate, undefinable nature. As such, the writer professed his lack of belief in either good or evil people. “[G]ood men sometimes do evil things, and evil men sometimes do good things,” Crews asserted (Foata 36-37). Nonetheless, Crews does not let the inherent evil streak in humankind obstruct his love for mankind. As he proclaimed both in interviews and A Childhood, “no man is a villain in his own heart” as each person merely does his or her best “according to their own best lights” and for each thought or action they have their own good (at least to them good) reasons (Crews 1993, 10). Who are we to judge others?

These convictions are a driving force in Crews’ fiction. The writer draws upon southern imagery to compose his stories simply because it comes naturally to him being a
southerner and because the South provides him with strong and illustrative material. Nevertheless, his stories cross regional boundaries. By adding to the stereotypical elements of the poor white's culture of the South a universal dimension, Crews lifts the South up to a higher status: although it is still distinctive – stereotypes have their truthful origins – in essence it fits within our wide, mindboggling world.

4. **Literary analysis**

In the following chapter the aforementioned hypothesis about Crews’ fictional work will be proven with concrete literary material. Therefore the stereotypes of southern culture in both *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes* will be studied fairly extensively. First, various elements in the novels will be defined as stereotypical by connecting them to the mythological representations of the South discussed in chapter 2. Subsequently, their undercurrent universal dimension will be looked at in detail, and his literary material will be linked to Crews’ statements in his essays, interviews or in his autobiography *A Childhood* to support the analyses.

4.1. **The Gospel Singer**

Harry Crews’ debut, *The Gospel Singer* narrates two tragic days in the small town of Enigma, Georgia. The inhabitants of this poor provincial place are all desperately awaiting the coming of the Gospel Singer, a young man who was once an inhabitant of Enigma, but has escaped his place of birth by acquiring national fame with his beautiful and captivating voice. By singing gospels, the young Gospel Singer could flee from both the place and poverty of his youth, yet his feelings urge him to return regularly to the town of his childhood, whose inhabitants eagerly welcome him. However, ‘eagerly’ is definitely an understatement. The poor villagers desperately seek help for their misfortunes from the Gospel Singer and idolize him like a Christ-like figure. Tension escalates when the Gospel Singer arrives and the townspeople, already under high emotional stress since the murder and suspected rape of the young town beauty MaryBell by the ‘nigger’ preacher Willalee Bookatee Hull, all claim the Gospel Singer’s attention and his so-called divine healing powers. These events are colored by the arrival of a freak fair, whose manager (and freak) Foot has found gold in following the Gospel Singer’s tracks. Each time the Gospel Singer has drawn a crowd to his performances, Foot’s freak fair is around, profiting from the ecstatic crowd’s presence.
4.1.1. Religion

The novel starts with one of Crews’ own epigraphs, which perfectly sets the tone for the whole story: “Men to whom God is dead worship each other”. Indeed the small population of Enigma, estimated 600 people, have nothing to thank God for. They go through endless hot and humid days by reluctantly doing their monotonous work “[i]n the field chopping cotton or breaking corn” or just killing time “sitting on the bench in front of Enigma Bank whittling tobacco plugs and spitting between their feet” (8). Moreover, poverty, sickness and death are the order of the day. Therefore the town of Enigma is at first sight a perfect example of a benighted southern community in which both the fortunes and intellectual capacities are low. As a consequence, the people of Enigma turn to religion to console themselves and to preserve their belief in a better future (whether or not after death). In Enigma, the myth of the Bible Belt is real.

However, their ties with God appear to be loose. In the daily miserable life in Enigma, a high and mighty God is absent, so that its inhabitants turn towards the visually present Gospel Singer with an overpowering force. In their desperate attempt to find salvation for their poor and sinful lives, the people single out the Gospel Singer as their chosen one and throw all rationality overboard. Envisioning him as a Christ-like figure who soothes their miseries by his astonishingly good looks and beautiful voice, and whose gospels reinforce their spiritual belief, the religious crowd even attribute to him healing powers, which he of course has not. In short, the people of Enigma are depicted as insanely superstitious people who create their own story of reality. Nonetheless, in the meantime there is no condemnation in these people’s superstition. However surreal they behave, there is logic to their thoughts and actions. Is it not evident that “if you’re dying, and your skin is turning black, and somebody even suggests that there may be somebody who can do something, why not come, and not just ask, but demand to be saved, which is what we are all asking of each other?” Crews wondered (Foata 33). In that case it is also reasonable that the Gospel Singer is chosen as their savior. While they all remain poor in Enigma where “nothing ever changes” (40) and their hopes for better remain unfulfilled, he has travelled the country and has more money than he can spend. In other words, he has apparently found the key to success in life, and they demand to share it with them.

As such, the figure of the Gospel Singer as he is perceived through the eyes of the people does not really exist. He is just their own mental construct, an invented person that he is not:
“No matter how hard he argued against it, sinners at every turn accepted God on the strength of his voice. [...] Because it was true, people began insisting he was something which he was not; because it was true, people began insisting that he could do other things he could not.” (77)

Structurally this is articulated in the absence of the Gospel Singer’s true name. In the novel he is only spoken to or referred to with regard to his professional status. In contrast we are mostly reading his thoughts and viewpoints on the events. As a result, the novel is structured on a binary opposition between a deified Gospel Singer whose true nature is hidden behind a false identity constructed and viewed by others, and a nameless subject of focalization whose trains of thought reveal his actual identity. As it soon becomes clear, the Gospel Singer is not the perfectly sinless, exemplary figure everyone believes him to be. Driven by money instead of religious conviction he pursues his career: “Gospel singing was a way to make money, a way to escape Enigma, a way to keep from having to spend his life wading through hog slop” (117). Moreover, obsessed by women, he abuses their faithful devotion to get between their legs:

“And the women, seeing the beautiful contorted face, the saddened inflamed eyes, mistook his lust for a religious ecstasy and a gentle, collective relaxing engulfed them as they yielded toward him, all their defenses down before God. And it was there, in that vulnerable moment, that he chose the woman he would have. He might take her in any number of places – back of the church, in her apartment, in a hotel, even in the backseat of the Cadillac with Didymus roaring down the highway at one hundred-twenty miles per hour shouting over his shoulder that God did not love fornicators.” (70)

Consequently, the dichotomy between both Gospel Singers, the fake perfect idol and the real sinful human, argue for an anti-religious reading of The Gospel Singer. No matter how logical the people’s superstition may be with regard to their situation, the Gospel Singer’s true nature emphasizes its ridiculousness. It is nothing more than hot air, so that their religious belief in him is built on illusions. However, the crowd’s religious nature also has a viable source, namely their search for meaning. As interviews with Crews illustrate, the writer found himself between two sides and his stance towards religion is ambiguous as he considered himself a believer and thinks “about God as contemplating the inadequacies of [his] own heart”, but

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10 See 4.1.2 on women’s role in The Gospel Singer
11 The Gospel Singer’s fundamentalist manager

To illustrate the extreme ridiculousness of people’s religion in *The Gospel Singer* further, Willalee Bookatee Hull founded the Church of the Gospel Singer with other negroes under the guidance of MaryBell. First, this already illustrates the ludicrous strength of people’s faith in the Gospel Singer’s religious power, as they are blindly prepared to worship him in an institutionalized form. Secondly, MaryBell only encouraged the creation of this Church denomination as a private joke. Having her own reasons to hate instead of worship him\(^{12}\), she knows that the Gospel Singer consciously struggles with his sinful life and sinless image. Subsequently, she creates a congregation of Gospel Singer worshippers out of Enigma’s Negro slum. As such the worshippers are merely players of a personal feud that has nothing to do with religion itself. Even more, when MaryBell finally tells the truth about the Gospel Singer’s lack of religious powers to Willalee, her confession triggers a rage in him so violent that he kills her. In other words the worship of the Gospel Singer is not only a hollow sham, but it also leads to murder.

Additionally, the religious dimension in *The Gospel Singer* has been thematically enforced by a conspicuous focus on sin. As already mentioned before, the Gospel Singer is considered as a prototypical human, one without vice or sin, by his environment. In contrast, we learn that the Gospel Singer is a money-obsessed, lying nymphomaniac. Again the context for understanding his vice is provided when Crews gives his personage room for self-defense:

“The more he demanded his right to sin, the more sinners flocked to his voice and found salvation. He was rapidly coming to the place where he believed, against his will, that he might be what the world said he was. It was frightening! […] It was a moment he would always remember when he realized that he could not be what they were saying he was if he was also taking every advantage of MaryBell, lying to her and laying her as regularly as breathing.” (121)

As the Gospel Singer proclaims, his sins against MaryBell (and against his family and women in general for that matter) function as an antidote against his so-called divine powers. In order to keep his feet on the ground, to remain a human instead of a godlike figure, he deliberately commits sin. In that way the novel not only argues that religion is an understandable result of man’s incomplete lives, but also that sin is pardonable. Even those who we think are without sin, have their gigantic faults. “[S]in is the fact of man!” Didymus passionately claims, and a

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\(^{12}\) See 4.1.2 on MaryBell Carter and *The Gospel Singer*’s sexual relationship
reading of the whole novel confirms that he is right. Crews thereby affirmed one of his most beloved philosophical credos in his literary work, namely that “good men sometimes do evil things, and evil men sometimes do good things” (Foata 36-37). Sin is an inherent streak of mankind – “nothing is so monotonous in its sameness as man’s vice” (200) – and we cannot alter it. If we believe one of us is without sin, we are just blind to the truth.

4.1.2. Sex and gender
Among the Gospel Singer’s sins, his lies and his obsession with money are minor faults compared to his untamable sexual appetite. As already indicated, the Gospel Singer is a nymphomaniac and he takes every opportunity to sleep with women. That is why the Gospel Singer is idolized for yet another reason; he has the looks and an admirable talent to attract women, including the one girl after whose voluptuous figure the male popularity of Enigma all lusted: MaryBell Carter. As such, the Gospel Singer implicitly embodies the ideal dominant male in a patriarchal society sexually objectifying women. Possibly having its origins in the Old South myth with its patriarchal plantation structure, such male dominance is still ingrained in the poor South’s imagery which is culturally defined by “casual sexism” (Lake 91). Therefore, we can discern amid the people of ‘southern’ Enigma its male horny inhabitants versus its women, who are either absent or taking care of their household, unless they are objects of sexual desire.

Basically, the male sexual dominion of women is most explicit in the relationship between the Gospel Singer and his numerous sexual partners, including Foot’s personal whore Jessica. Each girl or woman throws herself at his feet, eager to do whatever he wishes. However, his relationship with MaryBell is more intricate. Through the Gospel Singer’s flashbacks we learn that the two had a secretive sexual relationship when the Gospel Singer’s tours started off. At the same time, the Gospel Singer used his absence from Enigma to sleep with a massive amount of other women across the country, while making MaryBell believe that she was his only lover and that they were soon going to marry. As such, the Gospel Singer exerted his power over MaryBell. He dominated her both mentally by lies and physically by “work[ing] at MaryBell with a will, teaching her whatever delights he learned from whatever various whores” (121). In that way MaryBell played the role of a naïve, subjected sex toy.

However, soon the roles reversed. MaryBell’s naivety did not last forever, nor did her initial boundless love for the Gospel Singer remain intact. After a while, she gained sexual control over the Gospel Singer, as “it was she who finally began thinking of variations on the
old perversions. The student rapidly surpassed the master. She took the initiative: she showed him where; she showed him how; she told him when” (123). At the same time MaryBell also attained mental power over her lover:

“He came more and more under the spell of her flesh. […] He walked about in a daze at times thinking of her; he awoke in the night, soaked, straining for the touch of her. And even though he never knew when his control of her turned into her control of him, it was one day an accomplished fact.” (123).

Furthermore, while the Gospel Singer was increasingly yearning for their sexual intercourses, MaryBell grew indifferent and coldblooded, realizing the truth behind the lies. In her eyes the Gospel Singer had reduced her to a whore, which is “the one thing God never lets you out of Hell for” (125). Subsequently, being angry, disappointed and God-fearing, MaryBell decided to take her fate into her own hands, and to mend her losses by boundlessly exercising her sexual dominion over him. The Gospel Singer’s flashbacks account of his returns to Enigma, how she burst upon him stark-naked and seduced him into sexual intercourse every single time. As a result, the Gospel Singer’s perpetual homecoming to Enigma was due to her bidding temptations, even though he was perfectly aware of her revengeful goal: to make his life a living hell so that “the last thought [he] ever gone have on this earth’ll be between [her] legs” (128). Nonetheless, he was obsessively bound to her body until her death set him free.

For that reason, we can argue that MaryBell eventually becomes a female character of power and dominance in her relationship with the Gospel Singer. She uses the initial cause of her subjection, her desirable body, to regain control over her own life. Rather than being dominated, she learns how to become an actor of her own life again, instead of someone acted upon. As such, she is an argument against the hypothesis of ‘a typical Crews heroine’ who is innately evil and destroys men (Lake 80). MaryBell does not strive to bring the Gospel Singer down out of an innate violent nature, but her actions are caused by an impulse of revenge and self-defense. These causes can be regarded as natural phenomena, as her revenge is merely a reversal of the wrong she was subjected to; it is an eye for an eye. Her urge for dominion over the Gospel Singer, then, is in fact a way to dominate her own life again, an attempt to reclaim her own identity. According to Crews, this is a basic human streak. It is “the most basic of all human actions to dominate a thing physically. And to dominate yourself, in a kind of metaphor, emotionally and spiritually and every other way” (Watson 13).

56). Hence, MaryBell is a literal reversal of the clichéd image of the woman as an object of desire, but most importantly, she is a human rather than a cultural stereotype (Lake 93).

Accordingly, MaryBell fits completely within the larger framework of Crews’ views on his characters. As already mentioned before, he regarded them as real human beings rather than archetypes or symbols (Foata 33). Yet he also acknowledged that “[e]verything is a symbol as it becomes involved in any narrative” (Foata 30). Thence, we can argue that his humanlike characters carry a “meaning larger than themselves” concerning our humankind, unraveling what being human actually is. In the case of MaryBell, we broadly distinguished two larger meanings in her character. Firstly, that the ‘southern’ lustful gaze of the male inhabitants of Enigma towards MaryBell is based on a fact, namely that men and women are distinctive and that women’s appearances may heavily arouse men’s desire (Lake 84). Secondly, however, these differences do not affirm general inequality between men and women, as the shifting hierarchy between the Gospel Singer and MaryBell, who uses her sexual attractiveness for manipulation, illustrates. Both men and women strive towards dominion, either physically, mentally or both, because despite their vast differences, men and women are essentially the same human beings with similar human urges (Lake 93).

4.1.3. Individualism

Considering the Gospel Singer’s other vices, namely lies and luxury, we can bluntly argue that he is a self-centered hypocrite. Primarily concerned about his own well-being, he sings gospels for money, while pretending to be inspired by God, so that the common people believe, love and pay him. Also, unwilling to see his family, he defers his returns to Enigma as long as possible, sending letters full of invented excuses, and his lies to seduce MaryBell were numerous. Additionally, the Gospel Singer exhibits his hypocritical nature while doing penance for each sexual intercourse to secure his place in Heaven. In short, the Gospel Singer’s distinguished nature is merely a façade in order to profit from his surroundings. Linking this up to the myth of the southern Frontier, we can regard his opportunist individualism as exemplary of the southern frontier explorer and settler, who tries to profit from his personal gains amid a wild landscape.

That wild land is Enigma, although the Indians and vast countryside have been traded for a religious fanatic crowd that claims his non-existing divinity. Yet, they are no less terrifying, as the crowd’s growing aggressiveness is steadily evolving throughout the novel. At first, it is only implicitly referred to by Didymus driving into Enigma declaring that “this country is wild” (44) and by the Gospel Singer assuming in his paternal house that “Enigma
was out there waiting to stare at him, to touch him, and to suck consolation out of him. They would gather about his Cadillac as though it were a magical chariot that would carry them to Heaven” (69). Next, as predicted, people from all over the county are waiting on the porch’s steps the following morning, to ask relief from their afflictions. Afterwards, they follow him to the funeral parlor where they become nervous, “hot” and “mad” (114). On the steps of the funeral parlor, the individuals that stood on his porch before become lost in a “collective” crowd and their aggressiveness is given extra vigor by the Gospel Singer’s growing fear for them.

From that point onwards the crowd repeatedly yields towards the Gospel Singer with an untamable fortitude:

“The street was a jammed mass of faces turned up like masks with black open mouths sucking and expelling a collective breath [...] ‘We’ll never get through that,’ said Didymus. For an answer the Gospel Singer plunged into the mob. [...] Getting back to the Cadillac was like running the gauntlet. Hands sought to pat and touch and caress the Gospel Singer, but there were so many hands they had to hurry, and in their haste the caresses became slaps and digs and finally outright punches. Or so they felt. A squirming wall of flesh squeezed in from all sides.” (158)

Eventually, the aggression of the mass reaches its culmination point during the Gospel Singer’s performance, when he – full of guilt, and tired from lying and pretending – admits his sins to the crowd. In turn, they are unforgiving for his inability to save them. “Enigma moved as one man, not out of the benches, but through them, over them. Babies thudded from laps, old people lost their footing. The cripples in front were pushed aside, tipped over and stepped upon” (195-196). Steered by an incredibly violent disappointment, the mob comes into action, attacks the Gospel Singer and his family, and eventually hangs him together with Willalee¹⁴: “[t]he Gospel Singer and Willalee fell together. The ropes were tied badly and they strangled. They writhed at the end of the rope and were finally still. The mob watched dumbly” (197). As such, the mob’s bloodthirstiness becomes satisfied.

Consequently, the communal murder of the two men poses the question of guilt. Who is the perpetrator of this hideous crime? The case is after all “a strange one”, as the police investigator later on asserts, and he does not “even have a lead on who didn’t do it” as “[t]he tracks under that oak tree look like everybody in the world was there” (203). Thus trial and prosecution of the perpetrator becomes almost impossible, since it means that more people

¹⁴ See 4.1.5 on racism and lynching
than an entire village ought to be prosecuted. By lack of a concrete identity of the perpetrator, there is no one to assign responsibility to. It is this lack of identity, Crews explained, that creates the danger of a human crowd:

“[Y]ou know, good men, and I mean large numbers of good men, have done absolutely atrocious things for no other reason than that they were caught up in the frenzy of the lack of identity. And when you get caught up in that frenzy, then you revert to the cutting edge of the front teeth and the grinders in the back.” (Jeffrey & Noble 111)

As such, the clear boundaries between perpetrator and victim become blurred, which is also intensified by the Gospel Singer’s obscure status as the victim of the crowd’s violence. Before the attack, an almost equally violent and murderous rage awoke in himself when he “felt the strongest stab of hatred he had ever known” (192). Soon after we learn that “[i]f he could have touched a button and killed them all, he would have” (192). Therefore, we can argue that the Gospel Singer was undergoing a similar murderous frenzy, but that he was unable to pursue that murderous goal, either because he did not have the means to eliminate the huge crowd on his own, or because he still owned the moral restraints that go hand in hand with a personal identity.

In other words, it is feasible that The Gospel Singer sustains the idea that distinctive borderlines between perpetrator and victim are often difficult to maintain, which is also implied in the relationship between the Gospel Singer and MaryBell. In fact, both were perpetrators and victims of each other, as in most cases of wrongdoing each man or woman is partly guilty and partly innocent at the same time. Furthermore, the novel is an account of how the tension between individual identity and the masses is present in human nature, how it is easy to shift from one ‘individual’ identity to another ‘non-existing’ one, and how these blurred boundaries can be deadly dangerous. As Crews correspondingly remarked:

“Every crowd takes on a character. The men have individual characters, it’s true, and the men have individual minds, inside; but the group takes one and… I must admit my audiences really reflect what, I think, has caused this country so much grief. They’re almost uniformly violent, and the crowds I know anything about are violent. They’re greedy, they’re pushy, they’re disrespectful of the must human kinds of considerations as well as spiritual or economic considerations, all of them.” (Bellamy 74).

Again, this individual and communal streak is a human feature, but The Gospel Singer also suggests that some of us are more susceptible for it than others. In the novel the common people that make up the crowd are all naturally drawn to become part of the mass, whereas
some unique figures remain or become more or less immune. In the aftermath of the Gospel Singer’s hanging, his brother and sister, Mirst and Avel, “are the only ones that didn’t seem to get hurt in this” (204). Even though these two adore and admire their older brother, they are mostly occupied with their own aspirations to appear on TV with their music. Therefore, as we learn in the epilogue, they pursue their own individual goal in the media, “rac[ing] away from the ruined tent […] singing at the top of their lungs” (206). In their case, an extraordinary individualism overcomes the temptation of the mass, but that does not make them stronger, or more humanlike characters. On the contrary, their coldblooded selfishness implies that they are less human in their thoughts and actions than the people who lost their conscientious identity in the collective, but temporary, murderous frenzy.

4.1.4. Racism
Nevertheless, the mob’s violent force is overwhelmingly frightening, and not merely because of its final, murderous act. The inhabitants of Enigma are already ominous when they appear to be immune to reality and insusceptible of reason. Despite the Gospel Singer’s efforts to persuade them of his humanness, these people stubbornly pursue their adoration. Evidently, they could have known better, as the Gospel Singer hysterically clamors during his final performance: “[d]idn’t you know from your own black hearts what mine must be like?” (194). One moment of critical thought about human nature would have evinced that the Gospel Singer’s holy identity was untrue. Yet the people of Enigma are too eager to see what they want to see, so that they blind themselves for the obvious truth.

The crowd’s joint blindness is countered, and consequently accentuated, by the character of Anne, the undertaker’s daughter. Born physically blind, her perception of her surroundings are different and, most importantly, less tainted by the mentally blinding force of seeing the Gospel Singer’s physical beauty and believing in its divine powers. When the girl touches the Gospel Singer’s face, she remarks that the “face is nice, but it’s more like everybody else’s than not” (136). Anne immediately grasps that he is not more than a pretty young man and a common human being. As a result, she also understands that his curative skills are fake – “You caint help me to see, can you?” (137) –, whereas her father and the rest of Enigma stubbornly believe them to be true. In short, the Gospel Singer proposes that real blindness is not about a lack of physical perception, but about misunderstanding what is real, and what is not.

Next to the Gospel Singer, there is another major character whose personality and actions are wrongly perceived by the “blind” crowd, namely Willalee Bookatee Hull. He is
the black preacher of Enigma’s negro community, who patiently awaits his trial for the murder of MaryBell Carter. As already indicated, Willalee killed MaryBell in a fit of uncontrollable anger, but immediately after his arrest, invented stories about his crime spread through Enigma. Without any proof, everybody was soon convinced that he raped her multiple times before stabbing her to death, whereas we learn from the conversation between the Gospel Singer and Willalee that he did not rape her at all. The reasons for the people’s wild imagination and subsequent anger could be mere stupid naivety combined with a strong tendency towards sensationalism and gossip. Yet there is definitely more to their judging gaze towards Willalee; the act of defining the black preacher as a rapist links up with the tradition of racism in the southern states.

One of the two main reasons that the inhabitants of Enigma quickly believe Willalee to be a murderer, is the sexual attractiveness of his victim, MaryBell. As all men of the community desired to have sex with her, with or without her consent, they are unable to believe that the preacher would have overpowered and killed her without raping her first. The sheriff of Enigma explains this to the Gospel Singer in the following words:

“Somebody in Enigmer would’ve got MaryBell sooner or later if that nigger hadn’t killed her. You gone have to forgive me talkin like this but it ain’t nothing but the truth. I mean, you was gone from Enigmer a lot of the time and… well, more’n one of the boys had they eye on her. It ain’t nothing but the truth. She couldn’t stay a virgin forever. Then that nigger gitten in her pants after ever man in the county had dreamt – it ain’t nothing but the truth- a hundred times about him bein the one to…” (149)

In Enigma’s men’s eyes, rape is the only possible explanation for murder, and consequently their anger for MaryBell’s death is massively invigorated by their jealousy. Each of them desired MaryBell, and it was “that nigger” who eventually got her – or so they think. So it pains the men that an Afro-American took his chance before they did. As a result, their anger is not only enhanced by jealousy, but also by racist feelings towards the black preacher.

Furthermore, the mob’s persistent collective anger at Willalee’s assumed rape accords with the South’s history of racist trials and lynching. From the 1850s until the 1920s, lynching occurred in the entire country, and both men and women, whites and blacks, were victims. However, data show that black males in the South most commonly died from lynching activities, as the lynch-law was most frequently justified as “‘the white woman’s guarantee against rape by niggers’” (Wilson 89-90). Raped, white women were ought to be “spared the agony of testifying in court”, so that quick execution was absolutely necessary (Wilson 91). As a consequence, rape was so often a motive for lynching, that cases of assumed rape were
seldom investigated, nor condemned, by society (Wilson 92). In the Gospel Singer, it is also assumed rape, not murder, which provokes the people of Enigma to cut off Willalee’s genitals and to hang him together with the Gospel Singer. Following the footsteps of their ancestors, the townspeople of Enigma decide on right and wrong themselves and punish the murderer. Clearly the lynching of black rapists is ingrained in the town’s regional history, and it encourages the people to become prejudiced and deadly violent.

Thus racism and racial history is thematically present in The Gospel Singer. However, it is noteworthy to consider that Crews has implied, in the summarizing words of Anne Foata, that “this topical subject of the race relations” is unexploited in his novels “even though The Gospel Singer has two barbarous lynchings in it” (Foata 37). It is not the writer’s aim to write a “tract novel” (Jeffrey & Noble 108) that deals with “blacks as blacks, or whites as whites, or their problems with one another, or how they meet one another, or anything like that” (Foata 36). More importantly, the issue of racism is, as explained before, part of the southern experience (Foata 37) and consequently it is also part of Crews’ personal experience. As he stated in his biography, racism “mattered to the world I lived in. It mattered to my blood” (A Childhood 68). Therefore, the novel’s issue of race is again a way to deal with human nature via southern cultural imagery, instead of racist or antiracist propaganda. Specifically in The Gospel Singer, it is the stereotypical castration and lynching of Willalee that gives “definition to those [people] who perpetuate them” (McGregory 100), as the mob’s extremely racist and deadly violent nature is given form in its irrational anger over Willalee’s alleged rape.

It is remarkable, however, that the crowd’s racist motive for murder is absent in their hanging of the Gospel Singer, which implies that both murders are essentially equal crimes. The two men are lynched in a frenzy as a result of the crowd’s misconception of reality and its subsequent anger. As such, the racist motive for Willalee’s murder by the revengeful violent crowd is transcended by another, more general driving force, which also prompts the crowd to lynch the Gospel Singer, namely the mass’s collective blindness for reality. In the novel, their blindness culminates in an uncontrollable fit of rage, triggered by jealousy (in the case of Willalee) and by a desperate need for religious belief (in the case of the Gospel Singer). For that reason, we can argue that the racist violence in the novel is exemplary for the general violent streak of humankind, which can be caused by anger, jealousy and/or desperation, and which can become deadly if it is reinforced by group pressure and anonymity. In other words, humans have a tendency towards murder, if their environment generates emotions that may arouse deadly cruel actions. Racism, then, is one of these
environmental phenomena, ingrained in southern culture, that can cause man’s murderous streak to arise on the surface.

4.1.5. Freaks

So far multiple characters have been discussed, but there are still a few who are left unexamined and who are remarkable in their appearance and function, namely Foot and his freaks. Although they are still minor characters in comparison with the Gospel Singer and MaryBell, their contribution to the stifling and weird atmosphere of Enigma is vital. From the first moment onwards that “The Thing”, one of the freaks in the show, is met by the Gospel Singer’s brother, their presence is constantly felt by Enigma’s inhabitants and repeatedly referred to by the novel’s other characters. Using the freak fair as a major theme in the novel, Crews’ draws upon one of the most burgeoning industries of popular entertainment in America during the 18th and 19th century to create his story (Bogdan 25-30). Even though the freak fairs were not unique for the South, they were popular entertainment among the lower class southerners. As such, they are part of Crews’ southern experience during childhood, and consequently present in his stories. Moreover, like the other southern elements that were already discussed, the freaks’ roles in The Gospel Singer reveal some viable notions about human nature. In the novel, as will be pointed out, the presence of the freak fair does not merely exemplify the common people’s attraction to the weird, the marginal, and the exceptional, which contributes to the sensationalist character of Enigma’s crowd; it also reveals Crews’ stance towards the conceptualization of freaks and freakishness in contemporary society, namely his idea that the label of ‘freak’ is a social construct and that each human is a little freakish, even if it does not show on the outside.

During the first appearance of a freak in The Gospel Singer it becomes clear that the appearance and character of the freaks are always described from the viewpoint of one of the other characters instead of the omniscient narrator. In one of the first scenes the encounter between Gerd and “the Thing” is described as follows:

“He shifted his weight to hunker deeper into the pine shade and as he did, he looked square into the eyes of something that, in the same instant, made him scream and corked the scream in his throat. The something was sitting on a stump not twenty feet in front of him. It had arms that looked like legs and legs that looked like arms and a short square head jammed so deeply into its body that half its face was hidden behind collarbones. ‘Hot’n hell, ain’t it,’ said the Thing.” (29)
It is suggested in this scene that the conception of a freak is a mental construct of the surrounding people, a subjective label instead of a physical characteristic like gender. In the fragment Gerd is seeing in his fellow human being his physical deviation from the norm, and consequently considers him a ‘thing’ rather than a ‘man’. We encounter a likewise viewpoint from the Gospel Singer towards Foot, the director of the fair, before they actually meet in person, hating the fact that “something like that was on his trail” (41).

However, the Gospel Singer’s religious assistant Didymus differs from his fellow people by his fanatic attraction to the freaks. From his perspective, these men and women are the “signposts of humanity” (46) for their “perversions of the flesh”, their “wrecked” bodies, are exemplary for human sin. As such, Didymus echoes Crews’ fascination for and ideas about freaks, yet without the religious ideology underlying Didymus’ thoughts. Namely, in one of his interviews, Crews’ argues as follows:

“[H]ere is the thing about midgets, and it may make some comment on the whole kind of deformed and perverted – perverted in the sense of not responding to reason, being strange, to some extent unnatural- characters of my novels. Midgets have to deal with the fact of their bodies every instant of their lives. Whatever compromises they want to make, whatever adjustments that they want to make, when they turn the corner, somebody new will look upon them, and there they stand in their tiny body.” (Foata 28).

In other words, the freaks in the novels are constantly confronted with their physical abnormality, and they are incapable of changing their obvious deviation from society’s norm. In contrast, non-freaks may also deviate from this ‘norm’, and may think or believe whatever society does not ‘accept’. Yet they are able to pretend that they do.

“You and I can live emotionally anywhere we choose in our heads as long as we function in society, so that nobody notices it; we can believe our right foot’s turning into a cocker spaniel if we want to, and nobody is going to bother us believing that. Thus, in our inner selves, we don’t have to react so much and so immediately to whatever we believe or to whatever we are, but midgets in a sense do.” (Foata 28)

As such, humanity pretends that there is “a tremendous commonality”, but this is just hot air, a social construct (Foata 28). Humans are capable to, and often do, deviate from those invented norms. The great difference between freaks and other people, then, is that the freaks’ deviation is displayed physically, not to be concealed by pretense, whereas the other people can easily pretend to be ‘sane’ while their thoughts and beliefs prove otherwise.
In short, Crews tries to indicate that freaks are, in the words of Didymus, “the signposts of humanity”, as humanity in itself actually comprises deviation from an artificial and generally accepted norm. In *The Gospel Singer*, this is emphasized during the Gospel Singer’s visit in Foot’s trailer. By the Gospel Singer’s surprise, Foot and his freaks possess the same goals and ambitions as himself: money, comfort, and a feeling of belonging. Yet they have to show their abnormalities out in the open. In that way, Foot and his freaks are hardly different from the Gospel Singer who constantly hides his secret, his ‘abnormal’ sex addiction, from the rest of the world; nor do they differ from Enigma’s inhabitants with their outrageous, yet ‘accepted’, adoration for the Gospel Singer.

By the way, Crews’ fascination for freaks, as *A Childhood* narrates, may have its origins in the writer’s early youth. At the age of six, Harry Crews was personally confronted with deformity, when he suffered from a disease that paralyzed his legs. He had to stay in bed for months during which he had to endure endless curious visitors and numerous unhelpful cures. Altogether, the period was highly emotional, as he narrated in the following words:

“[A] great parade of people aunts and uncles and cousins and even Grandpa and Grandma Hazelton […] and people from neighboring farms; and after them, total strangers from other counties, all of them come to stare at me where I lay in a high fever and filled with the most awful cramps, come to stare at my rigid legs. I knew that they were staring with unseemly intensity at my legs that they wanted most of all to touch them, and I hated it and dreaded it and was humiliated by it. I felt how lonely and savage it was to be a freak.” (*A Childhood* 87)

Whether or not as a result of this childhood trauma, Crews developed a strong fascination for freaks, and made them into one of the most recurrent and significant themes in his literary oeuvre (Bledsoe 1999, 3). Thereby, he takes the opportunity to focus on the universal, rather than on the distinctive nature of freaks, interlacing his stories with empathy and love for human life in all its shapes and forms, including the grotesque and ‘tabooed’ features. As Crews said, “you can say more about what the world out there calls normal by dealing with what the world calls abnormal. This is what I do” (Oney 97).

4.2 *A Feast of Snakes*

Apart from *The Gospel Singer*, one of Crews’ best known literary works is *A Feast of Snakes*, a novel which narrates a series of bizarre events in the rural town of Mystic, Georgia. Main character Joe Lon Mackey is a former All-American running back whose career failed to start
off due to his illiteracy, despite his great talent. As a result, Joe Lon reluctantly goes through life without any pleasure or purpose, keeping his father’s liquor store and once in a while going home to his unhappy wife and little children. However, each year a locally famous festival is held in Mystic, which temporarily disrupts Joe Lon’s monotonous daily routines: the Rattlesnake Roundup. This annual competition of snake hunting draws snake hunters from across the country to Mystic’s fields, among whom Joe Lon tries to satisfy his search for excitement. In the meanwhile, other inhabitants of Mystic are trying to live their lives too, but it is easier said than done when the Rattlesnake Roundup triggers a string of the most violent events, including rape, murder, and suicide.

4.2.1 Localism
Similar to Crews’ debut, the events in *A Feast of Snakes* take place in a small, rural community in Georgia. As already indicated before, Crews drew upon his own roots to create and situate his stories, among which *A Feast of Snakes* is no exception. The town of Mystic is definitely ‘southern’ and it is portrayed as a little world on its own, hardly without ties to the rest of the modern world. “I live still in my little – and it is a very little – world, the southern landscape of Georgia”, Crews once said after the publication of *The Gospel Singer* (Foata 32), and Mystic – like Enigma, for that matter – features as a perfect illustration of what the writer must have meant. Unsurprisingly, then, in *A Feast of Snakes* Mystic’s setting is key to the story and the dichotomy between rural and urban is of viable importance (Edwards 67). Namely, as Crews favored to write out of the conditions of the South, he consequently wrote out of the specific conditions of the southern Sun Belt too. As a result, “what Crews often record[ed] in his novels [was] a society in transition, a world that is changing from its rural roots to a more urban existence” (Bledsoe 1999, 5). Mystic, for instance, is one of those rural societies challenged by modern changes in Crews’ novels, and subsequently the people of Mystic are confronted with urban novelties as well.

In *A Feast of Snakes*, the contrast between the rural and the urban is mostly visualized in the characters of Joe Lon Mackey and Berenice Sweet. The two adolescents used to be a couple during high school, but after graduation their lives went different ways. Berenice left town to study at the University of Georgia, while Joe Lon failed to meet the college entrance requirements and stayed in Mystic. Thus Berenice preferred the big city above the small rural town of her youth, and more importantly, she aspired to gain personal enhancement and individual achievement by pursuing a career in law. After the industrial value system of money and success in an individualistic world had entered Mystic’s community in the course
of time, Berenice is one of the examples that pursued its goals (Edwards 67). In contrast, Joe Lon did not disentangle himself from his rural roots. Featuring as a low-class white southerner whose physical strength is more consequential and more valued than his intellect, both by himself and by his community, Joe Lon personifies the popular image of the southern redneck\(^\text{15}\) (Watkins 27), whose culture sticks to him like his own skin.

So when modernity’s new value system entered Mystic’s rural, ‘redneck’ community, Joe Lon’s ‘redneck’ value systems jeopardized. Subsequently, Joe Lon feels after a few years that something in his life is missing, certainly when Berenice’s personal success throws his own lack of intellectual capacity and professional sterility right in his face.

“It was said that Joe Lon, on any given day of his senior year of high school, could have run through the best college defensive line in the country. But he had not. He had never set foot on a single college football field even though he had been invited to visit more than fifty colleges and universities. But that was all right. He’d had his. That’s what he told himself about ten times a day: That’s all right. By God, I had mine.” (6-7)

As this fragment indicates, Joe Lon initially tries to reason himself out of his misfortunes. Yet while the Rattlesnake Roundup is held in town, Joe Lon steadily focusses his attention on the unsatisfying aspects of life, growing all the more angry and bitter about the boredom and poverty that accompanies his failure to leave Mystic. As a result, he is unable to control his own disappointment, so that “something in him was tearing loose. He felt it more and more out of control. […] He wished to God he could escape. But he didn’t know where he could go or what he wanted to escape from” (109).

The question arises, then, which party’s side A Feast of Snakes takes: the rural or the urban? At first sight, the story proposes that modernity is an escapist alternative for the benighted, rural south of ignorance and violence\(^\text{16}\). Joe Lon is extremely unhappy, while Berenice seems to be doing alright in Athens. Likewise, Crews himself asserted in one of his interviews that “[e]verybody likes to rhapsodize how beautiful the rural life is. The rural life, as I knew and experienced it in childhood, is, without exception, dreadful. It makes a man brutal to animals, to himself. It makes him callous and unfeeling” (Watson 57). Yet the urban setting of Athens is never explicitly present in the novel, so that city life remains mysteriously unevaluated. We know for sure that Mystic is a poor and violent place, but there is no inclination that every Athenian is rich and peaceful. Moreover, whether Berenice has truly

\(^{15}\) Negative stereotype of southern lower- and working-class whites, originally used for the poor, benighted white southerners in the 1930s (Watkins 27; Wilson 259)

\(^{16}\) See 4.2.3 on violence
found happiness or not, remains a mystery. Her eagerness to return to Mystic and to revive her relationship with Joe Lon even makes that rather doubtful. Therefore it would be presumptuous to state that *A Feast of Snakes* favors modernity and industrialization, certainly if taken into account Crews’ passionate comments on the emergence of the Sun Belt:

“I drove through Polk County, which is the phosphate capital of the world, as they call it. As I was driving along that day, as it so often is in Florida, the sky was a brilliant blue, the air was beautiful, and then way ahead I began to see this awful yellow pall hanging in the sky; [...] So what I thought was, ‘The men who put that gritty thing in the air don’t live under it; they live in Miami Beach, or on the Riviera, or somewhere else. It’s Capital that put it up there. And those poor hopeless people who live under it were glad when the factories came in; they thought that it was Progress’ [...] And I’ve got to tell you this: I’d rather be hungry, and I’d rather be cold, and I’d rather not have roof than have that kind of thing in the sky and that kind of livelihood.” (Foata 45-46)

Considering that Crews’ works were closely tied to his life and thought, it is very unlikely that one of his novels is in absolute favor of industrialism and its value system.

Consequently, one can argue that *A Feast of Snakes* builds on the southern conflict between the rural/agricultural and the urban/industrial to create a story about human failure and unhappiness. Remarkably, it does not propose one option to be better than the other. Instead, the Sun Belt’s conflict in itself is one of the novel’s main themes. The story of Joe Lon and Berenice indicates how industrialization forces societies and its people to change and adapt to new circumstances. Worlds change, people change, and it does not matter how these changes actually happen; yet the fact that you are part of this changing world and that you have to bear one or many of its puzzling consequences is inevitable. Crews’ put it into the following words when he expanded on the themes in his novel *Naked in Garden Hills* (1969), a comment which is also applicable to *A Feast of Snakes*: “I only meant to stress the fact that we are caught, all of us, the rich men as well as the poor, in a world we partially made but did not make, we partially understand and do not understand. And so here we are” (Foata 46). In Joe Lon’s particular case, Mystic’s adaptations to modernity are lethal. When the rural town’s original value system changed and Berenice proved to be a successful example of its new norms, Joe Lon was confronted with his inability to meet these new values. Instead of overcoming that failure, his unhappiness grew into desperation, with his violent death as a result. Joe Lon, like other people in this world, could not “climb the tower” of the world’s irrefutable complexities (Edwards 76).
2.4.2 Determinism
On a certain level, Joe Lon is a victim of his benighted southern background situation. Yet if he had been depicted as a mere victim of his poor situation in Mystic, his violent and murderous actions throughout the story would have been pardoned. This, however, is not the case. The question whether Joe Lon is morally responsible for his violent frenzies remains mysteriously unanswered during the novel. Still, the story gives enough material to speculate on the issue (Edwards 76). As A Feast of Snakes develops, a vast amount of the Benighted South’s clichés are presented which typify Joe Lon as a genuine southern redneck. Due to his native circumstances, there are outer forces at work which entrap Joe Lon into a web of external influences (Edwards 71-72). As a consequence, Joe Lon’s life situation and actions pose the question of determinacy: how accountable is Joe Lon for his mass murder at the end of the novel?17

Undoubtedly, there are various aspects of his ‘benighted’ background that force Joe Lon’s life into decline during the Rattlesnake Roundup (Edwards 71). First of all, Joe Lon is an alcoholic. “Throughout most of the novel,” Joe Lon reaches for the bottle, “drinking to collapse at night, and chasing coffee with whiskey at breakfast” (Edwards 71). Presumably, this addiction results from the endless boredom accompanying his life that “had become a not very interesting movie that he seemed condemned to watch over and over again” (102). Alcohol, then, has a soothing effect:

“[…] and then worse, much worse, how it had been afterward when he had got drunker and drunker, remembering that Berenice was coming home, remembering how it used to be with her, thinking about everything the world had promised him and then snatched away until he was stone drunk on the scalding bourbon and drunk on the honey-legged memory of Berenice. He somehow managed to get what he wished was true confused with the facts of his own life. It wasn’t the first time it had ever happened. It was a little quirk his head had of working when he was lost in the sour mist of bourbon whiskey.” (55)

So while Joe Lon conjures up his pleasant past as the captain of the Mystic Rattlers, those daydreams inevitably remind him of his “present and future failures” (Edwards 71) and alcoholism is the easiest way to deal with life’s disappointments.

17 The question of determinism is analyzed by Tim Edwards in his essay “‘Everything Is Eating Everything Else’: The Naturalistic Impulse in Harry Crews’s A Feast of Snakes”. Edwards focusses on naturalistic tendencies in Crews’ novel, among which determinism is prominently present. This chapter is mainly based on Edwards’ specific analysis of determinism in the novel.
Also, as the previous passage clearly indicates and as it was already briefly discussed, Joe Lon misses his former life as a football player. Feeling nostalgic to the past, he repeatedly compares his lost youth, full of ambitious goals and passionate sex, with his present life that is meaningless, passionless and without prospects – even though he finished high school but a few years ago. Instead of living on a college campus or earning money on the football field, Joe Lon inhabits a trailer, earns some money as a shopkeeper and fails to love and care for his wife. In other words, Joe Lon Mackey’s life in Mystic is an endless repetition of boredom and relative poverty, without any meaningful goals to be achieved. Trapped in this Benighted South’s continuum, he does not see any prospects for a better future, so he refrains from ameliorating anything. Instead, Joe Lon goes through life with reluctance, often drunk and violent, like southern rednecks are ‘known’ to do.

Furthermore, Joe Lon’s “family heritage” is of significant influence in shaping Joe Lon’s identity as a southern redneck (Edwards 72). Apart from the liquor store, Joe Lon inherited some personality traits from his father that enhance his steady decline, namely alcoholism, violence and marital abuse (Edwards 72). Growing up with an alcoholic father who he “loved” and “even admired” (40), Joe Lon’s own drinking habits easily grew into addiction after his paternal example. Also, Big Joe was known to be a violent man:

“The old man was not a good man by anybody’s reckoning; […] He had once castrated a Macon pulpwood Negro who drove bootleg whiskey for him because the Negro had stolen a case off the truck. […] He also had probably the best pit bulldogs in all of Georgia, […] because he treated them with a savage and unrelenting cruelty that even other pit bull owners could not bear witness or emulate.” (40)

Nevertheless, Big Joe is a beloved and admired citizen due to his success in dog training. Similarly, Mystic admires Joe Lon for his football talent, while he is also known for his violent cruelty:

“He had the name of being the most courteous boy in all of Lebeau County, although it was commonly known that he had done several pretty bad things, one which was taking a traveling salesman out to July Creek and drowning him while nearly the entire first string watched from high up on the bank where they were sipping beer” (6).

Contrary to his father, though, Joe Lon extends his violent streak to his wife Elfie, who he “liked to beat […] occasionally” (40). While his father “didn’t hold with hurting women”, Joe Lon’s marital abuse can also be traced back to his childhood, namely to the disastrous marriage of his parents and his mother’s consequent suicide. Although Big Joe did not beat his wife, he failed to give her enough love, so that Joe Lon’s “mother had left for reasons of
love. Deserted them all: Big Joe, himself, his sister Beeder, the big house. And in deserting them had left an enormous ragged hole in their lives” (119). Big Joe went after her and brought her back to Mystic, only to have Beeder found her dead in her chair later that same day. As a consequence of his childhood trauma, Joe Lon lacks capacity to love anyone at all:

“But love, love seemed to mess up everything. It had messed up everything. He could not have said it, but he knew it. It was knowledge that he carried in his blood. […] The note had said. I have gone with Billy. Forgive me. But I love him and I have gone with him. […] And the bitterest, most painful thing Joe Lon ever had to do was admit to himself that his mother had been fucking that little shoe salesman for reasons of love when she had a house and a husband and children […]” (118-119)

Consequently, Joe Lon’s relationship with either Berenice or Elfie is cold and brutal, without any kind of warmth and affection. Additionally, the fact that he is known for drowning a salesman, can be brought back to his anger towards his mother and her lover. In short, Big Joe Mackey “serves as a kind of metaphorical figure embodying the determining forces” that steer Joe Lon’s life and personality (Edwards 72).

To sum up, various determining factors – “his family situation, his alcoholism, his football background, [and] his saturation in a brutally competitive culture – are largely influential on Joe Lon’s character and behavior (Edwards 75). Therefore, their presence and fortitude plead for taking into account some mitigating circumstances when judging Joe Lon’s final murderous frenzy. However, as already indicated before, Joe Lon’s murderous act seem to be beyond these powers of determinacy too, as there is “a mysterious indeterminacy behind Joe Lon’s decline – something slippery, shadowy, unnamable, something that violates the often scientific examination of causality” (Edwards 75). Although those determining forces are at work, there is no inclination that Joe Lon cannot fight them. On the contrary, he is consciously aware of his vices; yet he does not change: “Jesus, he wished he wasn’t such a sonofabitch. Elf was about as good a woman as a man ever laid dick to, that’s the way he felt about it. […] Christ, he treated her just like a goddam dog. He just couldn’t seem to help it.” (12). Maybe Joe Lon could have overcome all these forces, so that he could have prevented his final frenzy (Edwards 75). Since this question remains unanswered, the borderline between determinism and free will is definitely vague in A Feast of Snakes. Whether Joe Lon is personally responsible for his actions, “we do not and cannot know” (Edwards 76).

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18 Chapter 2.4.5 on sex and gender will take a closer look into Joe Lon’s relationships.
19 This theme will be elaborated on in the next chapter, 2.4.3 Violence.
For that reason, we can concisely argue that Crews’ novel proposes a non-judgmental reading of Joe Lon’s mass murder. Even though there is no explicit pardoning of Joe Lon’s final act, and even though we are left with the notion that the young man may have had the possibility to prevent those murders, there are clearly external forces at work that shape and enhance his violent nature. To declare him guilty or not is beside the question. More important is the fact that the mass murder did happen, and that it has its reasons, even though we do not know which reasons exactly. As such, the novel seems to underscore Crews’ notion that “we are all victims of the human condition; we are victims of the little bit we can see, and hear, and know at any given moment; We are all victims of our angle of vision, and that includes spiritual vision, emotional vision, as much as anything else” (Foata 33). In A Feast of Snakes, Joe Lon is a victim of his life in the Benighted South, that is for sure. Due to his situation in life, he is limited in his ability to act and think, for his surroundings steer his acts and thoughts. If he had grown up in a wealthy family in Athens, his ability to act morally rightful would be different; so would his views on morality itself be. However, whether all this sets him ultimately free from his hideous crime, is less certain.

4.2.3 Violence
Undoubtedly, Joe Lon’s final crime is one of extreme violence, but it is merely the culmination point of a series of violent events. For readers who are already familiar with Crews’ work, this ubiquitous violence comes as no surprise. For in Crews’ stories, violence is of major importance. As Erik Bledsoe poignantly remarks, A Feast of Snakes shows Crews’ remarkable talent “for finding the surreal in the real; a small town in south Georgia does host an annual snake roundup that draws huge crowds who fan out across the countryside, pouring gasoline into badger holes to drive hidden snakes above ground” (Bledsoe 1999, 17). Inspired by such events in the American South, Crews created a story and gave it a “typically Crewsian surreal quality” by embellishing it with extraordinarily “brutal and graphic violence” (Bledsoe 1999, 17). More importantly, though, the violent scenes in A Feast of Snakes are not only striking in their surreal quality and number, but they are also largely meaningful within a philanthropist reading of the novel. As will be pointed out, the ubiquitous violence in A Feast of Snakes is not always so inhumanly cruel as one would think.

Again, the violent atmosphere in Mystic fits within the stereotypical picture of the rural South. Although violence is not unique for southern life, there are arguments for situating the origins of violent southern communities like Mystic in southern history. Apparently “the Wiregrass region holds no special patent on violence but is prone to it in
keeping with its isolation and frontier past” (McGregory 99). Jerrilyn McGregory showed in her research that during these frontier period “one ‘could identify his friends by the sound of their pistols as we identify now by the honk of automobile horns. Men carried pistols to town, parties and to church’. Within such a context, violent acts are normative” (McGregory 99). Likewise, the myriad of violent acts in *A Feast of Snakes* are mostly regarded as commonalities by both perpetrators and bystanders. The clearest example is Joe Lon and Willard’s “playing” with Enrique “Poncy” Gomez, a visitor for the Rattlesnake Roundup. From the first moment the poor man bumped into the two young men, they aggressively bully him. “They were playing. But the little man didn’t know that. They looked as though they were set to go crazy mean. […] Duffy Deeter sat down on the bench, smiling, […]. Listening to these country boys playing with the old man pleased him. It amused” (87).

Moreover, various violent actions in *A Feast of Snakes* serve a judicial purpose, which reminds of southern frontier politics. Nobody counts upon the law to let justice prevail; the people of Mystic decide on crime and punishment themselves, and in their culture that often involves physical violence to sort out personal differences. There is no reason to count upon the law in Mystic anyway, as the Sheriff himself is a drunk and a rapist, who freely commits crime after crime (Romine 121):

“Buddy Matlow would take a liking to a woman and if she would not come across he would lock her up for a while, if he could. As soon as he had been elected Sheriff and Public Safety Director for Lebeau County he started locking up ladies who would not come across. […] He had been called to accounts twice already by an investigator from the governor’s office, but as he kept telling Joe Lon, they’d never touch him with anything but a little lecture full of bullshit about how he ought to do better.” (14-15)

In other words, official law in Mystic is absent in practice. Real problems are solved face to face and fist to fist, or even gun to gun.

Yet apart from the legal aspect of physical violence, its most important function in the lives of Mystic’s inhabitants is to disrupt the monotony of their daily lives. Joe Lon, Willard, Hard Candy, Duffy Deeter, Buddy Matlow, among other characters, all use violence as an antidote against the lack of excitement in their lives. By using or watching cruelty and brutality, they literally compete against their boredom. This idea about violence’s value is already announced by the novel’s motto:

“If I could only live at the pitch that is near madness
When everything is as it was in my childhood
Violent, vivid, and of infinite possibility:
That the sun and moon broke over my head.” – Richard Eberhart

The connection between violence and possibility is crucial to the understanding of Mystic’s inhabitants. Violence disrupts the pattern of their lives without possibilities, as the previous chapters on Joe Lon illustrated. In his case, his youth brought him possibilities that the citation indicates; yet he lost them afterwards. So through violence – next to alcohol, drugs and games\(^\text{20}\) – the people in Mystic take action instead of passively undergoing their tedious lives. When Hard Candy and Willard visit Joe Lon in the liquor store “just bored as shit” (19), they try whiskey, betting and snake feeding to kill their time. In that way, they live in the temporarily illusion that their lives are exciting, with possibility, and with meaning. Additionally, violent actions give these men and women the opportunity to ventilate their frustration about their consistently boring life.

As a result, the people’s violent streak is expressed in different forms, depending on each character’s personality traits. For instance, Joe Lon works out his growing anger and disappointment on his wife Elfie and eventually in his final mass murder. Sheriff Buddy Matlow, another violent figure, focuses his attention on serial sexual abuse\(^\text{21}\). However, the most shocking example of violent men is probably Duffy Deeter, a visitor for the snake hunt, who loves extreme violence in itself, whereas the other men are either ignorant or feel partly guilty of their crimes. Exceeding all kinds of sadism, Duffy does not only like extreme violence as pleasant entertainment, but it also gives him sexual satisfaction:

“Duffy Deeter in an effort of will was thinking of Treblinka. He had already finished with Dachau and Auschwitz. Images of death pumped in his head. […] The prisoner’s graspy choking breath mixed with Susan Gender’s breath, became her breath. And the prisoner’s starving body entered her thrusting thighs and magnificent ass. He killed her where he rode her, there on the high crest of his passion. […] He sat on the edge of the bed and began lacing his blue leather Adidas shoes onto his feet. His eyes were still full of dying children and hopeless parents. ‘Before television. We used to get the news at the neighborhood movie,’ he said. ‘They told us everything. I loved it. One disaster after another. Burning blimps. Collapsing buildings. Ships blowing up.’” (79-81)

Even Duffy’s mistress Susan Gender, willingly undergoes his violent outbursts and sexual excesses, “because she was bored witless by her studies at the University of Florida” (81). Living with Duffy Deeter counterbalances the boredom of her decent life in college.

\(^{20}\) See chapter 2.4.4 for further illustration

\(^{21}\) See chapter 2.4.5 for further illustration
Evidently, these people’s violent outbursts come and go, the one more forceful than the other, sometimes even hidden in a genuine pleasure from another one’s fight.

Furthermore, those men and women also find pleasure and purpose in games and competition. Remarkably, though, these games “are never playful” (Romine 118). Often violent in their sports and competitions, the people of Mystic – where you “can smell the goddam blood in the air” (145) – try to ventilate their aggressive streak in a playful kind of violence. As such, their games feature as “surrogate violence” (Romine 125). For instance, the rattlesnake hunt and the pit-bull fights are common games which partly satisfy the town’s communal tendency towards aggression. Also football features as a major medium of relief for young men’s violent drifts:

“It was important to run him against grunions now and then. It gave him a chance to practice his moves without running the risk of getting injured. It also gave him great opportunities to run over people and step on them, mash their heads and their hands, kick their ribs good.” (7)

Alas, Joe Lon lost his opportunity to “structure the violence within him, to provide victims within the limited arena of the game” when he had to quit football (Romine 125). As a result, “his only alternative is to play the Game of Life (opponent: the world) according to the same violent rules” (Romine 125). Performing his most violent and bloodiest act without any playfulness or fairness of a game, his mass murder, he commits a purely violent crime. Besides, not only Joe Lon is confronted with a lack of playful displacement for his violent nature. Throughout the story, there are games being played that fail to have the true structure of a game as they cease to be both playful and fair (Romine 124). Consequently, they are no longer games, but acts of pure violence. For instance, Scott Romine remarks that when Buddy Matlow attempts to construct his rape of Lottie Mae in terms of a fair and playful game, the sheriff is confronted with Lottie Mae’s refusal to play along. From Matlow’s viewpoint, it is fair to abuse the girl since he already “paid his dues” during wartime “and now it was his turn” (15). Moreover, he constructs the rape as something playful – Lottie Mae can choose between him or a snake – and something played by rules – the girl is forbidden to call him ‘Mister’ because he loves her. However, Lottie Mae does not play along and castrates him, with his death from hemorrhage as a consequence (Romine 124).

If we go back, then, to Erik Bledsoe’s notion that Crews creates a surreal atmosphere in A Feast of Snakes, there are reasons to agree that the redundancy of violence in the story creates the novel’s surreal quality. Violence is too much present and too extraordinary to be real, so that it exceeds reality and gives the story a surreal dimension. Certainly Duffy
Deeter’s extreme sadism, the town’s submissive acceptance of Buddy Matlow’s frequent rapes, and the novel’s apocalyptic ending with Joe Lon’s shooting spree, add up to this surreal violent quality. Nevertheless, there is reality behind the surreal veil that hangs over Mystic. How impossible the practical, believable quality of the story may be, Crews said that “[t]he human truth is there, never mind the mechanical truth” (73). Within the story, there is a narrative about true human nature. The theme of violence, so prominently present in *A Feast of Snakes* is one of that narrative’s voices, showing that even the most violent, cruel and seemingly inhuman people are still human beings. Even more, these people have their reasons to act, whether or not it sets them free from guilt, as the previous chapter already indicated.

The South, in which violence is ingrained in community life, and in which boredom and poverty enhance it to live forth and grow, there is no question about why these people are violent. *A Feast of Snakes* shows that the answer is rather obvious. Their background that is reminiscent of the Benighted South’s picture in the 1930’s – poor, uneducated, uncivilized – enhances the violence that is rooted in their culture.

Again, Crews seems to have drawn from his personal childhood experience to create such meanings in his story. In his biography he accounts of his father’s working place, where he had to use physical violence to survive. In the words of Crews, “[t]hese were not violent men, but their lives were full of violence” (*A Childhood* 24). To make a place for one’s own, a man had to speak the same language as his fellow people, namely the language of physical violence. As such, the novel shows that to be violent is less a personality trait, than a necessary reaction to one’s surroundings. For “ultimately, there is no difference between the human and the brute” (Edwards 69).

### 2.4.4 Sex and gender

As indicated before, violence in Mystic is not rarely extended towards the other sex. Joe Lon frequently beats up and sexually abuses his wife Elfie – “he had her pinned, driving her against the headboard of the bed. It was a God’s wonder he hadn’t broken her neck” (55) –, whereas Buddy Matlow is known for his serial rapes. Even if there is no direct aim to hurt their women, the sexual experiences of the men in Mystic are constantly violent and brutal. As Hard Candy’s thoughts teach us about Willard, “[t]here was hardly any difference at all in the noise he made when he scored on the field or scored on her. In whatever he did, he was always noisy and violent and wet” (4). Or as we learn from Joe Lon’s memories of Berenice, “[a]ll the way through high school they had been at each other as though they were fighting a war” (33). Clearly, sexuality and violence are closely connected. Like Enigma, Mystic is a
world of sexual male dominance. In each sexual encounter, the man is the highest in hierarchy, dominating his partner by physical strength and the power of his will. Again, this is reminiscent of Old Southern hierarchies in which the woman is positioned lower on the social – and consequently sexual – scale. Moreover, Mystic’s sexual norms also correspond with the “casual sexism” that is culturally defining for the southern lower-class as depicted in the Benighted South’s image (Lake 91).

Remarkably, this male sexual reign in Mystic’s community is underscored by the ubiquitous images of snakes, for the snake imagery in A Feast of Snakes undoubtedly carries a sexual load (Romine 125). The snake hunt primarily affirms and enhances the men’s male vitality, as their primary concerns are “snake hunting, pussy and violence” (82). So the hunt of the snakes awakens and strengthens their manliness. In that way, the image of the snake can be regarded as a phallic symbol of male virility. Furthermore, the snakes’ phallic meaning is explicitly shown in the castration of Buddy Matlow (Romine 125). When Lottie Mae is forced to choose between the snake or being raped, her sexual encounter with the sheriff is inherently linked to snake imagery. As a consequence, her sexual trauma is transplanted by an un conquerable fear for snakes. In her mind, the image of the snakes collides with the image of the phallus, so that, as Lottie Mae is unmistakably traumatized by being sexually abused, she only recognizes the snake instead of the phallus as her tormentor and enemy. Afterward, the conflation between snake and phallus becomes the most explicit when Lottie Mae cuts off Buddy’s penis covered by a condom in the form of a rattlesnake (Romine 125):

“in a single fluid movement she struck his lap and came away with the snake in her hand, its softening head with the needle fangs still showing just above her thumb and forefinger. She raised it aloft and was amazed that it did not struggle but hung limp from her hand utterly dead and beaten.” (129)

Thus the snake symbolism is clearly closely entangled with the male sexual dominance that reigns the small town of Mystic, Georgia.

Evidently, this notion brings up the question of gender balance and sexism. More than once, Crews has been accused of writing novels from a sexist perspective. Yet the substantial amount of sexism that is unmistakably present in the male-dominated world of Mystic and other fictional communities, derives from another source than Crews’ assumed sexism (Lake 81). The identity of the male characters, strongly developed as violent and sexist, is given form by their stance and gaze towards their surrounding female characters (Lake 81). “Women [...] define male characters, not only to the reader, but to the men themselves. Through interaction with women, men become self-aware and find their identities” (Lake 82).
In fact, this is already hinted at in the opening scene, when Hard Candy is observed by Joe Lon from a distance:

“Even now as she pranced in place, her back arched, her pelvis thrust forward, she was winking at Joe Lon Mackey where he stood under the end zone bleachers. That was where he usually stood when he watched them practice and she was not surprised to see him there, glad rather, because it gave her something to think about.” (5)

From the first description of a woman, there is a man lurching in the background who is watching her, and this continues throughout the story. For instance, through Joe Lon’s consciousness we learn that the young Rattlesnake queen Novella is “all flashing legs and rounded arms over rounded breasts over rounded hips, her little matted, mounded beaver pulsing there where she kept her thighs peeled apart” (146-147). Or, Susan Gender – “the long-legged, black-haired cream-colored piece of ass” in “the shortest dress Willard Millar had ever seen” – is repeatedly described by the perception of the male gazer, either Poncy, the bartender, or Joe Lon and Willard (Edwards 73). As a result, the male gaze in A Feast of Snakes is of major importance in interpreting the women’s characters.

Unremarkably, the observations of the male gazers are uniformly focused on the women’s bodies and sexual attractiveness. As such, their observances underscore the male sexual dominance that lives in Mystic, as only the women that are promising to be sexually satisfying, get attention. In that way, the observatory male is identified as sexually virile and permanently horny. Therefore multiple female characters in A Feast of Snakes have astonishingly sexy bodies, while their psychological characterizations remain almost undeveloped. These women, with the “transparently evocative names” Susan Gender, Berenice Sweet and Hard Candy (Lake 85), are merely “objects for male consumption”, “objects to be possessed and devoured” (Edwards 73). Elfie, on the contrary, is also primarily evaluated by physical standards by her husband, but due to her withered body she is a cast-away object of male lust. Even though both she and Berenice are essential in the development of Joe Lon’s craziness, they merely play a passive role. They enhance Joe Lon’s murderous actions, yet they do not partake in any meaningful action themselves (Lake 85).

In contrast, other female figures feature in A Feast of Snakes that challenge rather than confirm the expectations of Mystic’s male gazers, namely the late Mrs. Mackey, her daughter Beeder and Lottie Mae (Lake 85). As I discussed before, Joe Lon’s mother ran away from her life in Mystic and from her responsibilities as a wife and a mother, but she failed in her first attempt. Nevertheless, when she had to return home with her husband, she took initiative again and committed suicide. Likewise, her daughter Beeder, sincerely traumatized by the
loss of her mother, retreated to her own private world, her bedroom, where she remains closed off from her old life in Mystic. As Elise Lake remarks, both women “intentional[ly] escape from the madness of normal life in Mystic” which is violent, brutal and loveless, cutting themselves loose from male control (Lake 86). Yet their decisions are not without consequences for their male family members. “[T]heir masochistic responses are simultaneously aggressive, causing pain to the men around them” as the pictures of their dead or insane faces haunt the men and drive them towards the whiskey bottle (Lake 86). Probably, though, the women’s violence towards Big Joe and Joe Lon is a side-effect of their essentially self-centered acts. In contrast, Lottie Mae castrates her male oppressor with the death of the “snake” that “wore [her] skin like clothes”, namely Buddy Matlow’s penis, as her first and foremost goal (132). As such, Lottie Mae rebels against the sexual male dominion that is imposed on her by getting rid of her mental burden. As a result, “it is Lottie Mae and Beeder who seem victorious as they watch the chaos around them” in the novel’s final scene.

Yet however victorious they may appear to be, these three women’s struggles have not ended with their rebellion. Whether before or after the end of the novel, they have to pay the price for their defiance, as their options are limited (Lake 87). Mrs. Mackey’s only choice was to quit life, instead of living a different one. Almost similarly Beeder commits “social suicide” by turning herself into a hermit, and what price Lottie Mae still has to pay, remains unclear, but it evidently lurks behind her back (Lake 87). Without doubt, these women are born in a “dead-end world”, and it limits their possibilities (Lake 87). However, they are not alone, as Joe Lon is also cornered in Mystic, as the previous chapters illustrated. Not only for women, but for “most characters, hopes are unrealized, goals are unattained. Success is illusory, and self-determination is elusive for both men and women. In modern society, people fail” (Lake 93). Without being sexist, Crews points out in A Feast of Snakes – as he did in The Gospel Singer as well – that men and women are incontrovertibly different in various ways, certainly in physical appearance and behavior. In the novels, this is shown in how women arouse men’s desire, and how men’s sexual urges can or cannot be contained within moral boundaries. Yet their goals and strifes are equally challenged by their surroundings. Life is hard for each and all of us, and Lottie Mae, Beeder, Joe Lon and others have to find their ways to deal with it, whether or not these ways are egoistic, violent, or murderously cruel.
5. Conclusion

In one of his interviews, Harry Crews refers to his literary mentor Andrew Lytle who once said about literature that “there are only two subjects: love and absence of love”, to which Crews added: “I don’t know exactly what he means by it, except that I sort of believe it” (Foata 37). After reading Crews’ interviews and autobiography, and after my analyses of his novels *The Gospel Singer* and *A Feast of Snakes*, I would say that – whether it is applicable to all literature or not – the statement suits Crews’ fiction. Love for humankind in all its shapes and forms is the driving force of his novels, thereby implicitly refuting people’s tendency to narrow their conception of what is human by omitting all that is ugly, weak or cruel. In contrast, Crews’ understanding of humanity is all-encompassing; in his definition of ‘humanness’ he includes rather than excludes all acts and thoughts that are complex, tabooed or startling to ‘civilized’ society. Yet it is important to note that, although Crews is straightforward about his opinions in interviews, his novels do not explicitly contain these points of view as “tract novels” do (Jeffrey & Noble 108). Building his characters on the fertile grounds of southern stereotypical imagery, Crews used the South to implicitly point to the fact that its unique features exhibit mankind’s universal qualities. For Crews, who grew up in the South, that is easily done; either because the South is inspiring as his immediate surroundings, either because southern conditions are exceptionally illustrative:

“A man who can buy barbiturates, who can buy warm blankets, and six mistresses and wives, and all the other things, can at least disguise, even to himself, the problems of his own life and his own world. A man who is farming in the South – what Mr. Lytle calls making ‘a man’s eternal last stand’ – is always making that last stand, because he always has his back to the wall. If you lose your crop, you won’t have any seed, and if you don’t have any seed... So, in such a place, all the archetypal concerns of man are there in such a way that there is no possibility to disguise them, to hide them.” (Foata 37)

Evidently, research into Crews’ other literary works would support and nuance this conclusion on Crews’ literature. Moreover, as his oeuvre is sparsely studied, a steady growth of academic interest into Crews’ stories and his position in the literary field of American (Southern) literature would be more than interesting. Not only would it be desirable to give Crews’ oeuvre more academic recognition for its consequent prestige, but also for its possible effect; namely that Crews’ works become more well-known to the general public, so that they may experience the beauty and wisdom of ‘Crewsian’ ugliness too.
Works cited


