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Baptizing Boo: Religion in the Cinematic Southern Gothic

SOON AFTER THEIR MUTUAL WRITING/ACTING/DIRECTING SUCCESSES OF *Sling Blade* (1996) and *The Apostle* (1997), Billy Bob Thornton and Robert Duvall participated in a joint interview that focused on their “shared passion” of “a love for the South.” The interviewer, Elizabeth Weitzman, asked the two if they also “shared an interest in Southern writers”:

- BBT: Well, I don't know as much about the contemporary ones. I mean, I'm not a real well read guy, but the people I do read, I kind of read all their stuff. Faulkner had a brother named John that not a lot of people know about. Matter of fact, Bobby, I've got to get you a couple of his books, 'cause I think you'll love them.
- RD: He was a good writer too?
- BBT: He was terrific. And a lot funnier than William.
- RD: William you kinda gotta decode when you read, don't you?
- BBT: [laughs] Yeah, it's kinda like reading physics—Southern physics.
- EW: Billy Bob, it seems there's a pretty strong connection between Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Karl in *Sling Blade*. Did you have that in mind when you wrote the script?
- BBT: Not consciously, but a lot of times you do something and don't realize your influences until somebody points it out to you or you sit back and look at it. And not only Boo Radley, but Bobby's character in *Tomorrow*.
- EW: There are similarities between Karl and Sonny in *The Apostle*, too, in that they're both compassionate, instinctual, good men who've done bad things.
- RD: Nah, there's no real kin between them. (101)

Duvall's denial of “kinship” here carries some irony, as he echoes his most important line from *Sling Blade*. At a critical moment in Thornton's film, Duvall, playing Karl Childers's father, quietly snarls under his breath, “You ain't no kin to me.” Just as Karl's father asserts something that is both true and false, Duvall's declaration of “no real kin” here is both accurate and wrong-headed. Duvall is right about the clear distinctions of background, motivation, and behavior that exist between Thornton's Karl and his Sonny, but in the essay that follows, I want to decode the “Southern physics” of the kinship of these two characters and their relationships to characters, stories, and images that

appear in several Southern films featuring Duvall.¹ These feature films move chronologically from a “domestication” of the South and its Gothic literary tradition in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to a rich exploitation of the Southern Gothic as a means to explore complex intersections of religious belief, class, violence, and male sexuality.

Southern “kinship” relations between these films emerge even in a brief overview. In 1962 Duvall made his feature film debut in the classic Hollywood adaptation of Harper Lee’s popular novel about growing up in Alabama during the Depression, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As the silent “Boo” Radley, Duvall literally steps out of the shadows of the film’s efficient domestication of the Southern Gothic literary tradition. In the 1972 film adaptation of William Faulkner’s “Tomorrow,” Duvall again collaborated with the Texas playwright Horton Foote, who had won an Academy Award for his *To Kill a Mockingbird* screenplay. Duvall’s interpretation of *Tomorrow*’s Stonewall Jackson Fentry is often cited as a high point in his prolific career and Foote’s script is considered by many as one of the best dramatic adaptations of a Faulkner work. Twenty-five years later in *Sling Blade*, Billy Bob Thornton’s Karl Childers clearly owes something to Duvall’s thick-tongued Fentry and Duvall’s own dark cameo as the father of this cinematic descendant of Boo Radley confirms many other obvious connections between *Sling Blade* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. While many of these connections are clearly worth exploring, I’m particularly interested in how the Hollywood version of Harper Lee’s story essentially excises Christianity from Maycomb and the religious dimensions of Boo’s strange upbringing, whereas Thornton’s 1997 update of Boo’s story deeply entangles his killer-savior with the words and images of Southern evangelical Protestantism. Although Thornton playfully dismisses the difficulty and density of Faulkner’s Southern Gothic during his joint interview with Duvall, in one sense *Sling Blade* reclaims the complexity

¹During his long career, Duvall has frequently portrayed “Southerners.” In 2003, for example, Duvall played both the ultimate Southern patriarch in *Gods and Generals*, Robert E. Lee (a distant relative), and a playful Texas eccentric in *Second Hand Lions*. Often Duvall’s roles have either been defined by their “Southernness” or have come to define the regional character of the American South for a broad audience: *The Chase* (1966); *The Great Santini* (1979); *Belizaire the Cajun* (1986); *Days of Thunder* (1990); *Rambling Rose* (1991); *Convicts* (1991); *Something to Talk About* (1995); *The Stars Fell on Henrietta* (1995); *A Family Thing* (1996); *The Gingerbread Man* (1998).

of Faulkner's "Southern physics" through its merged interrogation of Southern manhood, violence, and religious belief.

Karl Childers's baptism in *Sling Blade* also provides connections to two other Robert Duvall films that reclaim the complexity of this "Southern physics" and the full range of its Gothic discourse. In 1983, Duvall won an Oscar for his portrayal of Mac Sledge, a down and out country-western songwriter who finds redemption in Horton Foote's *Tender Mercies*. Although Foote avoids the conventions of the Southern Gothic in his original screenplay for *Tender Mercies*, the film does create a spiritualized landscape out of everyday west Texas that helps us more clearly understand what Flannery O'Connor had in mind when she described the South as "Christ-haunted" (44). In the 1997 film *The Apostle*, Duvall offers a visual echo of Mac Sledge's transformation through God's "tender mercies" when the protagonist, "Sonny" Dewey, emerges from his own self-baptism. At the same time, *The Apostle* also invokes the language of the Southern Gothic and links Sonny's spiritual redemption to the deformity of characters like *Sling Blade*'s Karl Childers as well as to the destructive excess, violence, and grotesques of O'Connor's and Faulkner's Southern fiction.

Although Duvall has argued that "there's no real kin between" Thornton's Karl and his Apostle E. F., there is a clear kinship between all these characters, and Duvall's affinity for the South and its "spirituality" ultimately offers another avenue for exploring the complications of Southern culture. While the 1962 film adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* makes effective but ultimately truncated use of a domesticated Southern Gothic, *Sling Blade* and *The Apostle* reclaim Southern complexity in film through fuller Gothic explorations of the South's pervasive evangelical Protestantism and its web of relationship to class, race, family, and Southern manhood.

Harper Lee's Southern Gothic

By 1960, when Harper Lee crafted her nostalgic *bildungsroman*, she had at her disposal both her autobiographical experiences of growing up as a lawyer's daughter in Monroeville, Alabama, and the fully-matured generic fixtures of the Southern Gothic tradition. As Lee shapes Scout and Jem's story of moving toward adulthood through the sometimes dark vortex of a small Southern town, she makes efficient and effective use of a pliable narrative discourse that is fully established for both her and her

readers.² Twenty-five years before Lee published *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Ellen Glasgow had already affixed her then-pejorative label of “Southern Gothic” to this strain of regional discourse. When Glasgow named this “Southern Gothic School” in 1935, she was primarily lamenting what she viewed as an exploitive use of Dixie poverty through the dark excesses of newly emerging writers like Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell (Kirby 49). This younger generation of Southerners’ shocking representations of sex, violence, religious excess, rural poverty, a degenerate aristocracy, and the legacy of racial hatred undercut traditional romantic images of the South and established regional tropes and stereotypes that were corroborated by the social analysis of non-fiction writers like W. J. Cash and H. L. Mencken. The Southern Gothic label eventually proved flexible enough to account for a broad range of authors from Erskine Caldwell to Tennessee Williams. By the time Lee’s novel emerged as a pre-publication selection for the Literary Guild and the Book-of-the-Month Club, Faulkner’s Nobel prize for the “dark fabric” of his corpus was a decade old and the Southern Gothic was fully established as a persistent cultural discourse.³

²Claudia Durst Johnson’s *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries* (1994) offers a fully developed analysis of what Lee achieved through this Gothic mode. My own reading aligns with her argument that *Mockingbird* “is essentially a tale about boundaries—those of race, region, time, class, sex, tradition and code—boundaries that are at times threatening to collapse, that are threatened by circumstances and community members” (31). These contested “boundaries” are established and explored through Lee’s careful manipulation of the Gothic narrative tradition: “Virtually every external feature of the Gothic can be located in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, either as part of the action of the novel, or as an operative element in the children’s imaginations” (41).

³While Gustaf Hellström’s Nobel Prize “Presentation Speech” never uses the word “Gothic,” his citation clearly establishes the fact that this “dark” and “bloody” regionalism now carries cultural and aesthetic value. Hellström presents Faulkner’s corpus as a product of “the bitter fruits of defeat right down to their worm-eaten cores: impoverishment, decay, degeneration in its many varied forms.” And out of this decay

With almost every new work Faulkner penetrates deeper into the human psyche, into man’s greatness and powers of self-sacrifice, lust for power, cupidity, spiritual poverty, narrow-mindedness, burlesque obstinacy, anguish, terror, and degenerate aberrations. . . . His subhuman and superhuman figures, tragic or comic in a macabre way, emerge from his mind with a reality that few existing people—even those nearest to us—can give us, and they move in a milieu whose odours of subtropical plants, ladies’ perfumes, Negro sweat, and the smell of horses and mules penetrate immediately even into a Scandinavian’s warm and cosy den.

For Southern writers emerging in the 1950s like Flannery O'Connor, the Gothic label had become something of a cultural "Tar-Baby." Not only did they have to contend with Faulkner's "Dixie Limited" roaring down these regional tracks, they also had to do battle with the cartoonish caricatures of Southern poverty and decadence that had become part of the national imagination. Although Harper Lee wrestled with that "mythical entity, The School of Southern Degeneracy,"⁴ in a very different way than her contemporary O'Connor, one way to understand the selection of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as both a *Reader's Digest* condensed book and as a Pulitzer Prize winner is that the novel trafficked in the Southern Gothic in a way that was accessible to a broad American audience and at the same time carried the weight of a literary tradition that now had the cultural *imprimatur* of being considered high art.⁵

***Mockingbird* in Black & White**

Horton Foote's screenplay begins its skillful condensation of Lee's material in the exposition of the Boo Radley narrative thread. Instead of rattling the Gothic chains with Lee's initial references to Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* and the children's renditions of their own blood and thunder tree-house dramas, the film moves in a quick two-minute sequence from Dill's strange visual emergence out of his aunt's collard patch to the sealing of a bond of friendship among the three children through Jem's efficient rendition of Boo's story. Replacing Jean Louise's narrative summary of Arthur Radley's back-story are the typical sound and visual images available in the horror movie tradition. As the three children

⁴See O'Connor's "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (38, 45). Because O'Connor saw her own use of the grotesque as more directly aligned with her theological vision than with sociological critique, she resisted the Southern Gothic label and considered it merely a reductive category for reviewers: "No one has ever made plain just what the Southern school is or which writers belong to it. . . . [O]ften the term conjures up an image of Gothic monstrosities and the idea of a preoccupation with everything deformed and grotesque. Most of us are considered, I believe, to be unhappy combinations of Poe and Erskine Caldwell" ("The Fiction Writer & His Country" 28).

⁵As Patricia Yaeger has suggested, because of its broad use, the Southern Gothic label—like the labels "Southern" and "Southern Writer"—has become somewhat baggy and deservedly contested. But this notion that the South has produced a strain of literary discourse linked by its representations of sexual, familial, religious, and cultural aberration and degeneration has remained a persistent distinction.

watch Mr. Radley walk past the Finch house, Elmer Bernstein's musical score picks up what he calls his "over the top" and "very Gothic" mystery theme that tries to capture the exhilarating fear of these children's enthrallment with Boo.⁶ This conventional musical shorthand is then reinforced by a sequence of shots of the children gazing at the decaying Radley house as Jem sums up the essence of his imaginative vision of Boo: "Judging from his tracks, he's about six and a half feet tall. He eats raw squirrels." While Foote's screenplay employs much of Lee's Boo Radley material, the conventions of popular horror film take over the task of conveying the ironic weight of this particular Gothic thread. For example, as the children are contemplating the dark mystery of Jem's descriptions of Boo, a disembodied hand comes from off-screen and grabs Dill by the shoulder. The hand that nearly gives Dill "a heart attack" belongs to his Aunt Stephanie; such comic deflation of narrative tension is a typical figure of the filmic Gothic. This "Boo!—I scared you!" moment also brings another character onto the screen to efficiently deliver more of Arthur Radley's back-story: Aunt Stephanie's own manic account of this dangerous maniac's attack on his father with a pair of scissors confirms Jem's narrative that something mysterious lurks behind the closed doors of this neighborhood haunted house. At the same time, Aunt Stephanie is clearly an unreliable witness—her handkerchief facial bath of Dill and her characterization as an emotive gossip tell us to read the threat of the Radley house ironically.

Faithful to Lee's novel, the parodic and ironic elements of the children's Boo Radley adventure serve as frame and interpretive counterpoint to the Southern Gothic stories that give shape to the rest of the film. When Dill wants to see the "bat-infested" basement where they locked up Boo after he stabbed his father, instead of discovering "chains and instruments of torture" the children's trip to the courthouse leads to our first direct encounter with the real monster of the narrative, Bob Ewell. The first half of the film continues to appeal to cinematic horror conventions as it tells the children's Boo Radley story in order to establish the Gothic context for the more sinister threat in the form of Bob Ewell and his cracker, racist rage.

When the film abandons the thread of Boo's haunted house for the thirty-three-minute trial sequence, the Southern Gothic tropes fully

⁶Bernstein makes these comments during an interview in Charles Kiselyak's 1998 documentary, *Fearful Symmetry: The Making of To Kill a Mockingbird*.

assert themselves in the testimony of Bob Ewell, his daughter Mayella, and Tom Robinson. When “Robert E. Lee” Ewell is called to the stand, his ironic full name reminds us that he represents the worst of post-bellum cultural decay—an angry farmless yeoman farmer whose infrequently washed white skin is his only cultural capital. The Gothic anxieties produced through Atticus and Ewell’s verbal and physical encounter⁷ morph from questions of class to the twin demons of sexuality and race as Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson take the stand. Collin Wilcox played Mayella with the assumption that she “has been sexually molested by her father.”⁸ But rather than pursuing this possibility of father/daughter incest, the film finally focuses on the Gothic perversion of Mayella’s sexual attraction to Tom Robinson. Tom’s account of Mayella’s grabbing him around the legs and waist offers an

⁷As James Anderson’s Ewell crouches in the witness chair, his strong physical presence is no match for the camera angle that sets him below every other character in the frame and thereby reinforces his “white trash” status. While the county has gathered to witness a Negro’s trial for raping a white woman, a significant part of the spectacle is about class conflict in this small town. After Ewell spits out his rape accusation to the packed courtroom, he feeds off the reaction of the crowd to his revelations. His recitation of the culture’s favorite horror story gives him a momentary sense of power which is further reinforced in his first early exit from the witness stand as he runs headlong into Atticus and elicits laughter from a large section of the courtroom. The laughter is a complex response to Ewell’s loutish behavior and his undermining of Atticus’s cultural authority. When Atticus quickly reasserts his authority in this power relationship, he does so with a “tricky” lawyer’s question that again emphasizes class status—“Now, Mr. Ewell can you read and write?” Atticus clearly wins the class battle here—Ewell’s pigeon-scratches demonstrate he is likely the left-handed man who has beaten Mayella—but as Ewell takes his seat there is latent anger in a quieted courtroom. Many of the good townfolk of Maycomb seem to resent the fact that they have to turn to those few “men in the world who are born to do our unpleasant jobs for us.” While Atticus’s natural wit, wisdom, and nobility reaffirm the social hierarchy here by making sure everybody remembers the Ewells occupy the town dump, his natural aristocracy can’t ultimately contain the simmering class anxiety that haunt this “tired old town.”

⁸Wilcox assumed that given Mayella’s class status she was like the host of poor girls that Wilcox knew growing up in North Carolina who “took it for granted that they’d be molested by the time they were twelve . . . by a father, a brother, an uncle, or someone down the road” (Kiselyak). But beyond the animal-like confusion of Wilcox’s portrayal, the film is even more reticent than the book to name Mayella as victim of Bob Ewell’s sexual abuse. Lee hints at this sexual taboo of incest by giving Ewell earthier language to describe the rape scene. He claims in his testimony that “I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin’ on my Mayella!” (196)—the words add a sexual dynamic to Ewell’s character that is absent in the film’s trial scene.

inversion of the black rapist myth at the heart of the trial. While the 1962 film aims to correct the racial politics of this rape myth, the inversion is still offered in the Gothic terms of debased sexuality. The producer and director believe that this exploration of Mayella's pent-up and destructive desire is particularly effective because of their casting of a "very sexual" and "African" Brock Peters as the object of her affection.⁹ Although the politics of the film clearly challenge the racist codes of the American South, the mysterious power of black/African male sexuality as a cultural trope is still clearly available for liberal white New York film makers even as the Civil Rights movement is finding its stride three decades beyond the South that Harper Lee tried to capture in her nostalgic novel.

In this 1960s Hollywood iconography of black/white sexuality, the film has difficulty handling some of the Gothic complexities of Lee's book. For example, in the novel as the children survey the carnival-like atmosphere outside the courthouse before the trial, they spend a considerable amount of time contemplating Mr. Dolphus Raymond, the whiskey-soddened scion of a "real old family." According to Jem's account, after his bride-to-be "blew her head off" with a shotgun, Raymond took to living with his "colored woman" and produced a passel of "mixed" children on his river plantation near the county line (183-84). Lee's novel uses the children's subsequent interaction with Raymond to call into question the stability of class, sexual, and racial categories that the film is happy to leave intact during the trial.

Ultimately, twin hazards of Hollywood film making domesticate the narrative in ways that diminish Lee's own careful cultivation of a full range of Gothic conventions. The first—and unavoidable—hazard of condensation forced cuts of other material like the Mr. Dolphus Raymond episode. For example, Miss Dubose, the Finches' other Gothic monster/neighbor, is reduced to a grumpy old lady who yells at the Finch children. According to director Paluka, even some limited development of this pistol-toting Daughter of the Confederacy ended up somewhere on Universal Pictures' cutting room floor because it slowed

⁹In their 1998 DVD commentary track Alan Paluka argues "that's where the casting of Brock is very good, because he's a very sexual image which really helped with the story," and in response Bob Mulligan offers: "I think what also works—and what impressed me about Brock when I first met him—is that he has a strong *African-American* face."

down the film's movement. It simply would take too much time to dramatically explain how this morphine-addicted racist functions as Atticus's hero and Jem's moral *exemplum*. The hazard of the restricted length of a narrative film is further heightened when the complexities of this Southern moral discourse are placed in the hands of New York/Hollywood film makers; the pace of the film and the outsiders' response to the moral conundrums of the South are better served by simple "black & white" storytelling.

Even though some of these simplifying omissions also occur in the Boo Radley narrative thread,¹⁰ when Robert Duvall's Boo finally emerges from these narrative elisions and the shadows of the film, he is still a powerful cipher that Foote and Mulligan use effectively. He first appears as another disembodied hand of the Gothic horror film tradition when he rescues Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell's Halloween attack. But instead of the comic variation of a hand from nowhere that gave Dill his "heart attack" early in the film, this hand delivers real violence. As Ewell and Boo wrestle, we see only images of their hands and shadows of their hands as they move across Scout's face. Even when we hear the "thunk" of a knife into a body, Mulligan remains committed to emphasizing Scout's limited point of view through tight reaction shots on her eyes visible only through the slot of her harvest festival ham costume. We see the ultimate violence of the film only through the fear in Scout's eyes and the final dropping shadow of Ewell's hand across her face. *To Kill a Mockingbird* maintains its Halloween horror film mode through its score and shots from Scout's perspective that continue to emphasize the mystery of this violent action. She watches and listens to more fragments of Boo as his legs thump across her restricted field of vision. Even after Scout regains her feet and a wider visual perspective, Boo's exit from the

¹⁰For example, when Jem opens the film's Boo story with his description of Mr. Radley—"There goes the meanest man who ever took a breathe of life"—Foote is borrowing a line that Calpurnia delivers in the novel when they carry the dead senior Mr. Radley from his house: "'There goes the meanest man ever God blew breath into,' murmured Calpurnia, and she spat meditatively into the yard. We looked at her in surprise, for Calpurnia rarely commented on the ways of white people" (13). In this abandoned reference to the senior Mr. Radley's passing, the film not only loses some of the complexities of the Gothic's exploration of Southern racial politics, it also loses the Boo story's ties to generational history. Even in Lee's brief exposition, the details of the Senior Radley's drawn-out illness and his replacement by a Gothic double, his son Mr. Nathan Radley, remind us that the problems of the Southern Gothic are ancestral—a story of familial and cultural degeneration. Boo's history is a family's horror story.

woods is classic horror film iconography: through blowing tree branches and the full-moon of a street lamp, Boo is a Frankenstein-like monster carrying away a child's limp body.

Using these horror movie motifs, Mulligan's film effectively merges the comic and ironic Gothic of Boo's lurking narrative with the more dangerous Southern Gothic threat of Ewell's cracker depravity. The merger functions as a closing inversion that restores some order to Maycomb. Bob Ewell's attack on the Finch children is a distorted rendition of a Southern honor code; Atticus has insulted him and his family in the course of defending Tom Robinson and he has laid down his gauntlet by spitting in Atticus's face. This Southern honor code, interpreted through a drunken, ignorant, and sexually depraved mind, transforms Ewell into a Gothic ghoul of the woods between the school and the Radley house. When this cracker monster is dispatched from this social world by the up to now invisible ghost of Maycomb, Boo is effectively redeemed by the legitimized violence of this honor code. He goes into the woods a horror movie monster and emerges as a fully formed Southern Gothic grotesque—"Mr. Arthur."

Boo's violence is not inconsistent with his redeemed status as Mr. Arthur. Moments after Sheriff Tate has announced that Bob Ewell is "lying on the ground under that tree down yonder with a kitchen knife stuck under his ribs," Scout discovers the man responsible for this violent act lurking in the shadows of the room. Although Atticus quickly corrects Scout's greeting—"Boo!"—through his formal introduction of "Mr. Arthur Radley," Duvall's subtle facial reactions suggest that he is comfortable with either name if it is delivered by Scout. Duvall's near-albino whiteness still mark Mr. Arthur as a



Image 1: Mr. Arthur meets Jean Louise. (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, Universal Home Video.)

ghostly freak, but Scout's offer of her hand indicates that this violent agent is welcome in this social world. Atticus later shakes Arthur's hand on the front porch to seal this social redemption and also the personal compromise he has made with the "law" in not contesting Sheriff Tate's assertion that Bob Ewell accidentally killed himself. Tate seems to see no inconsistency between a man who can violently lodge a kitchen knife deep under someone's ribs and Mr. Arthur with "his shy ways." For Tate, Boo's violence operates on a plane outside the limits of a legal system. Bob Ewell's killer has brought moral balance to this world by honorably and efficiently disposing of the man responsible for the death of an innocent, and Tate is not going to allow Mr. Arthur to become a victim of either a legal system that can't promise justice or a town that would inappropriately turn a shy and honorable man into a celebrity hero.

This violently redeemed Boo isn't just readmitted into the social world through this informal legal pardon, he also seems to be at least symbolically adopted into the Finch family as both surrogate mother and ambiguously gendered suitor. The visual images surrounding Boo's introduction complicate his gender identity. The Finch home is a motherless household. While the widowed Atticus is ably assisted in his task of child-rearing by Calpurnia, at several points in the film we are reminded of the mother's absence. When Scout finally meets Boo, he's presented in a tableau that prominently features the absent mother's photo on the mantle. Unlike the leering monster of Bob Ewell who is always linked with depraved heterosexual violence, the now freakish rather than monstrous Boo is presented as an androgynous figure who has stepped in as a mother-bear to violently repel the threat to her cubs. This feminization of Boo is confirmed as he gently "pets" the sedated Jem. Duvall's hesitant stroking of Jem's head seems loaded with multiple impulses: a frightened mother-figure touching her ill child; a grown man lamenting the loss of his own childhood; a lover's first touch. His hand has moved over Jem's face before, but that was as shadow monster. Here the gentle touch and Duvall's visual reactions to it suggest an erotic energy at this physical contact with a boy he has loved from afar.

But Boo is more Scout's symbolic lover than Jem's. Boo's androgyny allows him to serve not just as she-bear for these Finch cubs but also as an appropriate suitor for the equally androgynous Scout. As Miss Jean Louise offers Mr. Arthur her hand and leads him out to the Finch's front door, she has found a suitable match for her pre-adolescent tomboy

ways. As the strangely linked couple sits on the Finch porch swing, they offer a symbolic inversion of the empty swing of the haunted, decayed, and ultimately sterile Radley house. The film completes this romance comedy ending for its Gothic narrative¹¹ by continuing these gender inversions as Scout escorts Mr. Arthur back to his house; but as the pair move from the Finch front porch to the Radley steps, Scout takes a feminized position by placing her hand in the crook of Boo's elbow. When she parts with her freakish suitor at the creaking Radley screen door, the voice-over narration of the adult Jean Louise Finch rehearses the cycle of the seasons and events that have effectively been a rite of passage for her out of her tomboy childhood toward the nostalgically lilting female voice we hear now.

Again Foote and Mulligan's dramatic and visual adaptation of Lee's material in these final scenes is faithful and effective, but the scenes again point to some Gothic complexities that the film seems to resist or avoid. For example, the film's nostalgic voice-over tells us that Boo "had come out," and as Scout runs home to the comforting arms of Atticus, there is effective closure for the Gothic narrative. But Lee's Scout has the time to tell us on her final pages that she never saw Boo again after he "gently released my hand, opened the door, went inside, and shut the door behind him" (320). Boo may have "come out," but as the Radley door seals him back up, he is ultimately an inexplicable Gothic mystery.

Another example of this faithfulness yet loss of complexity can be found in these closing images of Scout's movement toward femaleness. The film's effective "closing" images here sum up a major narrative thread that the novel explored more fully in Scout's relationship with her Aunt Alexandra, who has moved herself into the Finch home primarily to teach the motherless Jean Louise the ways of Southern womanhood. Scout for the most part effectively resists this manipulative intervention from her hypocritically culture-bound Aunt. But late in the novel as the children and the rest of the Finch household are struggling with the results of the Robinson trial, Aunt Alexandra hosts a women's missionary circle tea that introduces Scout to the Gothic complexities of

¹¹See Morgan for a fully developed argument about the relationship between the generic mode of comedy and gothic: "Despite the commonplace wisdom that comedy and tragedy are kindred, it is arguable that instead . . . it is traces of horror that are more often found bound up with comedy, and the two may well have been part of an original single weave that . . . later became unraveled" (25-26).

feminine social roles. On this late August afternoon, Dill and Jem have escaped the household to swim naked at Barker's Eddy while Scout has exchanged her overalls for the prison of her "pink Sunday dress, shoes, and a petticoat" (261) and the terrors of a tea party. Serving as junior co-hostess for this event Scout first hears the "blood-curdling" (266) details of Mrs. Merriweather's report on "the poverty . . . the darkness . . . the immorality" (263) faced by Rev. J. Grimes Everett in his missionary work amidst the "sin and squalor" (264) of the Mrunas. Scout soon discovers that a different sort of horror exists closer to home in the threatening gossip of the "ladies of the Maycomb Alabama Methodist Episcopal Church South" (263) and their Baptist and Presbyterian neighbors. Jean Louise bravely faces down this crowd as she helps to serve the refreshments and tries to engage the ladies in polite conversation. But when the conversation turns both racist and slanderous of Atticus, Scout learns a lesson about how to negotiate the hostility of this "world of women." She knows she "must soon enter this world, where on its surface fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently, and drank cool water" (266), and she puts on her "best company manners" so that she can "be a lady" (271) like her iron-willed Aunt Alexandra and her sharp-tongued neighbor Miss Maudie. So when the film offers a lady-like Scout walking arm-in-arm with a redeemed monster, it carries some of the weight of this gender identity development at the same time that it leaves behind the cultural complexity of this socially-constructed role of Southern woman.

The loss of the complexities of this missionary circle also points to a central thread in the South's social fabric that the film completely abandons. Except for Atticus's refusal of Jem's request that he "play football for the Methodists," the film adaptation excises any references to "the familiar ecclesiastical impedimenta" of Lee's evangelical Protestant South (136). Gone are "missionary circles" and their byzantine etiquette of women's power relations, cheap cardboard church fans bearing images of the Garden of Gethsemane, rotogravure prints of Hunt's *The Light of the World*, and sermons on the "Impurity of Women doctrine that seemed to preoccupy all clergymen." The film is silent about the Finch's Methodist heritage (4) and the complex social fabric of Baptists and Presbyterians that weave together Maycomb's cultural world. There are no nuanced explorations of different manifestations of Baptist belief. Gone as well is Jem and Scout's visit to

Calpurnia's African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Negro "Quarters" south of town (136-41).

The film completely avoids the novel's theological explanation of Boo's character. In Lee's novel the Radley house becomes the small town's haunted castle because the family's extreme brand of evangelical Protestantism isolates them even from "Maycomb's principal recreation" of going to church: the Radleys "worshiped at home" (10). According to the reliable Miss Maudie, the Radleys are among the "foot-washing" Baptists who are deeply suspicious of the orthodoxy of the town's other Protestants. As a "primitive" Baptist, Mr. Radley takes "the Bible literally" and Miss Maudie tells Scout that the Bible is a dangerous thing for men like Mr. Radley "who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one." She claims Boo is the "result" of such a religious outlook (49-50). Still, Miss Maudie's theological account of Boo Radley's origins doesn't fully explain away the Gothic mystery of Boo. When Scout asks if she reckons Boo "is crazy," Miss Maudie assumes so, given his forced seclusion in the Radley home, but she has no way of explaining the mysteries of that "sad house": "Miss Maudie shook her head. 'If he's not [crazy] he should be by now. The things that happen to people we never really know. What happens in houses behind closed doors, what secrets—'" (51).

Although one might argue that the film's removal of the religious context for these "behind closed door" secrets actually creates a more inexplicable mystery, Duvall's cipher-like Boo is a step removed from this traditional generic feature of the Southern Gothic. Given the 1962 political context and the limitations of their story-telling medium, these Hollywood film makers sacrificed Lee's Southern religious complexities for what they could reasonably assume was the primary Gothic horror of the South: persistent and irrational racial hatred inflamed by a degenerating poverty. In accounting for this terror in "black & white," the film makers seemed to have no appetite for portraying the pervasive character of Southern evangelical Protestantism or the Gothic's exploration of its excesses.

Boo Gets Baptized: *Sling Blade*

As Southern collaborators on *Tomorrow* (1972) and *Tender Mercies* (1983), Robert Duvall and Horton Foote found effective ways to explore the South's rural poverty and its pervasive religious culture with care

and nuanced attention. In *Tomorrow*, Foote and Duvall translated to the screen a short story about an impoverished regional character in a way that captures the Faulknerian conviction that the “lowly and the invincible of the earth” like Jackson Fentry contain enormous complexity in both their “capacity for love” and their power “to endure and endure and endure.” A decade later, in *Tender Mercies*, these collaborators turned this same sympathetic disposition to the everyday religious sensibilities of these Southerners. Rather than excising “the familiar ecclesiastical impedimenta” or treating Mac Sledge’s story of “redemption” and “mercy” with a wink and nudge of caricature, Foote and Duvall (along with director Bruce Beresford) weave the fabric of Southern evangelical Protestantism into the understated realism of *Tender Mercies*. In doing this kind of work their films expanded the possible range of what could be accomplished in the Southern Gothic mode. While the muted tones of *Tomorrow* and *Tender Mercies* often seem oppositional to Gothic excess, the two movies demonstrated how film narrative could pay attention to Southern poverty and evangelical Protestantism in ways that moved beyond caricature. In doing so they offered later Southern Gothic films the opportunity to reincorporate these more nuanced understandings of Southern culture that were already present in the mature fiction of the Southern Gothic tradition. To adapt Billy Bob Thornton’s metaphor, if Southern Gothic films were to approach the “Southern physics” of fiction writers like Faulkner (or even Harper Lee), they needed to add additional “variables” to their equations. These two films add two “variables” to the cinematic Southern lexicon—they are two intermediate equations that allow films like Thornton’s *Sling Blade* to more fully “model” the complex physics of the wider Southern Gothic tradition.

Billy Bob Thornton seems to take some pleasure in acknowledging his Southern roots and cultural indebtedness. By formally listing Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner in the closing credits of *Sling Blade*, Thornton is embracing both the Caldwellian excess of the Southern Gothic and the Faulknerian complexity that can often be embedded in that excess. In *Sling Blade*, the Caldwell debt is easy to spot in the strange cohort of characters in Doyle Hargraves’s band or as the film’s dim-witted protagonist violently dispatches Doyle with the meaty thunk of a sling (or Kaiser) blade to his skull. In the midst of this strange and violent story, Thornton is also a student of “Southern physics” who

recognizes the value of attending to the complex variables available to him through writers like Faulkner and Southern story-tellers like Horton Foote. While his slow-talking Karl Childers is clearly shaped and stunted by the socio-economic and class condition of his degenerate Arkansas home, he is also a morally complex and religiously literate character negotiating a complicated social and spiritual cartography.

Thornton has also acknowledged the indirect influence of Robert Duvall's Boo Radley and Jackson Fentry on his creation of the character of Karl Childers. Karl's football game with the fatherless Frank Wheatley suggests that he might want to add Duvall's football-tossing Mac Sledge to his list of influences. Late in the film Karl overhears his employer talking with a father and son who have brought in their portable generator for repair at the small engine shop. The talk is of the son's starting position on the high school football team and the team's prospects for the coming season. Karl as the "humped-back retard" of the shop is outside the margins of this conversation, but even with the heavy generator in his hands he waits within hearing range as he catches the father's pride in this "chip off the old block." Like Atticus Finch, the middle-aged Karl has thus far declined young Frank's invitation to play football, but after overhearing this father/son football conversation, Karl heads down to the junior high field in the next scene. Thornton's *Sling Blade* offers us only one play in this informal contest, but it's the right one for a Southern film. Before being tackled by four other boys, quarterback Karl laterals to Frank for a touchdown—"just like the wish-bone" Frank tells the flattened Karl. This football moment seals the father-son relationship between this odd couple of essentially fatherless freaks. As they walk home from the game, Frank says that he knows that Karl lateraled to him just so he could score the touchdown—"My daddy used to do that sort of thing." Frank hopes Karl can play every Saturday, and Karl accepts the invitation—he'll be there if he "ain't too stove-up"—and he tells Frank: "I'm proud of you."

The football sequence is a near perfect merger of the cinematic Gothic and Southern materials that lie at the heart of Thornton's story.¹² Instead of Frankenstein's monster's tossing an innocent little girl's flower petals

¹²In 2004 Thornton starred in the film adaptation of *Friday Night Lights*, H.G. Bissinger's exploration of Southern secular religion in the form of high school football in West Texas. For a more fully developed reading of the sacred and Southern football, see Wilson's "The Death of Bear Bryant: Myth and Ritual in the Modern South" (37-51).

into the lake, Thornton's monster executes the wishbone to perfection and in doing so establishes a paternal bond to a fatherless boy. Thornton knows what he's up to here with these Southern materials, and he also knows this combination of humor and sentiment has the possibility of undermining the dark story that he wants to tell. To quell that sentimentality, immediately after Karl's affirmation of fatherly pride, Daniel Lanois's haunting score makes a sound bridge to begin the film's climactic sequence of Karl's return to the home where he hacked apart his mother and her lover when he was Frank's age. In the sequence Karl engages the abusive father from his past with the graceful offer of mowing the old man's lawn and the larger possibility of a restored family. As he sits on his bed anticipating this visit, Karl anxiously rubs his hands together, and it seems that Karl is meditating about what it might mean for him to be a "chip off the old block."

The sequence Gothicizes whatever sentimental emotions had been generated by Frank and Karl's father-son play. After an establishing shot tracks Karl as he walks up to a rundown house along a highway at the edge of town, we follow him back to the shed behind the house where he slept for the first twelve years of his life. Karl opens the door on this dark place, and a hand-held point of view shot unveils the hole in the ground that had been his bed. We're led by these same hand-held point of view shots through the accumulated years of trash, derelict possessions, and decay of the back porch, the screen door, and the interior hallway of the house. Since we never got past the Radley's screen door in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this shaky camera is as much for us and our anxiety as it is for Karl's. At the end of that 1962 film, Scout tells us that she was content with her view from the Radley porch for understanding Boo, but here we are allowed to fully follow Atticus's advice—we are in Boo's shoes inside his house. As Karl looks into the neglected bedrooms, Lanois's music is displaced by an echoing whisper of Karl's father. This ghost of a voice from Karl's past comes into the present as Karl steps through the veil of the curtained doorway into his father's living room. A better name for the room might be the death-in-life room. Surrounded by the accumulated detritus of twenty-five years of isolation, Robert Duvall's body seems to be slowly decaying into an easy chair like Homer Barron into Emily Grierson's bed. When Thornton's Karl emerges from out of the shadows of this doorway, the shot offers a visual echo of Boo Radley's first appearance inside the

Finch's home. But as this story descends into a darker Gothic vortex, instead of the delight of friendly recognition from someone who has never actually seen Boo before, Karl receives no greeting, no welcome, and no delight at his homecoming.

When Boo II meets Boo I, Karl is perceived and received only as an unwanted, if not unexpected, specter. Karl's father seems to be at home with such ghosts, as if they are frequent guests. His denial of kinship here is more than just the present rejection of Karl and his graceful offer of assistance, it's the emblem of what has always been wrong with this anti-home. As Karl hints at the physical (and perhaps sexual¹³) abuse he suffered at the hands of his parents and as he references the infanticide of the brother he had to bury in a shoebox, his father seems to enact a ritual response that he offers all the ghosts that visit him in his easy chair: Duvall's character closes his eyes, partially sticks out his tongue, and opens and closes his mouth in mocking derision. From the senior Childers's perspective, the ritual incantation is effective: the ghost of Karl departs and he can go back to calling for a dog that isn't there.

The evil of Karl's father is clearly aligned with the Southern Gothic's class arguments about white trash debasement; he is a physically and sexually abusive Bob Ewell. But Karl's father is also the product of the broader community's decadence. Unlike Ewell, Karl tells us in his opening monologue, his father was a "hard workin' man" employed by a cruel and economically exploitive sawmill owner. And it was this mill owner's son who was sexually exploiting Karl's mother and even younger girls in this poor neighborhood. But in the more immediate Gothic story that *Sling Blade* narrates, these class dimensions are absent: Doyle Hargraves is a working-class villain who runs his own small construction company, and decadent aristocrats don't seem to be a factor in the evil of Frank Wheatley's world.¹⁴ So while the debasement of

¹³There is no direct reference to Karl's sexual abuse in the film, but a subtle shift in eye contact between Duvall and Thornton when Karl tells his father, "You ought not to have done that to your boy," suggests some unspeakable violations. The sexual undercurrent of Karl's accusation is reinforced by his sexual awareness as pre-adolescent; in his opening monologue Karl reported that as a child he knew about the sexual abuse of neighborhood girls and that he clearly understood that Jesse and his mother were having intercourse when he discovered them on the Childers' back porch.

¹⁴Thornton's 2005 director's cut includes a scene absent from the original theatrical release that expands the class matrix of this world. Frank, who has an unrequited crush on the daughter of the local dentist, takes Karl to visit her at a white-column home. An

Karl's white trash heritage obviously helps explain who he is, he seems prepared to let the threat of this legacy die with his father as an evil thing of the past. Karl has "studied on killin" his father, but he has come to the conclusion that this model of white trash debasement is no longer a threat to him or anyone else: "All you're going to do is sit there in that chair—you'll be dead soon enough and the world will be shut of ya."

Although Karl can leave his father in that chair to die, in a significant way he is still haunted and shaped by elements of this household and hometown that seem to transcend class boundaries in Southern culture. The visual landscape of the Childers' home reinforces Flannery O'Connor's notion of a "Christ-haunted" South:

I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows. . . . (44-45)

Karl lives in a theological landscape, haunted by an inescapable religious culture. Faulkner says it this way: "My life was passed, my childhood, in a very small Mississippi town, and that was a part of my background. I grew up with that. I assimilated that, took that in without even knowing it. It's just there. It has nothing to do with how much of it I might believe or disbelieve—it's just there" (Wilson 61). When Karl steps into his father's living room, he is surrounded by at least twenty Christian images and artifacts. In fact, *To Kill a Mockingbird's* introductory tableau of Boo aligned with the photograph of the absent Finch mother is displaced by *Sling Blade's* tableau of Karl surrounded by three popular prints of Christ, two images of the Good Shepherd and one image of Christ of the Sacred Heart. Obviously, these function as symbolic pointers to Karl's Christ-figure status in the plot of the novel: he will soon sacrifice himself via violence to "save" Frank and Linda Wheatley. But the sacred images do more than just offer that conveniently

African American maid tries to shoo away the odd flower-bearing pair, but Frank persists in getting his class-based rejection directly from the girl. But even when this scene is included in Thornton's extended version of the film, the Gothic evil of a decadent aristocracy has simply been replaced by an innocuous dentist's Southern "Mc-Mansion" and his whiney daughter. This 1990s Southern town includes neither the stoic *noblesse oblige* of a wise Atticus Finch nor the decadence of a fallen planter like Mr. Dolphus Raymond.

packaged symbolism. If Karl is a Christ-figure because he is surrounded by three Jesus pictures, then his father must be a “super-Christ figure”; he has more than ten religious icons and pieces of Christian kitsch hovering over his head! Karl isn’t just a literary convention of a Christ-figure, but rather functions as another emblem for the pervasive character of Southern evangelical Protestantism. All this “familiar ecclesiastical impedimenta” decorates the Childers’ home because this Southern faith is “just there”; Karl’s family faith is simply part of the larger cultural fabric. Certainly, the iconography in the Childers’ living room functions as an ironic critique of the excesses and abuses of this Southern evangelical Protestantism. The senior Childers’s chair looks like a statuary niche for this patron saint of child abuse. Thus the scary juxtaposition of Karl’s parents’ use of his “Bible lessons” for sexual exploitation reinforces the Gothic horror of a child murderer presented as a religious icon. But *Sling Blade*’s theological references don’t conclude with a simplistic explanation that Karl and his father are merely the debased products of a religious culture given to excess and violence.

After Karl exits his father’s house he examines the grave marker he fashioned long ago for his aborted brother. The notched cross on the stone suggests that even the young Karl simply saw his world in theological terms, and he still does. He is a good Protestant; he has come to read and interpret the Bible for himself. He sees himself as a fallen creature with imperfect knowledge, but he can have direct access to spiritual authority. *Sola Scriptura*. With Billy Graham and countless other Southern evangelical Protestants, he can proclaim “The Bible says.” In Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Miss Maudie tells Scout that the Bible in some men’s hands is a dangerous thing and we should probably be a little worried about what Karl might do with his Bible knowledge. But the fact that he has it, that he reads it, that he references it in conversation, that he totes it around, and that he sets it on top of his stack of farewell gifts to Frank all suggest that the Bible is just part of the fabric of his Southern reality. He may not “understand all of it,” but by Karl’s own reckoning he “understands a good deal” of the Bible and it gives order to his fallen world. It has given him a way to account for the lies of parents, and it seems to help him navigate his present moral course. He has “studied” on killing his father, but since his father is no longer capable of hurting anyone, such an act wouldn’t be justified by the moral code

that Karl has established through his Bible reading and twenty-five years of reflection in the state “nervous hospital.”

After his climatic encounter with his father, Karl—like Mac Sledge—decides that he wants to make a profession of faith and be baptized.

Thornton first approaches this decision via Gothic horror film conventions: with a cloud-shrouded moon in the sky, Karl shows up in the middle of the night at Linda and

Image 2: Karl picks up a hammer and asks to be baptized. (*Sling Blade*, Miramax.)



Doyle’s bedroom door with a silhouetted hammer in his hand and announces to them “I want to be baptized.” When asked why he’s holding the threatening hammer, Karl responds, “I don’t arightly know. I just kinda awoke up aholdin’ it.” Karl’s propensity for Gothic violence is “just there,” like the evangelical Protestant religious culture that surrounds him. But significantly, Thornton abandons the Gothic horror film images to present the baptism itself with a simple lyrical beauty. There doesn’t seem to be anything sinister about Karl’s participation in this religious ritual; in fact, the outdoor setting for the baptism offers even an idyllic contrast to the plain everydayness of Mac Sledge’s dunking in the worn-out concrete block baptistry of *Tender Mercies*. After Karl’s immersion, the riverside congregation responds by singing “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling,”¹⁵ and his proclamation of faith and the ritual baptism gives Karl permission to “come home” both to Jesus and to his newly formed family of Frank and Linda, who sing on the

¹⁵The idyllic quality of the scene is reinforced by reference to another Horton Foote Southern film: “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling” opened the film version of Foote’s *Trip to Bountiful* (1985).

riverbank for him. The baptism functions as the final ritual cleansing of Karl's past—he has put his father's family behind him and made a claim to a new surrogate family. But in a Gothic juncture of religion, family, and violence, during the final trajectory of *Sling Blade's* story this baptism also functions as ritual cleansing to prepare Karl for his self-sacrificial killing of Doyle Hargraves.

Karl's premeditated murder of Doyle is clearly different from Boo's defensive intervention on behalf of Scout and Jem, but the killing is invested with similar questions about violence and Southern manhood. Doyle's man-to-man talk with Frank and Karl that precipitates this violence is premised on his proclamation of his new role as "head of the household." In this threatening "sermon"¹⁶ Doyle claims his traditional and divinely-given rights of male authority figure as he tells Frank that he will now have to play by Doyle's "rules" in his "house." Just as Boo's actions dispatch the threatened manhood of Bob Ewell, Karl's actions undermine this hierarchal vision of male power. His final visit with Frank suggests the same sort of sexual ambiguity as Boo's petting of Jem. Frank's "secret place" where they meet was originally introduced as the location where Frank would meet his "girlfriend" and hold hands, and in their final encounter Karl functions as Frank's surrogate father, older brother, and beloved. When Karl puts his arm awkwardly around Frank's shoulder and Frank pets his hand in return, there is nothing unseemly about the actions. But the "love" they speak to each other goes beyond father-son bonding to an intimacy of friendship that neither has ever experienced. Neither Karl nor Frank perceives this intimacy in homoerotic terms, but it clearly seems to be breaking traditional modes of male-male relationships that the film presents elsewhere.

Because Karl is a good, Bible-reading Protestant, he knows the Bible's prohibitions against homosexual behavior, but his relationship with Frank has also changed his perception of Linda's boss and homosexual friend, Vaughan. Before he kills Doyle, Karl first establishes a place of refuge for Linda and Frank by asking Vaughan to take them in for the night, but his request is framed by judgments that reflect a depth of moral complexity and an understanding of the "other":

I don't reckon that you have to go with women to be a good daddy to a boy. You've been real square dealin' with me. The Bible says that two men ought not lay

¹⁶The DVD versions of the film label the scene "Doyle's Sermon."

together. But I betcha the good Lord wouldn't send nobody like you to Hades. That boy, Frank, he lives inside of his own heart. That's an awful big place to live in. You take care of that boy.

Aside from the implied finality of this last imperative, Thornton gives this speech special emphasis in two ways. First, he offers one of the film's tightest and brightest close-ups of Karl. Karl has had several *chiaroscuro* close-up set pieces in the film—his expositional monologue, his rendition of his brother's death to Frank, his climatic chastisement of his father—but here the camera moves in and holds onto Karl's fully-lit face in a different way. The fill lighting suggests Karl's certainty of his words and actions at this moment and, while Thornton still uses the generically appropriate back-lighting of a horror film, he uses it here to communicate spiritual enlightenment as much as the threat of impending Gothic violence. Karl has come out of a thunderstorm to stand on Von's front porch, and the extended close-ups of his dripping head and drenched shoulders remind us that he had been baptized earlier in the day. While Karl never claims that God has instructed him to kill Doyle, this scene's words and images present his determination to do so as revelatory: these are religious convictions and insights for Karl—it's about the "good Lord" and the holy territory of the "sacred heart."

Thornton also gives emphasis to this scene through its mirrored repetition and dramatic reversal of an earlier encounter with Vaughan at the local Frostee Cream that comically interrogated male sexuality, manly protection, and the "depth" of Karl's character. Vaughan initiates this previous conversation because of his protective concern for Linda and Frank. Since his own family has rejected him because he's gay, Vaughan considers the Wheatleys his surrogate "family" and he wants to know if he can trust this former inmate of the state mental hospital who has just moved into their garage. Vaughan confesses that he used to "pray" for his own father's death every night and appeals to Karl and their bond of "difference"—his gayness and Karl's "affliction." But Karl merely plays with his frozen Coke and smothers his fried "pataters" in mustard, and he seems oblivious to either Von's transparency or his warnings about Doyle as "monster." Even when Vaughan tries to find a more appealing category with which he can label Karl—he would rather picture Karl as a silent "deep thinker" rather than as ex-mental patient—this early encounter comically undermines such stereotyping.

Karl seems more concerned with his fast food than with Von's personal revelations or the need for deep wisdom in their shared role of protecting the Wheatleys from the monstrous Doyle. But the later mirrored scene between Vaughan and Karl does allow Karl to momentarily function as a "wise" or "holy fool": Karl knows that a heart is an "awful big place to be inside" because, like Frank, he lives inside his own heart. In this moment of framing repetition, Thornton does present Karl as someone who possesses the sort of deep and hidden wisdom that Vaughan looked for in the Frostee Cream booth.

Ultimately though, *Sling Blade* isn't interested in placing Karl into any particular box—be it matricidal child-killer, humped-over retard, small-engine whiz, or wise fool. Thornton wants to throw his Southern grotesque into a matrix of different roles to explore Karl's and his own culture's complexity. When Karl crushes Doyle's skull with his sharpened lawnmower blade, there seem to be a host of variables that shape this action. Karl is still the same mentally-challenged individual who as a twelve-year-old killed his mother and her lover; he's still a lost boy looking for a home and family; he's still a lost mental patient who longs for the order and security of his hospital walls; he's still shaped by his Southern working-class world of saw mills, sling blades, small-engine repair, Dollar Stores, football, Frostee Cream french fries, and Chicken Champ; he's still the product of a culture that closely aligns maleness with violence; and Karl is still the good Southern Protestant who reads his world through the Bible and sees his actions in theological terms.

Karl's murder of Doyle falls into a different legal and moral category than Boo's stabbing of Bob Ewell. If Atticus Finch were legal council in this Arkansas town, he would not let Karl go no matter how much better off the "tired old town" would be without the likes of Doyle. But Karl's actions before and after the killing lay a better claim to the Boo Radley of Harper Lee's *Southern Gothic* than to the Boo of Gregory Peck's black and white classic. As Karl prepares for the killing and wrestles with his decision to kill, Thornton has him contemplatively roaming through his Southern landscape and town. Karl is not a blank cipher who appears from nowhere to quickly restore order to the disturbed social world and then disappear again into the shadows; rather, like Lee's Boo, he has a past and present that are deeply entangled in that social world. The film has had us walk in Karl's shoes into the interior of his eight "homes": the state mental hospital, Dr. Woolridge's home,

the small engine shop, the Wheatleys' garage, the Wheatleys' home, Von's home, Karl's childhood shed, and his father's house. While this social world might ultimately be "too big" and too complicated for him, even the final scene which returns Karl to the opening frame of the mental hospital's day room presents him as a character of depth and moral complexity. He will no longer passively listen to the pathological ramblings of a rapist; nor will he let his sacred memories of his new family be tainted by letting references to "that boy" (Frank) pass over the lips of this serial killer.

Race and Gothic Kinship in *The Apostle*

An argument about the Southern "kinship" relations between these films doesn't hinge on Robert Duvall's brief appearance as Karl's father in *Sling Blade*, but it is interesting to speculate that Duvall probably wouldn't have appeared in this cameo role if he hadn't already formed a filmmaking relationship with Billy Bob Thornton that reflected their shared interest in Southern materials. After Duvall worked with Thornton on *The Stars Fell on Henrietta* (1995),¹⁷ he asked Thornton and his writing partner, Tom Epperson, to develop a screenplay for him, which eventually became *A Family Thing* (1996). Because Duvall was shooting *A Family Thing* in Memphis at the same time Thornton was shooting *Sling Blade* in Arkansas, he consented to drive over for a day to play Karl Childers's father in Thornton's small budget film. Aside from relating the happy serendipity of making Duvall available for this role, recalling *A Family Thing*'s proximity to *Sling Blade* also points to a Gothic variable in "Southern physics" that Thornton chose to ignore in Karl Childers's narrative—race.

While *Sling Blade* is visually and verbally silent about the complications of race in Karl's Arkansas town, Thornton's screenplay for *A Family Thing* reasserts race as the central Southern concern. Duvall's character, Earl Pitcher, Jr., discovers at the opening of the film that he is not the white working-class Southerner that he always thought he was, but rather the child of a black house-servant who was sexually exploited by his white father. After Earl receives this revelation of his true parentage via a post-mortem letter from the woman who raised him

¹⁷ *The Stars Fell on Henrietta* tells the Depression-era story of a wildcatter looking for oil and hope in a West Texas small town.

as her own white son, he heads to Chicago to find his black half brother, Ray, played by James Earl Jones. *A Family Thing* allows two great actors to feed off each other in an essentially comic exploration of serious questions about racial identity and the burden of racial hatred, but significantly, the film turns to Gothic modalities at its climax. Earl and Ray only finally seal their bond of brotherhood as their blind Aunt T. tells them the blood and thunder story of Earl's birth and their mother's death. Aunt T.'s dark narrative of a white father's racist indifference, his wife's iron-willed integrity, and a young black woman's tragic death is supported by sepia-toned images of the stormy night when Earl was born in a dilapidated cabin.

A Family Thing initially began with Duvall's request that Thornton write a script that would let him play a black man.¹⁸ Duvall must have had this latent desire for over a decade because he wrote his own original script for *The Apostle* about the same time that *Tender Mercies* was released in 1983. Although Duvall's Sonny in *The Apostle* can't claim the same black bloodlines as Earl Pitcher, Jr., in many ways this white Pentecostal preacher is more clearly African American than Earl. As *The Apostle* follows Sonny's pilgrimage through the Christ-haunted backwaters of rural Texas and Louisiana, Duvall's narrative of his fall and redemption incorporates the variable of race into a Gothic equation of Southern physics that takes it far beyond the simplistic and racist exploration of race in the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In some ways the Southern kinship links between the Sonny of *Tender Mercies* and Duvall's Sonny in *The Apostle* are much stronger than with the post-modern Gothic strangeness of Billy Bob Thornton's Karl. The film opens at a rural Texas church with a small boy simply soaking up the language and rhythms of the theological world that surrounds him. For Sonny that theological world also happens to be black, and Duvall's approach as a writer/director throughout the whole course of *The Apostle* is to offer us a semi-documentary view of this world in order to help his audience understand the religious language, rhythms, and ritual that pervade large parts of the Southern experience.

But Duvall still laces this semi-documentary approach to the everyday language of Southern religious belief with many of the images and tropes

¹⁸See "A Conversation with Billy Bob Thornton and Robert Duvall," a "Special Feature" on the "Exclusive Directors Cut" of *Sling Blade*.

of the Southern Gothic. The film presents Sonny as essentially another fatherless child. We first see him being towed into the little country church by an African American “auntie” who pulls up the thumb-chewing boy’s socks before they enter the sanctuary proper. After the opening title sequence of the young Sonny soaking in the charismatic power of this rural black church, the contemporary narrative proper starts with macabre images of the now grown Sonny praying over the bleeding bodies of a young couple trapped in the netherworld between life and death after an automobile accident. In what will continue to be a strange juxtaposition of violence and religious fervor, Sonny essentially beats off the restraining arms of a sheriff who wants him away from the car before he has finished his prayer for this dying couple. This strange exposition continues as the film moves to his mother’s house and Sonny goes to retrieve a comforter for his cold mama. In her bedroom, he picks up an old photo and the film flashes back to twelve-year-old Sonny, now preaching in the same rural church that opened the film. The boy has fully adopted the rhythm and language of black Pentecostalism, and the blind preacher of the opening sequence sits behind him clearly functioning as his figurative father in this extended and complex back story. To complete the Gothic strangeness of this sequence, Sonny returns to the present to find his “dead” mama on the living room floor. He lays the comforter over her, tells her that he knows that she’s “died and gone to heaven” and asks her to hug St. Peter for him as he rushes out the door. As Sonny bounds off the front porch announcing his intention to “hit the road” and “go to work,” his “dead” mama raises her head in confusion and frustration and we realize that we’ve just witnessed a ritual encounter with his aging mother that has probably been played out in some variation each time Sonny “hits the road” as a Holy Ghost preacher.

After a remarkable montage of Sonny’s itinerant gospel work, which continues to establish the multi-racial milieu of his charismatic Southern evangelical Protestantism, the film moves from the strange energy of these Pentecostal revivals to the Gothic violence that sets Sonny’s pilgrimic plot into motion. After a mid-night revelation that his wife, Jessie, might not be sleeping in his bed, Sonny returns home to discover her infidelity and the loss of the large multi-racial church that he has founded. The film makes its most important narrative pivot with a moment of horrific violence when the drunken and jealous Sonny kills

his wife's lover with a baseball bat. The moment darkly betrays the Southern convergences of family, sports, and religious faith: Sonny kills in the context of his children's softball game at a church picnic. In an ironic inversion of father-child bonding through sport that we have seen in several films, this manslaughter swing of the bat fully separates Sonny from his children and the possibility of family.

This drunken honor code violence sends Duvall's preacher on an itinerant journey very different from the exposition montage that surveyed the range of Sonny's charismatic milieu. He is now clearly a gospel preacher who has lost his way, but Duvall isn't interested in tracking down the Hollywood version of this myth of the hypocritical Southern minister; rather, Duvall wants to explore his Southern grotesque as a complex character shaped by spiritual realities that are both commonplace and supernatural. His violent swing of the bat sends him on a pilgrimage into the rural South that allows Sonny (and Duvall) to encounter gradations and variations of these Southern grotesques, and like his work with *Tomorrow's* Jackson Fentry, Duvall treats these rural Gothic characters as complex moral agents with a range of emotional depth.

One such grotesque is the nameless one-legged "Bayou Man" who watches Sonny re-baptize himself as "the Apostle E. F." After Sonny has abandoned his car and set off on foot to avoid detection by the authorities, another African-American father figure gives him refuge in his grandchildren's pup-tent. While the one-legged man initially isn't sure what to make of this strange white man—he sleeps with his shotgun the first night of Sonny's stay—he recognizes him as a preacher during the first minute of their conversation. In the context of this man's hospitality, Sonny wrestles with the demons of his recent fall and decides he must re-baptize himself to make a break with this old life.

Sonny's heretical self-baptism obviously points to the individualistic excesses of Southern evangelical Protestantism. The tension of the next ninety minutes of *The Apostle* is wrapped in Sonny's gradual awakening to his own self-deception. Although he petitions God with "great humility" at his baptism, ultimately Sonny discovers he doesn't have the authority to use his new identity in Christ as a "cover" to avoid the consequences of his crime. But at this point in the film Sonny's self-interest is served by the radically individualistic gospel of "Jesus and me." If the core claim of this theology is "coming to know Jesus Christ as your

personal Lord and savior,” it is not a giant step for Sonny to privatize this relationship to the point where he claims he can baptize himself “without witnesses,” and a sacrament of the church becomes a private contractual exchange.

At the same time that Sonny’s heretical baptism is offered as a critique of Southern evangelical Protestantism’s individualistic blind-spots, it also serves as a visual remix of Mac’s and Karl’s baptisms and the film seems to suggest there is some efficacy in this religious ritual. The Sonny of *Tender Mercies* asks Mac if the two of them “look any different” after their baptisms, and here Duvall’s preacher seems both remarkably unchanged and transformed by the ritual. While Sonny may have thought of his act as a private bargain between him and Jesus, the film actually gives us “a witness” to this baptism, the one-legged “Bayou Man.” This disabled black man sends the Apostle E. F. on a religious quest that gives him the opportunity to submit himself to yet another African American father figure, the Rev. Charles Blackwell of Bayou Boutte, Louisiana. Like the blind preacher through his implied mentorship and the one-legged man through his hospitality, Blackwell seems to function as another black “wounded-healer” for Sonny. Rev. Blackwell has had to give up his church because of health concerns, and the Apostle submits himself to Blackwell’s authority as he reopens the rural church and begins to build another congregation out of the orphans and misfits of Bayou Boutte. What began as a self-interested, individual, religious pilgrimage with Sonny cut off from his family and church is transformed into a corporate redemption. Along the way *The Apostle* still offers plenty of opportunities to see Sonny’s persistent self-delusion and hubristic flaws as he builds *his* new church, but ultimately the relationships in Bayou Boutte and his recognition



Image 3: Sonny baptizes himself as the Apostle E. F. (*The Apostle*, Universal Home Video.)

that he can't simply jettison his past lead him to a full confession to Rev. Blackwell and a submission to his spiritual and fatherly authority. Sonny's persistent submission to the power and authority of African Americans is both a matter of spiritual humility and a Gothic inversion of Southern racial politics; it reminds us of the complexity of these power relationships in a racist and Christian culture.

Sonny's humble, earnest, and energetic work building a multi-racial church with the strange but good folk of Bayou Boutte suggests that there might be supernatural efficacy in his baptism and self-imposed penance. But once those church doors are open, the Apostle E. F. defends it with the same violent energy he put into swinging a baseball bat. When Billy Bob Thornton's nameless character invades an evening service to question the Apostle's authority and why white people are worshipping with "niggers," Duvall's preacher appeals to the "wonder working power in the blood of the lamb" to beat the tar out of this "troublemaker." When Thornton's character returns during a church social with a bulldozer to plow the church under, instead of fisticuffs, the Apostle faces down Thornton's bulldozer and pistol with just his Bible and the power of his congregation's call and response litany. As "the troublemaker" submits to the power of the Holy Spirit's movement here,¹⁹ Duvall can't resist investing the moment with a heightened comic element of Gothic strangeness: the local radio station manager whispers a play-by-play account of "the troublemaker's" reversal and proclaims it the first live conversion ever carried over his airwaves.

During the first visit of "the troublemaker," after Duvall's Apostle kicks his "ass," he returns to his ragtag congregation to lead them in a gospel song:

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
 Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
 I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;
 It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.
 I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
 To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.

¹⁹Or perhaps Thornton's character submits to the power of the social construction of Southern religious experience. In Duvall's objective documentary style he seems to withhold judgment about whether we are witnessing something supernatural or merely well-mastered cultural rules. What is clear is that the participants in the religious event see it as something beyond the ordinary experience and in the realm of the sacred.

In the back pew that night is the woman that the Apostle has been trying to woo. She hasn't been presented as a "churched" character, and she doesn't know quite what to make of this "Holy Ghost power" preacher, but she is taken by his energy and violent passion for his little church. At the chorus, she begins to sing too. Like Mac in *Tender Mercies* or Linda and Vaughan in *Sling Blade*, the words of the gospel song are "just there" for her. The "old, old story" is simply part of the fabric of her Southern life. But Duvall is also borrowing from another "old, old story" as he continues to find links between "Jesus and His love" and a Southern culture of violence and excess. These "kinship" relations between Duvall's redeemed and enduring Southerners in *Tomorrow*, *Tender Mercies*, *The Apostle*, and Billy Bob Thornton's violent hero Karl help us better understand how *Sling Blade* actually does more than just give us a post-modern update of Boo Radley's story: Thornton takes "Boo" more fully back to his generic origins in the "Southern physics" of the Gothic tradition.

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