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“You All Have Such a Wholesome Look”

Class and the Gothic Family in Ozark

Abstract

The paper examines the phenomenon of class in contemporary television broadcasting, which has only recently become of interest for television historians and theorists, as well as for producers and broadcast platforms, and it demonstrates the possibilities of class analysis in the case study of the Netflix series *Ozark* (Bill Dubuque and Mark Williams, 2017–2022). The introduction to the state of research on class in contemporary cultural studies, demonstrated on the recent works of UK and German scholars (James Bignell, Faye Woods, Sieglinde Lemke and others) is followed by a discussion of several class-based categories that play a major role in US popular culture, namely the figures of the hillbilly, redneck, and “white trash.” The theoretical part of the paper also highlights the necessity of thinking beyond the boundaries of “us” versus “them” that are prevalent in class-based analysis, and offers more nuanced methods of approaching the impact of class upon other identity facets and their intersection. In this respect, the paper focuses specifically on the intersections of class and region and class and gender, as these form a strong basis for the analysis of the chosen series.

The dynamics of class in its intersection with gender and regional identity are examined in narrative and especially stylistic choices of the *Ozark* creative team. The analysis of the mise-en-scène, strongly influenced by contemporary naturalistic tendencies, is methodologically underpinned by gothic theory, which forms a relevant bridge to the final analysis of the concept of the American family and its class base.

Keywords

Ozark, Netflix, gothic theory, gender, class, region

Introduction: Ruth is Dead, Long Live Ruth!

The final episode of *Ozark* (2017–2022), which was released on Netflix on April 29, 2022, has polarized critics and fans over the fate of the main characters and the “justice” of the conclusion of this crime television series. The plot of *Ozark* revolves around the Byrdes, an upper-middle-class family whose father launders money for a Mexican drug cartel through local businesses at Lake Ozark, Missouri. Throughout the series, the family is torn between serving the cartel and trying to break their bond and move to Chicago, which they were forced to leave in a hurry after an operation went wrong in the first episode of season one.

At the end of the series, the Byrdes have achieved their goal. They are freed from their service to the cartel and free to start a new life. However, Ruth Langmore, one of the show’s most beloved characters despite her “white trash” background, is not allowed a similar fate. Although she has done everything she could to free herself from her partnership with the Byrdes and the cartel, Ruth is killed by the new head of the cartel.

Scripting Ruth’s death was a difficult task, as the showrunner Chris Mundy admits, but it had to be done:

Mundy ultimately concluded that the shocking death [of Ruth] “was the right decision for the show,” even though it was difficult for the cast, crew and audience to admit. “Ruth was almost a stronger character in death than she would have been if she was off living somewhere,” said Mundy. “That was our hope for the show. As everyone’s favorite character [...] you just wanted to do it justice.”¹⁾

Many fans were outraged by Ruth’s death in light of the Byrdes’ escape. As Daniela Scott summarizes, “[u]nsurprisingly, fans weren’t at all happy on how Ruth met her end, with lots of them flocking to *Twitter* to share their less-than-impressed opinion on the whole thing.”²⁾ In an interview, Julia Garner, the actress who plays Ruth, offered a perspective on the necessity of her character’s death that will also guide this paper:

Asked how it felt knowing that Marty and Wendy survived but not Ruth, the actor said, “I can’t speak on behalf of Ruth, because she was dead by then. But as a viewer, it reflects real life in a way. The middle class, the poor, the dreamers almost always pay for it in a sense. The super-powerful people with all the money, in the end, they do okay.”³⁾

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- 1) Charna Flam, “‘Ozark’ Creator Says There’s No Ambiguity to the Final Shot in Series Finale: ‘They Get Away With It,’” *Variety*, February 19, 2023, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://variety.com/2023/tv/news/ozark-finale-julia-garner-ruth-death-mel-1235528055/>.
 - 2) Daniela Scott, “Ozark fans are all having the same reaction to the finale,” *Cosmopolitan*, May 4, 2022, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a39902187/ozark-finale-fan-reaction/>.
 - 3) Julie Miller, “Ozark’s Ending, Explained: Exclusive Finale Conversation With the Cast and Showrunner,” *Vanity Fair*, May 3, 2022, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/05/ozark-finale-netflix>.

My goal is to follow this logic: why does it seem acceptable to kill poor people on television shows? — and examine its basic structure, using *Ozark* as a case study. Despite the outrage the final episode caused among fans and critics, I will argue that *Ozark* performs an important operation by exposing the classed nature of the American family. Moreover, I will read the treatment of the family in *Ozark* through the lens of gothic theory to point out how its concepts help to undermine the image of success of the upper-class family and give voice to local representatives of the lower classes, like Ruth.

Class in Contemporary TV Studies

Garner's note strikes a chord in current television studies — class and its representations in popular (US) culture are understudied phenomena. They either present the middle class as standing for the whole of society or focus on analyzing reality shows and their use of stereotypes.⁴⁾ Sieglinde Lemke argues in her *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (2016) that “[p]overty studies and class studies occupy a marginal role in the academic landscape of the twenty-first century. [...] The scholarly interest in class-based oppression and its cultural ramifications remains in its embryonic stage.”⁵⁾

Although this may describe television studies as well, there are exceptions that this study would like to expand on — the fourth edition of Routledge's *An Introduction to Television Studies* (2023), authored by UK scholars Jonathan Bignell and Faye Woods, includes a chapter on representation and identity, calling for an intersectional approach to its facets:

We must remember that identity is always intersectional, people are never defined solely by a single facet of their identity. Instead, the complexities of nation, gender, race and class inform and shape our experience of the world.⁶⁾

As *Ozark* shows, representation of class issues is no longer the privilege of reality television or British social drama. Lemke and Schniedermann argue in their introduction to *Class Divisions in Serial Television* (2016) that

the Quality TV format, with its sophisticated narrative and formal techniques, coincides with equally complex ways of exposing class divisions in contemporary US life

4) See, for instance, Laura Grindstaff's chapter “Class” in *Keywords for Media Studies*, eds. Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 39–42; or Diana Owen's “‘Hillbillies,’ ‘Welfare Queens,’ and ‘Teen Moms’: American Media's Class Distinctions,” in *Class Divisions in Serial Television*, eds. Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schiedermann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 47–63.

5) Sieglinde Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 167. For more recent treatments of class in scripted television, see Holly Willson Holladay, “Doing Whiteness ‘Right’: Playing by the Rules of Neoliberalism for Television's Working Class,” in *Neoliberalism and the Media*, ed. Marian Meyers (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 192–208, and L.S. Kim, *Maid for Television: Race, Class, Gender, and Representational Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023).

6) Jonathan Bignell and Faye Woods, *An Introduction to Television Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 233.

[...]. Television — perhaps the most middle-class of all US media — has begun to turn away from class denialism and to engage with a broad range of socio-economic issues.⁷⁾

The representation of class issues in contemporary media and television often relies on a series of frames. Following Robert Entmann, Diana Owen defines framing as "a social construction or a mediated interpretation of reality that can be accurate or highly distorted."⁸⁾ When it comes to class, the latter is usually the case, resulting in the oppositional notion of "us vs. them." Owen refers to these frames as episodic (depicting poverty "in terms of personal experience by highlighting the stories of poor individuals or families") and thematic (taking "an abstract, impersonal approach by focusing on general poverty trends and public assistance. [...] These stories are depersonalized and often rely on statistics and graphics."⁹⁾). The "us vs. them" metaphor is taken up by Lemke, who sees two approaches at its root — the individual/cultural theory of poverty and a structural one. She sees both as fundamentally flawed:

[T]he culture of poverty thesis holds that poverty is the result of a failure of personal or collective initiative in a society that has impartially provided the opportunities for upward mobility [...]. By contrast, the structural thesis of poverty, which holds that poverty is a result of a failure of social, political and economic institutions [...], has the merit of not blaming the poor, though it does contribute to the same disenfranchisement of the precarious, who are relegated to the status of helpless objects in need of top-down intervention.¹⁰⁾

Lemke calls for a more holistic approach, a new narrative of class in US culture, and sees the culture industry as its main producer. Due to geographic and social segregation, the rich and the poor rarely come into direct contact anymore and thus learn about each other through different media representations. The new narrative should strive to overcome the "us vs. them" binary and position itself on "the understanding of mutual interdependence of the two Americas, connecting the privileged and precarious class."¹¹⁾ This is what happens in *Ozark* in the narrative interplay between the Byrdes and local characters, of whom Ruth Langmore is the best representative.

One of the goals of this study is to show how intersectional approach to class, one that takes into account gendered agency and regional differences, mobilizes shifts in the treatment of class. I want to argue that *Ozark* offers a surprisingly critical perspective in this regard, probably unintentionally or rather accidentally, given Netflix's official approach to class issues in its programming and production.

7) Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schniedermann, "Introduction: Class Divisions and the Cultural Politics of Serial TV," in *Class Divisions in Serial Television*, eds. Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schniedermann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1–17, esp. 1.

8) Owen, "'Hillbillies,' 'Welfare Queens,' and 'Teen Moms,'" 48.

9) Ibid., 54.

10) Lemke, *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*, 166.

11) Ibid., 6.

In 2021, Netflix released a diversity report, covering their production from 2018 to 2019. In his commentary on the results, Ted Sarandos, then Netflix co-CEO and Chief Content Officer, wrote self-critically that despite improvements across several inclusion indicators, like hiring women and people of color in front of the camera as well as behind it, “we still have notable representation gaps in film and series for Latinx, Middle Eastern/North African, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander communities. And we still have work to do in increasing representation of the LGBTQ community and characters with disabilities.”¹²⁾

Sarandos also promised to do these reports every two years, so a new one was released in 2023 and 2025. After two and four years, not much has changed.¹³⁾ Interestingly, none of the reports focused on the representation of people by class background, and the research team that produced the report did not comment on this omission. Despite Netflix’s efforts at diversity and inclusion, class, and especially lower class, is still not felt as an issue.

Stereotyping Class in Popular Culture

Representation, in the broadest sense of the word, is linked to stereotypes, and class is no exception. As Diana Kendall observes:

The most popular portrayal of the working class, caricature framing, depicts these people in negative ways, for instance, as idiots, white trash, buffoons, bigots, or slobs. Many television shows featuring working-class characters play on the idea that their clothing, manners, and speech patterns are inferior to those of the middle or upper classes.¹⁴⁾

Stereotypes, as Stuart Hall noted, play an important cultural role in maintaining order on both the social and symbolic levels:

Stereotyping [...] sets up a symbolic frontier between the “normal” and the “deviant,” the “normal” and the “pathological,” the “acceptable” and the “unacceptable,” what “belongs” and what does not or is “Other,” between “insiders” and “outsiders,” Us and Them.¹⁵⁾

12) Ted Sarandos, “Building a Legacy of Inclusion: Results From Our First Film and Series Diversity Study,” *Netflix Newsroom*, February 26, 2021, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/building-a-legacy-of-inclusion>.

13) Netflix, “Our Latest Film & Series Diversity Study,” *netflix.com*, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://about.netflix.com/en/inclusion>. See also Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Dr. Katherine Pieper, Katherine Neff, and Sam Wheeler, “Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Films & Series: Full Report,” *netflix.com*, accessed July 5, 2025, <https://about.netflix.com/en/inclusion>.

14) Diana Kendall, “Framing Class, Vicarious Living, And Conspicuous Consumption,” in *Class Divisions in Serial Television*, eds. Sieglinde Lemke and Wibke Schniedermann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 21–46, esp. 28.

15) Stuart Hall, “The spectacle of the ‘other,’” in *Representation*, second edition, eds. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Stuart Nixon (London: Sage, 2013), 215–287, esp. 248.

The television industry, the most middle-class of all U.S. media, as Lemke and Schiedermaier observed, is a particularly rich field when it comes to class issues, and especially to the labeling of the pathological, the misfits, the unacceptable, "them." Most of the stereotypes on display in television programming, both historically and today, have a long genealogy in other media as well as the social arena, and the expansion of television (and streaming platforms, like Netflix) has only made them visible on a global scale.

There are three most common stereotypical personas pertinent to *Ozark*, given its location¹⁶⁾ — the redneck, the hillbilly, and the "white trash." A brief overview of these will provide a background from which the characters of *Ozark* are distilled. Aside from the fact that all three are mostly used as invectives in mainstream discourse, labels that distance their user from the offended, they have a fascinating social history that includes acts of appropriation.

In his 2005 study, Anthony Harkins identifies the hillbilly as a ubiquitous figure in American popular culture:

[T]he portrayal of southern mountain people as premodern and ignorant "hillbillys" is one of the most lasting and pervasive images in American popular iconography, appearing continuously throughout the twentieth century in nearly every major facet of American popular culture from novels and magazines to movies and television programs to country music and the Internet.¹⁷⁾

In attempting to elucidate the prevalence of this "icon," as the title of his book indicates, Harkins emphasizes the dual cultural function of the hillbilly label. Given its association with rural America, it can also be regarded as a repository of middle-class nostalgia:

"[T]he hillbilly" served the dual and seemingly contradictory purposes of allowing the "mainstream," or generally nonrural, middle-class white, American audience to imagine a romanticized past, while simultaneously enabling that same audience to recommit itself to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society.¹⁸⁾

Another rural persona that is often used interchangeably with the hillbilly is the redneck. While both designations share a considerable amount of interpretive ground in contemporary culture (the same films are sometimes labeled as hillbilly horror and redneck

16) The plot of the series is set at the Lake of the Ozarks in central Missouri, an existing site. As a border state during the US Civil War, Missouri has in some parts quite a strong link to the American Southern culture, although according to the US Census Bureau, it belongs to the group of Midwest states. See America Counts Staff, "MIDWEST REGION: 2020 Census," *census.gov*, August 25, 2021, accessed July 5, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/midwest-region.html>.

17) Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

18) *Ibid.*, 7.

horror, for instance¹⁹⁾), the redneck carries a history of pride and rebellion, whether real or imagined. As John Goad notes in his specific lingo in *The Redneck Manifesto* (1997):

Although the term was invented by outsiders to describe soil-tilling low-class white nobodies, the word's stiff-spined rebel obstinacy made it the term most frequently embraced by the aliens themselves. To this day, "redneck" connotes defiance — stupid or otherwise.²⁰⁾

The terms "defiance" and "rebel obstinacy" illustrate the way impoverished white people reappropriated the designation. This assertion is corroborated by Patrick Huber in his investigation:

The term redneck originated as a class slur in the late-nineteenth-century South, but white blue-collar workers — especially, but not exclusively, those from the South — gave it a complimentary meaning in the late-twentieth century. The redefinition and use of the term by these self-styled rednecks speak powerfully to their racial and class consciousness as an economically exploited and yet racially privileged group.²¹⁾

From this perspective, a redneck may not only connote backwoods origin and lack of urban sophistication but also "an honest, hard-working man who identifies with traditional southern social and religious values."²²⁾

The least cherished moniker historically is that of "white trash." John Hartigan Jr. (1997) notes that it is often used "to mark the edge of sociality, either through their unruly behavior and lifestyle, or their isolation from the rest of the community."²³⁾ Jim Goad (1997) shifts the attention to culture and heredity, as the label evolved from "poor whites" to "white trash": "[I]n shunting the emphasis from 'poor' to 'trash,' one's attention is diverted from economic explanations toward behavioral and genetic alibis."²⁴⁾ Nancy Isenberg offers a similar yet more nuanced reasoning behind these shifts in her *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*:

Before the end of the 1980s, "white trash" was rebranded as an ethnic identity, with its own readily identifiable cultural forms: food, speech patterns, tastes, and, for some, nostalgic memories. [...] A larger trend was turning America into a more ethnically conscious nation, one in which ethnicity substituted for class. The hereditary

19) See John Beifuss, "Film, Horror," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Vol. 18: Media*, eds. Allison Graham and Sharon Monteith (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 68–72.

20) Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks and White Trash Became America's Scapegoats* (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1997), 83–84.

21) Patrick Huber, "A Short History of Redneck: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity," in *Southern Cultures: The Fifteen Anniversary Reader*, eds. Harry L. Watson and Larry J. Griffin (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 303–327, esp. 305.

22) Huber, "A Short History of Redneck," 317.

23) John Hartigan Jr., "Unpopular Culture — The Case of 'White Trash,'" *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997), 317.

24) Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto*, 79.

model had not been completely abandoned; instead, it was reconfigured to focus on transmitted cultural values over inbred traits.²⁵⁾

In contrast with both redneck and the hillbilly, "white trash" has a much shorter history of appropriation. In her article in *Washington Post*, Ylan Q. Mui investigates the mid-2000s popularity of "trash chic" or "trailer park chic" by interviewing both sociologists and marketing experts. One of the latter offers a simple explanation:

"[W]hite trash" has shed its connotations of rural poverty and poor education to become a symbol of everyman [...]. It now evokes a simpler life and more comforting times — terrorists don't attack trailer parks.²⁶⁾

Despite its dissemination across popular culture, the label still carries a heavy stigma. What Hartigan Jr. argued a decade earlier still holds true: "Assertions of 'white trash' as a form of self-designation, though, have not dispelled the term's negative connotations; rather, they coexist in a confusing series of cultural exchanges."²⁷⁾

In many cultural representations, class does not only intersect with regional belonging but other identity facets. "White trash" clearly demonstrates the inseparability of class and race/ethnicity, but gender is also an important issue. An intersectional approach is therefore needed in this exploration, more so because the general idea of a working-class character has dominantly been embodied by the white man, which is no longer true. As Julie Bettie argues in her analysis of the changes in working-class iconography, "class, race, and gender become more visibly entangled as the working class is increasingly composed of people who do not represent the unmarked categories of whiteness and maleness."²⁸⁾ I will therefore now focus on how gender interlocks with the above-analyzed labels in the world of *Ozark* and produces a multi-level narrative dynamics.

The Merging of Gender, Class and Region in *Ozark*

From the first episode of the series, *Ozark* was approached by its audiences as a less accomplished clone of *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), a story of Walter White who trades chemistry teaching for methamphetamine production to secure his family's future after he is diagnosed with cancer in the terminal stage. *Esquire* ran a review with a telling title in this respect, "Netflix's *Ozark* Might Be Too Much Like *Breaking Bad* for Its Own Good."²⁹⁾

25) Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2006), 270.

26) Ylan Q. Mui, "The Selling Of 'Trailer Park Chic': One Person's Trash Is Another's Marketing Treasure," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2006, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/2006/03/18/the-selling-of-trailer-park-chic-span-class=bankhead-one-persons-trash-is-another-s-marketing-treasurespan/b04e4e98-90d4-448a-9d5e-c866dbbf0264/>.

27) Hartigan Jr., "Unpopular Culture — The Case of 'White Trash,'" 317.

28) Julie Bettie, "Class Dismissed? Roseanne and the Changing Face of Working-Class Iconography," *Social Text*, no. 45 (1995), 126.

29) Corey Atad, *Esquire*, July 24, 2017, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a56488/ozark-netflix-series-review/>.

The main male character of *Ozark* is Martin Byrde, played by Jason Bateman, who also executive-produced the series and directed 9 of its 44 episodes, including the pilot and the finale. Marty, a financial adviser from Chicago laundering money for the second-largest Mexican drug cartel, follows a similar trajectory as Walter from *Breaking Bad* — providing for his family and trying to keep it from any collateral damage from his criminal operations. While Walter keeps his family in the dark about his new business, Marty's wife and children know about it and become involved in it.

This is a crucial distinction between the two series because knowledge invests the Byrdes with agency, which, especially for Marty's wife Wendy, means following separate agendas. Women make the difference, as Courtney Watson put it: "Though the show is written in the vein of *Breaking Bad*, it features significant departures from that show's formula, particularly with respect to the role of women in the story."³⁰

Wendy takes initiative early in the narrative — it is she who tells their children Jonah and Charlotte the real reason why they had to leave Chicago for the Ozarks (their father's involvement with the cartel). It is Wendy's wit as a former political campaigner that secures the Byrdes a necessary permit to open a casino to launder money more efficiently; she decides the family will stay in the Ozarks, while she becomes a confidante to the head of the cartel, who values her opinions over Marty's for a considerable amount of screen time. From an unhappy, depression-prone housewife with a rich elderly lover, Wendy transforms herself into a strong player on the national political scene, able to move her family back to Chicago on her terms in the end.

Although Wendy Byrde is "[t]he breakout character in *Ozark*,"³¹ it is the local women who engage in Sieglinde Lemke's call for a more holistic approach to class representation. When the Byrdes arrive to the Ozarks, they expect to find an open field for their operations, with small struggling businesses eager to be bought and have cartel money laundered through them. What they find is the Snells, a family of old-time farmers and heroin manufacturers, with their own drug distribution and money-laundering scheme set in place, the local sheriff in their pocket, and a mansion on a hill.

Jacob and Darlene Snell are the *Ozark* version of the redneck/hillbilly stereotype. Barbara Selznick argues that "although presumably wealthy because of their business, [the Snells] are marginalized by their self-identification as hillbillies grounded in the values of the rural; values that mark them as brutal and bigoted."³² The Snells, however, are far from passive recipients of classed and racialized slurs; they are agents who have to be taken into account. To Marty and Wendy's dismay, they become a major obstacle in the smooth proceedings of their Ozark plans with the cartel. The agency of the Snells in *Ozark* betrays any simple classism. Class becomes subsumed by region, with its insider/outsider dichotomy, which, at least in the first three seasons, is played contrary to expectations — the outside teams, be it the Byrdes or the representatives of the cartel, are presented as either invaders or are racialized. In their first meeting in the sixth episode of season 1, Jacob recounts to

30) Courtney Watson, "Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama," *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 6, no. 2 (2019), 43.

31) Ibid.

32) Barbara Selznick, "He's Not Good, But He's Not Bad': Jason Bateman as the White, Middle-Class Devil," *TV/ Series*, no. 20 (2022), 11.

Marty the history of the Snells to make him understand the flip side of Lake Ozark's popularity as a "redneck riviera":

In 1929, the power company stole our land, flooded us out. Snells fled up the mountains and started all over again. [...] But then, you came along... [...] The problem we have here is one of power. And you seem to think you've got more of it than you do. [...] Now, in these parts, power comes from time. And our family, we got a history older than anything. [...] You are a threat to my colony, Martin Byrde. You have disturbed the ecology of our delicate little system.

The Byrdes represent the same danger to the Snells as the operations of the Mexican cartel. This is particularly true about Darlene, who is more vehement in defending the Snell ground and pride than her husband, and takes action to prove it. She kills the current cartel operative for calling them "a bunch of rednecks," explaining it by saying, "I won't abide that talk, you know that." Darlene becomes an obstacle in closing a deal between the Snells and the cartel, necessary for the casino opening, and refuses to be intimidated by violence or money, to which Jacob succumbs. Before he acts on his plan to get rid of her, Darlene kills him and takes over their operations. She even reaches out to Ruth, revenges a severe beating Ruth got which Marty feared to do anything about, and offers Ruth and her cousin Wyatt to become part of the Snells's business as well as the clan (Wyatt is her lover at the time and becomes her husband soon after): "Look, you and Wyatt could grow the business. I'll teach you. And besides, it's about time both of you understood the value of people from here having their own thing."

The relationship between Darlene and Wyatt, and her partnership offer to Ruth, turns stereotypical readings of the Southern lower-class upside down. The "rednecks" or "hillbillies" (nomenclature is quite fuzzy in the series — the Snells are called both "rednecks" and "hillbillies" by other characters, while Ruth and her family, the Langmores, are "white trash," as well as "rednecks") are historically said to feel superior to "white trash" representatives, priding themselves on their hard work. In contrast, "white trash" has historically been associated with laziness and shiftlessness, prone to criminal behavior.³³⁾ Darlene does not follow this sentiment and wants to become allies instead of enemies. Class divisions are overcome by regional bonds.

Ruth Langmore is the most pronounced local character in *Ozark*, and it is through her that the convolutions of the "white trash" label are explored. Although the Langmores have a similarly long history in the region as the Snells, Ruth does not cherish it, nor finds any source of pride in their ancestors: "God's a motherfucker. [...] Built me smart enough to know how fucked up my life is. But not quite smart enough to haul my ass out of it."

Contrary to Darlene's advice, Ruth wants to leave her history as well as the place she grew up in behind her and wants the same for her cousin Wyatt. She starts working for

33) See J. Brooks Bouson, "'You Nothing but Trash': White Trash Shame in Dorothy Allison's 'Bastard out of Carolina,'" *The Southern Literary Journal* 34, no. 1 (2001), 101–123; Janet Holtman, "'White Trash' in Literary History: The Social Interventions of Erskine Caldwell and James Agee," *American Studies* 53, no. 2 (2014), 31–48; see also Isenberg, *White Trash*.

Marty and soon becomes indispensable to him, drawn to him not only for the money that would allow her and Wyatt to leave, but also because Marty seems not to judge her by her family, but accepts her for who she is and helps develop her skills. The actress Julia Garner observes that “Ruth wants to be acknowledged and never gets acknowledged. I think that’s why she was drawn to Marty in the first place, to be seen in a way she’s never been seen.”³⁴⁾

Ruth’s position is often related to as “cursed,” and there is much discussion about “the Langmore curse” in *Ozark*, echoed even in the title of one of the episodes (“Once a Langmore...”), meaning that any member of the Langmore family will always be judged by the deeds of their fathers and punished for them, as distinctly noted in the essay Wyatt writes for his university application:

You ask why I belong at Mizzou. The simple answer is I don’t. An undercurrent of savagery pervaded my life long before the violence truly began. My dad made grand theft auto seem like a good career path like we were entrepreneurs in a start-up. Only our start-up was the motor of someone else’s car or truck or boat. [...] My childhood traumas are not like yours. My mother’s leaving is not like your mother’s leaving. You see, I’m a cursed Langmore, long inured to violence and death. “Taken too soon?” people ask me of an untimely death. And in the case of a Langmore, perhaps not soon enough.

The Langmore curse in practice is mostly evident in Wyatt’s interactions with Charlotte Byrde, with whom he becomes friends and whose misdeeds at school for instance are treated very differently by the management. Once Charlotte steals the first edition of *Look Homeward, Angel* from an antiquarian shop, a book Wyatt loves, he gets mad at her, explaining the different treatment they get based on their background:

You just don’t get it. It’s like what happened at school. If you get caught, you get a slap on the wrist. Marty pays for the book. I get caught, I go to fucking jail. [...] You just don’t understand who my family is, ok? The shit that they’ve done, it’s like I can’t escape it.

The female characters in *Ozark* do not buy the curse talk. Ruth gets angry at Wyatt after she reads his essay, Charlotte explains to him agitatedly that the criminal background in her family haunts her, too. When Wyatt tells Darlene about the Langmore curse, she rejects it completely:

Bullshit. Your daddy may have been useless, his daddy human garbage, but before that... your folks were all right. [...] Langmore stock is as good as any around here. Don’t let anyone tell you different.

34) Ben Travers, “‘Ozark’: Laura Linney Could Be the Antihero of Season 2, Cast Discusses ‘Breaking Bad’ Comparisons, and More,” *Y!Sports*, July 29, 2018, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://sports.yahoo.com/ozark-laura-linney-could-antihero-192408912.html?guccounter=1>.

While Ruth tries to get away from her trailer home for most of the series, using Marty to disentangle herself from her family, she has a change of heart after Wendy gets her disobedient brother — Ruth's lover of the time — killed. She stops working for Marty, and after Darlene and Wyatt are killed by the cartel, she inherits Darlene's property as well as a share of the casino. She cleans her felony record, buys more shares, takes the casino over, and decides to stop laundering cartel money through it. Taking Darlene's advice from earlier, she stays in the Ozarks, tears down the old Langmore trailers, and plans to build real houses on the premises. At this point, her story is one of a successful move up the social class ladder and a defeat of the "Langmore curse." Ruth is starting a new life on her own, with a clean record and her own local business. But in the final episode, when she gets killed, her luck becomes as fragile as her family trailers were when she had them torn apart by an excavator.

As representatives of the lower class in *Ozark*, Darlene and Ruth are both killed by the cartel, but their deaths are not simply explained by their social position, which is malleable, breaking the bounds of the stereotypical rubrics of "redneck," "hillbilly," or "white trash." *Ozark* is not simply a classist series, as Julia Garner observed in the interview quoted at the beginning of this text, and some reviewers, such as Hank Stuever in *Washington Post*, have accused it of being:

It's disappointing to watch *Ozark* lean so heavily on white trash cliches. The people who live around the lake are seen as backward, racist, homophobic and intelligent only in the criminal sense — all of which could very well be truthy, but not entirely fair.³⁵⁾

In rationalizing Ruth's and Darlene's deaths, class is gendered and regionalized. They both pay for acting out of emotion, without premeditation, which in the world of *Ozark* is a gendered position, occupied mostly by its main women characters, including Wendy Byrde. Contrary to Wendy, though, Darlene and Ruth follow their inner moral codes, rooted in their regional histories. Their deaths activate the gothic dynamic *Ozark* is working with because they may be approached more broadly as a surrender of a region, a demise of its specific identity, fused with the location, which was colonized by external forces (the Byrdes and the Mexican cartel) and abandoned once no longer needed. In this way, it is not the class that is regionalized; rather, it is the region that is classed, and I want to argue that it is through the treatment of location as gothic that this process is set in motion.

In their introduction to *Twenty-First Century Gothic*, Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes argue for the importance of location in gothic narratives. They even see the place as one of the grounding characteristics of the otherwise fluid and hybrid nature of the gothic:

35) Hank Stuever, "Netflix's relentless 'Ozark' gets drunk on an ice-chest full of redneck cliches," *Washington Post*, July 20, 2017, accessed December 26, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/netflixs-relentless-ozark-gets-drunk-on-an-ice-chest-full-of-redneck-cliches/2017/07/19/2aa601fa-6b34-11e7-9c15-177740635e83_story.html.

The specificity of setting [...] may ultimately prove invaluable in separating the Gothic — which we see as strongly marked by time, characters, and place — from horror, largely defined by the emotion it aims to generate.³⁶⁾

Without going further into a discussion of genre, I would like to point out here that it is the setting of *Ozark* at a massive body of water (where dead bodies may be conveniently disposed of) surrounded by woods inhabited by the inscrutable locals, which allows for a gothic reading of the series.³⁷⁾ This lens is supported by the series' mise-en-scène.

The (Neo)Naturalist Look of *Ozark*

Location matters so much in *Ozark* that it becomes almost a character. On the one hand, the creators wanted to achieve a sense of realism and authenticity. The setting was based on the experience of one of the showrunners, Bill Dubuque, who owned a cabin at the Lake of the Ozarks and once worked at a restaurant/motel there. During location scouting, the team spent time at the actual lake to uncover the lingo and “the local way of life.”³⁸⁾ While the writing team was at work, the series designer and the pilot production designer were busy creating “an authentic run-down look perfect for *Ozark*, with Mundy [Chris Mundy, the showrunner] seeking to use lots of natural light to ensure it ‘felt real.’”³⁹⁾ At the same time, though, the show was not shot on location at the lake, but was filmed not far from Atlanta, Georgia, at Lake Altoona and Lake Lanier. The choice was motivated by Georgia's generous tax incentive program and its production facilities,⁴⁰⁾ but Jason Bate-man points out an aesthetic perspective as well:

[W]hat's nice about shooting there [...] is that you can spin the camera 360 degrees and you still have some really great color and grit to the aesthetic that's perfect for the rural flavor we want.⁴¹⁾

36) Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes, “Introduction: The Gothic In The Twenty-First Century,” *Twenty-First Century Gothic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 3.

37) Helen Wheatley argues in her *Gothic Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 1. In this central argument of her book, Wheatley follows the work of Lenora Ledwon on the *Twin Peaks* series, where Ledwon focuses on the domesticity of both television and the Gothic: “Like that other strangely domestic item, the Gothic novel, television can create a sense of the uncanny precisely by drawing on the unfamiliarity of the familiar. In fact, Gothic is the uncanny/*unheimlich* contained within the familiar/*heimlich* of the home.” Lenora Ledwon, “*Twin Peaks* and the Television Gothic,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1993), 260–261. Apart from domesticity, Ledwon and Wheatley accentuate TV series' seriality, with its tool of deferred conclusion, similar to Gothic emphasis upon repetitive structures, and the long temporal investment which allows for a deeper psychological development of the characters.

38) Michael Pickard, “Clean Living,” *Drama Quarterly*, July 14, 2017, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://dramaquarterly.com/cleaning-up/>.

39) Ibid.

40) See Rachel Polansky and Tim Darnell, “Competition From Other States Increasing Pressure on Georgia's Film Industry,” *Atlanta News First*, August 8, 2022, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.atlantaneewsfirst.com/2022/08/08/competition-other-states-increasing-pressure-georgias-film-industry/>.

41) Pickard, “Clean Living.”

Authenticity may have been important to the makers of *Ozark*; the show, however, has a very distinct look that is deeply connected to its meaning-making process and its imaginary. Much has been written about the choice of somber hues and a bluish tint most scenes carry.⁴²⁾ The lighting, as one of the DPs remarked, also renders a specific meaning:

[O]ne thing that I pitched to Jason [Bateman] was to let the shadows fall and let the darkness take over a little bit of the frame, even if it's a bright day outside. That gives a sense that there's some sort of hiding.⁴³⁾

The work with the *mise-en-scène*, especially in framing, making use of drone shots of the lake, inviting a preternatural perspective, the color palette and lighting, as well as the minimalistic and somber soundtrack, suggests a noirish reading. Film and TV critics even use the "Ozark noir" label for works set in rural Missouri and the Ozark mountains, like *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010), *Gone Girl* (David Fincher, 2014), or the third season of HBO's *True Detective* (Nic Pizzolatto, 2019). *Ozark* is also mentioned in papers on neo-naturalistic tendencies in contemporary literature and film.⁴⁴⁾ Gary Totten gives examples of specific techniques that underwrite the naturalist feeling of human insignificance and nature's omnipotence used by *Ozark* creators:

In order to create suspense, the naturalistic cinematographic style of the series places characters and scenes in prolonged states of instability or peril until climactic moments of despair and collapse. The characters' insignificance and ongoing misery are also emphasized using camera angles and techniques such as overhead shots and flashbacks.⁴⁵⁾

The tension between outsiders and insiders, mentioned above in connection with the intersection of class and region, is approached by some as a characteristic of the naturalist style: "The Ozarks are presented as a hostile environment and a place that is especially perilous for outsiders."⁴⁶⁾ This is an intriguing note that brings tension between the narrative and audiovisual style of *Ozark* — on the one hand, as Jasmine Humbug remarks, the setting is ominous and viewed as incomprehensible by the outsiders, most of whom want to get out as soon as possible, on the other hand, they react by pure exploitation and violence,

42) "Ozark has selected a blue tint for its imagery. It makes everything look steely, somber, cold, and somehow unforgiving," Sean T. Collins, "Ozark Is the Platonic Ideal of a Netflix Drama," *Vulture*, April 22, 2020, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/04/ozark-ideal-netflix-drama.html>.

43) Pepe Avila del Pino, "How the 'Ozark' DP Created a 'Gritty, Authentic Vibe' with Consistent Color Temps and Practical Lighting," interviewed by Hawkins Dubois, *Nofilmschool*, July 31, 2017, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://nofilmschool.com/2017/07/subconsciously-creating-more-cinematic-show-pepe-avila-del-pino-dp-ozark>.

44) See Klaus H. Schmidt, "Neonaturalism in Contemporary U.S. Film," *Studies in American Naturalism* 15, no. 1 (2020), 18–48; Jasmine Humbug, *Television and Precarity: Naturalist Narratives of Poor America* (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2020); and Gary Totten, "'Time is a Flat Circle': The Naturalist Visual Aesthetic of Contemporary Television Crime Series," *Studies in American Naturalism* 17, no. 2 (2022), 197–218.

45) Totten, "'Time is a Flat Circle,'" 197.

46) Humbug, *Television and Precarity*, 238.

which makes them toxic to the local community. The audiovisual rendering of the location speaks to the pervasiveness of the “us” vs. “them” logic: the locals, deeply classed, as I have shown above, are at home in this “hostile environment” which makes them, as well as their surroundings, strange and monstrous to “us,” the outsiders, represented by the Byrdes. “Our” reaction to the incomprehensible nature of the setting and its inhabitants — violence and exploitation — activates the colonial mindset and is the source of a profound moral unease, which, in my view, led to the angry reactions of the viewers to the conclusion of the series.

This unease, as well as the visual treatment of the setting with “a sense that there’s some sort of hiding” is at the core of the cultural work performed by the gothic mode, and one of the reasons why it is intriguing to approach *Ozark* as a gothic narrative. The connection between naturalism and the gothic may seem like a contradiction in terms, but as Eric Sundquist states as early as 1982, “[t]he gothic is the grandfather of naturalism.”⁴⁷⁾ Klaus H. Schmidt made a similar observation in 2020, writing about “the [...] Gothic predilection for naturalistic motifs.”⁴⁸⁾ Among these, Schmidt foregrounds “focus on rural poverty, religious fanaticism, grotesque protagonists, inexplicable violence, and the curses of the past.”⁴⁹⁾ Most of these features form the core of the intersections of class and region in *Ozark*.

Ozark is gothic not only in its treatment of the landscape, the quirky local characters, or violence as a guiding principle of many actions, but in the way it presents one of the most commonplace notions that America prides on — the American dream and the role of the classed family in its accomplishment. As the gothic lens allows for pinpointing, it is class again that directs the narrative flow of the series.

Gothic Family and the American Dream

The family is probably the most overused word in *Ozark*. Both Marty and Wendy justify their connection with the cartel, and all the killings that come with it, once they move to the Ozarks, by the necessity of protecting their family. The logic seems simple — either they get ahead of events, or they end up dead. There is some reason in their fears, as the first cartel operative Del threatens Marty with just that in the very first episode of the series:

I’m torn, Marty... between intrigue and thinking this whole Ozark thing is complete and utter straw-grasping bullshit. But I’m willing to roll the dice. Because you’re special. You have a gift. But if I think that you’re trying to fuck me... I will have to kill you... and Wendy... and Jonah... and Charlotte. And not in that order.

The foundation of the Byrde family, Wendy and Marty’s marriage is dead at this point, though, and the family falls apart further after their relocation to the Ozarks. In a heated

47) Eric Sundquist, “Introduction,” in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric Sundquist (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 13.

48) Schmidt, “Neonaturalism in Contemporary U.S. Film,” 23.

49) *Ibid.*, 24.

scene in the ninth episode of season 2, Marty laments: "It's not even a family. It's a god-damn group of criminals."

The family is, however, quintessential for *Ozark* showrunner Chris Mundy, who claims in an interview that "the show doesn't work if we don't think of it framed through the marriage and framed through the family."⁵⁰ In another *Ozark* review, Mundy is quoted endorsing the Byrdes:

The arrival of the Byrde family changes the Ozarks, and the Ozarks change the Byrdes, with the new surroundings pushing the family to their limits. But when push comes to shove, adds Mundy, "they want to be together. There's something that still holds them together. At their core, they're still a family worth fighting for."⁵¹

This attitude, in tune with Wendy's and Marty's reasoning throughout the series, deserves a closer look. Many of the series *Ozark* was compared to (*This Is Us*, *Succession*) center on well-to-do American families whose problems never stem from their social status. *Ozark*, however, occupies a peculiar position — on the one hand, the dynamic inside the Byrde family undoubtedly drives the narrative of the whole series and its focus; on the other hand, the gothic stylization of the series' mise-en-scène, discussed above, undermines the reading of the Byrdes as "a family worth fighting for." The otherworldly perspective often created through camera angles, combined with the show's bluish tone, creates a space for doubt, and it is exactly where the series challenges the integrity of the American family and its enduring mythical status.

The first visual cue of this deconstruction comes from within the family. On the first morning, after they move to their new house, vultures appear on their backyard, picking on fresh animal carcasses. Wendy suspects the Langmores brought them as a warning, only to find out in the following episode that her son Jonah drags them to their property to study the vultures' behavior. Jonah is also interested in starlings, an invasive species, and asks for his mother's permission to kill them. In his reasoning he might as well describe his family trajectory in the Ozarks: "They're invaders. They steal nests and peck unhatched eggs." This metaphor, played upon in the very name of the family and voiced later by an angry Darlene calling the Byrdes vultures directly, points at the gothicization of the (upper) middle-class family that *Ozark* is performing. It also complicates the "us" vs. "them" logic — the narrative as well as stylistic approach to the Byrdes as a family undermines viewers' identification with them, which the outsider-insider perspective (along with their position as central characters) invited.

In the eighth episode of season one, we see Marty discussing with Wendy in a flashback to their past whether he should start laundering money for the cartel, and their agreement is explicitly class- and family-motivated. Wendy has had a miscarriage and has been depressed and distant from the family. Depending on Marty's salary only, the family

50) Chris Mundy, "Ozark' Boss Talks Twists and Turns and the Emotional Impact of Killing Off Characters," interview by Tyler Coates, *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 18, 2020, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/ozark-boss-talks-twists-turns-emotional-impact-killing-characters-1307224/>.

51) Pickard, "Clean Living."

has been living on a tight budget, and the prospect of “never ever having to worry about money again” is just too tantalizing, especially as Wendy has had trouble finding a job after several years spent home with the kids. *Ozark* offers just this glimpse into the Byrdes’ life before their connection with the cartel, but it is significantly bleak and in sharp contrast with what they can afford after Marty starts his side job, catapulting them to an upper-middle-class status. Their move to the Ozarks makes them even more tied to the cartel, and it is under these circumstances that we see Wendy’s personality and skills flourish at last, making her the more powerful asset in the family than Marty. Witnessing her talent for gentle but elaborate extortion, the local lobbyist voices Wendy’s position succinctly: “You’re not just involved with the cartel. You are the cartel.”

This scene, along with the flashback and the new opportunities that arise for both Marty and Wendy after their move to the Ozarks, prevents the viewers from approaching the family as victims of the cartel, despite the permanent fear for their lives that seemingly motivates their every move. Rather, they form the bedrock of a gothic view of the American (upper) middle class — what *Ozark* says is not only that crime pays, and the more wealth one accumulates, the more untouchable one becomes; it shows that this strategy is available to some people only. The Byrdes’ confrontation with local families, be it the Snells or the Langmores, cuts deep into the intricate web of class, region, and legitimacy that the concept of family embodies.

The image of a wholesome family of members who love and support one another is exposed as a myth. The only time the Byrdes are presented as an ideal family is in their PR campaigns, first to get the casino permit, and later in the building of a foundation that would allow them to extricate themselves from their bond to the cartel. The casino is a venue for more efficient money laundering, and the foundation is based on much extortion and corruption. Despite these facts, Marty and Wendy rationalize their deeds by their concern for the family and insist on certain rituals, like always eating breakfast together. Ruth Langmore once spends the night at the Byrdes and is in awe at the breakfast table: “Does this happen, like, every day?” To this, Jonah semi-jokingly replies: “Unless we’re on the run. Then we eat in the car.” Ruth does not eat breakfast with her family members, and her family is far from picture-perfect. Their public image is more in the vein of what Dorothy Allison describes in her *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a chronicle of growing up “white trash” in the 1950s:

Aunt Alma had a scrapbook full of newspaper clippings [...]. “Oh, we’re always turning up in the news,” she used to joke when she’d show people that book. Her favorite is the four-page spread the *Greenville News* did when Uncle Earl’s convertible smashed into the barber across the street [...]. In those pictures, Uncle Earl looks scary, like a thief or a murderer, the kind of gaunt, poorly shaven face sketched on a post office wall. [...] he looks like a figure from a horror show, an animated corpse. Granny, my mama, uncles, aunts, cousins — all of us look dead on the black-and-white page.⁵²⁾

52) Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

Bastard Out of Carolina is a first-person narration from within the "white trash" family, which is technically impossible in the TV medium. The objectifying scrapbook appears only towards the end of the novel, while a similar tool is used as an introductory strategy in *Ozark*, disclosing its inherently middle-class perspective. Marty meets Ruth for the first time through her mugshot at the sheriff's office, and although she appeared in the episode earlier, it was as a nameless housekeeping person at the motel where the Byrdes were staying. Marty is also the first person to use the "white trash" epithet in describing the Langmores, setting the perspective through which the viewers should approach them. Not only are they living in trailers on the outskirts of the town, don't have jobs and are hopelessly incapable of getting and keeping money — from the 20,000 dollars they steal from Marty, they purchase two bobcats hoping to profit on the offspring, not noticing that they are both female. Moreover, they are not a nuclear family. Ruth's father is incarcerated and violent towards Ruth when out on parole, and her mother has long been gone. The Langmore family thus comprises of three brothers and three children of the two eldest, with Ruth being the only female. Until the Byrdes settle in the Ozarks, their life follows the stereotypical route of trailer people — petty thefts, felonies, incarceration, parole. When Ruth is fired from her job at the motel for stealing from Marty, she asks him to get her another job. He refuses, telling her that his daughter Charlotte managed to get a job interview within an hour, to which Ruth replies: "I doubt she got a rap sheet like mine."

Ruth starts working for Marty and explains to her uncles that she has a sound plan — learning to launder money, steal Marty's, and then kill him. Her plan does not work out because she is promoted by Marty and gets close to him. Once her uncles lose patience and want to carry out the plan themselves, she kills them to save Marty's life. The scene of the killing is connected by a sound bridge to the following one, featuring a Sunday morning sermon, the words of which label Ruth as a Judas, implicating she betrayed her kin. There is no such judgment voiced when Wendy empties the family accounts, or when Marty plots against their common interest in buying a second casino for the cartel. Betrayal is again a classed concept in the world of *Ozark*.

As a result of her work with Marty, Ruth's family falls apart completely. Her father is released from prison, only to be murdered by the cartel as soon as Ruth becomes valuable to them, and he tries to prevent her from working with them. Her cousins leave her as well, and even though they reunite later, it is under the roof of Darlene's house, not on their terms.

The Snells are another family affected profoundly by the arrival of the Byrdes to the Ozarks. Their local drug business model falls apart, and the husband and wife start to fight about the solution to their problems — while Jacob prefers a settlement with the cartel, Darlene refuses to succumb to them. Ironically, considering she has married into the family, she becomes a more vehement defender of the family traditions and its past than Jacob, the true heir. The situation climaxes in both Darlene and Jacob plotting to kill each other, Darlene being quicker. She becomes the head of the family business and includes the remaining members of the Langmores to work with her and protect their local operations from the cartel. She even marries Wyatt and manages to adopt a baby. But before they begin a new life as a family, the cartel kills them both.

The Byrdes are the only family that survives the chain of events in *Ozark*. Even the cartel is left thoroughly diluted, losing four top members and leaving Camila Elizondro the

only surviving member of the family. The Byrdes, on the other hand, pay no price for their involvement with crime but step up the social ladder among the elite with their foundation which is supposed to be their moral-laundering device. As Wendy sums it up: “When we are set up, we’re gonna be a major employer in Chicago. We are gonna be helping people on a large scale. Women, sick people, poor people.” When Wendy and Marty try to bribe a detective towards the end of the series, they use a similar logic: “Name your price. You can change your life. You can change anyone’s life you want. [...] Money doesn’t know where it came from.” This reasoning is backed up by a deal they managed to negotiate between the cartel and the FBI, allowing Camila to launder drug money through the casino and travel as she pleases, Marty and Wendy to be free from their obligations to the cartel, and Ruth safe from the law, all in exchange for a cut of the money in question. As Camila observes in her conversation with the Byrdes: “Don’t pretend like this is for my benefit. If I run the cartel with the approval of the FBI, that means they’ll stop investigating you, and you’ll be free to run your foundation and play kingmaker.”

Ethical questions are rarely on the table in the version of the American Dream that *Ozark* portrays. The final deal is presented as a win-win to all interested parties. This twist in the narrative, orchestrated by Wendy, is exactly where the storyline intersects with the series’ gothic *mise-en-scène* to form a perfect whole. At this point, the Ozarks, pictured as a bleak, overbearing locale brimming with poverty, violence, and stereotypes, overflows onto the map of the whole country. The survival of the family that profits and grows from crime, or rather its vindication, is making *Ozark* a disturbing lesson in the class- and region-based injustice inherent in the pursuit of happiness.

Conclusion

As this paper aimed to demonstrate, *Ozark* is a multilayered show inviting analysis from diverse angles — agency of its women characters, the role of the location, and its deconstruction of the myth of the American (upper) middle-class family. Many of these are, however, tied to the concept of class, which has only recently gained critical attention. Class in *Ozark* is the dominant lens through which major narrative twists are written into the series — the class background sets the limits for female agency, privileging upper-middle-class Wendy Byrde over the endeavors of both Ruth and Darlene, class divisions guide the approach to the setting as dangerous and incomprehensible, inhabited by cultural stereotypes of hillbillies, rednecks, and “white trash” people.

Class governs the way regional culture and history is presented. As the Langmores and the Snells get more screen time, their stereotypical characteristics fall apart and the “us” versus “them” reading is no longer feasible, making way for a more complex view of the intersections of class, gender, and region. The deaths of almost all the members of the Langmores and Snells, following a long struggle with the Byrdes and the cartel over what the locals perceived as their land and birthright, cast them as truly tragic personas and an indictment of the unholy nature of American inner colonization.

The *mise-en-scène* of *Ozark* presents a specific analytical challenge, as it performs a double role — on the one hand, it supports the view of the location as somber and full of

implicit dangers that need to be eradicated, on the other, the drone shots and bluish hues invite a non-human perspective, as if nature and the lake themselves were given agency unavailable to any of the human characters. While the locals have learnt to accept this condition, the newcomers, be it the Byrdes or the cartel members, are startled by such helplessness and respond with violence and exploitation. The wasteland that the Byrdes turn the community into demonstrates the toxic nature of their presence at Lake Ozark and carries a profoundly disturbing message of the show — the pursuit of wealth and family well-being in the current economic setup leads over dead bodies of people from lower classes and rural areas.

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Filmography

- Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2008–2013)
Gone Girl (David Fincher, 2014)
Succession (Jesse Armstrong, 2018–2023)
This Is Us (Dan Fogelman, 2016–2022)

True Detective, season 3 (Nic Pizzolatto, 2019)

Winter's Bone (Debra Granik, 2010)

Biography

Veronika Klusáková is a graduate of the Faculty of Arts of Palacky University in Olomouc, where she held the position of Assistant Professor at the Department of Theatre and Film Studies in 2012–2020. Between 2019 and 2025, she has been working at FAMU as an assistant professor, teaching the history of world cinema to Czech and foreign students. Since 2020, she has been the editor-in-chief of the academic journal *ArteActa*, which she turned into an online open-access peer-reviewed journal focused primarily on artistic research. In 2025 she became the vice-rector for academic and artistic research and equal opportunities at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Her own research focuses on the interconnection of history with interdisciplinary theoretical concepts (Southern Gothic and its socio-political framework, representations of childhood from the perspective of gender and queer studies, aesthetic and performative foundations of tomboyism) in film and television production. Her most recent book is *Jižanská gotika v současných televizních seriálech* (Southern Gothic in Contemporary Television Series, NAMU, 2023).

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