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By

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Absurdism

MOVEMENT ORIGIN: c. 1950

Absurdism, and its more specific companion term Theatre of the Absurd, refers to the works of a group of Western European and American dramatists writing and producing plays in the 1950s and early 1960s. The term ‘‘Theatre of the Absurd’’ was coined by critic Martin Esslin, who identified common features of a new style of drama that seemed to ignore theatrical conventions and thwart audience expectations. Characterized by a departure from realistic characters and situations, the plays offer no clear notion of the time or place in which the action occurs. Characters are often nameless and seem interchangeable. Events are completely outside the realm of rational motivation and may have a nightmarish quality commonly associated with Surrealism (a post-World War I movement that features dream sequences and images from the unconscious, often sexual in nature). At other times, both dialogue and incidents may appear to the audience as completely nonsensical, even farcical. However, beneath the surface the works explore themes of loneliness and isolation, of the failure of individuals to connect with others in any meaningful way, and of the senselessness and absurdity of life and death. The writers most commonly associated with Absurdism are Samuel Beckett, Euge` ne Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee, as well as a number of lesser known dramatists. The avant-garde nature of absurdist writing contributed in part to its short life as a literary movement. Features of the plays that seemed completely new and mystifying to audiences in the 1950s when absurdist works first appeared, soon became not only understandable, but even commonplace and predictable. With the exception of Ionesco, most playwrights abandoned the absurdist style after the 1960s; however, many of the individual plays were later considered classics of European and American drama.

THEMES:

Absurdity

Absurdity is the most obvious theme explored in Absurdism. Absurdity characterizes a world that no longer makes sense to its inhabitants, in which rational decisions are impossible and all action is meaningless and futile. Absurdity also describes many situations and events that take place in plays associated with the movement, such as orators who speak in gibberish (The Chairs), a clock that strikes seventeen (The Bald Soprano), or a rhinoceros that walks across the stage (Rhinoce´ros). Cruelty and Violence Beneath the nonsense and slapstick humor of Absurdism lurks an element of cruelty, often revealed in dialogue between characters but occasionally manifested in acts of violence. Pinter's plays are noted for the latter. In The Room, a blind man is brutally beaten; in The Birthday Party, the celebration becomes an interrogation and eventually an abduction; and in The Dumb Waiter, a pair of assassins are involved in an apparently random murder. Similarly, in Ionesco's The Lesson, a professor frustrated by his students' inability to understand his meaningless lessons, savagely kills them one after another. The seemingly innocent, child-like characters created by Arrabal engage in unspeakable acts of torture, even murder. On a less physical level is the cruelty hiding behind the apparently humorous dialogue in Beckett's Endgame, which features a master/servant relationship in which Hamm dominates Clov. Hamm, in turn, has suffered from the cruelty of his parents when he was a child. His father recounts how the youngster would cry because he was afraid of the dark, and their response, according to the father, was ''We let you cry. Then we moved out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace.''

Domination

Several well-known absurdist works feature pairs of characters in which one is the dominator and the other the dominated. Some of these are quite literally master/servant relationships, such as in Genet's The Maids or Beckett's Endgame. Others reproduce the master/slave relationship within marriage, as in Albee's The American Dream in which Mommy dominates the spineless Daddy character or within the traditional teacher/student dynamic, as in Ionesco's The Lesson.

Futility and Passivity

The futility of all human endeavor characterizes many absurdist works, such as Adamov's Ping- Pong in which two promising students abandon their studies and devote their lives to the appreciation of pinball machines. Adamov's earlier play La Parodie (1947) shares the idea that individuals are powerless to direct their own lives; it does so by presenting two characters, one who refuses to live and one who embraces life with joy. The fate of both is ultimately exactly the same. Havel's early plays, such as The Garden Party, deal with the inability of even the most ambitious individual to make any headway against a self-perpetuating bureaucracy. Beckett's Waiting for Godot suggests that human effort is meaningless and leads to nothing in the end. Beckett's characters are so ineffective and doomed to failure that they are unable even to commit suicide successfully despite two attempts. Their passivity, established by their interminable waiting, is even more famously illustrated by the closing scenes of both first and second acts, in which each stands rooted to his spot on the stage despite having made the decision to leave.

Language

The failure of language to convey meaning is an important theme in the literature of Absurdism. Language is either detached from any interpretation that can be agreed to by all characters, or it is reduced to complete gibberish. The play entitled The Bald Soprano, for example, has nothing to do with a soprano, much less a bald one. The standard philosophical discourse is mocked by the nonsensical dialogue in Waiting for Godot; although it is meaningless, it bears a strong resemblance to the structure of the real thing. The language of religious fervor is employed by Adamov in Ping- Pong, but the object being venerated is a pinball machine. The characters in Havel's plays speak in cliche´s and slogans, from which all real meaning has been drained.

Loneliness and Isolation

Many absurdist works illustrate the loneliness and isolation of individuals, resulting from the nature of modern life and, in some cases, from the impossibility of effective communication between humans.
Albee's The Zoo Story offers a prime example of this theme, featuring a character so eager to make a connection with a complete stranger that he is willing to die in order to do so. If the two men are unable to achieve contact in life, at least the man is able to involve the stranger, however unwillingly, in his death. Ionesco's The Bald Soprano explores the

same theme with a husband and wife who are so isolated from each other that they fail to recognize their connection in a social setting and have only a vague sense of having met before.

Materialism

Materialism is criticized in Albee's The American Dream, in which even relationships between family members are subject to the terms of profit and loss statements. A woman marries a man she does not love simply because he is wealthy, and they buy a baby to complete their family. The baby dies, leaving them to mourn their financial loss rather than their emotional loss. Adamov's characters in Ping-Pong devote their lives to the worship of a thing, which some critics consider a critique of capitalism and materialism.

STYLE

Character

Absurdism often abandons traditional character development to offer figures who have no clear identity or distinguishing features. They may even be interchangeable, as are the supporting characters in Waiting for Godot who appear as master and servant in the first act and trade places when they return for the second act. Role playing causes confusion among the characters in Genet's The Maids in which the audience initially thinks the figure onstage is the lady of the house being served by her maid Claire, but then realizes that Claire is impersonating the mistress and the other maid, Solange, is impersonating Claire. These exchanges continue throughout the play, which deprives the audience of any stable sense of character identity.

Denouement

In conventional literature or drama, the denouement serves to tie up the loose ends of the narrative, resolving both primary and secondary plot conflicts and complications. Since so little happens in an absurdist work, the denouement has little to resolve. Thus endings tend to be repetitious, such as the nearly identical ending of both acts of Waiting for Godot. Such repetitive actions reinforce the idea that human effort is futile, which serves as a prominent theme of Absurdism. In Ionesco's The Lesson, which features the murder of a student by a professor, the audience learns that it is the fortieth such murder that day. Since the ending of the play consists of yet another student arriving for yet another lesson, the audience has every reason to believe the newly arrived student will meet the same fate. Dialogue Since the ability of language to convey meaning is called into question by Absurdism, dialogue is of special importance in absurdist works. Artificial language, empty of meaning, consisting of slogans and cliche´ s, is a hallmark of the movement. Many of the texts contain dialogue that appears to be meaningless but that mimics the style of educated or sophisticated speech. Often there is a marked contradiction between speech and action, as in Godot when the characters claim they are leaving but actually stay.

Plot

Absurdism at its most extreme abandons conventional notions of plot almost entirely. Beckett's Waiting for Godot has been described as a play in which nothing happens. Its opening line is ''Nothing to be done,'' and the characters proceed to do just that—nothing. Although the characters do engage in various actions, none of those actions is connected in any meaningful way, nor do the actions develop into any sort of narrative or logical sequence of events.

Setting

The use of setting is one of the most unconventional stylistic features of Absurdism. Typically, an absurdist play is set in no recognizable time or place. Stage settings tend to be sparse, with lots of vacant space conveying the sense of emptiness associated with characters' lives. The empty chairs of Ionesco's The Chairs serves as an example, as does Waiting for Godot's nearly bare stage with a single spindly tree as the only prop. But the setting can also be cramped and confining, such as the claustrophobic single room of Beckett's Endgame.

Philosophy

Absurdism is often linked to Existentialism, the philosophical movement associated with Jean- Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, among others. Although both existentialists and absurdists are concerned with the senselessness of the human condition, the way this concern is expressed differs. The philosophers explored the irrational nature of human existence within the rational and logical framework of conventional philosophical thought. The absurdists, however, abandoned the traditional elements of literature in general and theater in particular— setting, plot, character development—in order to convey a sense of absurdity and illogic in both form and content.

In general, the two movements also differ in the conclusions each seems to draw from the realization that life is meaningless. Many absurdist productions appear to be making a case for the idea that all human effort is futile and action is pointless; others seem to suggest that an absurd existence leaves the individual no choice but to treat it as farce. The existentialists, however, claimed that the realization that life had no transcendental meaning, either derived from faith or from the essence of humanity itself, could (and should) serve as a springboard to action. An individual's life, according to the existentialists, can be made meaningful only through that individual's actions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the roots of Absurdism can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century, the movement reached its peak in the years immediately following World War II, a war of catastrophic proportions that saw the armies of fascist Germany overrun most of Europe and the Japanese attack the United States at Pearl Harbor. An estimated 48 million people in Europe were killed and millions more became refugees. Bombs turned cities to rubble. As the Allied Forces liberated the concentration camps at the end of the war, Europeans and Americans were confronted by the enormity of the Holocaust, Germany's final solution for Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and political prisoners. Faced with the evidence of evil on such a grand scale, people were often overcome by feelings of pessimism and helplessness.

At the same time, the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 introduced the reality of nuclear war and the possibility of a future nuclear disaster that could potentially eliminate all humankind. The change to using nuclear weapons ushered in the Cold War of the 1950s as the United States and the Soviet Union, former allies against Germany, became enemies. The two sides entered into an arms race and began stockpiling nuclear weapons. Thus, the achievement of peace after World War II was clouded by the specter of an even more horrific war to come, and this sense of the future led to feelings of hopelessness and futility. The continental United States, however, was untouched physically by the war.

Returning soldiers were more optimistic than their European counterparts and were eager to pursue the American dream. They married in record numbers and began having children, producing the well-known postwar baby boom, lasting from 1946 to 1964. Cities and schools became overcrowded and many urban families, aided by the prosperity of the postwar years, eventually moved to the suburbs. Women had worked in a variety of jobs during the war, filling in for the men who were fighting overseas and contributing to the war effort by producing weapons and supplies for the troops.

The idea of women working in factories was popularized by the poster image of Rosie the Riveter as a capable worker doing a man's job and doing it well. After the war, however, these same women were encouraged to return to their homes and care for their husbands and children, thereby giving up their places in the job market to the returning soldiers. The nuclear family of husband, stay-at-home wife, and small children living in a single-family home in the suburbs became the 1950s idealization of the American dream. In the arts, the social and

community concerns of the Depression years and the war years gave way to introspection and individual visions. In some cases, artists began to concentrate on form rather than content. Abstract art—Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism—with its emphasis on individual expression replaced artistic modes tied to political themes. In Hollywood, the optimistic and patriotic films of the war years were replaced in the late 1940s and early 1950s by film noir, a dark, gritty, urban genre that exposed the menacing underside of American life.

The Cold War also inspired a host of monster and horror films that served as allegories for potential invasion by a foreign enemy; perhaps the most famous of these was The Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1955).

Life and background of Cormac McCarthy

It may be surprising to many that the writer who was to become so indelibly associated with the American Southwest—and, earlier, Tennessee—was born in the large New England city of Providence, Rhode Island, on July 20, 1933. He was third in a line of six children, and as eldest son was named Charles, after his father. (Sources vary as to whether he officially renamed himself Cormac or the family legally changed his name.) According to Richard Woodward, "Cormac, the Gaelic equivalent of Charles, was an old family nickname bestowed on his father by Irish aunts" ("Venomous Fiction"). He was preceded by sisters Jackie and Bobbie, while siblings Bill, Maryellen, and Dennis came after him. Cormac McCarthy's father was a successful attorney who graduated from Yale University; in fact, McCarthy came from roots that were not only genteel but progressive: His paternal grandfather, John Francis, after whom Cormac McCarthy would eventually name his youngest son, had gone against the grain of early twentieth-century society by sending his daughters to college, along the same path as his sons.

Cormac McCarthy did not live in Rhode Island for very long, however. At the age of four, the family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where his father had taken a job as legal counsel for the Tennessee Valley Authority. Charles Joseph McCarthy and Gladys Christina McGrail McCarthy and their six children eventually settled in a ten-room home located at 5501 Martin Mill Pike. McCarthy was raised as a Roman Catholic in the South, something that certainly set him apart from the majority, and he was educated in a parochial high school.

The writer's Tennessee upbringing was crucial to his development and is the root of the unflinching portraits of violence and bloodshed that would come to dominate his work. "You grow up in the South, you're going to see violence," he told an interviewer in 2007. "And violence is pretty ugly" (Kushner). As a child, he took a keen interest in the natural world that surrounded his home, another preoccupation that would come to dominate his novels, as he would become notable for distinct and uncanny descriptions of natural environments. "When I was a kid, I was very interested in the natural world," McCarthy remembered in 2007. "To this day, during casual conversations, little-known facts about the natural world will just crop up" (*ibid.*).
McCarthy entered the University of Tennessee during the 1951-1952 academic year, but then left college to join the United States Air Force in 1953, serving a four-year stint.

He was stationed in Alaska for a couple of years, where he had a radio show. He also began reading ravenously, using literature as a means to fill the off-hours boredom of military life.

After the Air Force, he returned to the University of Tennessee in 1957, and while he would never achieve a degree, it was during this second attempt at college that he began to take up writing with serious intent. He became hooked after a professor tasked him with editing a textbook of eighteenth-century essays. Soon after, he appeared

for the first time in print, publishing two stories in the college's literary magazine, *The Phoenix*. "Wake for Susan" appeared in the fall of 1959 and "A Drowning Incident" appeared in early 1960. During that time, McCarthy also received a grant from the Ingram Merrill Foundation. This foundation, established by celebrated poet James Ingram Merrill—son of the founder of Merrill Lynch—awarded money to writers and artists.

McCarthy permanently dropped out of college in 1961 and moved to Chicago for a short spell, working at an auto parts warehouse while writing his first novel. Around this time he married his first wife, Lee Holleman, whom he had met at the University of Tennessee. The couple had a son, Cullen, and settled in Sevier County, Tennessee. The marriage was brief, however, and McCarthy set out on a peripatetic existence, drifting to Asheville, North Carolina, and later New Orleans, living in humble abodes and scratching out a hand-to-mouth existence. (His ex-wife Lee McCarthy published a collection of poems titled *Desire's Door* in 1991; the collection included ruminations on the failed marriage.) He also continued to work on his first book.

Cormac McCarthy finally emerged as a recognized novelist with the 1965 publication of *The Orchard Keeper*, a novel that established him as an heir to the Southern tradition embodied by William Faulkner. In fact, McCarthy's editor at Random House, Albert Eskine, had been Faulkner's editor, as well as that of Robert Penn Warren and Ralph Ellison. (McCarthy had blindly submitted the manuscript to the only book publishing company of which he had known.) But some saw the debut as too fraught with, and hampered by, tones of his famous Southern predecessor Faulkner. The *New York Times* review deemed the book "impressive" but "sorely handicapped by ... humble and excessive admiration for William Faulkner" (Prescott). As if to cement the comparison, *The Orchard Keeper* garnered a William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel by an American writer.

But the work also displayed McCarthy's sensitivity for old and disappearing ways of life in the rural Tennessee hills—intimacy with nature, as well as hunting, trapping, and bootlegging. *The Orchard Keeper* also featured the writer's dark and grim sensibility, a lack of psychological exploration or justification, and the flair for the grotesque that would come to occupy much of his early work. In the story, which takes place before World War II, a boy named John Wesley Rattner forms a bond with Arthur Ownby, an old man with a deep connection to the land and the old ways of living, and Marion Sylder, a bootlegger who is the unknown murderer of John Wesley's father. At this stage of his career, critics firmly placed McCarthy in the Southern Gothic tradition embodied not only by Faulkner but Flannery O'Connor as well.

But *The Orchard Keeper*, like all of his first five novels—up through *Blood Meridian* (1985)—sold poorly upon initial release (only moving a few thousand copies). McCarthy continued to pull down grants, however, allowing him to eke out an existence and to continue writing. One such award, a travel fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, allowed him to head by ocean liner to Ireland, reportedly to research his family history for a possible book. While on board he met an English woman

named Anne DeLisle, who was working as a singer and dancer on the ship. The two married in England in 1966, and on the back of a Rockefeller Foundation grant they traveled around Europe and settled for a time on the island of Ibiza, about 80 kilometers off the coast of Spain, in the Mediterranean Sea. (The island was a relatively bohemian artistic settlement at the time.)

Here McCarthy finished *Outer Dark* (1968), his second novel. The book firmly established the unremitting darkness of McCarthy's vision and clearly showed that he was willing to tap into uncomfortable regions that others avoided. He centered the novel around an incestuous union between a brother and sister, a union that results in a baby. There is a dreamlike and archaic atmosphere to the haunting narrative of *Outer Dark*, as well as an arduous journey motif and a cast of malevolent characters. These qualities presaged *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy decades down the road, though *Outer Dark* stands apart as McCarthy's most turgid and "problematical" work, and it doesn't possess the powerful immediacy of many of his narratives.

In 1967, Cormac McCarthy and his second wife moved back to the writer's native Tennessee, taking up residence near Knoxville, where they lived first at a pig farm and later in a dairy barn that McCarthy had refurbished. DeLisle claimed years later that they lived in virtual poverty. He did, however, receive a Guggenheim Fellowship to subsist on while writing his next book, *Child of God* (1973), a grotesque and uncanny tale about a serial killer/necrophiliac named Lester Ballard who lived in a cave with the bodies of his dead victims.

Child of God was based on actual news reports out of Sevier County, Tennessee, and in a lengthy and admiring essay on the book in August 1974, *The New Yorker* tagged McCarthy as a novelist "whose fate is to be relatively unknown and often misinterpreted" (Coles, p. 90), a prediction that the immediate, if not long-term, future certainly bore out. What was most interesting about McCarthy's rendering of Lester Ballard was that the writer was able to somewhat humanize such a character without casting a wholly sympathetic eye on him or his atrocities. It is a vivid, grotesque, and even darkly humorous book.

In 1974, director Richard Pearce sought out McCarthy to write the screenplay for *The Gardener's Son*, a television drama about a South Carolina mill owner who is murdered in the 1870s by a disturbed young man with a wooden leg. (The boy is hanged for the crime.) The film premiered on PBS in 1977, starring Brad Dourif, Ned Beatty, and Kevin Conway as members of two feuding families, the affluent Greggs and bluecollar McEvoys.

In 1976, McCarthy left Tennessee, separated from his second wife, and moved to El Paso, Texas. The writer "showed up in El Paso around January 1976 ... unannounced and his arrival completely unnoticed. He was a 43-year-old writer of three out-of-print novels, a man twice divorced, living exclusively off of literary fellowships," piped a 1992 *Texas Monthly* profile. "He began to be seen in pool halls and bowling alleys on the southside of town, as well as in various Mexican restaurants, always with some esoteric book

under his arm" (Draper).

The geographical shift would also resonate in his writing, which would soon turn to the Southwestern borderlands and Western literary and historical motifs—opening up a whole new world for McCarthy's novels. But, first, 1979 saw the release of a Knoxville-centered novel, *Suttree*, which McCarthy was said to have been toiling at on and off for two decades. It was also considered to be a tangentially autobiographical work, making it a rarity in the McCarthy canon. In the novel, the title character balks at his privileged upbringing, abandons his wife and son, and seeks out an existence among degenerates, outcasts, and other such characters while carving out an existence as a fisherman on a houseboat on the Tennessee River. The ambitious and trenchant *Suttree* would weather comparisons to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and would later be hailed by some as McCarthy's greatest novel, running up against frequent and competing claims for *Blood Meridian*. While still married to McCarthy, DeLisle had typed up the lengthy manuscript of *Suttree*, and in the wake of their official divorce in 1978, the two remained friends.

While residing in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, McCarthy reportedly undertook rigorous research of the region and its history, including scouting trips into Mexico. He also mastered Spanish, which would often crop up in the dialogue of his future books. Despite having several commercially unsuccessful novels under his belt, his financial circumstances were vastly improved by a 1981 MacArthur Fellowship, the award more commonly known as the "genius grant." The fellowships are bestowed upon individuals from a wide range of disciplines—the sciences, the arts, the humanities—who, based on their accomplishments and potential, are awarded a substantial sum of money (in McCarthy's case, over $200,000).

The fellowship was a clear indication that, despite his meager sales and reclusiveness, McCarthy was gaining great respect in high literary circles. Among the writers recommending him for the award were Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow and acclaimed Southern novelist and historian Shelby Foote. Nevertheless, despite such honors and accolades, McCarthy remained a defiantly private person. He gave no interviews, avoided public appearances, and steered wide of traditional milieus such as literary circles and university lecturing gigs. "Cormac has staked out a life completely outside the literary system," claimed his agent Amanda Urban in 1992 (Draper).

During the 1980s McCarthy wrote a screenplay called *Whales and Men* that has yet to see publication or production, though it can be located in the Cormac McCarthy Papers in the Southwestern Writers Collection of Texas State University–San Marcos library. (The work was most likely written in the early 1980s, as it references the year 1984.) The screenplay is a deep, dialogue-driven meditation on the nature of whales, particularly how they communicate, with a locale that shifts from Florida, to Ireland, to Sri Lanka. In *Whales and Men*, according to Edwin T. Arnold, "Whales come to represent the unknowable in nature, perhaps even the sacred mystery that man senses but cannot comprehend" (*Whales and Men* synopsis).
But *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*, released in 1985, would

become the author's grand achievement of the 1980s and the product of all of his border-ands immersion. It was also the book that truly galvanized his literary reputation (though celebrated writers such as Foote and Bellow had been singing McCarthy's praises before that book ever came to fruition). *Blood Meridian* was a vast, epic, bloody, and phantasmagoric narrative about a motley band of scalp hunters running amok in the American Southwest and Mexico during 1849 and 1850. The heightened and archaic prose, epic scope, and lofty ruminations drew comparisons to McCarthy's favorite novel, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick: or; The Whale* (1851). The novel also contained one of his greatest, vilest characters, Judge Holden, a monstrous, hairless, compellingly astute killer who comes to seem immortal by book's end. But *Blood Meridian* only gathered critical steam in the following decades; at the time of its release, it received little recognition and only sold a few thousand copies. McCarthy was still very much a cult figure and "writer's writer." Nevertheless, *Blood Meridian* would be discovered by many readers in subsequent years, and eminent literary critic Harold Bloom would even come to rank it among the greatest American novels of all time, deeming it the continuation of an American literary heritage that coursed straight out of Melville and Faulkner.

With *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy had firmly hammered out a novelistic worldview that would come to dominate subsequent novels as well, a gaze characterized by stark pessimism, apocalyptic imagery, and deliberations on the inevitable violence of the human condition. The latter aspect meant that McCarthy's narratives were sometimes (and necessarily) charged with frank, brutal, and startling descriptions of the most unimaginable bloodshed and killing. Bloom recalled that he initially "flinched at the overwhelming carnage" in *Blood Meridian* (p. 255) and wasn't able to clearly ascertain the greatness of the work until he could see beyond that element. All of McCarthy's Western novels also came to be characterized by deep philosophical musings on history, God, and the very nature of being.

These qualities were certainly evident in McCarthy's next novel, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), which took up the same borderlands locale 100 years after the time of *Blood Meridian*. But they were combined with a more accessible narrative upheld by recognizable romance and adventure tropes. Only McCarthy himself knows whether this was a calculated attempt to launch his reputation out of relative obscurity—and that's exactly what happened. *All the Pretty Horses*, the first volume in the proposed Border Trilogy, not only showed commercial vitality by becoming a bestseller but also was critically lauded, pulling down both a National Book Award and a National Book Critics Circle Award.

McCarthy, then nearly 60 years old, was still living in El Paso at the time, in a modest stone house near a shopping center. Just prior to the release of *All the Pretty Horses* he granted his first major interview, to Richard Woodward from the *New York Times*. He only relented after his publisher had implored him to submit to the publicity in order to help promote the new book and the pending Vintage reissues of his older novels. For devotees of McCarthy, it was an opportunity to glimpse the personality of the enigmatic and mysterious writer for the first time. The portrait that Woodward painted of McCarthy certainly seemed a stark contrast to his complex and dark novels:

A compact unit, shy of six feet even in cowboy boots, McCarthy walks with a bounce, like someone who is also a good dancer. Clean-cut and handsome as he grays, he has a Celtic's blue-green eyes set deep into a high-domed forehead. "He gives an impression of strength and vitality and poetry," says [writer Saul] Bellow, who describes him as "crammed into his own person." ... For such an obstinate loner, McCarthy is an engaging figure, a world-class talker, funny, opinionated, quick to laugh ["Venomous Fiction"].

The profile also revealed that McCarthy had reestablished a relationship with his son, Cullen, in recent years, and that he didn't have many "literary" friends, preferring to keep company with such scientists as Nobel Prize–winning physicist Murray Gell-Mann and whale biologist Roger Payne, both of whom he had met through the MacArthur Fellowship association. (McCarthy did, though, admit to becoming acquainted with novelist Edward Abbey before his death in 1989.) The *New York Times* interview didn't augur an era of openness and accessibility for McCarthy, however, and it would remain his sole interview—and one that critics continually ransacked for information—for the next 13 years. (In his seventh decade and well into the next millennium McCarthy finally opened up a bit.)

At the time of the *New York Times* piece, McCarthy was immersed in composing *The Crossing* (1994), the second border book and a novel that would stand out as the most weighty, complex, and multifaceted volume of the trilogy. In July 1993, the world would get a first glimpse of that endeavor in *Esquire* magazine, which featured the first section of that larger work, there entitled "The Wolf Trapper." The novel introduced a new protagonist, Billy Parham, and went back in time about ten years before the action of *All the Pretty Horses*, to a period just before and during World War II. The narrative consisted of three "crossings" over the border, deep into Mexico and back again, giving it the quality of an epic literary voyage such as Homer's *Odyssey*.

In the first, Billy traps an elusive and pregnant she-wolf that has been feeding on ranch livestock and then somehow sets his mind upon freeing the wolf in the mountains of Mexico, prompting an unceremonious break with his family and an arduous and unlikely journey. After that, Billy returns to find that his parents have been murdered and the family's horses stolen, so he and his younger brother, Boyd, set off into Mexico to recover the horses. During the final crossing, Billy returns for his brother, who had remained in Mexico to be with a young Mexican woman that he and Billy had rescued, only to find that Boyd had become a legendary vigilante and had been killed. Billy then sets out to return Boyd's corpse across the border. But the mere summary of these journeys barely hints at the thematic scope and the countless people Billy meets along the way, as well as the vivid imagery and deep musings that are interwoven in the narrative.

In the early 1990s, Cormac McCarthy had begun making regular trips to Santa Fe to visit the Santa Fe Institute, a place that would eventually become a sort of home base for him. McCarthy's physicist friend, Murray Gell-Mann, and a group of other scientists had founded the institute in 1984. Housed in an old convent in the hills outside of Santa Fe, it became a haven for thinkers from varying disciplines to come together and ponder the complexities of existence. McCarthy has made no bones about preferring the

company of scientists to that of other writers or artistic types. “Science is very rigorous,” he once said. “When you hang out with scientists and see how they think, you can’t do so without developing a respect for it.... When you say something, it needs to be right. You can’t just speculate idly about things” (Kushner). McCarthy became a de facto writer-in-residence of the institute, and he even eventually relocated from El Paso to Santa Fe to be closer. At times he was viewed as a curiosity among so many notable scientific minds. “People who know my work walk in and they’re kind of confused as to why I’m there,” he said, “but that’s OK. They soon get over that” (*ibid.*). Gell-Mann has said of McCarthy’s daily presence at the institute, “He has a long-standing interest in a great many things and he knows an immense amount about them ... if he weren’t so shy, he could probably ask penetrating questions” (Woodward, “Cormac Country”).

Richard B. Woodward, interviewing McCarthy for the second time—this time for *Vanity Fair* in 2005—for what would become McCarthy’s second major interview, opened the article by painting this colorful picture:

The parking lot at the Santa Fe Institute, in New Mexico, features rows of vehicles typical of American academia—S.U.V.’s and minivans, a few older model BMWs and Mercedeses, a Toyota Prius, and an inordinate amount of Subarus and Hondas.... Standing out from the crowd is a red Ford F-350 diesel pickup with Texas plates. Equipped with a Banks Power-Pack that boosts the 7.3 liter engine to more than 300 hp, it has a stripped down profile in back, like a wrecker’s, with no winch.... The owner of the truck, the novelist Cormac McCarthy, would also seem not to belong here. He is the lone fiction writer at the institute, and his books, although they constitute one of the towering achievements in recent American literature, are often horrifically violent [“Cormac Country”].

In 1997, McCarthy received the Texas Institute of Letters Lon Tinkle Lifetime Achievement Award. The following year, four years after the publication of *The Crossing*, the final Border Trilogy book, *Cities of the Plain*, finally appeared. This time the narrative did not offer journeys that strayed deeply into Mexico, but hewed close to the border, in the vicinity of the title cities of El Paso and Juárez, Mexico. The novel brought together the protagonists from the first two books, Billy Parham and John Grady Cole, who appeared here working together at a New Mexico ranch not far from the titular cities.

Billy, now in his late 20s, assumes a brotherly/mentor role toward the younger John Grady, who falls in love with a young, epileptic prostitute in Juárez and tries to free her from her pimp so that he can marry her. But again, as so often happens in the work of McCarthy, things end terribly and Grady perishes from wounds sustained in a knife fight with the pimp. The novel has a more subtle, wistful, and elegiac cast than the previous two books, and because it does not possess the immediacy of *All the Pretty Horses*’ romance and adventure or *The Crossing*’s epic and harrowing overtones, it was not as well received.

Cities of the Plain had actually first seen life as a screenplay, over ten years before the first Border Trilogy volume, 1992’s *All the Pretty Horses*, was released. In fact, according to the *New York Times*, McCarthy and director friend Richard Pearce (from *The Gardener’s*

Son association) had tried to get the film made.
The late 1990s ushered in the era when McCarthy's novels began to be much more coveted as potential Hollywood properties. Around this time, production began on the 2000 film version of *All the Pretty Horses*, directed by Billy Bob Thornton and starring Matt Damon and Penélope Cruz. For the most part, the movie was poorly received, andThornton made no bones about his anger over having had to cut out a full hour of story from the final version.

Well into his sixties, McCarthy also became a father again. John Francis McCarthy was born to the writer and the significantly younger Jennifer Winkley, who would become his third wife. "He dotes on his son, whose bedroom is stuffed with books, maps, and models," wrote Richard B. Woodward in 2005. "One has the sense that he wants to atone for his shortcomings as a parent earlier in life. He seldom saw his first son, Cullen, after his first marriage dissolved" ("Cormac Country").

In 2001, McCarthy's *The Stonemason: A Play in Five Acts* was staged in Houston. He had conceived the piece years earlier, and it was published by Ecco Press in 1994. (In 1992, an intention to mount a production of the play in Washington, D.C., at the Arena Stage, had fallen through.) McCarthy was not directly involved in the 2001 production but did make a rare appearance to witness the staging of the play, which, according to critic and close McCarthy follower Edwin T. Arnold, appeared in a much abbreviated form. "Drama is the hardest to write," Cormac McCarthy said regarding this turn to a different medium. "Novels and other forms of literature are difficult, but drama is the hardest. It's unusual to get two outstanding playwrights in a century" (Arnold, "Stonemason Evening"). The play went up for one night only on October 12 at the Arts Alliance Center in Clear Lake, Texas.

Arnold describes McCarthy's presence at the performance:

He comes in quickly and unobtrusively with his brother Dennis. They are both wearing sports coats and jeans, and the resemblance between the two is obvious. When the lights dim, McCarthy, his wife Jennifer, and Dennis sit near the back of the room, inconspicuous members blending into the anonymous audience, waiting for the play to begin ... the audience stands at the end of the performance, applauding and nodding their heads in approval. McCarthy, of course, chooses not to come forward when he is introduced at the end, but he does smile and wave his hand so that the audience can see him ["Stonemason Evening"].
While this condensed version of McCarthy's stage drama omitted and altered many elements, *The Stonemason: A Play in Five Acts*, as written by McCarthy, tells of the close bond between a young black construction worker, Ben Telfair, and his stonemason grandfather, Papaw. The play intercuts two dramatic sections; in one Ben delivers stirring monologues that pay tribute to Papaw. The other more traditional staging presents the Telfair family living together in a house in Louisville, Kentucky, in the early 1970s, delving into topics such as racism, infidelity, drug abuse, and suicide.

According to the *New York Times*, the "breakdown of the family in the play mirrors the recent disappearance of stoneworking as a craft" (Woodward, "Venomous Fiction").

"Stacking up stone is the oldest trade there is," said McCarthy in 1992, showing his typically keen interest in archaic practices. "Not even prostitution can come close to its antiquity. It's older than anything, older than fire. And in the last 50 years, with hydraulic cement, it's vanishing. I find that rather interesting" (*ibid.*).
McCarthy's next book, *No Country for Old Men* (2005), was a surprising departure. (According to the Southwestern Writers Collection, which houses McCarthy's papers, the book's genesis was as a screenplay in the 1980s [Witliff].) The novel dealt with a familiar geographical locale, the borderlands, but acknowledged a new dark forcethat had consumed the region: drug trafficking. Set in 1980, it was typically violent but also turned out to be McCarthy's briskest and most readable work to date, assuming the dimensions of a white-knuckle crime thriller. Lauded filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen (*Fargo*; *O, Brother Where Art Thou?*; *The Big Lebowski*) snapped up the rights to the novel and adapted it into a screenplay. The Coen brothers would also direct the film. The movie, released in 2007 and starring Tommy Lee Jones and Josh Brolin, stayed remarkably true to McCarthy's book, and the reception to this film was far different from that to the movie version of *All the Pretty Horses*; in fact, the movie won scores of awards and pulled down eight Academy Award nominations, bagging four statues, including best picture, director, and screenplay adaptation.

McCarthy, becoming cautiously more accessible, could be seen in attendance at the Oscars, standing and applauding when the film won for best picture. The camera even focused directly on him in his seat (son John at his side) when producer Scott Rudin thanked him from the stage. During the press run-up to the movie, McCarthy again showed willingness for publicity: In October of 2007 *Time* magazine ran a short article that was basically an informal conversation between the Coen brothers and Cormac McCarthy. They discussed the film as well as American cinema in general.
McCarthy also made another foray into theater in 2006 with *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*, which premiered onstage in May at the Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago and then opened for a short run in October in New York City, where it was well-received. The *New York Times* review described it as "a poem in celebration of death" and compared it to the work of Samuel Beckett (Zinoman). The play consists of two characters, named "BLACK" and "WHITE," monikers that represent both the characters' race and their opposing outlook on existence. (Here, as he so often does, McCarthy works with contradiction: BLACK possesses the more idealistic outlook of the two.) At the outset, we learn that BLACK, a reformed convict, has recently saved WHITE, a professor, from throwing himself in front of a train. BLACK is a man of faith who espouses the teachings of the Bible, while WHITE, an atheist and nihilist, shows that he is the antithesis of his moniker: "I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death," he says. "Real Death. If I thought that in death I would meet the people I've known in life I don't know what I'd do. That would be the ultimate horror" (p. 57).

During this period, McCarthy claimed to be working on a few novels at once, and he promptly followed up *No Country for Old Men* with *The Road* (2006), one of his grimmest, most horrifying works (and as one critic pointed out, "that's saying something" [Barra]). The post-apocalyptic tale describes a man and his son undertaking a relentless journey across a charred landscape that has been obliterated by some unnamed and cataclysmic

catastrophe. McCarthy finally delivered what he had been suggesting for so long: the end of the world. The two central figures endure starvation, exposure to the elements, and hordes of tribal cannibals in their quest to reach the sea.
The narrative itself is stripped-down and stark (especially when compared to the Border Trilogy), but won McCarthy his biggest accolade yet, the Pulitzer Prize (2007); it was also a national bestseller. In the UK, it scored the prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize, Britain's oldest literary award. TV mogul Oprah Winfrey even picked *The Road* as a choice for her book club, and in perhaps the strangest twist in the storyof the publicity-shy writer, McCarthy agreed to be interviewed by the talk-show host on her program in June 2007. Oprah traveled to McCarthy's favorite haunt, the Santa Fe Institute, to tape an interview with him in the institute's library.

Flak Magazine described the televised image of the two sitting across from each other in chairs, discussing the writer's work: "For McCarthy's longtime fans, the prospect of finally seeing the man on TV, but with You-Go-Girl icon Oprah Winfrey in the opposite chair, is the very essence of cognitive dissonance" (Danzen). For fans, it was the first time to see and hear McCarthy, who, at 73 years of age, came off as kindly, down-toearth, and humble. When Winfrey asked him if he was "passionate" about writing, McCarthy, slouching in an easy chair in a pressed denim shirt, responded, "I don't know. Passionate sounds like a pretty fancy word. I like what I do.... You always have this image of the perfect thing which you can never achieve" (Winfrey). When Winfrey inquired about the inspiration behind *The Road*, McCarthy explained that he and his young son John, to whom he dedicated the book, were staying in a hotel in El Paso when the idea came to him. "I went and stood at a window, and I could hear the trains coming through, a very lonesome sound" (*ibid.*). He said he had an image in his head of what the landscape would look like in the wake of apocalypse, with fires burning on a hill.

After the Hollywood success of *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road* was quickly picked up as a film property. Australian John Hillcoat (*The Proposition*) directed the movie, and Viggo Mortensen of *Lord of Rings* fame portrayed the father. The film was shot in locales that suited the barren, post-apocalyptic setting of the novel. Production began in February 2008 in and around Pittsburgh, and scenes were also filmed in New Orleans and on Mount St. Helens. In a May 2008 *New York Times* profile on the production, one member of the crew explained that Pennsylvania was chosen "because it offered such a pleasing array of post-apocalyptic scenery: deserted coalfields, run-down parts of Pittsburgh, windswept dunes." The article added that "Chris Kennedy, the production designer, even discovered a burned-down amusement park ... and an eight-mile stretch of abandoned freeway, complete with tunnel." This latter location was "ideal for filming the scene where the father and son who are the story's main characters are stalked by a cannibalistic gang traveling by truck" (McGrath). The completed film was initially planned for release in November 2008, but was withheld until November 2009.
Cormac McCarthy's name broke across the national news wires for an altogether different reason in January 2009, when his childhood home, long abandoned, was destroyed by fire—just as Knoxville preservationists were turning an eye toward restoring it as a literary landmark. One local news story noted that there had been reports of "homeless people squatting" in the vacant building, and the attending fire chief said that

the "interior was disgustingly dilapidated." In addition, the house "was hidden from the street by a thick wall of bamboo and honeysuckle" (Stambaugh). For close readers of McCarthy, all of this sounded like life imitating art, as the descriptions conjured the author's "Knoxville novel" *Suttree*. In fact, there is even a scene in the novel where the central figure explores a similarly once-noble home that has fallen to ruin and become a haven for squatters (*Suttree*, pp. 134–136).

In early May of 2009, McCarthy received another in a long line of honors. *USA Today* reported, "The author of *The Road*, *All the Pretty Horses* and several other novelswas named the winner ... of the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for lifetime achievement in American fiction" ("Author Cormac McCarthy Receives PEN Award"). As the awarding organization itself noted, the honor "goes to a distinguished living American author of fiction whose body of work in English possesses qualities of excellence, ambition, and scale of achievement over a sustained career which place him or her in the highest rank of American literature" (PEN American Center). The judges who chose McCarthy were Claudia Roth Pierpont, Philip Roth, and Benjamin Taylor.

Predictably, McCarthy did not show up in person to accept the honor; Ajai Singh "Sonny" Mehta, a publisher and editor-in-chief at his book company, Knopf, accepted for the author, briefly thanking the PEN organization for recognizing McCarthy's work. In the citation, the judges lauded McCarthy as a "self-transformer," an artist whose career was "driven at the inmost by a will to change." The statement also admired how the "phenomenal career of Cormac McCarthy embodies just such a self-transformation. Between *Suttree*, his Knoxville novel of 1979, and *Blood Meridian*, his 1985 novel of midnineteenth- century Texas and Mexico, the Southern writer has become a Western writer" (PEN American Center).

As of this writing, in the summer of 2009, Cormac McCarthy is said to be at work on a new novel—set in New Orleans and with the working title *The Passenger*—and allegedly has two other books underway as well. News of this broke in May 2009, when an archive of Cormac McCarthy's papers went public at the Texas State–San Marcos library, as part of the Southwestern Writers Collection. The Southwestern Writers Collection purchased the archives for two million dollars, according to the Associated Press ("Texas State Acquires Cormac McCarthy Archives"). The London *Guardian* reported on May 18, 2009, that the "author's notes, handwritten drafts and correspondence for each of his 10 novels are included in the archive" (Flood).

Among these items are such treasures for enthusiasts as "[h]and-drawn and photocopied maps of Saltillo and Zacatecas ... as part of McCarthy's research for *All the Pretty Horses*" as well as "correspondence between McCarthy and a doctor" regarding an initial draft of a scene in which a rural Mexican physician treats Boyd's gunshot wounds in *The Crossing*: "From a literary standpoint, there is no doubt that the scene well depicts the adversity Boyd faces in the character of the Mexican physician who intervenes," writes the doctor to McCarthy. "However, from a purely medical view, it doesn't tie together." The doctor also "provided information about the period appropriateness for some of the medical instruments used in the novel" (*ibid.*).

While these materials are a testament to the diligence and thoroughness with which McCarthy pursues real-life accuracy, the unfinished manuscript of *The Passenger*, which is included in the collection as well (with restricted access until publication), presents a different kind of testament: to that of the restless, enduring artistry of Cormac McCarthy, who—40-plus years after the publication of his first novel and 50-plus years since he first set out to be a writer—continues to seek out new literary terrain.

The Road

By

Cormac McCarthy

Introduction

With his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Road* (2006), Cormac McCarthy finally realized the dark premonition scattered throughout his previous works. Here is what he had only suggested before: "the end of the civilized world, the dying of life on the planet and the spectacle of it all," as writer William Kennedy put it in his *New York Times* review. *The Road* presents a world that, in the wake of some unnamed, apocalyptic catastrophe, has dissolved into a primordial condition devoid of nature, culture, law, personal identity, government, economics, territorial borders, agriculture, literature, commerce, art—or any recognizable feature of the world in which we live.

For a father and son trudging day by day through a barren, scorched landscape of gray, endlessly foraging in wasted buildings for food and supplies—while trying to avoid rogue tribes of cannibals—there is only good and evil, survival, and God, whom the father sometimes addresses in desperation and anger, lifting his face to the heavens: "Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh, God" (pp. 11–12). As the *Philadelphia Inquirer* put it, "*The Road* is about the bleakest book [McCarthy] has ever written, and that's saying something" (Barra).

Cormac McCarthy has consistently dwelled on the impermanence of—and what he sees as the inevitable violent end to—the human condition. And post-apocalyptic imagery has been a constant in his novels, from a foreboding and sickly looking litter of kittens in his very first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), who appear "as if they might have been struck simultaneously by some biblical blight" (p. 180), to the turgid, prophetic dreamworld of Billy Parham in *The Crossing* (1994), where he envisions "God's pilgrims laboring upon a darkened verge ... returning from some dark enterprise" (p. 420). Even *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), one of McCarthy's most accessible and popular books, ended with the dire image of a lone bull rolling in the dust "against the bloodred sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment" while the shadows of horse and horseman merged and slipped off into "the darkening land, the world to come" (p. 301). The title of the last book of the Border Trilogy, *Cities of the Plain* (1998), makes a direct reference to the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which God destroyed by consuming them in fire and brimstone because of the hopelessly corrupted nature of the humanity that inhabited them. This also calls to mind the ashy, incinerated world of *The Road*, which looks like it could have been consumed in such fire and brimstone.

In *The Road*, though, McCarthy moves beyond suggestion and imagery to finally present the post-apocalyptic world itself in all of its horrible magnitude—the landscape littered with corpses, the sun blotted out, flora and fauna dead, the seas poisoned. Though the novel is not explicit about the cause of the world's destruction, McCarthy did tell *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2007 that he didn't believe that climate change or environmental disaster would be the end for humanity; it would be the violent nature of the human race itself: "We're going to do ourselves in first," he claimed (Kushner).

In presenting to the reader a post-apocalyptic world, *The Road* takes up a theme that has been explored countless times before by other authors, many of them genre writers (primarily in the area of science fiction). But this dystopian idea has been tackled by everyone from Stephen King, in *The Stand* (1978); to Richard Matheson, in *I Am Legend* (1954); to Margaret Atwood, in *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Author Michael Chabon said that McCarthy's "excellent" novel "presented a very pure example of post-apocalyptic literature, pared down to the essentials of a post-apocalyptic vision" (Timberg, p. F9).

However, just as McCarthy took the notion of a "Western" and created something new in the Border Trilogy, so too does his post-apocalyptic novel, funneled through his distinct prose sensibilities, move beyond a genre exercise and bear the markings of a striking original. "What propels *The Road* far beyond its progenitors are the diverted poetic heights of McCarthy's late–English prose," claimed London's *Guardian*: "the simple declamation and plainsong of his rendered dialect, as perfect as early Hemingway; and the adamantine surety and utter aptness of every chiseled description" (Warner). What also makes *The Road* stand out from other post-apocalyptic renderings is the father and son relationship, which is detailed with heart-crushing pathos. Janet Maslin, writing in the *New York Times*, noted how the turgid, turbulent "narrative is also illuminated by extraordinary tenderness.... The father's loving efforts to shepherd his son are made that much more wrenching by the unavailability of food, shelter, safety, companionship or hope in most places where they scavenge to subsist" (Maslin, p. 8).

The very first lines of the novel let us know that this relationship is the novel's center and that all of the themes radiate outward from the bond between father and boy: "When he woke in the woods in the dark of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him," McCarthy writes as *The Road* opens. "His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath" (p. 3). McCarthy doesn't meditate on the cause of the devastation and reduces the scope of the novel to this insular tale of survival, this world between a father and son who are never named. The narrative is built around the man and boy's endless trudge down the titular road—heading southward to the ocean and hopefully warmer climes—and their never-ending foraging for food, shelter, and supplies.

But the mind-numbing repetition of their travel and foraging and the succession of bleak, gray days are always charged with the potential of unspeakable violence, keeping the action taut. The father and son must be constantly vigilant against savage elements of post-apocalyptic humanity, including people who will go so far as to consume "a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on [a] spit" (p. 198) or keep fellow humans hostage in a cellar, harvesting chunks of their living flesh as food.

Nevertheless, while it is easy to become mesmerized by McCarthy's vivid renderings of unthinkable horror and the phantasmagoria of corpses frozen in all kinds of poses of antic death, *The Road* also takes up some of McCarthy's most compelling questions yet, such as, what wills one to live when every shred of humanity, culture, and society has been obliterated? Or even, what does one live for when the recognizable features of your own life have slipped off into a void? "The slow surf crawled and seethed in the

dark and he thought about his life," writes McCarthy of the father, "but there was no life to think about and after a while he walked back" (p. 237).

For the man, the only thread binding him to this barely living world is his son, who was born around the time of the apocalypse and knows no other world. (The boy's mother chose to end her own life rather than try to exist in the dead and dying landscape.) The entire circumference of life is protecting the boy and sustaining him. This is his Ahab-like obsession; existence has been swallowed in the void, and there only remains this mission, a sort of Manifest Destiny handed down to him from above: "My job is to take care of you," he tells the boy. "I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (p. 77).

This mandate from God has also instilled in the father a strict moral compass, an anachronistic quality in a world devoid of humanity, structure, and law. Anointing themselves as chosen ones who "carry the fire," the father and son have a strict, if simple, moral code by which to live. "We're still the good guys," he tells his son. "And we will always be," the son replies. "Yes. We will always be," says the man (*ibid.*). This is the figurative "fire" they talk about; the two decide to lay fierce claim to the last vestiges of goodness in world beyond despair.

It is compelling that the man holds on to a notion of God in the wake of an apocalypse that has taken hope, most of life, and certainly all organized religion with it. And this actually makes *The Road*—the novel that, paradoxically, finally brought to bear McCarthy's end of the world—much less nihilistic and pessimistic than most of his other works. There is even something like hope in the novel's final pages, when the boy is taken in by strangers, strangers who also appear to be rare "good guys," and when the woman says to the boy that "the breath of God was his breath yet through it pass from man to man through all of time" (p. 286). What, specifically, can emerge from this lift at the end is unclear, though, and more a suggestion than a resolution.

Nevertheless, in this book of unrelenting blackness, we see a sea change from the ultimately triumphant evil in books such as *Blood Meridian* (1985). We experienced similar relentless visions of horror in that novel, set in the Old West of the 1800s, such as a tree with the bodies of infants hanging from it, but, as William Kennedy notes, "Evil victorious is not [*The Road*'s] theme. McCarthy changes the odds to favor the man and boy, who for a decade have survived death."

There is a flirtation with McCarthy's old brand of nihilism, though, in the form of Ely, an aged and starving man reduced to filth and rags, whose reaction to the desiccated world they inhabit is summed up in the paradoxical assertion: "There is no God and we are his prophets," which casts him for a moment like a character in a Samuel Beckett play (p. 170). But the father, despite his bleak vision for their future, clings to his God and his morality and considers himself a final agent of His will, even if his mission exists in a void, the larger design of the world having been annihilated: "On this road there are no godspoke men," ruminates the man. "They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world" (p. 32). *Slate* magazine described the conundrum

as a “desire to be good although it serves no purpose” (Egan).
Obviously, all of this points to the biblical overtones in the novel. There are even suggestions that the son of the man is actually a Son of Man and that this road has all of the gravity and importance of the biblical roads to Damascus and Emmaus. Nevertheless, a clear parallel with biblical themes is difficult in a novel where all of culture and the religions within it have dissolved (possibly in the wake of a holy war).

Some McCarthy fanatics on the Internet have debated the significance of the clocks having frozen at 1:17 during the catastrophic impact. If one were to draw a biblical connection, this would place us in Genesis, where God is creating the world and all of life.
In 1:17 God places the sun and the stars in the firmament, to light the earth and divide day from night. McCarthy often cuts against the grain of canonical themes and stories and converts them into something that is his own; therefore, it would be just like the author to actually blot out that light in the firmament at 1:17, so that “by day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp” (p. 32).

This inversion calls to mind the final border volume *Cities of the Plain*, the title of which alludes to Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Bible, the cities are destroyed by God because they are evil and corrupt, but in McCarthy’s narrative, the corrupted cities of Juárez and El Paso flourish while the just and good John Grady Cole is killed by a Juárez pimp, truly a victory for depravity. William Kennedy, himself a Pulitzer Prize winner for *Ironweed*, noted the biblical overtones running through the work and contended that *The Road* “is as biblical as it is ultimate” and even termed it a “messianic parable.” Kennedy also noted the clear parallel between the previously mentioned ragged old man they encounter, named “Ely,” and the prophet Elijah. That bent and blighted naysayer from *The Road* also has a corollary in the character Elijah from *Moby-Dick*, McCarthy’s self-professed favorite novel. Melville’s biblical Elijah is also physically decrepit, sporting a withered arm and deep smallpox scars and speaking in a similarly cryptic and foreboding manner regarding Ahab, whom Ishmael has yet to lay eyes upon.
One of the messianic qualities of the boy—and another bit of redemptive light in the blackness—is his overwhelming sense of compassion for all he encounters: the ragged old man, a boy he briefly glimpses in an abandoned town, one of the last dogs in existence, even a robber whom they overtake after he steals all of their life-sustaining supplies.
He is a sort of pure boy and a blank slate. Born after the devastation, he has no sense of the pop culture and structures that preceded this life. He even gets confused by common sayings like “as the crow flies,” an expression that has no meaning in a world where all of the birds have died and no one asks for directions anymore.

The Road is dedicated to McCarthy’s son, John Francis McCarthy, who was still quite young around the time of the book’s release, so certainly McCarthy’s own boy and parenting were at the forefront of his mind as he composed the novel. He admitted—in an interview with Oprah Winfrey—that his son inspired *The Road*. In another of his rare interviews, with *Rolling Stone* in December 2007, a year after the release of the novel, McCarthy presented this dismal outlook on raising children in contemporary times, pointing a finger at the growing violence in American society and pop culture: “If kids are unstable, they may very well be cranked up by the violence they see, and might do

things that they wouldn't have done or would have taken them longer to get around to," McCarthy said. "But the real culprit is violence against children. A lot of children don't grow up well.... We know how to make serial killers. You just take a Type A kid who's fairly bright and just beat the crap out of him day after day" (Kushner). McCarthy presents in *The Road* a child who is never exposed to contemporary, violent popular culture and who is under the care of a fiercely protective parent, basically resolving the two issues he speaks of here (though surely this boy is exposed to unspeakable visions in this post-apocalyptic world).

The novel was almost universally well received upon its release in 2006 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. Stylistically, though, it was a bit pared back, especially when compared to the Border Trilogy or *Blood Meridian*. Kennedy noted in his review that it was "a dynamic tale, offered in the often exalted prose that is McCarthy's signature, but this time in restrained doses—short, vivid sentences, episodes only a few paragraphs or a few lines long, which is yet another departure for him." He also pointed out how McCarthy had put aside the linguistic excesses and the philosophizing for which he has been both venerated and mocked—those Faulknerian convolutions, the Melvillean sermonizing—and opted for terse dialogue and spartan narrative, a style he inherited from another of his ancestors, Hemingway, and long ago made his own.

Nevertheless, that big, profound stentorian voice for which McCarthy is known does ring out in its omniscient way from the mountaintop occasionally, particularly in the final passage of the novel, a short epilogue that leaves the characters and action to present a brief and final statement, one that is simultaneously filled with hope and hopelessness—as well as downright ambiguity:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and Mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery [*The Road*, pp. 286–287].

That mysterious hum is often at the heart of McCarthy's novels. Mystery burst free from human strictures and ecclesiast is in fact his very idiom. Here he presents the idea that there is a natural order that can never be restored, yet he also presents us, just before this, with hope for humanity—the boy and the father did keep the course of their moral compass, they did remain the "good guys." And though the father does die, the boy still has "the fire." He still carries that flame of humanity, and he is taken in by others who are "good" as well.

But the lines make it clear that if there is to be a new world, then it will be nothing like the old natural order. There is also a sense of the fleeting condition of the human race: "In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (p. 287). There are no words for that mystery, McCarthy seems to be telling us; it is a mystery that existed long before humans and before the language, philosophy, or religion that we use to explain the world. In fact, in *The Road* McCarthy describes a

world that is withdrawing to a pre-language, pre-belief, pre-cultural condition: “The world shrinking down around a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true” (p. 88).
That old mysterious hum is something that McCarthy keeps bringing us as close to as he can, but it necessarily remains just beyond our periphery. For it is just that: a hum beyond language and human understanding. As one academic suggested of those final lines in *The Road*: “These evocations of nature function primarily as points of inaccessibility.

Not merely because they refer to the past or to that which is dead but because they are intimations of a nature that exceeds the human.” The critic added, “They are points of numinosity that signal to the present reader a not-yet-achieved consciousness” (Ryan, p. 11).

Nevertheless, McCarthy’s insistence on keeping the mystery just that, a mystery, has frustrated many readers of *The Road*. William Kennedy saw the concluding evocation as too “austere” for such a vividly rendered, post-apocalyptic pilgrimage and furthermore lamented how the “scarcity of thought in the novel’s mystical infrastructure [left] the boy a designated but unsubstantiated messiah” with an uncertain future. “It makes us wish that that old humming mystery had a lyric,” he concluded in his *New York Times* review. The work of Cormac McCarthy, however, has consistently been to take the reader to the mouth of the allegorical cave or to the edge of those figurative glens—and no further. Just close enough to ponder that ageless hum. Perhaps the final word is best left to McCarthy himself, who said in his TV interview with Oprah Winfrey, “I don’t think you have to have a clear idea who or what God is in order to pray.”

Summary and Analysis Section 1

Summary

The man wakes in the woods to the desolate, gray, gloomy world around him. He pushes aside the tarp and stinking blankets and rises, checks on his sleeping son, and reflects upon a dream he had in the night. In the dream he holds the boy's hand, leading him into a cave where there's a lake and, on the far shore of the lake, a pale, translucent, naked creature.

At the first sign of light, the man leaves the boy to study the land around them. He thinks it is October, but hasn't kept a calendar for years, indicating that the world has been in this desolate state for an extended period of time. He and the boy are moving south where the man hopes the winters will be easier to survive.

He returns to the boy and readies the tarp for breakfast, setting the pistol on the cloth in front of him. He reassures the boy that he is there, that he hasn't left him alone.

Then, they return to the road, pushing a cart loaded with their supplies and belongings. Each of them carries a knapsack that holds their essential things should they have to abandon the cart and make a run for it.

At a gas station, the man finds very little. He finds a phone and dials the number of his father's house, just as he'd done in his earlier life, but there's no phone service anymore. He is able to decant a bit of oil for their lamp before they leave and continue their walk south. They crest over a hill and look down upon roadways and a burned house, billboards that now mean nothing. Everything is dead and covered in ash.

The next day, they descend into the city. There are no signs of life here, just burned buildings, cars covered in dust, and a dried corpse in a doorway. The man tells the boy that he should be careful about what he looks at and what he puts in his head, because once those memories are there, they won't go away, especially the bad memories. The man recalls a day from his boyhood, spent with his uncle on a lake in a rowboat. They dragged a stump across the water's surface and didn't speak a word the entire afternoon or evening. The man believes this was the perfect day from his childhood.

Analysis

From the start, McCarthy establishes that the man and boy exist in a future where the world as we know it has been destroyed. The landscape is ravaged, little life survives, little hope remains, and danger is ever present as the man and boy make their way south along the road. This danger is evidenced by the care they take in keeping their cart hidden on the side of the road, and the rearview mirror they have attached to the handle to see if anyone is approaching them from behind, and their constant states of lookout for signs of smoke or fire.

Throughout the novel there is a strong focus on the bond between father and son. The man sees his son as the only remaining sign of God's existence; without his son, the man has no hope for the future. Their mutual desires to live and die depend solely on one another.

Another theme that emerges at the start of the novel is that of frames, or skeletal shapes. In the city and along the road, all that the father and boy see are the shapes (or remains) of the old world. They see the frames of cars, barns, and houses, and they see the physical remains of dried and decaying human bodies. McCarthy's writing style reflects this sparseness in that he chooses to write in fragments and he keeps the father's and son's dialogue very choppy. The language of the novel reflects the skeletal and barren landscape through which father and son must travel.

Additionally, the theme of dreams emerges in this section. There are dreams that the man has at night, the dreams (or flashbacks) he has during the day. Examples of these flashbacks would be the man's memories of phoning his father's house or spending time on the lake with his uncle.

Summary and Analysis Section 2

Summary

The man and the boy continue south. They walk for weeks through the raw landscape, passing old aluminum houses and burned countryside. They struggle against the cold nights and the man worries about keeping their shoes in good shape and finding their next source of food. They eat sparingly and watch out for the bloodcults, roadagents, and marauders. They stop in an old barn, where bodies hang from the rafters. The man and boy speak very little and trudge on through the unforgiving landscape.

The man has dreams about his wife, but he mistrusts these dreams, that take him back to the phantom world of what once was. He believes that his survival depends upon his dreams remaining dark and perilous, whereas pleasant dreams mean that he is succumbing to death's beckon. The man wills himself to stay alive because the boy needs him.

At a supermarket, the man finds a soft drink machine with one Coca-Cola inside. He lets the boy, who's never seen a soda before, drink from the can. The boy knows he might never taste this drink again.

They make their way into a city where all that remains are the mummified dead. Farther south they find the man's childhood home, which stirs up memories of his sisters, his mother, his father. The boy is scared of the house, just as he is scared to go inside many of the houses and enclosures that they come upon.

They make their way into the mountains and the man recalls the first years of the world's demise, how the refugees wore masks and goggles and sat along the sides of the road, their spirits destroyed. Now very few survivors remain, and the man worries often about death. As they make their slow ascent, the cold worsens, as does the man's cough, which leaves a mist of blood on the gray snow. They come upon the gap in the mountains, the man unsure of what they will find at the coast, or if they'll even make it there at all.

Analysis

The man continues to draw a link between the boy and God. When he sees the boy catch a gray snowflake in the palm of his hand, the man thinks about taking the host, the body of Christ. And

it is the boy whom the man calls "God's own firedrake." The boy carries the fire and keeps the fire alive within the man.

The theme of fire, and of carrying the fire, is also an important theme in this novel. Fire is an important source of warmth for the man and his son; they have to struggle through many cold, wet nights without it. The flames, though, stir hope in the man.

Dreams and memories continue to play a large role in this section. The man must fight back dreams of his wife and dreams about things that will never happen again, such as walking through the wildflowers and forests, tasting a peach, spending a Christmas in his childhood home or a night by the fire with his sisters. These dreams, he believes, are the call of death, the phantoms that will make him want to give up.

There is a recurring juxtaposition of the old world with the new, the phantoms and shapes that remain of a world that will be no more. In this section, along with the man's dreams and his childhood home, the man and boy also see a lake that has no more fish, a concrete dam that will remain long after people, and newspapers that contain "quaint concerns."

The man's cough is ominous in this chapter, as is his uncertainty about what they will find at the coast. As much as he encourages his son onward to the south and to the coast, he is very aware that all of his plans and promises could be empty, that maybe there is no chance of survival. Still, for his son, he presses on and carries the fire, wondering all the while if he'll be able to do it "when the time comes." While the man doesn't say what he's referring to, it becomes clear that he thinks he may have to one

Summary and Analysis Section 3

Summary

The man and the boy make camp in the mountain pass and then move on the next morning. Before setting out they have a small breakfast of crackers, tinned sausages, and hot chocolate. The boy watches his father, noticing that his father is pouring himself only water. The boy tells his father not to do that, not to go without so that the boy may have more.

The man has to drag the cart through sludge, and their continued descent takes days. Finally, they reach the river. A waterfall streams before them and the boy watches it in awe. The water is freezing, but the man and the boy go swimming in it anyway. They make camp near the waterfall and find some morels, out of which they make a meager dinner. To put the boy to sleep, the man tells him stories of courage and justice from the old world.

The boy wants to stay at the waterfall, or at least follow the river, but the man says the river runs east and that they must continue south. He shows the boy their map, now a tattered piece of parchment they must piece together each time they want to look at it. They continue to follow the state roads of states that no longer exist, states that the boy has never known.

They come upon an overturned tractor-trailer that's been jackknifed there for years. To get to the other side of it, they must slide the cart sideways beneath it. They camp in the truck cab and the next morning the man finds human bodies sprawled in the trailer.

That night in the woods, a storm breaks out, lightning flashing around them and setting fire to the trees. They have to wait for the road to cool so that the macadam doesn't stick to their feet. Ahead of them they see tracks and soon come upon a man, limping and ragged. They follow him, but his pace is slow, and soon the man sits on the road, not even daring to look up at the man and the boy as they pass. He's been struck by lightning, and they leave him there, the boy crying. He wants to help the man, but his father explains that he's going to do and there's nothing they can do to prevent that.

The man remembers his billfold, how he eventually left that behind in the road, along with his wife's picture. He feels guilty for not keeping her memory alive. He thinks back to the first day, how the clocks stopped at 1:17 and he filled the bathtub with water, all the electricity exhausted.

The boy says he wishes he was with his mom, that he wishes he were dead. The man tells him he mustn't say that. The man remembers the night she left, how she'd wished they'd all gone ahead and killed themselves, but she especially wished she'd killed their son. She's leaving them both so that she can die alone. She can't bear to see her son raped, killed, and eaten, a future she believes is imminent no matter how much the man says he will protect them. She leaves in the dark night, and the next morning, the man and the boy set out. The boy knows she's left them.

Analysis

In this section we see that the boy feels a great deal of responsibility to keep his father alive, to make sure that his father is taking care of himself, too. This is shown in how the boy makes him take some of the hot chocolate.

As much as the world has changed, there still exists a strong, traditional bond between the man and his son. The father is trying to keep the fire alive in his son by telling him stories of courage and justice. They take time to enjoy the waterfall together, the man floating the boy on his stomach and helping to push him around in the water, just as a father might have done before the world expired.

This section highlights the boy's strong sense of right and wrong. He feels guilt at leaving the man who's been struck by lightning behind. This is a recurring theme in the novel, how the boy wants to give what they have to others in order to help them, but how the father must refuse such help so that the two of them can survive. It creates a tension between the father and son, sometimes a silence, as is indicated by the father asking if his son is still talking to him after they've left the man behind.

Dreams and memories play a strong role in this section as the son has a nightmare about an old wind-up penguin toy that he had at the house where they once lived. The man, too, has dreams about figures standing on the far side of a river, calling to him. Perhaps it is the call of death. He thinks more and more about his wife, about the day on which the world ceased to exist as they'd known it, about how she'd left them in the middle of the night, and about how he'd left her, too, when he put his wallet with her picture on the road. The man wants to hold onto his wife, wants to keep her memory alive for himself and for the boy, but he knows that this will only make living harder.

The son says that he wants to be with his mother, that he wishes he were dead, and the man tells him that it's bad to say this, bad to think it, that he mustn't wish to be with his mother. Not only

does the ghost of the old world haunt the man and the boy, but the ghost of the boy's mother haunts them as well.

Summary and Analysis Section 4

Summary

The man remembers the birth of his son, how he delivered him by the light of a drycell lamp and cut the cord with kitchen shears, the beginning of their special bond.

The boy asks his father if he used to have friends. The man said he did, that he remembers them, but they're all dead now. When they wake the next morning, they hear men coming, the bad men who carry lengths of pipe and clubs. The man topples the cart, hides it, and takes the boy and runs through the woods. They crouch behind an embankment, and the road gang's truck dies. Upon them comes one of the bad men who is going to the bathroom. The father raises his pistol at the bad man, they exchange words, and the father reveals in his speech that he has knowledge of human anatomy. The bad man asks if he's a doctor because they've got a man hurt. The father says he isn't anything and asks the bad man to go with them, but the man refuses, reaches for his knife, grabs the boy, and the father shoots the bad man in the head, covering the boy with the man's gore.

They run through the woods and hide, listening through the freezing night as the men search for them. The man holds his son close, trying to keep him warm. He thinks of the single round left in the revolver and wonders again if he'll be able to do it, if he'll be able to shoot his son should the time come.

The next morning, all that remains of the road gang are some tracks in the road and the dead man's remains. The dead man's gang boiled the man, ate him, and left behind his innards. Their cart has been ransacked and they leave it behind, continuing south, camping through cold and barren nights around a fire, their food supply running out.

Eventually they come upon a town and enter one of the stores, taking whatever supplies they can find. They move southward to the houses at the edge of town and they see a dog. The boy makes sure that they aren't going to eat the dog, and his father promises him that no, they won't hurt the dog at all.

That night, sleeping in a parked car, the boy asks his father if they're still the good guys. The man tells his son that they are still the good guys, that they are still carrying the fire.

Analysis

The man sees the boy as something that is greater than himself, something holy, as is symbolized by the man referring to his son as the "golden chalice." He also describes the moment in which he washes the bad man's brains from his sons hair as some kind of "ancient anointing," something that indicates the boy's holiness in this new world.

Because the man was chosen as the boy's father, he has been entrusted by God to take care of him. The man reflects often on his role as the father, how he must be the one to wash the bad

man's brains from his son's hair, and he questions again in this chapter about whether he'll be able to kill his son if the time should come. With one bullet left, he knows that

Fire continues to be a central theme, as many of the descriptions in this section focus on the building of fires, how the man shapes the fire, and how both he and his son stoke the fire. In many ways, the man is shaping and stoking the fire within his son, too, by sharing stories of the old world and by instilling a sense of right and wrong in the boy.

In this section, the boy still raises questions of morality, asking if they're still the good guys even though they killed the bad man. He wants to make sure that they are doing right even when so many others are doing wrong, as is indicated by the dog and how the boy wants to make sure that he and his father won't hurt the dog, a creature that many others would choose to eat. The fire is alive in the boy.

The bad man and the road gang in this chapter symbolize the deterioration of the human race. They embody the ugliness that has emerged in this new world where almost all things beautiful have been destroyed. For the man, though, he still has his son. And the boy still has his father. What is shared between them is something sacred, and McCarthy alludes to this by including the flashbacks of the boy's birth, how it is the father who delivers his son and how it is the father who is appointed by God to take care of his son no matter what evil and desperate situations befall them.

Summary and Analysis Section 5

Summary

The next morning they begin to search through more houses. The boy sees another little boy, about his age, and chases after him, shouting that he won't hurt him. The man chases after his son and grabs him, asking him what he was doing, but doesn't see the other little boy himself. The man believes that there are people there watching them, but they're hiding.

They move southward, and the snow and cold continue to be relentless. They are almost completely out of food, and the man can feel the old world moving farther and farther out of his reach. He cannot remember certain colors or the names of birds. They come upon more burned houses where all that remains is the shape of each place.

They follow a stone wall past the remains of an orchard, and hanging on another wall they find dried human heads and raw skulls. They move slowly and wake from camp one morning to find the bad guys tramping by them, an army wearing red scarves at their necks. They carry lengths of pipe and every manner of bludgeon. There are pregnant women and slaves harnessed to wagons. They move past the boy and the man who hide along the roadside.

While they walk, the boy asks if the man will tell them if they are about to die. The man says he doesn't know, but that they're not going to die.

One night they camp in the snowy woods and the trees begin to fall down around them. The man and the boy run to get out of the path of the falling trees and huddle under the tarp until it stops. The next morning, they find the cart, and the father rewraps their feet to keep them warm and dry.

The man asks the boy if he still thinks they're going to die and the boy isn't sure. He doesn't know if his father would lie to him about that. The man admits that he might lie about dying, but that he isn't lying now and that right now they're not dying.

They come upon wheel tracks in the snow. Someone had passed their camp in the night, and the man believes that the bad guys are coming. He and the boy make a maze of tracks in the snow so that they can't be followed, and move to higher ground from where they can watch the road. Two men come through, but they pass by, not seeing the man and his son.

Analysis

In this section we see the constant dangers that the man and the boy must face. They fight starvation, the cold, and must evade the bad guys. While their daily purpose remains the same — to stay alive and to move south — the threats that they encounter vary, and they must learn to deal with these threats in various ways.

We see that the boy is very concerned for the other boy's safety, wondering what will happen to him and asking if they can take the boy with them. In many ways, the boy's fear for the other boy represents the fear and worry that he has for himself. He fears losing his father and being left all alone.

The man's inability to recall the birds and colors and pleasantries of the old world illustrate how the old world is falling away from him, in much the same way that the physical world is being scaled back, too. The trees in the forest collapse, and all that is left of the old world is a shape, the skeletal remains of houses, barns, buildings, and roadways. This theme of sparseness and skeletons continues in this section as is seen through the image of the human skulls on the stone wall, the image of the "trellis of a dog," and even the thinness of the boy as observed by the man. McCarthy continues to reflect the barrenness of this world in the barrenness of the language. The writing style is often in fragmented form, especially when the father and son are exchanging dialogue.

The description of the bad guys as wind-up dolls recalls the nightmare that the boy has earlier in the novel when he dreams of a penguin toy that walks without being wound-up. The bad guys are just as soulless as the penguin wind-up toy. Whatever was once human in them — the fire — has gone. It is up to the man and the boy to carry the fire and be the good guys.

Summary and Analysis Section 6

Summary

The man and the boy come upon a house that was obviously once very nice. They are starving and the man wants to go inside to search for food. The boy, however, finds the house terrifying and doesn't want to go inside. But the man pushes on. Inside they find mattresses and bedding sprawled in front of a fireplace and a pile of clothes, shoes, belts, and coats in a corner of one of the rooms.

In a small room adjoining the kitchen, something like a pantry, there is a door in the floor that's locked with a large padlock. The man finds tools to break the latch, while the boy begs him not to open it. The boy claims that he's' no longer hungry anymore and just wants to leave. The man

persists; he opens the door in the floor and the two descend into a cellar — the stench almost unbearable. They find naked and starving men and women. They see a man with both of his legs gone to the hip; his torso, where his legs would have started, burned. The people beg the man and boy for help, but the two run back up the stairs and through the hatch. Through the window they see four men and two women walking across the field to the house.

The man and boy run for the woods. The man fears that this may finally be the day when he's going to have to kill his son. He thinks about running in the direction opposite the boy to lead the bad people away. He tries to leave the pistol with the boy and tells him that if the people find him, he has to shoot himself. He directs the boy to stick the pistol's end in his mouth and aim up, but the man sees that the boy is too scared and that he can't leave him there alone. The man wonders what he'll do if the pistol fails, if he'll be able to pummel the boy's skull with a rock. They wait out the night in the cold woods.

Analysis

This section illustrates more of the evil that the man and the boy are up against. The juxtaposition of the house, itself, which was once a grand estate, and the horrible things that are now going on inside the house speaks to the novel's ongoing theme of how a once beautiful world has disintegrated into something so cold, stark, and ugly.

This section provides a glimpse into the atrocities that some people are willing to commit to keep themselves alive. While there are hints throughout the house that something terrible is occurring (such as the pile of clothes and the bell attached to a line), the man doesn't recognize the warnings signs until it's too late. Instead, it is the boy who senses that they need to leave, but his father doesn't listen and they almost end up paying with their lives.

It is implied that the people in the basement are being kept alive only to be eaten, a limb at a time, as illustrated by the man on the bed whose legs have been burnt off. Before opening the door, the man says, "There's a reason this is locked" (108). He believes it's because there is food down there, and, in a morbid sense, this is true. The humans in the basement are being treated like livestock, and there's nothing that the boy or man can do to help them, or they might end up in the same position.

This section also investigates the man's internal struggle about whether he'd be able to kill the one thing that is keeping him alive: his son. The man does everything in his power to protect his son and to make sure the boy doesn't fall into the hands of the bad people. It is a continuous struggle for him to weigh the risks surrounding them while they are on the road. Houses and enclosed spaces may lead to danger, as this house does, but these places also offer the possibility of food, which is detrimental to their survival.

Summary and Analysis Section 7

Summary

The man and boy set out through the woods, often stumbling due to exhaustion and hunger. The man has to carry the boy but can't get very far. He wakes in the woods and sees the shape of a

house and a barn in the distance. He knows that desperation led him to carelessness at the last house and understands that he must proceed with more caution from here on.

He leaves the pistol with the boy, who's still sleeping in the woods, and goes through a gnarled apple orchard to get to the barn. Inside, the smell of cows linger. The man wonders if cows have gone extinct. In the house, he finds a packet of grape powder drink mix and notices a drainpipe running down the corner of the porch and into a tank, where he finds fresh water. He fills mason jars with the water and goes out to the orchard, where there are the shriveled remains of apples. He fills his pockets with the apples and returns to the still-sleeping boy. They spend the afternoon eating apples and drinking water. The boy likes the grape mix. They return to the house to gather more water and apples, then they embark on the road again.

Analysis

After they found no resources at the last house and going into it nearly cost them their lives, this farmhouse proved to be a source of lifesaving sustenance. The boy tells his father that he did good. The man and boy's journey continues to be one of ups and downs. They come close to death and then, at the last moment, they find something to help them continue on the road for a little bit longer.

The theme of skeletons and skeletal remains continues in this section. The father sees that the boy is so starved that he resembles a prisoner at a death camp. The man also sees the shape of a house and a barn from his vantage point in the woods, indicating that those places were once a house and a barn, but now they are simply the empty shells of a time that's past. The apple orchard, too, is gnarled and skeletal in appearance. All of these images call up a world that is no more. Only skeletons of the old world remain.

The theme of memories reappears, too, with the smell of cows in the barn. The scent makes the man wonder if any more cows exist in the world. He thinks of the past and what he once knew of cows, and then he thinks of the future and wonders why anyone would care to keep a cow now, which hints at his sense of hopelessness for the world.

Summary and Analysis Section 8

Summary

The man and the boy walk the road into the night and through the freezing rain. Of all the bad nights they've had, this is one of the worst and longest nights the man can remember. When the rain stops, the man tries to dry their clothes. The boy asks for a fire and the man apologizes but tells him that he dropped the lighter. The boy asks if the bad are people are going to eat the people in the cellar. The man tells him yes. The boy asks if that's why they couldn't help the people in the cellar, if it's because the bad people would have eaten them too. The man says yes again, that they couldn't help otherwise they may have been eaten, too.

They pass through towns with billboards advertising products that no longer exist, the ads painted over with warnings. Out of apples and starving, they search desperately for food. The boy tells his father that they'd never eat anyone, no matter how hungry they become. He wants to

make sure this is true, and the man confirms it. The boy wants to make sure they are still the good guys, that they are still carrying the fire.

Fearing that they're both close to death, the man wonders if they should find a place to hide where they won't be found. He watches the boy sleep and sobs uncontrollably. He has nightmares about the boy on a cooling board, and then he has other dreams about the old, lost world, about his wife in her nightgown.

They move through the remains of charred houses. The man raises the pistol to their reflections in a mirror in one of the houses. The boy tells him, "It's us," and they move on. At the back of the house, the man notices that the ground feels different beneath his feet. He gets a garden spade and begins to dig.

Analysis

The boy is very aware of the horrors happening around him. He knows what is going to happen to the people in the basement without asking his father, but he still asks. The boy wants to make sure that they couldn't have done anything to help the people. He struggles with guilt and morality and wants to make sure that no matter how desperate they become, he and his father continue to carry the fire and the goodness along the dark road.

As the man and boy make their journey, scavenging for supplies, their dialogue continues to mimic the landscape. It's very sparse and exists as more of a frame for a conversation rather than a fully realized discussion.

Just as it is difficult for the man to recognize the world he now inhabits, it is also difficult for him to recognize his own reflection. He worries constantly about their survival, particularly for his son, and the theme of dreams returns as both the present and past worlds come to haunt him at night. His nightmares are of violence to his son and his other dreams, the pleasant ones that call him to death, are of his wife. He cries for his son and for all of the beauty that he will never see or experience, which again begs the question about the future, about why they're trying to survive at all. For what? Yet, as the man digs at the end of this section, there is a continued search for something good and for something to sustain the man and his boy.

Summary and Analysis Section 9

Summary

The man digs and finds a door. The boy, remembering what happened when they opened the cellar door at the large house, doesn't want him to open it. So they sit down together and talk about it. The man says they need to try it, that the good guys keep trying things. The boy decides it's okay to try.

The man lifts the door and beneath he finds stairs that descend into a bunker full of canned goods, blankets, cots to sleep on, water, soap, ammunition (but no gun), and various other supplies. The abundance astonishes both the man and the boy, and the boy wonders about the people who made the bunker. He decides they're dead and wants to know if it's okay for them to use their supplies. The man says they'd want them to use their bunker because they were good guys, too.

Over one of their meals, the boy thanks the people who supplied the bunker. The man knows they can't stay here long, that it will be difficult to keep their door in the ground hidden. They heat water and bathe in the house. The man has to come to terms with living. He'd been prepared to die, and now they've found sustenance to keep them going for a bit longer. The bunker is their small paradise in a very brutal world.

Analysis

This section allows us to see the man and the boy enjoying a brief reprieve from their rigorous journey. The discovery of the bunker itself is very dreamlike, and the man observes that the boy doesn't appear to be able to commit himself to the reality of the bunker and all of its luxuries, wary that he might wake up in the middle of the woods, cold and hungry. The bunker, itself, is yet another reminder of the world that is no more. The boy has never known a world in which he had easy access to such wealth, and the bunker provides them with all of these comforts.

After being so close to death, the man finds it difficult to shift his thoughts back to living, to prepare himself to continue this fight for survival. In many ways, death would be a relief, but — as the man says — the good guys keep trying, and he knows that he must keep himself alive to keep his son alive.

The boy continues to worry about their role as the good guys, making sure that by eating someone else's food and using someone else's bunker that they aren't doing anything wrong. Carrying the fire is of the utmost importance to the boy.

Summary and Analysis Section 10

Summary

The man and the boy head into town and find a cart to fill with the goods from the bunker. They hide it in the shed until they're ready to leave their sanctuary. The man knows it's important not to stay too long, that their paradise will be discovered soon enough.

Later that day, the man cuts the boy's hair, then his own. He shaves. There are a few nights of heavy rain, so they delay their departure from the bunker and spend the days eating and sleeping. When the rain eases up, they leave and continue their journey to the coast. The man thinks they're about 200 miles away, "as the crow flies." The boy asks if there are any more crows or if they're only in books. The man says they only exist in books now, and the boy says that's what he thought.

They stop for the night on a hill. The boy wants to know what their long-term goals are. The man asks where the boy heard that phrase and the boy tells his father he heard it from him, but neither the man nor the boy can remember what those goals were.

Analysis

Again, we see the man thinking about the future, imagining how the boy fits into the future. The man also thinks about what the boy must think of him. To the boy, the father decides, he must be a kind of alien, a person coming from a world that the boy has never known. The man worries that his stories of the old world, and perhaps even the bunker itself with all of its wealth of

goods, might be harmful to the boy; they might make his trek on the road more difficult. At the end of this section, the father learns that the boy has thrown away his flute, which indicates that at some point along their journey, the boy determined that music no longer had value. The boy's actions indicate that he, too, might feel as if there's no hope left.

The moment when the man cuts his son's hair is very poignant in that it recalls father and son rituals of the old world. The boy watches the man shave, learning from his father, except this father and son exist in a different world, one in which rituals such as these are almost forgotten. The two of them keep some part of that old world together, but they're pioneering what that relationship means in this world where they are two of the few remaining good guys.

The man has another dream. This time it is about creatures at his bedside; he thinks they have come to warn him — but of what, he's not sure. The dream makes him regret their discovery of the bunker. He admits that there's some part of him that always wishes for their struggling to be over, and perhaps those creatures are connected with that part of him, that link to death of which the man always ponders when he dreams.

This section ends with the boy asking about long-term goals, a question that leads the man to wonder what those goals are, what they have become. They're still heading toward the coast, but what future will they find once they get there?

Summary and Analysis Section 11

Summary

The man and the boy come upon an old man ahead of them on the road. The man is wary of the old man, worrying that he's a decoy for roadagents. The old man is filthy and in poor shape. The boy wants to give the old man something to eat. He wants to comfort him, but his father tells him that the old man can't come with them, that they can't keep him. He and his son make a deal: They give the old man a cup of fruit on the side of the road and invite him to eat dinner with them that night.

At their fireside, the man asks the old man about his time on the road, about how he has survived for so long and who else he's met along the way. The old man offers his perspective on the state of the world, saying that he knew something like this would happen eventually. The old man relates that he thinks it would be awful to be the last person on earth, and suggests that it might have been nice to have died already because while nobody wants to be living under the circumstances they're living in. The old man also confesses that no one wants to die, either. He says that his name is Ely, but also says that's a lie. He doesn't want to give away his real name because he doesn't want people talking about him. He doesn't trust anyone else with his name. Ely goes on to say that he doesn't believe in God, and that it'd be better if everyone did just die, because then all that would be left of the world would be Death, who would have nothing left to do. Ely admits that he thought he had died when he saw the boy, because he didn't think he'd ever see a child again.

The next morning, the man and the boy part ways with Ely. The boy has persuades his father to leave Ely with some cans of food. Ely, however, doesn't thank the boy, admitting to the man that he wouldn't have given them food if he'd been the one with supplies. The man says that the boy

didn't give him the food for the thanks. Ely wonders if the boy believes in God. The man says he's not sure what the boy believes in.

Analysis

This section illustrates more of the moral dilemmas that the man and boy struggle with. The boy wants to help the old man, saying that he's scared and hungry, but the father is wary of the man, wondering if Ely might be a decoy for some roadagents. The father also knows that their survival depends upon them conserving their food, so helping others along the road isn't a good option. But the boy's sense of goodness and his desire to remain a good guy are enough to make the man give Ely some food.

Their discussion about whether they should feed the man calls up a father and son conversation common to the old world that usually focused on whether a child could keep a dog. They use the same language that would have once been used to negotiate a pet adoption ("Can we keep him"), but in this new world, such language refers to a human life.

This section, too, focuses on this theme of the future and death with Ely serving as the primary philosopher on the topic. Just as the man has wondered about whether it's better to give in to death or to keep going, Ely too has thoughts on this topic, believing that being the last man alive would be a horrible fate.

Ely admits that he no longer believes in God, but he wonders if the boy does. The man mentions that perhaps the boy himself is a god, again placing almost a mythical quality to the boy's role in the future of this new world. When Ely says that he never thought he'd see a child again, it adds to the boy's importance. The boy still represents hope and, perhaps, the presence of innocence and goodness alive in this new and caustic world. The boy's goodness is one that not even his father can understand, something buried deep within. The boy, more so than anyone, carries the fire.

Summary and Analysis Section 12

Summary

Later that afternoon, the man asks if the boy is purposefully not talking to him. He knows that the boy is upset over the man's unwillingness to let Ely stay with them and tells the boy that he'll have more time to think about Ely when they're out of food. The man knows the boy thinks that he was wrong for making Ely leave them. The boy feels sure that Ely is going to die.

The man's cough continues to get worse. He wakes in the cold night and thinks about Ely out on his own. The man knows he is dying and wonders how he can do that with the boy still alive.

The boy forgets to turn off both valves on their stove, so it runs out of gas. The man tries to hide the mistake from the boy, but the boy figures it out. The man insists that the mistake is not the boy's fault but his, because it's his job to check the tank.

They continue to make their way to the coast. The towns and land they pass through are full of death — dead creatures, dead homes, and barren fields — and they have been completely looted.

The boy discovers a train in the woods. They explore it and the boy sits in the engineer's seat, but they find nothing of substance. Their stores are all gone long before they reach the coast.

During their journey, they pause to look at the map and figure out their location. The boy wants to know if the sea is blue. The man says it used to be, but he doesn't know if it is anymore.

The man assures his son that there are other good guys on the road, but they're just hiding. They run into three men in the road, who want to know what's in their cart. The man aims his pistol at them, and he and the boy make their way past.

Analysis

In this section, multiple scenes foreshadow the man's death. The man's cough is getting worse and he admits to himself that he is dying and isn't sure how he can do that with his son still alive. He is afraid of leaving his son alone and continues to do all he can to protect the boy, even trying to spare him the guilt of forgetting to turn off the gas valve on the stove. The boy has a dream in which his father won't wake up even though the boy is crying for him.

The landscape is as hopeless as ever, with multiple images of death, such as the bones of dead creatures in the gullies and fields.

The image of the man and the boy on the train again recalls father and son moments from the world that no longer exists. The man places his son in the engineer's seat and makes train noises for the boy, before realizing that those noises mean nothing to him since the boy has never seen (nor heard) a working train. Again the man struggles to reconcile the old world with the new, while trying to decipher what his son must think of the world in which he's being raised. The train, which once represented industry and technology, now sits in the woods — an empty vessel and stands as a stark reminder to the man of a lost world, something that cannot be recovered or recreated for the boy.

When the man and the boy study the map, they work to figure out their location. This serves as a metaphor for their ultimate search for their place in the world. The man and boy don't know who else is out there, and although the man promises that there are other good guys out there, soon after they run into three men who aren't good guys. Still, the boy has already expressed that he believes his father is correct. He continues to believe that there are others out there like him and his father, carrying the fire.

Summary and Analysis Section 13

Summary

The man becomes very sick with a fever, and the boy is scared for him. The man's dreams become more peaceful and in them he's visited by dead kin. They don't move for more than four days and the man recalls a scene from his boyhood when he watched men burn a pile of snakes in a field.

The boy has a bad dream and refuses to tell the man what it's about. The man assures the boy that his bad dreams mean he hasn't given up. When they set out on the road again, the man is very weak. They come upon a stretch of road where everything has been burned and people

abandoned their belongings. Farther up, they find dead bodies, mummified in agony, melted into the black asphalt. The man says he doesn't want the boy looking, but the boy tells him that the images are already in his head and that they're not leaving.

The man feels as if someone is following them. They watch the road from a hiding spot atop the bluffs and see three men and a pregnant woman on the road. The man and boy remain where they are for the night and let the people pass.

The next morning, they see smoke coming from the place where the people camped. They go to investigate and find a skewered baby cooking over an open fire.

Analysis

In this section, the father's deteriorating health adds to the novel's tension. All along the man has been worried about his son, wondering what will happen if he has to leave the boy behind. The man believes that it is his purpose to protect the boy. There is a moment in this section when the father briefly muses on fatherhood, wondering if his ancestors are watching and if they are judging him and how he is caring for his son. This reflection is part of the novel's theme of fatherhood and the special bond that exists between father and son.

Dreams continue to play a large role in this section. While the man warns the boy that pleasant dreams are bad, telling his son that bad dreams mean he still wants to live, the man's dreams have taken a turn and become peaceful. The man's dreams focus on his own death; visions of dead relatives while he's ill represent his calling to death.

The image of serpents recurs in this section, as well. The man has had multiple dreams about beasts and creatures that are related to evil, and here he remembers seeing snakes burned when he was a boy. Shortly after the man recalls the burning snakes, the man and boy come upon human carcasses that were burned in the road, and the infant cooking on a spit. Each of these burned/burning images conveys desperation and hopelessness, which resonates with the man and boy's current state. The man continues to grow weaker and closer to death, the boy is beginning to realize that he is losing his father, the days remain bitterly cold, and their food stores are almost completely used up.

Summary and Analysis Section 14

Summary

They camp at the river. The man hopes the sound of the water will cheer up the boy after seeing the cooking baby carcass. The boy asks where the baby came from but his father doesn't answer. They continue to head south and to the coast without any knowledge of what they'll find when they get there. People's belongings are scattered by the road and the man recalls how the boy used to pick things up and carry them with him. The boy doesn't do that anymore.

They sleep deeper than before, waking up in the middle of the road, and the man knows that they are in desperate need of food. They haven't eaten in two days. The boy spots a house across the field and they make their way to it. Crossing the field, they find arrowheads and a coin with Spanish writing on it.

This house, like many of the other houses, makes the boy nervous. He doesn't want his father to go upstairs. They build a fire in the hearth and the man finds jarred foods. They cook a hot dinner and sleep, then explore the house the next day. They stay for four days, eating and sleeping, and in the yard they find a wheelbarrow. When they set out to retrieve their cart and resume their journey on the road, the boy asks if they did good, and his father confirms that they did.

Analysis

The man is noticing changes in the boy; it has been ages since he'd seen the boy run or pick up objects along the roadside and carry them with him. It's as if the boy has become less of child. Earlier in the novel, the boy discarded his flute. Now, he's lost a bit of his curious nature.

In this section, the country house offers the man and boy a moment of reprieve. They are able to find food and regain a bit of their strength. While doing so, the man muses on, wondering if "they" are watching. This question recalls the moment in the previous section when the man wonders if his fathers are watching him. The man believes that they are watching, that they are looking for something that not even death can undo. This "thing" is, presumably, the connection and love between father and son. The man believes that if the fathers don't see that this bond is still alive, that they will leave the man and boy there to die alone. But, if the man and boy remain so strongly linked, as they have been throughout their entire journey, then their fathers won't leave them.

The man recognizes that the tragedies the boy has witnessed while on the road have altered the boy in many ways, taking away his childhood, but the father continues to protect his son and keep the fire alive inside him. At the end of the section, the boy is pleased, knowing that they've done good, that they've managed to find a bit of sanctuary during their journey to the coast

Summary and Analysis Section 15

Summary

The man hopes that the coast will offer hope, but he knows he has no reason to believe this will be true. They eat sparingly and when they do finally reach the coast, they find that life isn't much different there. The sea isn't blue, and the man apologizes to the disappointed boy. Along the shore there are the bones of birds and ribs of fish, a bleak scene up and down the beach. The boy asks his father what's on the other side of the ocean. The man says that there's nothing, then he says that maybe there's another boy and his father, carrying the fire. The boy goes for a swim after the man telling him he should try it.

The man remembers another night he was at the beach, before the world slipped into this dark state. He recalls the warm sand, the stars, and his wife there beside him; a comforting, nearly perfect night.

The man and the boy comb the shore for tools and supplies they can use. They come upon a sailboat keeled over in the water, and the man undresses and swims out to the hull. He explores the boat and gathers clothing, pulling on foulweather gear and returning to the boat's deck to check on the boy, who's a bit alarmed by the man's new appearance.

The man also finds a brass sextant from London, a navigation tool that stirs something inside him that has been hibernating for a long time. He finds rope, too, and cans of food that are rusting and bulbous. He selects those that look salvageable and returns to the shore, telling his son that he's found lots of stuff.

Analysis

While the coast doesn't offer the relief or salvation for which the man and boy have hoped, it does restore a bit of the fire within them. The man thinks about a father and son on the other side of the sea, the boy hoping that they, too, are carrying the fire and remaining vigilant under these harsh circumstances. The man also encourages the boy to go for a swim, an attempt to keep a bit of the child alive in his son.

The man, too, has a moment on the boat when the sextant stirs old emotions in him, perhaps emotions of curiosity and hope for discovery. The man and boy are, in many ways, navigators of this new world and the sextant, as a navigational tool that is also beautiful in form, offers the man hope and a rekindling of heart.

The theme of shells and skeletons is exceptionally strong in this section. Not only are there bird and fish bones washed up along the shore, but there is also the boat, an empty vessel of the old world. Throughout the novel, the man and boy have walked through abandoned homes, empty shells that hearken back to the old world and reveal all that has been lost. The ship in this section functions as those homes have throughout the novel. While the boat offers the man and boy hope with the supplies it provides, it also stands as a reminder of something from the old world that is lost to them.

Summary and Analysis Section 16

Summary

The man and boy start making their way back to their camp when the man asks the boy where the pistol is. The boy realizes he forgot it on the beach and they have to turn back. The boy apologizes, but the man says it's his fault; he should be making sure they have the pistol at all times. They return to the beach and the man cleans the sand from the gun. The boy is nervous, asking if the dark is going to catch them.

A storm moves in and they hurry to get to their camp before nightfall. The night does catch them, though, and so they move with the help of the lightning. Then the man hears the rainfall hitting their tarp. They take refuge for the long, cold, wet night.

The next morning they go back to the ship and spend the day offloading whatever supplies they can find. They sleep on the beach that night and the man's bloody cough returns. He admits to himself that he is dying. The following morning, the man makes one more trip to the ship and finds a raft, a first-aid kit, and a flare gun, which excites the boy. The boy asks about the flare gun and what it's used for, and the man says it's for signaling, so that people know where they are.

That night, the man shoots off the flare gun. The boy asks who they might signal to, wondering if there's anyone else out there. The man says he doesn't know, that he's not sure where the other

people are. The boy says he doesn't know what they're doing then, and the man changes his mind about people, telling his son that there are others out there and that they'll find them.

Analysis

The man continues to try to protect his son, blaming himself and not the boy when the pistol gets left behind. This is similar to an earlier scene in the novel when the boy forgot to turn the gas off on the stove and the man said it was his fault, that he should have checked to make sure both valves were closed.

The man continues to struggle with his bloody cough, which foreshadows his death as well as his involuntary abandonment of the boy. Because the man fears he'll soon be leaving his son to fend for himself, it is even more important to him to encourage his son and inspire hope in him. When the man shoots off the flare and says he doesn't think many other people are out there, the boy says he isn't sure what they are doing then, that he doesn't know why they continue with their journey on the road if all hope is lost. The man changes his mind, deciding that it's best to tell the boy that there are others out there like them and that they'll eventually find these people. He wants the boy to believe that there is purpose in their time on the road and that there is hope for the future.

The boy continues to maintain a deep focus on the morality of his and his father's actions. He asks his father if he thinks the people from the ship are dead. The man, understanding the motive behind the boy's question, says he thinks the people are dead so that his son doesn't think they are stealing somebody else's belongings. The man knows his son so well that he recognizes the boy would be more upset if the people from the ship were alive and came back to find their belongings plundered.

While the flare gun serves as a source of entertainment for the boy, it also allows the boy to feel as if they are orienting themselves on the earth in some way; as if they are signaling to God, telling God where it is they stand. The boy, like his father, is fascinated by maps and studies theirs frequently. The flare gun represents one more way in which the boy is trying to understand what it is he and his father are trying to do as some of the last remaining good guys on earth.

Summary and Analysis Section 17

Summary

The man walks along the beach while the boy sleeps and when the man returns, the boy is sick. The boy vomits and apologizes, and the man tells him he hasn't done anything wrong. The man holds his feverish son through the nights, terrified that the boy is dying. He works to keep the fire going and examines their food for anything suspect. He gives the boy medicine from the first-aid kit, but nothing seems to be helping. He vows that he won't let his son die alone.

Then, one morning, the boy wakes and he asks for water. He's ready to eat again. The man asks if he remembers being sick. The boy says he remembers and that he had some weird dreams, but doesn't want to say what they were about. The man stares at his son. The boy asks him to stop looking at him, but the man can't.

Analysis

This section, like the rest of the novel, illustrates how much the man loves his son. He comes so close to losing him and is enraged at the thought of having his son taken from him. He keeps his promise, though, making sure that he doesn't leave his son because he refuses to let his son go into the darkness alone.

This section also contains a lot of fire imagery, referring multiple times to how the father tends to and rekindles the fire. This physical fire stands as a metaphor for the fire that he and the boy talk about carrying within them. The father fights to keep both his son and the fire within the boy alive, and McCarthy uses the physical fire to emphasize this recurring theme.

For the first time, the boy reveals that he does keep some of his thoughts private, even from his father. The boy doesn't want to tell his father about the dreams he had while he was sick. While we don't know what the boy dreamed about, the implication is that the boy is keeping his dreams a secret to save his father's feelings. Maybe the boy's dreams would scare or depress his father. Or, instead, maybe the boy is simply shy, or maturing. He gets uncomfortable when his father stares at him. This, too, could represent a part of the boy's growth: he needs his father to care for him but at the same time, he's craving a bit of independence, too.

Summary and Analysis Section 18

Summary

The man and boy spend two more days at the beach. They eat large meals and work to get their stores down to a level that will make travel a bit easier for them on the road. One day they come back to the camp and the man sees boot prints in the sand. They reach their campsite and everything is gone: the cart, their food, the tarp, blankets, and shoes. Everything has been stolen from them.

The man is beside himself, calling himself a stupid ass. He and the boy race up to the road and try to find traces of sand so that they can see in which direction the thief, or thieves, headed. The boy sees some sand and they follow it. By the time they overtake the thief, it is dusk. It's a single man, an outcast from one of the communes. His clothes are ragged, the fingers of his right hand have been cut off, and he's filthy. He holds a butcher knife in his hand, but steps back when the man raises his gun at him. The man tells the thief to step back from the cart and take off all of his clothes, even his shoes. The boy begs his father not to kill the thief, but the man responds by saying that's what the thief was doing to them — killing them by stealing all that they had.

The thief tells the man to listen to the boy, who's begging his father to let the man be. The man forces the thief to pile his clothes and shoes on the cart. Then the man and the boy leave the thief in the road — alone, naked, and starving. The boy cries for the thief, but his father tells him to stop. The man tells his son that he's scared because he's the one who has to worry about everything. The boy refutes his father, claiming his father's statement is not true: It's him, the boy, who's the one that has to worry. They return to the place in the road where they last saw the thief. They call for him, but no one comes. The boy remains sure that the thief is there, hiding because he's scared. The man leaves the thief's clothes and shoes in the road.

That night, the man assures the boy that he wasn't going to kill the thief. The boy, though, claims that they did.

Analysis

This section illustrates more of the boy's compassion for others, even those who might have done harm to the boy and his father. The boy has a strong sense of right and wrong and a commitment to humanity, which again recalls the boy's desire to carry the fire. The boy represents hope for the world's future, proof that humanity still exists. Even the thief recognizes this in the boy, as he is described as seeing something "very sobering" to him in the child.

The man, however, finds it harder to forgive. He believes that the thief left them for dead, so he plans on repaying the thief back in the same manner. When he tells the boy that he's scared because he's the one who has to worry all of the time, he doesn't realize that the boy worries, too; that the boy feels just as much of the burden as he does. It is an epiphany for the man, to see that his son is shouldering his own burden. It is because of the boy that the man decides to return to find the thief and leave his clothes for him.

The man wants the boy to know that he wasn't going to kill the man. The boy, however, states that by taking the man's clothes and leaving him for dead that, for all intents and purposes, they did kill him. The boy's comment could regard the thief's life, literally, or it could refer to a metaphorical killing. The boy's father treated the thief as something less than human, killing something inside of the man that cannot be recovered. The boy so strongly desires to be a good guy that he doesn't even wish harm to his enemies, a righteousness that the man finds difficult to support.

Summary and Analysis Section 19

Summary

They set out the next morning and the man tries to get the boy to talk. The boy, still upset about the thief, says he's trying to make conversation. The man hears the earth rumble and thinks about the past and what's ahead in the future, what's coming for them.

The man goes through their cans of food once more to toss whatever seems like it might be rotten. They make their way into a town and as they're pushing the cart through some back streets, the man is shot in his leg by an arrow. He covers the boy and shoots a flare at a man with a bow, who is standing inside a window of one of the houses. He and the boy hear the man with the bow scream. The man tells the boy to stay put while he runs inside. He finds a woman holding the man who had the bow, who may be alive or he may be dead. The woman curses the man, but the man asks the woman where the bow is. She claims not to have it, and the man realizes there must have been others with the two of them, who have taken the bow and left the injured man and the woman behind. She says that she chose to stay behind.

Outside, the man gets the boy and they go into a building that was once a store. The man's leg bleeds heavily, and he rinses out the wound, cleans it with disinfectant from the first-aid kit, and stitches it up. The boy asks if it hurts and the man says it does, but that it's okay.

The man and the boy spend the next day in the store, where the man asks the boy if he wants to hear a story. The boy does not, because stories aren't true because in them, his father tells him that they're helping people. The boy no longer believes they are helping people. The man asks the boy to tell him a story, then, or to tell him about some of his dreams. But the boy refuses to talk about his dreams because his dreams aren't happy. The boy believes that stories should be happy, but his stories are like real life. The boy says that real life isn't so great.

The boy tells his father that when he goes out to the road and starts coughing, that he can hear him. He says he can also hear him cry sometimes and that if his father won't allow him to cry, then he shouldn't cry, himself. The boy asks his father if he killed the man who shot him with the arrow. His father says no. The boy asks if his father's leg will get better, and he says yes.

Analysis

In this section, the boy is still trying to reconcile the sadness he feels for the thief that they left naked in the street. The boy's father is thinking about stories, musing on the story of himself and his son. He wonders how old the boy is, what time of the year it is, essentially organizing the setting of the story in his mind. Stories, after all, are what have allowed him to keep the old world alive for his son up until this point. The earth, however, interrupts the man's thoughts, creaking as if to remind him that stories of fiction and stories of reality have changed and will forever be changed in this new world. The man wonders what is coming for him, what is going to "steal" his eyes and "seal" his mouth, perhaps foreshadowing his death and how it will silence him as it has silenced so many others' stories before his.

The theme of stories and of dreams both continue throughout this section. The man asks the boy if he wants to hear a story. The boy does not, because the stories the man tells aren't real. The man tries to tell stories to make the boy happy, which is why he creates stories in which they help others. But the boy, presumably still thinking about the thief, says that they don't really help others. For the boy, being a good guy is one of his primary reasons for continuing on in their journey. He doesn't see much of a point in life if he isn't helping others. When his father asks him to tell him about his dreams, the boy refuses because his dreams are sad. The boy wants stories to be happy. He remembers that bad dreams are a good sign, though, because they mean that he hasn't given up. The man asks the boy about real life, and the boy admits that real life is pretty tough, a comment very reminiscent of others that the boy has made about wanting to be with his mother, wanting to be dead.

The man's ability to stitch up his own wound recalls an earlier section on the novel. Before the man shot the bad guy in the truck, the bad guy asked if the man was a doctor. The man answered by saying that he isn't anything. Obviously, the man has medical skills: he birthed his son, and he can suture wounds.

When the boy wants to know if his father killed the man with the bow and arrow, his father tells him that he didn't. The boy wants to believe his father, just as he wants to believe that they're still the good guys and don't kill people. Whether the man with the bow and arrow is really alive or dead remains unclear; all the boy (as well as the reader) has is the man's word. The boy also wants to believe his father when he says that his leg will get better. Throughout the novel, the boy has second-guessed what his father tells him, especially when it concerns whether or not they are dying.

Summary and Analysis Section 20

Summary

The man and boy struggle onward. They pass the ruins of seaside resorts and the hulls of stripped and empty boats. The man continues to cough up blood. They come to a coastal city, where the tall buildings have melted and bent slightly. The man's dreams turn to pleasant things. The man knows that his son listens for his breathing at night, worried that he'll soon be gone. The days get harder and harder, and the man grows weaker. As they slowly make their way along the road, the man notes the earth's deconstruction and wonders if the secrets of the earth's creation will be revealed in its deconstruction.

The road is so strewn with wreckage that the man and the boy abandon their cart. They trudge on for two days before setting up camp. The man knows that this is the place where he will die. They have a single can of peaches left and the man refuses to eat any. He tells the boy to save them for him until tomorrow. The boy brings him water and tries to cover him with a tarp, but the man says he doesn't want to be covered. He watches the boy, who is surrounded by light.

Analysis

The theme of skeletons and empty vessels resumes in this section. The man and boy come upon the remains of cities, buildings, cars, houses, boats, and human bodies. Everything has been stripped of life and has been hollowed out, left to rot in the wind and cold and ash. The tone of this section is increasingly desolate, and the language and sentence structure is very barren. The use of sentence fragments and choppy dialogue reflect the bleak landscape, as it has throughout the entire novel.

The man's softer, happier dreams foreshadow his death. The man has said throughout the novel that good dreams are a bad sign because they mean you've given up on the present world. This shift in the man's dreams indicates that his life is coming to an end.

The man knows that he is dying, but the boy comforts him. Again, the man notes godlike or holy qualities in the boy. When the boy turns to look at his father behind him in the road, the man likens him to a glowing tabernacle. Similarly, when the boy brings his father water, the man notes that the light comes with the boy and retreats when the boy moves away. This light symbolizes the goodness in the boy, as well as the fire that he carries. The man can feel himself and the boy growing farther apart. The boy will have to live on in this new world and make for himself a place within it, while his father is getting ready to leave.

Summary and Analysis Section 21

Summary

The boy takes the revolver with him and goes out to find food. But he returns with nothing, and his father tells him that he needs to press on and head south by himself. The man tells the boy to find the good guys and carry the fire. When the boy asks if the fire is real, the man assures him

that it is; that it's inside the boy. The man tells his son that he will always be able to him and that if he practices talking to him, he'll be able to hear the man's response. The boy goes down the road as far as he can, but then turns around to go back to his father who's asleep.

The boy asks his father if he remembers the little boy that he saw in one of the towns. The man says he does remember the other boy, and that he thinks the boy is all right, that goodness will find him because it always has.

The boy sleeps close to his father that night and when the boy wakes the next morning, his father is dead. The boy stays with his father for three days and then sets out on the road. A bearded man with a shotgun comes toward him. The man with the shotgun asks the boy if the man was his father. The boy confirms it was and that he died. He asks the man with the shotgun if he's one of the good guys, and the man with the shotgun assures the boy that he is. The man with the shotgun tells that boy that his group of companions discussed whether they should come after the boy or not, but they'd decided to ask the boy to join their group and travel with them. The boy asks if the man is carrying the fire, and he says that he is. Then the boy asks if there's a little boy in the man's group, and the man confirms that there's another boy about his age and a little girl too. The boy asks the man with the shotgun if he and his group eats people, and the man tells him that no, they don't eat people.

Before the boy sets out with the man, he wants to say goodbye to his father. His father's body is covered with a blanket, just as the man promised it would be. The boy cries over his father's body, and then sets out on the road once more. The woman in the group welcomes the boy. She and the boy talk about God, but the boy says he prefers to talk to his father, which the woman says is all right, and that God passes through all men through all of time.

Analysis

This section begins with a shift in roles between the boy and the father. It's now the boy who carries the revolver and leaves in search of food. The man knows that it's time for the boy to go ahead of him, to be a part of a future that doesn't involve him. He continues to encourage his son to carry the fire and tells the boy that the lightness (goodness) is a part of him, a quality the reader has witnessed throughout the entire novel. The man calls his son "the best guy." All along the boy has wanted to be a good guy, and here his father calls him the best.

When the boy asks his father about the other little boy, he not only calls to mind this thought that others could be there around them, offering hope, but he might also be voicing concerns about himself. He wants to know what his father thinks happened to that boy, and, indirectly, wants to know what will happen to himself, too. His father seems to sense this, and tells the boy that goodness will find the little boy because it always has.

After the boy's father dies, a new man enters the novel. The boy carries the revolver in the same way his father used to. The boy has to decide whether he can trust this new man or not, and so he asks him about carrying the fire and about eating people, two of the boy's major concerns throughout his journey. The man says that there's a little boy with them, although it's not clear if this is the same boy that has been mentioned throughout the novel.

The boy decides to trust the new man and go with him, and the children and woman with him. When the boy goes back once more to say good-bye to his father, we see that the new man has

left the boy's father covered with a blanket, just as he'd promised. This indicates that the man is, presumably, trustworthy and is, in fact, a good guy.

In such a bleak world, questions of God's existence emerge both for the boy and the man. Throughout the novel, the man has often seen glimpses of God in the boy. He sees a light in the boy and has referred to him as a "glowing tabernacle," a "golden chalice," and a god. But at the end of the novel, the boy reveals that he prefers to talk to his father instead of God. The woman tells the boy that the breath of God passes through all men and, in this way, the boy is able to recognize a bit of God in his father. Earlier in the novel, when the man is talking with Ely and Ely asks if the boy believes in God, the man says he doesn't know what the boy believes in. In this final section, the boy reveals that he believes in his father, thus perpetuating the mystical, and seemingly holy, connection that exists between father and son.

The novel's final paragraph begins in storytelling form: "Once there were . . . " The frame for this final paragraph recalls the man's thoughts about storytelling and about the death that was going to put an end to his story. This paragraph shows that while the old world remains a story, there is a future — and the boy is a part of it. The stories of the men from the old world, like the boy's father, will remain so long as the boy is able to carry the story on. The boy continues to carry the fire of his father and a new fire that lives within him and that he will spread over time.

Character Analysis

"The Boy" (*The Road*)

The nameless boy in Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Road* (2006) is what author William Kennedy, reviewing the book for the *New York Times*, has described as a "designated but unsubstantiated messiah." The father of the boy deems that the child is not only his "warrant" (and all that stands between him and death), but "the word of God" itself: "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (p. 5). At another point, the father sits "beside him and stroke[s] his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god" (p. 75).

McCarthy teases out this idea of the boy's messianic possibility throughout the two characters' arduous, suffering-laden trudge across a post-apocalyptic universe. But it is not only the father who champions this perspective. We see a shift in the boy late in the novel, a strengthening of resolve, and finally the proclamation from his own mouth. "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," the father says. "He looked up... Yes I am, he said. I am the one" (p. 259).

Nevertheless, if the boy is a messianic figure, he is one that is disconnected and adrift from all ecclesiastical forms; for all religions, all cultural structures, and all evidence of the world that housed such beliefs has been obliterated: "On this road there are no godspoke men," the father meditates. "They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world" (p. 32). And the father dredges up a fundamental and crucial difference between him and his son when he internally poses the question, "How does the never to be differ from what never was?" (p. 32). With all cultural and societal forms pitched off into the void, every person is a blank slate. "Are you a doctor?" one of the bad guys asks the man. "I'm not anything," he responds (p. 64). In a later passage, the old man, Ely, asks the man and boy, "What are you?" but "[t]hey'd no way to answer the question" (p. 162). Encountering traces of other people, the boy asks who they could be. "I don't know. Who is anybody?" answers the father (p. 49).

But the boy is a different kind of— and ultimately more genuine—*tabula rasa* than the man. The boy represents the "what never was" in the father's ontological question. By contrast, the man hangs on to his memories of the world that once was but is "never to be" again. When a morning forest fire stirs reminiscences of old sunrises in a happier world, it moves "something in him long forgotten." He chides himself, "Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember" (p. 31). And a childhood memory of a day at the lake hunting for firewood with his uncle becomes for the man a source of strength to draw from: "the perfect day of his childhood ... the day to shape the days upon" (p. 13). The man's trudge down the titular road, pushing the burdened shopping cart filled with scant worldly goods, is likewise plagued by daydreams of a past life. Of the boy's

mother, he "could remember everything of her save her scent" (p. 18). He is able to pull up tangible traces, her stockings and "thin summer dress": "Freeze this frame," he commands. "Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned" (p. 19).

The boy, however, was born after the devastation of humanity. His only glimpse of another child is for a brief second in a destroyed neighborhood, and he has a difficult time wrapping his head around ideas that were once basic to the human condition—sayings like "as the crow flies," the notion of geographical "states," the sensation of drinking a soda.

In this boy's blankness McCarthy suggests a certain purity; he is an untainted boy, unpolluted by the once-dominant humanity that brought about its own end. He is driven by a deep and abiding compassion for all he encounters—a skeletal dog, an old man reduced to a "pile of rags" (p. 62), the child he briefly glimpsed: "What about the little boy? He sobbed. What about the little boy?" (p. 86). Unfettered by the spiritually corrupt detritus of the former world, "the 10-year-old messiah ... is compassion incarnate," writes William Kennedy. Nevertheless, McCarthy, in his typically inchoate manner, never fully resolves the issue of the boy's messiah-hood, an issue that a more conclusive ending would have put to rest.

And it is primarily the novel's conclusion that Kennedy is bemoaning when he condemns "the scarcity of thought in the novel's mystical infrastructure," for it is the novel's pensive, evocative, and esoteric ending that leaves the boy an "unsubstantiated messiah" (Kennedy). "Of the boy's becoming, or his mission—redeeming a dead world, outliving death?— nothing is said," complains Kennedy.
The inconclusive handling of the boy fits the Cormac McCarthy vision in many ways, however. The author's canon is filled with agonizingly open-ended conclusions, many of them flatly bleak. (It must be mentioned that next to *The Orchard Keeper* [1965] and *Suttree* [1979], *The Road* actually possesses one of McCarthy's most relatively uplifting conclusions.) In addition, in order to substantiate the boy's messianic nature,

McCarthy would have to pose some kind of ecclesiastical order, something that *The Road* resists, despite the father's constant inner cries to God. (As McCarthy once said in a rare interview, "I don't think you have to have a clear idea who or what God is in order to pray" [Winfrey].) To clearly and distinctly substantiate the boy as a messiah and define his mission would also fly in the face of something that McCarthy has been suggesting in his novels for decades: That human beings have the capacity to ponder the deepest metaphysical questions but not to fully penetrate them.

"The Man" (*The Road*)

For the man (a.k.a. the father) in *The Road* (2006) a whole world, an entire universe of existence, has crumbled around him. Everything that was once familiar—loved ones, friends, a morning sunrise, nature, and the very lineaments of life as he knew it—has perished. Even his own identity and the identity of those few that still remain alive have dissolved in this post-apocalyptic oblivion. "Are you a doctor?" he is asked at one point. "I'm not anything," he tellingly responds (p. 64). Later in the novel, both the man and boy are asked, "What are you?"—"They'd no way to answer the question," writes McCarthy (p. 162). In an earlier passage, when the boy asks who could be nearby, the man answers. "I dont know. Who is anybody?" (p. 49).

But the man, unlike his son, is burdened with the memory and recalled sensations of the pre-apocalyptic world. He chides himself to "[m]ake a list. Recite a litany. Remember," so as not to lose the sensations of his previous life (p. 31). In some ways these memories become a source of resolve; for example, the recollection of a boyhood day at the lake with his with his uncle becomes, in a reverie, "the perfect day of his childhood ... the day to shape the days upon" (p. 13). Of the boy's mother, who ended her own life, leaving him with sole charge of the boy, he remembers "everything of her save her scent" (p. 18). And the tangible mnemonic traces of her, such as the feel of her thin summer dress long ago in a theater, give him strength: "Freeze this frame," he commands himself. "Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned," he taunts the heavens (p. 19).

Mostly, however, what defines the man is a sort of personal manifest destiny to protect the child. He knows that this is his duty and moreover the only thing standing between him and death. And like a true "manifest destiny" it is ordained by God: "If [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke," ruminates the man (p. 5). Whatever identity he once had, whatever life he once experienced, has been swallowed up and replaced by his almighty warrant to protect the boy.
Nevertheless, as that warrant begins to slip away, and as the inevitability of the man dying and leaving the boy alone becomes a closer and closer reality—and as the boy evolves and matures—what little was left of what one would consider "a life" (memories, etc.) slips off into the void as well. Close to his death, he "thought about his life but there was no life to think about" (p. 237). Here is manifested what the man feared earlier in the novel: "The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true.... Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever" (p. 89).

As the boy matures and becomes more cynical, even the bedrock beliefs that drove the two of them come into question and risk the annihilation just described. The boy questions whether they are truly the good guys, whether they truly "carry the fire." He questions the belief system with which his father has inscribed him. "But in the stories

we're always helping people and we dont help people," the boy insists (p. 268). Throughout the novel one could rightly question whether the man himself believes the protective philosophy that he weaves around the boy and himself, but ultimately he does—even if he wavers along the way—and ultimately this is a story of redemption in the utter blackness (unusual for McCarthy). In his final moments, the father displays a belief in things that had seemed doomed to oblivion—"luck" and "goodness"—and he tells the boy the fire is indeed real: "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (p. 279).

The ultimate redemption for the man may come in that beautifully cryptic final passage of the novel that has puzzled so many readers. It is a memory of the world as it once was, the natural world, with mountain trout "standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand" (p. 286). This calls to mind the sense memories that the man had relied upon for strength early in the novel, the memories that seemed to leave him as the narrative progressed: reveries of the day at the lake with his uncle; the sensation of the boy's mother, of whom he could recall so much, except for her scent.

The final passage of *The Road* recovers a memory of a lost world, with everything intact, scent and all (the brook trout "smelled of moss"). Whether this is the man's memory or an omniscient memory (or both) is not perfectly clear (the passage suggests it may be a memory older than humanity), but much like the boy's rescue, the memory is a hint of redemption at the end of a harrowing road.

Themes

Within the past few decades, humans have found increasing interest in imagining their survival following an apocalyptic event. One can find this fascination in a plethora of movies, television shows, and works of literature. Included in this phenomenon is Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, in which the author depicts a charred wasteland that used to be the United States. Following an unnamed mass extinction event that renders the American landscape ashen and cold, two characters, the nameless man and his son, struggle to survive daily life while constantly on the move. Their ultimate destination is the East Coast, at which the man hopes to find warmer weather and a better life for his son. Along the journey, the man struggles to maintain his morality in a world in which some survivors have resorted to cannibalism and a clear view of ethics has disappeared. The man and his son depend on the prospect of a better future on the coast, which is evident in the repeating motifs of the road, light, and the boy's messiah-like qualities. Cormac McCarthy's usage of both ethical and optimistic themes and motifs within the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* reflects the primal behavior of humans in a crumbled society.

In the novel, a large theme that illustrates humanity's primitive instincts is its struggle for morality. To emphasize this idea, McCarthy repeatedly uses a motif that creates much of the novel's conflict: cannibalism. Following an apocalyptic event, the most crucial materials are food and supplies necessary for daily survival. Survivors must abandon superfluous items that may overburden them. In some instances, this includes old-world morals. It becomes apparent that some survivors in the world of *The Road* have abandoned their morals in exchange for survival when McCarthy's first introduces the reader to one of the many cannibal groups that travel the roads in search for potential prey. One night, the sound of a truck rouses the man from sleep on the side of a road. He looks over his shoulder to see hooded men clad in canister masks and biohazard suits marching in front of a diesel truck on the road. Immediately, the man recognizes them as a group of cannibals and flees into the woods with his son (McCarthy 60). With the majority of American homes and stores already stripped of food and supplies, some groups in *The Road* have reverted to life without ethical restrictions by consuming other humans (Lawrence). The moral implications associated with this concerns the value of human beings as a species. Civilized society views animals such as cows, pigs, and sheep as viable to consume. With cannibalism, the disconnect between

human and animal becomes unclear (Cooper). Despite the constant struggle to locate food for himself and his son, the man never considers the practice an option due to his instincts to maintain the ethical organization with which he has been accustomed to. Without a doubt, McCarthy includes cannibalism as a recurring motif in order to contrast the man and boy's preservation of their morality with the degradation of society.

An additional motif that emphasizes humanity's moral conflict in *The Road* includes the man's skewed definitions of right and wrong. His moral standings are shaped around his and his son's survival at all costs. This becomes apparent when the two pass the blackened body of a man who has fallen victim to a lightning strike (McCarthy 49). The boy, whose morality has not been corrupted in the name of survival, pleads to his father to help the person. However, the father refuses because of their limited amount of food and supplies (McCarthy 50). In simple terms, he explains to the boy, "He's going to die. We can't share what we have or we'll die too" (McCarthy 52). To the man, the act of benevolence to the lightning strike victim threatens the survival of him and his son, so kindness is not an option (Kane). In a similar situation, the man and boy are searching houses in a suburb for food when the boy spots a lone child hiding behind a house across the street (McCarthy 84). Naturally, the boy wants to find help for the child, which sparks an argument with his father: "We cant [sic]. / And I'd give that little boy half of my food. / Stop it. We cant [sic]. / He was crying again. What about the little boy? he sobbed. What about the little boy?" (McCarthy 86). In this situation, the man's shifted ideas of right and wrong are prominent: to keep the food and supplies between the two is right, whereas to share with the abandoned child is wrong (Kane). Though behavior such as this can be considered wrong or cruel using today's standards, the desolate world of The Road has forced the man to revert to his primal instincts of survival and preservation of his offspring. The man conceives these new versions of right and wrong to accommodate his and his son's survival in a country reduced to anarchy.

An additional primitive theme that is evident in *The Road* is humanity's tendency to hope for a better future in order to escape a bleak present. Furthermore, Cormac McCarthy uses the actual road that the man and boy travel on as a motif for the prospect of a better life on the coast (McDonald). Without this road, both literal and symbolic, the man's efforts to reach the coast for his son would be futile and his life would be without meaning. Throughout the novel, the man creates a sense of urgency to the arrival at the coast. Whether it be due to the debilitating effects of the nuclear winter or the man's recognition of his own failing health, his primal instinct to move can be likened to those of sharks, which need to be in constant motion to survive (Esposito). After all, why is it necessary to keep

moving unless there is a destination to be reached? Offering an optimistic future in the midst of this catastrophe, the road facilitates the man and boy's travels to the supposed sanctuary of the coast. For both main characters, the road is a motif that McCarthy uses in the novel as a passageway to a better location.

Cormac McCarthy includes light as an additional motif in *The Road* for the man and boy's continuity of moral ways of life surrounded by a world of darkness. The author has constructed a barren landscape that is "stripped of meaning" in efforts to contrast the optimism of the two characters with the charred wasteland (Edwards). From early in the novel, the man instills in his son the concept that they are "carrying the fire." One night, the boy cannot sleep because he is troubled by the uncertain future. He asks his father, "We're going to be okay, arent [sic] we Papa? / Yes. We are. / And nothing bad is going to happen to us. / That's right. / Because we're carrying the fire. / Yes. Because we're carrying the fire" (McCarthy 83). In this exchange, the man comforts his son by reassuring him that nothing can harm them as long as they keep their proverbial flame lit. This fire represents a desire to rekindle the flame of civilization and overcome the darkness of the apocalypse. However, McCarthy suggests with the inclusions of the lightning strike victim that light can still have devastating consequences. The lightning, which had struck the victim in the eye and crippled him, demonstrates that possessing excessive hope or optimism can be as deadly as having none at all (Collado-Rodríguez). In a literal sense, the mention of a passing of fire in The Road alludes to a Celtic tradition in which a grown child would pass the flame from their parent's hearth to their new home. Both The Road and Celtic culture treat the idea of "carrying the fire" as a way to revere customs from the past and to live in remembrance of them (Cooper). The figurative light that the boy and his father carry into the future is the will to live with goodness.

In multiple sections of the novel, the boy acts as a messiah-like figure that is untainted by the horrors around him. His natural assumption that humans are deserving of goodness highlights the optimism of the youth. At the beginning of the novel, the man demonstrates that he believes his son is divine in goodness as he watches the boy as he sleeps: "He knew that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 4). McCarthy epitomizes the boy's innocence in this way in order evoke a sense of divine aura that surrounds him (Wilhelm). In multiple encounters with other survivors that are less fortunate than he is—such as with the lightning strike victim and the lone child in the suburb—the boy attempts to aid them. This indicates that the boy's outlook on life is significantly different from that of his father's. To the boy, life in this post-apocalyptic world is more than a cycle of struggling to survive; it is also for charity and acts of goodness (Sanchez). When he asks his father what their

long-term goals are, the man is taken aback (McCarthy 160). In this question, the boy thinks of their objectives for the distant future instead of daily survival (Sanchez). The question illustrates the boy's ability to see past the atrocities along the road and focus on humanity's survival. Additionally, McCarthy demonstrates the boy's peculiar innocence in his hatred for breaking promises. When the boy notices that his father has broken their promise of sharing food when the man gives his son an entire packet of cocoa mix, he explains, "If you break little promises, you'll break big ones. That's what you said" (McCarthy 34). In a godless world reduced to ash and rubble, the boy believes that lying is impermissible because it allows for further wrongdoing in the future (Wielenberg). McCarthy's portrayal of the boy as a messiah exemplifies the primitive tendency of young children to believe in the overall goodness of the world.

In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy uses themes and motifs to explore a post-apocalyptic world stripped of its morals in which the survivors must resort to the most primitive human behaviors. Under the theme of a constant struggle for morality, McCarthy includes the recurring motifs of cannibalism and the father's ambiguous beliefs of right and wrong as an analysis of the human psyche as a whole. In addition, the novel includes the theme of hope for a better future in order for the man and boy as well as humanity to continue life with meaning. This theme manifests itself in the actual road that leads the two characters to the coast, the figurative fire that the two carry, and the messiah-like qualities of the boy. It is with the ethical struggles and prospects of a better future that makes *The Road* a raw commentary on human nature and the behavior of humans without civilization.

The Road and the Absurd

The eternal struggle with meaning, it seems, will not end with human civilization. In Cormac McCarthy's work of post-apocalyptic fiction, The Road, Albert Camus' theory of the absurd, as defined in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, finds a contemporary vessel. McCarthy's protagonist begins his journey by choosing Camus' route of rebellion over self-destruction, creating a struggle for identity within the protagonist as he strives to find his place in the new world. Eventually, McCarthy's character comes to define himself by his struggle, and thus can face his death by concluding, much as Camus' Oedipus did, that "despite so many ordeals… all is well." Because the man in The Road comes to define himself by this final realization, one can easily link the man's struggles with Sisyphus' punishment in Hades; casting the protagonist of The Road as an example of Camus' theory of the absurd hero and further implicating the symbol of the road as an allegory for living life in absurdity.

Early in the novel, McCarthy chooses to draw a distinction between the man and his wife, essentially dividing them over the issue of suicide. This division represents an important dichotomy that Camus also draws upon in his *Myth of Sisyphus.* Camus states that with fate turned against them, an absurd hero may choose either self-destruction or to live and find meaning within the absurdity, traveling the road in the case of McCarthy's protagonist. The discussions between the man and his wife, both given and implied by McCarthy, suggest their struggle with this basic spilt in ideology. The man's wife simply states, regarding suicide: I didn't bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I'm done. I thought about not even telling you… You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take… As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart (McCarthy 56, 57).

These passages create a stark contrast between the man and his wife. Where she has chosen to give up, the man will continue to seek meaning and live within the absurdity of the post-apocalyptic world; thus he and his son eventually set off on the road.

Another way in which McCarthy's man seems modeled off of Camus' work is in his initial response to his new existence. Camus suggests that

Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself (Camus para. 6).

McCarthy frequently confronts the man with the fact that the world he lived in no longer exists. Early in the book, the man asks his son, "Don't you want to see where I grew up?" To which his son promptly replies "No" (McCarthy 25). This is a prime example of the man longing for his passed reality while the boy is able to easily reject it in order to survive the newly formed environment. Similar realizations throughout the text eventually lead to the man's final recognition "that to the boy he was himself an alien, a being from a planet that no longer existed" (McCarthy 153). With this, McCarthy effectively drives home the point that the man is being forced to exist in an entirely new world with an entirely new set of rules. Like Camus' Sisyphus, the man is forced to adapt to the new world surrounding him while he simultaneously lusts intently for the world and life that left him behind.

Any of several different points in The Road could be touted as the moment that the man comes to the realization of his absurdity, thus accepting his fate and becoming the absurd hero. One of the man's earliest thoughts, "He knew the child was his warrant. He said: if he is not the word of God, then God never spoke" (McCarthy 5), recalls Camus' statement "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (Camus para. 9). However, this optimism to set things right through the child, Camus would suggest, is only wishful thinking, and therefore can not imply the final stage of an absurd hero. One must imagine that the final acceptance of the road's absurdity comes through the man's encounter with Ely. "How do you live [on the road]?" asks the man. "I just keep going," replies Ely (McCarthy 168). Ely's insistence on continuing the struggle, despite his bleak outlook, personifies Camus' final vision of Sisyphus. Perhaps his most telling response is to the man's question: "'what if I told you [the boy] was a god?' The old man shook his head. 'I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men can't live, gods fare no better'" (McCarthy 172). Ely, the prophet, has just contradicted the man's only warrant for living. The man had believed, up until that conversation, that by carrying the fire and traveling the road, the world could be put right again. Following the conversation with Ely, though, the man comes to a realization: "I'm going to die... Tell me how I am going to do that" (McCarthy 175).

Even beyond Ely's dialogue with the man, though, McCarthy constantly bombards his characters with evidence of the absurdity of existence on the road, and yet they both keep struggling. In both the book's initial and final sequences, McCarthy exposes the futility of the characters' action: first comparing their efforts with a debilitated monster and at the end blatantly stating that the world could not be put right again. The initial monster, seen within a dream, portrayed in a decidedly non-threatening light, shows the man's quest for what it really is: a quest without an adversary. As the wife previously noted, the man is intent on taking a stand, but there is no stand to be made and no foe to defeat. Following the dream, the man simply returns to the road to struggle onward toward his lack of fulfilling resolution. This final lack of resolution is explicitly told in McCarthy's finale. After the long journey and inevitable death of the man, and all of the talk about the boy possessing the breath of God, McCarthy ends the novel with a reader's realization that despite the man's efforts the world can never be put back right again. He mentions scenes of nature, setting it as "a thing that can not be put back. Not be made right again," thus cementing the absurdity of the man's journey. McCarthy seems to say of the man's struggle: when there is no future, the road is all that matters; a moral which Camus certainly would have applauded.

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Like Sisyphus, the man and his son will always struggle toward the pinnacle, only to find themselves back in the depths. Since McCarthy offers no reason to believe that any real progress can be achieved, the characters of the novel are doomed to live their entire lives in absurdity, waiting, as Ely implies, to be the last human alive and finally meeting Death on the road. Like any absurd hero, though, there is a beauty in the struggles of the novel. Ely's testament that no one wants to be there, and no one wants to leave could not ring more true with Camus' argument, but also present are the man's final words, "goodness will find the boy, it always has," which are akin to Camus' Oedipus' statement that "despite all of my ordeals… all is well," and Sisyphus' comfort that "struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart," echoing Camus' assertion that one must imagine Sisyphus, just as one would imagine the man at the end of his struggle, happy.

The Road as a Postmodern post-apocalyptic novel

American novelist Cormac McCarthy's literary canon includes various genres like crime thriller (*No Country for Old Man*) and western novels (*The Border Triology*). His 2006 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Road* is generally evaluated in post-apocalyptic fiction. If not all, a great majority of McCarthy's novels explore human violence and people on the fringe. The bleakest one, however, might very well be *The Road* since the disaster that led to this post-apocalyptic world, where two unnamed characters struggle to stay alive is not clarified. McCarthy depicts such a world that the category of the novel could also be extended to postmodern as in fallen world, 'the man' and 'the boy's road is marked by a reliance on recollected dreams and memories, questionings of certain values like life and existence itself, a sense of fear and paranoia and a suspicion of reality and reason. Man, who has always been identified with "reason", has the potential to be the bearer of unreasonable, destructive outcomes due to unreasonable causes. This sudden shift brought about by wars has not only shaken the absolute faith in man but also in God, religion, life or the existence itself. This new attitude made itself evident in every step of life and literature was just one of the art forms that took its share. After wars or any experience that invokes apocalypse, the writers might have felt an urge to put those to pen. The changes that occurred throughout Western literature following two big world wars have also shaped the dominant forces of literature of what we know as modernism and postmodernism.

Postmodern literature is a type of literature that came to prominence after World War II. While modernist literary tradition generally follows a path of depicting a world on the edge of disaster, postmodernism seeks a new way of highlighting the fact that the world has already undergone many disasters and it is now beyond redemption or understanding. The notion of locating exact meanings behind any event looks impossible more than ever. Such disasters that occurred in the second half of 20th century could have left some writers with a sense of paranoia or conspiracy teories which have become increasingly common especially in the post war period. Timothy Melley in his work *Empire of Conspiracy and the Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* observes that a kind of paranoia has settled over many communities and many social groups depend on conspiracy theory for their survival. Melley makes further comments that such theory has been a fundamental organizing principle in American film, television and fiction since World War II (7). From that point of view, any apparent connections or controlling influences on the chaos of society would be very frightening, and this lends a sense of paranoia to many postmodern works. Not surprisingly it could be said that at the core of a postmodern writing lies a belief that the world has already fallen and literature could serve to reveal its paradoxes and ironies. Many postmodern authors write under the assumption that modern society cannot be explained or understood.

It could be said that a shift has originated in the way humanity and denouement of the world is viewed with global wars leading to countless deaths and ensuing failed policies. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the birth of postmodernism meets the post war period that the whole world had to endure. Most postmodernist futures, in other words, are grim dystopias (McHale 67). Furthermore, Brian McHale in his book *Postmodernist Fiction* dramatizes this shift from an epistemological to an

ontological one, namely, the dominant force of postmodern fiction is ontological as it raises the questions: "Which world is this?" and "What is to be done in it?" (10) The first and the general impression of McCarthy's novel is also concerned with such self-questionings given that the man and the boy live in a world where it is hardly livable and more like a post-war scene.
The Road is generally categorized as a post-apocalyptic novel and it fits into the genre particularly because of its subject matter and the setting given that the action takes place after destruction and two human beings try to adjust to an "environment from which all the usual markers geographical, temporal, and social- have been erased" (Lagayette 89). However, those features also bear basic resemblances to hold the view that they also contribute to being canonized in postmodernism. From the beginning to the end, the novel has a grim atmosphere. It is even likened to "a sort of tabula rasa-a landscape erased of many of its previously defining features" (Edwards 57). McCarthy makes it very clear even in the first page: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before" (1). It is consolidated in the further pages that there is no sign of life and the two main characters have to survive in such a "barren, silent, godless" (2) land where there is no sense of time. However this new world is also violent and inhospitable since the people left are portrayed as savages. It could be argued that McCarthy attempts to criticize human beings' tendency to destroy the planet with reckless abandon. David Kushner in his review in *Rolling Stones,* draws attention to the fact that McCarthy has an admittedly pessimistic worldview, seeing human life on the planet temporary, and hence developing "what if" scenarios while grounding his fiction in a greater reality. Accordingly, the novel might be expected to display a manner or tendency of an unlikely fantasy world, however, despite its full-blooded ambiguity, *The Road* gives a realistic account as to what such a world would be like with a great sense of accomplishment in helping the readers to feel and visualize it.

In the midst of desolation, the two characters in the novel head to the south with the hope of finding warmth, shelter and perhaps bits of civilization or a stable environment. One might question why the characters are going to the 'south' which is generally associated with being hotter or sunnier. Chris Walsh's comments clarify this further: "In the novel's otherwise utterly dystopian setting, the south not only functions as a physical frontier and goal, but also as an imaginative refuge; quite simply, the father starts to tell, and the son longs to be told, about the south"(53). When all seems to have vanished, besides the motivation that the climate will be better, the father's childhood memories in which he recalls "a perfect day" fishing with his uncle (52-53) also play a role in determining the south as the ultimate target. Moreover, those memories have pivotal roles in unfolding the fragmented narration and juxtaposition of past and present as a result of it.

Throughout the novel it is not hard to grasp that the narration is not in the traditional sense. In that respect, it even departs from McCarthy's previous works like *Blood Meridian (1985), The Crossing (1994)* or *No Country for Old Man (2005)* in which the story is told from an omniscient point of view, enabling the reader to figure out the chronology. *The Road* offers a representation of a devastated world in fictional narrative as the novel presents a world that is not so familiar; there is no comprehensible world order. This is highly noted in the dialogues between the man and the boy that are preoccupied with brief, repetitive sentences without a linear sense invoking the idea of fragmentation which is a tool that postmodernism heavily relies on. Whether it is a representation of fiction or an account of history, the book displays an unfamiliar manner in uncovering how the past is known at present. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon explains that in either form, the fragments of the past are made into a discursive whole in postmodernist fiction (59).

Accordingly, those fragments of the past find form in the memories of the mother that appear out of the blue in the course of the novel which is another factor contributing to the fragmentation. There is hardly a clear transition from one narration to the other. Although at one point the reader feels carried away with the discourse of the man and the boy, next an irrelevant dialogue with the mother surfaces as part of man's memories, a narrative tendency which McHale comments as follows:

> Narrative self-erasure is not the monopoly of postmodernist fiction, of course. It also occurs in modernist narratives, but here it is typically framed as mental anticipations, wishes, or recollections of the characters, rather than left as an irresolvable paradox of the world *outside* the characters' minds (101).

As McHale points out, it is possible to see fragmented narratives in modernism, too. However the existence of recollections of characters in postmodernism is a key distinguishing factor and postmodernist fiction embraces such mental reflections as the dark reality of outside that is far from resolvability. The mentioned "recollected character" in the novel could be the mother. Through the recollected memories of the man, there is a chance to comprehend that the woman or the mother took her own life in order not to experience what was happening *"outside"*. In those memories, rather than a domestic scene, all her words evoke her increasing sense of hopelessness and loss of faith therefore she sets out towards her own death without even saying goodbye to her son (59-60).

The fragmented narration which is reminiscent of man's dreams and memories not only help to examine man's inner state of consciousness but also mingles the past and the present. Frederic Jameson opens his book *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, stating: "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). That is to say, it is hard to situate postmodernism without taking into account its relation to the past. In the novel, the past is like a ghost - sometimes in the shape of the mother or bits of glimpses on what might have happened to turn world into such a chaos: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (54). The historical changes of the past provide a better understanding of the present which is the case in the novel, too. Although it is never made clear how and why it happened, the readers are fully aware that the natural world is dead or shattered by an unknown catastrophe of the past. However at present, its reflections are versatile and keep lingering as the houses are abandoned, cities are empty. With heaps of grey dust in the air, the sun is apparently absent and there is cold rain almost every night. Reminding of a post-war scene, there is no plant or animal life but hunger, constant hiding and fear of death. Rather than giving details on how and why the world turned into such an uninhabitable planet, McCarthy focuses on the outcomes of it particularly on two people representing the whole humankind as their names suggest: "the man" and "the boy". Eric Hage elaborates on this by saying: "McCarthy doesn't meditate on the cause of the devastation and reduces the scope of the novel to this insular tale of survival, this world between a father and son who are never named." (141).The two main characters who are harassed by threats of murder and starvation throughout the novel assume universal roles as reflected in their names. As the representatives of the bleak reality they are living in, the father or the man can be identified with the past as he is the one who has witnessed how the world turned into what it is; whereas the boy becomes the tool for hope with the "fire he is carrying in" (87) in a potential future. In that "posthumous condition of nature and civilization" (Kennedy), the boy, with his child-like innocence and state of already being born into such a world might possess an advantage, as he is unaware of some emotions that are familiar to

human beings. Regarding the symbolic significance of the characters, William Kennedy in his review on *New York Times* states that "it is through the voice of the father that McCarthy delivers his vision of end times. The son, born after the sky opened, has no memory of the world that was." For instance; when the man and the boy find a town, the father leaves his son to search for the area. At that point, the son sees another boy, and he immediately wants to help him. However, the man is very reluctant and insists that they should leave (88-89). In a way; the father's full awareness embodies a blockage in his approach towards other people - since in an utter atmosphere of independence, they only have each other, yet barbarity is a danger awaiting them on that unsafe road, a situation which carries parallelism with the way postmodernism questions the nature of freedom.

The notion of freedom has been subjected to suspicion in postmodernist criticism since the idea of man endowed with full freedom might also be coupled with repression, abuse or murder. Brian McHale points out that "postmodernist condition is an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural" (37). At first glance, the plurality recalls multiplicity in every field of life, particularly in terms of intellectuality. However, such an absolute freedom also causes such a void that it might beget limitless cruelties or inhuman activities which can be trailed in the murder, theft and cannibalism that are portrayed or implicated in the novel. Thus the world is now populated by different kind of people with different and complex ontological views. In one case, the man and the boy barely escape from a group of such people. After days without food and sleep, they come across a large house and the man has an immediate urge to search for the house. Yet, it soon becomes clear that it is a trap house as they find a room in which naked people are huddled against the back wall, "male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands" (116) probably to make food for the cannibals. The world of *The Road* is a lawless one, through which stalk bands of thieves, murderers and cannibals, all intent on maintaining their own essentially futile existences at the expense of the weak and vulnerable (Gullivan 99). The anarchy surrounding them does not only stem from the fact that the world is stripped of its basic needs like food, shelter and warmth, but also from the ideas concerning how survival instincts reign and lead to even more destructive outcomes.

Equally significant is the fact that anarchy repositions man in such a world. At this point Ihab Hassan's comments might be useful: "Yet it is already possible to note that whereas modernism created its own forms of authority, precisely because the center no longer held, postmodernism has tended toward anarchy, in deeper complicity with things falling apart" (29). Literally speaking, things have definitely fallen apart in the world portrayed by McCarthy. In such a denaturalized planet, man has no place or in other words, finds himself decentered. There is no exact form of authority but with complexi plural ontological views, the people have a tendency to act on their own more than ever. The father and the boy might have each other, however the fear of death also accompanies them on the road. Therefore, staying strong and cool as much as possible is vital for their survival. While the man tries to accomplish that by thinking that he has to protect the child no matter what, the boy supplies his father with mental sanity so that they can move on. Nonetheless, the man with all his doubts and fears inevitably initiates an act of questionings particularly pertaining to reality.

Reality and the relative condition of it have a solid place in postmodernism. According to Christopher Butler, the postmodernist novel does not try to create a sustained realist illusion (73). Devoid of a linear thinking, human perception of certain things alters so does the function of reality. On the other hand, in her article "Can the Apocalypse be Post?" Teresa Heffernan notes that in such stories centering the end of the world, "the real has imploded and the subject has disappeared" (171).

As for Linda Hutcheon, while bringing her version of postmodernism she also puts an important emphasis on the issue of truth as follows: "The standard negative evaluation of postmodernism asserts that it is without an ordered and coherent vision of truth" (38). In the novel, the relativity of truth is encapsulated by the blurred line drawn by the writer on the issue of goodness in such a chaotic world as the new order demands doing anything indiscriminately for the sake of survival even if it means breaking away with certain merits of society. For the man in the novel, they are "still the good guys" (81) as long as they do not eat man like those bad guys so that they can keep their morality. This prompts the question: what matters to be good in a world where only survival instincts reign? When placed in such a world, it could be argued that there is nothing to live for which paves the way for the loss of an objective approach to truth. What is certain is that the reality has turned into a more complex or relative matter as no matter how devastating the outcomes are, human beings have a tendency to accommodate themselves to varied conditions bringing into minds Stanley James Grenz's "community-based" approach to truth in postmodernism:

> The postmodernist worldview operates with a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate [...] the postmodern worldview affirms that this relativity extends beyond our perceptions of truth to its essence: there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate [...] On the basis of this assumption, postmodern thinkers have given up Enlightenment quest for any one universal, supracultural, timeless truth. They focus instead on what is held to be true within a specific community (8).

Grenz puts an important emphasis on how community is crucial in determining the truth. One might argue that there is hardly a community to live with in McCarthy's *The Road*. However, there are certain groups of people who somehow make a living even if it is on their own terms as it is the case for the man and the boy. The truth is no longer under the scrutiny of reason but it is based on a more arbitrary nature. Hence associating goodness or badness simply with morality would be awkward for such a world given the factor of self-defense in the community they have to participate in.

On the other hand, in the *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, the best way of describing postmodernism as a philosophical movement is explained as "skepticism" (Lewis 6). Lewis claims that: "Paranoia, or the threat of total engulfment by somebody else's system, is keenly felt by many of the dramatis personae of postmodernist fiction" (129). In the novel the man and the boy do not have to worry about cultural or political norm or a certain kind of authority, government or state but there is definitely a new order or system that poses a threat to everyone who is alive and it requires being merciless. They cannot even take a chance on meeting with other people, since in a world where men are reduced to wild animals, it is hard to feel secure, and trust people. The man cannot even expand his world beyond the child because he has lost his capacity to count on people. For the man, the only thing that is lashing him to this barely livable world is his son, and thus he inflicts on himself the missionary task of protecting his son, as he tells the boy: "I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (77). However, the boy, who was born around the time of the apocalypse and knows no other world, has an overwhelming sensitivity whatever he encounters, and he is more prone to reach out the other people. From the boy he catches a glimpse of a boy at a deserted town at the beginning of the novel to the old wretched man they come across towards the end of the novel; he has

a compassion that can be found only in a pure, innocent child. This could also be linked to the fact that with the fire he is carrying, he assumes the role of future. Therefore, what is expected from such a divine being is to remain as much good and dignified as possible.

In the aftermath of apocalypse, in order to make living worthy the father has an extra effort to remain dignified by not attacking, stealing or eating other people, and that is what he teaches to the boy. This cannot be a coincidence given their mission of carrying the fire which helps them to hold on to life, and believe that civilization can be sustained. According to Randall Willhelm:

> Since "culture" has been destroyed in this narrative and belongs to the void in a sense, the father's replication of the civilizing function of still life seems a strategic attempt to maintain a sense of dignity and a meaningful connection to human history as a means of surviving in this raw new world, where barbarity and the threat of cannibalism continuously loom (132).

Dignity might not exactly equal to what it used to stand for, but Willhelm evaluates its continuation as a strategic attempt taking into account that man needs a meaning to impose on life no matter what. Linda Hutcheon points out that self-consciousness or reliance, however ironic, on tradition is an important aspect of representing postmodernism (27). In line with Hutcheon's assertion, the man in the novel clutches at some traditions or certain methods so as to find traces of life in a dead world like promising they will be good and uttering the name of God at every opportunity. Interestingly, God still holds a value or virtue for the father; however, this also manifests an ironical situation. Postmodernism generally questions the existence of God and it is possible to find such characters in *The Road*. The mother sees life pointless and in one of the memories the man recalls, she says: "We are the walking dead in a horror film" (57). Her disbelief in everything including God facilitates to give up on life easily unlike the man who has a reason to live - that is the boy. The other character raising questions about God is Ely who is the only character with a name in the novel. The man and the boy encounter that old, battered man towards the end of the novel and their long conversation with him is of importance since he claims that "There is no God and we are his prophets" (181). In the absence of God the idea of prophet sounds irrelevant and meaningless. However, seeing the surviving men as Christ-like figures although their god has left them alone, serves a foreshadowing element for the end of the novel. The man may not be aspiring to save the world but his son's well-being has a missionary meaning for him since he values that above all else. On the other hand, the boy progressively adapts to that idea as he claims he is "the one" (277). It could be interpreted that through the wretched man, who is like a physical embodiment of the hopelessness of the world, an insight is developed on why they are existing.

Along with the faith in God, the flame that is believed to be carried by the boy presents an irony. The irony lies in the fact that the father chooses fire as the symbol to represent humanity for the future, however fire, as an element, has the capacity to destroy as well. It can exterminate and lead to new tragedies but also keep one warm and become an inspiration or igniter for survival and new hopes. Furthermore, though the father dies in the end, the boy is soon taken by some people on the shore. Although this is, as in Linda Woodson's words, an "ambiguous hope" (89), considering the whole negative worldview enclosing the novel, McCarthy bestows the reader with an optimistic ending. For Jay Ellis:

> The book's ending suggests that even after nuclear winter, or the

calamitous climate change sped up by a comet strike, or whatever happens to cover the book with an endless snow of ashes, there remains a distinction between the fires that ravage the hillsides and scorch the road, and the fire carried forward by the father and son (28).

It might be argued that the sudden arrival of the family stages a breakaway from the horror of the book, however with the father's death the boy enters a new phase and has a "fighting chance" (Kunsa 67). Yet, when the book ends, one cannot help questioning whether life will renew itself or the family, taking the boy, is really 'good'? Will they provide him with shelter, survival, even restoration of his late mother or just see the boy as potential bait?

In conclusion, *The Road* characterizes the journey of two people for survival in a world destroyed probably at the hands of humans themselves. Representing the whole humanity without particular names, the man and the boy advance on a road that stages traces of postmodernist fiction. McCarthy builds such a world of despair and sorrow that his outlook on the world also seems depressing which is in conformity with postmodernism's replacing optimism with an incisive pessimism. By means of the memories of the dead mother that intervene in-between, a bridge is established between the past and the present, a situation which, functions on the one hand as a way of fracturing the narration, and on the other, giving an insight to the inner world of the man who treasures protecting his son most. While the man and the boy are all alone on their journey to the shores of the south, death becomes a prevalent theme throughout the novel. The way postmodernism considers freedom being equal to anarchy draws an analogy with the fact that they have to avoid people for fear of violence or cannibalism. In addition, postmodernism rejects the idea of truth depending on pure rationality and gives a chance to analyze that human mind is manipulative, and it can yield to totalizing ideologies. Likewise, in the novel, some key concepts like humanity, morality, savagery, and face-off goodness and evil are imposed contradictory visions on the verge of extinction. The postdisaster condition is so dreadful that the crisis of existence, meaning and reality gain new dimensions in a world where living is worthless for some and for others it means cost of lives. With a feeling of insecurity and skepticism, they keep clutching on to life not solely through search of food and sanctuary but also to remain 'human'. In doing so, the way they keep their belief in God in an empty, grim world and choosing 'fire' as a metaphor for a hopeful future demonstrates implications of irony which is a tool postmodernism often turns to. After all, McCarthy's characters still find a way of holding on to life and maintaining hope, not just simply to live but to sustain civilization for future. Therefore, *The Road* deservedly takes place in a post-apocalyptic context yet the term 'postmodernist' can also be applied to it.