

ENGLISH B EXTENDED ESSAY

Research Question:

“How is humanity explored as a concept in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*?”

ABSTRACT

In Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, the two protagonists a father and his son, struggle to maintain their humanity, as they travel through a burned and demolished land which is now only accommodated by the few survivors left that are twisted and broken enough to kill, rape and even cannibalize those they come across. In this study the researcher tries to answer the question "How is humanity explored as a concept in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*?" and explore whether the characters the Man and the Boy are able to preserve the bits of humanity left in them when thrown into dire situations like starvation, robbery and in the way of cannibalistic cults, studying several themes such as death, good and bad, isolation spirituality, parental relationships that the researcher took inspiration from online sources when deciding on which to analyse. Through all these themes and perspectives, it is analysed how McCarthy explores the way the humanity in humans is affected when said humans are in a destroyed and barbarous environment. At the end of the study it is concluded that even though the majority is far gone and stripped from their humane emotions, some humanity might still be found even in the direst conditions.

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BACKGROUND

About Cormac McCharty

In order to be able to fully grasp the way Cormac McCarthy studies humanity in his novel, it is first essential to know about his writing style and overall world view. McCarthy has been known for his years long career in which he has created pieces with varying genres of literary fiction. His unique skills in creating dark and ominous settings with an edgy mixture of South's gothic and West's grotesque are especially emphasized in his novel *The Road*. This so called dark aspect is commonly the first point Lindsay Parnell mentions about *The Road* in online sources as well:

Cormac McCarthy is a displaced Northerner, who has become an adopted and proud son of the South. McCarthy's name is now synonymous with contemporary narratives of the gothic south, the violent grotesque imagination of the West which still haunts the region today. (Parnell, "Cormac McCarthy: Reinventing the Southern Gothic")

About The Novel '*The Road*'

With the publishing of *The Road*, a story about a lonely man who has no one left other than his son, travelling through the haunted and bleak roads of America with hopes only of survival, it is justified to say that McCarthy's style takes a twist towards a rather post-apocalyptic one. The characters McCarthy creates in *The Road* are quite intertwined with the themes of death, violence, gore and are most certainly bearing scars left from the world before. Along with having scarred and broken-in-spirit characters, McCarthy aims not only to analyse humans' unextinguishable desire to survive but also to provide a small preview of a world without food, laws and even any other living creature other than the few humans struggling to keep on

going. Expressing himself subtly but in a truly penetrating manner, McCarthy turns this simple journey of a broken family to a most certainly frightening literary piece of Gothic Southern Literature with an apparent hint of post-apocalyptic science fiction. The post-apocalyptic worldview that McCarthy bears, setting his plot in a dark and disturbed atmosphere, lets him explore the behaviours and perspectives of these humans he generated, which is highly suitable to the following definition by Colleen Seisser:

Post-apocalyptic fiction is a sub-genre of science fiction. For a novel to be post-apocalyptic, the setting must be one where the end of the world has already taken place and characters are trying to survive and start anew. The end of the world event that occurred can be anything from war, to plague, to natural or man made disasters. (Seisser, "Genre Guide: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction for Teens")

It is also necessary to note Carol Scheidenhelm's definition of Naturalist writers which is:

Naturalistic writers believed that the laws of behind the forces that govern human lives might be studied and understood through the objective study of human beings. Naturalistic writers used a version of the scientific method to write their novels; they studied human beings governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which the characters' lives were governed by forces of heredity and environment. (Scheidenhelm, "Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism.")

Taking Scheidenhelm's definition of Naturalism into consideration, the way McCarthy analyses his characters could also fit as a Naturalistic approach, since McCarthy studies his characters in undesirable conditions to see their reactions when they are put in exigent situations that allow their instincts to speculate their rightful evaluations and to further test their will to maintain their humanity.

DEVELOPMENT

Into the World of ‘*The Road*’

The concept of humanity is a major factor that affects the way Cormac McCarthy carves out his novel *The Road*, since the main focus of the story itself is how a father and son desperately try to hold on to their almost shattered humanity while struggling to ensure their survival in this new, cruel and merciless world. McCarthy both plays with their minds creating dreams that haunt them in night and their body with their ever-present hunger and cataclysmic events that keep happening on their path, but the father and son are determined not to give into their animalistic desires to survive. These small pieces of humanity left in their souls can be analysed with several themes, and some can be listed as such: death, paternal love, survival instincts, faith and trust in themselves and in the existence of God and so on. The strength of these humane emotions the father and the son have are often tested with the events happening in the book, as people are ready to throw their humanity aside at any second, just like how some already have, in this post-apocalyptic depiction of the US.

In such an environment where death is always one breath away, it is essential to start this study with by mentioning the effects the pressure of death creates on the Man and the Boy, so that the feelings they have and the decisions they make can be better understood .

Morality and Death:

Death is considered to be a normal, everyday part of this new Darwinist world order where you must kill not to be killed. Where even finding food and shelter is a severe problem, the

presence of death and mortality is also perennial in the descriptions McCarthy uses to create this post-apocalyptic world.

The world shrinking down about 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. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (McCarthy 12)

The few survivors left are constantly hungry to the level of starvation since all the food sources are either scavanged, burned or spoilt. The father tries his best to feed himself and his son but despite his outstanding efforts he struggles more each passing day. Furthermore, although he seems to be quite easily scared, the son is well aware of the fact that no matter what they do to prevent it, they are eventually going to end up dead.

He was a long time to sleep. After a while he turned and looked at the man .His face in the small light streaked with black from the rain like some old world thespain. Can I ask you something? he said. Yes of course. Are we going to die? Sometime. Not now. And we're still going to South. Yes . So we'll be warm. Yes. Okay. Okay what? Nothing. Just okay. (McCarthy 8-9)

Sailing towards a dark future full of death and suffering, the father and the son do not refrain from letting a little bit of hope light their path and help them contain their humanity. By creating symbolisms like carrying the fire and being the good guys, the father and son try to put theirs and others' actions into some category of right and wrong, but the world now has an order much different than the one it used to have before the apocalypse.

Good and Bad:

The world of *The Road* is so catastrophic and twisted is that even the smallest acts of mercy and kindness seem truly heroic. The phrase "carrying the fire" the father and son use frequently to preserve their hopes that there is at least some goodness left is this catastrophic

world, in their minds separates them from all “the bad guys”— thieves, rapists, murderers, cannibals. The Man describes the good guys as those who do not give up and keep trying, which he repeats several times through their journey to keep the Boy from losing his grip to survival.

You’re going to be okay, Papa. You have to. No I’m not. Keep the gun with you at all times. You need to find the good guys but you can’t take any chances. No chances. Do you hear? I want to be with you. You can’t. Please. You can’t you have to carry the fire. I don’t know how to. Yes you do. Is it real? The fire? Yes it is. Where is it? I don’t know where it is. Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. (McCarthy 298)

The Man and the Boy constantly discuss about the fact that they are “the good guys”, those that do not hurt people unless they are threatening their survival but the man sees killing to protect themselves needed and justified, and does not consider taking violent actions to defend his son’s survival evil, where the Boy rejects any kind of harmful act altogether and even offers to help any survivor they come across without a second thought.

What do you want to do? Just help him, Papa. Just help him. The man looked back up the road. He was just hungry, Papa. He’s going to die. He’s going to die anyway. He’s so scared, Papa. The man squatted and looked at him. I’m scared. Do you understand? I’m scared. (McCarthy 277)

It is understood that the Boy is not able to comprehend the need to harm other when their own survival is at stake. He questions whether they are indeed “the good guys” his father talks about, whether they have lost their humane emotions of pity and kindness and whether helping without waiting anything in return, in the midst of their selfish struggle to survive is the only way of keeping themselves alive, body and soul.

The boy didn't answer. He just sat there with his head bowed, sobbing. You're not the one who has to worry about everything. The boy said something but he couldn't understand him. What? he said. he looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one. (McCarthy 277)

This is where the fact that the lines that divide good from the bad are blurred is emphasized. McCarthy makes the readers see that in such a chaotic world where people rob and rape and eat each other to survive, it is not easy to distinct good from bad. Some actions might seem justified in the doer's eyes, like how the father shoots the guy that was about to harm them, but that does not mean they can easily be put into the category of good. McCarthy makes us ask ourselves to what extent humans can suppress their humanity and put their emotions and rational thinking aside to satisfy their primitive will to survive and to what extent doing so can be classified as righteous.

In a world where they can not even pin point what is right and what is not, the father and son find it best to isolate themselves and refrain from any contact with the few survivors but this, like every other thing they need to cope with, takes its toll on them by both affecting their relationship and their psychology individually and turns into another obstacle on their way of conserving their humanness.

Isolation:

In *The Road*, the father and the son are severely isolated from the outer world, as they avoid any contact with the few other survivors left to ensure their safety as much as they can. The Man involuntarily compares the world he used to live in before and the world they are in the middle of right now and feels as if he is left by his wife to struggle alone in this desolated landscape.

I wouldn't leave you. I don't care. It's meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you can not. Death is not a lover. Oh yes he is. (McCarthy 58)

There is also another aspect to their isolation that is created by themselves. The world they live in now has no rules and the remaining survivors are desperate enough to do anything from raping people to even slaughtering and eating them.

There are other good guys. You said so. Yes. So where are they? They're hiding. Who are they hiding from? From each other. (McCarthy 196)

In such an environment the Man most reasonably wants to keep his child away from those possibilities and although this decision of his is reasonable, it also adds to their ever present loneliness. Another reason why the father and son do not join any groups or at least associate with one to trade, might be McCarthy's way of making the readers wonder about what could happen in a group when in a post-apocalyptic environment.

The isolation is, however, balanced as he and his son has a strong and unbreakable bond. Their relationship being the only thing they can hold on to in their broad isolation, the Man and the Boy depend on solely depend on each other, not only for survival but also for even the slightest pshycological support they can get. When we take the chaotic and barbaric setting the father and the son are obligated to cope with , it is only natural for the Boy to be scared of loneliness in a level much greater than a normal kid would. Seeing his son's need of company the Man tries his best to make the Boy feel like everything will be okay, eventhough the Boy is well aware that it will not. Holding on to one another tightly, the father and son try and share this immense isolation.

He put more wood on the fire and knelt with his hand on his forehead. You'll be alright, he said. He was terrified. Don't go away, the boy said.

Of course I won't go away. Even for just a little while. No. I'm right here. Okay. Okay, Papa. (McCarthy 264)

Knowing that holding on to your sanity is the hardest to achieve in this survival struggle they are obligated to go through, the father actually tries to protect the Boy from the feeling of loneliness and isolation itself, rather than actually protecting him from a tangible danger that might come from the outer world. But when the Man reaches the limits of his illness, he also understands that he can no longer keep the Boy beside him and the Boy must go on alone, even if it meant that the only connection he has to his humanity would be gone with him as well.

Just take me with you. Please. I can't. Please, Papa. I can't. I can't hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I can't. You said you wouldn't ever leave me. I know I'm sorry. You have my whole heart. You always did. You're the best guy. You always were. (McCarthy 298)

Being isolated and alone in the madness the world has become, the father and son build a strong relationship full of co-dependent love, which is the most important support they can offer to each other in the war their humane emotions fight against their primal needs to stay alive.

Paternal Relations:

Through all the isolation and violence they witness during their journey to south, the father and son have an unmistakable love between them which helps them overcome all the obstacles on their journey. Deemed even more precious within their isolated and chaotic world, McCarthy creates a tender relationship that is full of a kind of care and sacrifice .

The Mother is unable to adapt to this new world order and abandons the duo in the early stages of the catastrophe, which makes the father become even more careful towards the Boy who is now the only piece left of his once happy family.

They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it.
You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I can't. I can't... (McCarthy 58)

The Man's will to survive is only present as long as the Boy lives. Therefore he frantically struggles to keep the Boy alive although he is well aware that he doesn't have much long to live himself. He tries not only to protect and feed the Boy, but also to lead the Boy to a rightful path of living, teaching him how that they are the Good Men and how they don't hurt people intentionally unless their lives are endangered.

And then later in the darkness: Can I ask you something? yes. Of course you can. What would you do if I died? If you died I would want to die too. So you could be with me? Yes. So I could be with you. Okay.
(McCarthy 9)

The man also does his best to keep the Boy happy when they feel relatively safer, by giving him small treats like hot chocolates or powdered drink mixes. These small sacrifices made in this demolished and twisted world, emphasize the greatness of their love and affection.

He withdrew his hand and sat looking at a Coca Cola. What is it Papa?
It's a treat. For you. What is it? Here sit down... It's because I won't ever get to drink another one, isn't it? Ever's a long time. Okay, the boy said. (McCarthy 23)

Though their affection and support towards each other help them maintain their grasp of human emotions, the Man knowing how beautiful and pleasant things used to be before all the catastrophes and annihilation, how he had his wife with him and how he used to love as well

as he loved, dreams about his earlier life and compares it with the current one he has, which is as demoralising and saddening for him as much as it is strengthening and reassuring.

Memories and Past:

In *The Road*, information about the past is often obtained from the memories and dreams of the Man. These memories are generally composed of scenes he remembers which remind him that there used to be beauty, love and good in the world and he regains his strength by reliving such pulchritude. On the other hand, getting swept away by the beauty of his past makes him lose focus and shatters his will to survive. Remembering how pleasant his past life was, makes the Man compare his former happiness with the struggle and fear he is obligated to go through now in this new world, reminds him those no longer exist and breaks his bond with the present altogether. McCarthy represents the double-edgedness of past and memories in *The Road* by putting the Man in a dilemma about whether he truly wants to remember his past or not and whether holding on to his past makes him a hero who can overcome all current problems to survive or a coward who seeks comfort in the past rather than facing the upcoming conflicts of the future.

Rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from. Things no longer known in the world. ...He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. As in a party game. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not. (McCarthy 139)

The dreams and flashbacks allow the reader to experience a glimpse of the Man's mind, what he fantasises about and what he wishes to have back. Like any other human being, waking up from a beautiful delusion where his family is still intact and he does not have to fear from starvation and getting murdered constantly, have great impacts on his psychology and threaten to soften him and dull his ability to make tough decisions. In their apocalyptic world, losing

your grip, even for a second, might lead to death and the Man knows he can not afford to stay in the dream world if he wants to keep his son alive. Therefore, he tries to keep himself from seeing delightful dreams and doing so puts him into another fight, one with his own mind and emotions.

McCarthy emphasizes the effect of their past on the protagonists by exploring their perspective on religion and spirituality as well, since having faith in each other and in a godly entity also provides a great aspect of their humanity.

Faith and Spirituality:

The Man believes that God has abandoned humankind and left them but is still convinced that the Boy is God's only reflection. "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (3).

Taking the whole of the book consideration, what he means is that there actually is a God but He has given up on humanity, leaving the Earth by herself and punishing the sinners in a demolished and fallen apart world, the good guys on the other hand are his prophets that are expected to fend for themselves, as they are the only remainders that there truly was some goodness that God tried to bring upon the humankind.

The Man, as mentioned before, sees the Boy as some godly being that perhaps has been sent to correct this barbaric and brutal world and to bring back the goodness that has gone invisible. He protects the child as if he is responsible for the preservation of some holy entity, with such devoutness that exceeds parental affection and love. The Saint like properties of the Boy is highlighted by McCarthy as well, as he seems to be bringing out the goodness in his father that has been buried with instincts of survival.

My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand? Yes. He sat there cowered in the blanket. After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? he said. Yes. We're still the good guys. (*McCarthy 80*)

The father is the only figure the Boy can look up to for both reassurance and guidance to survive this cruel world. Eventhough the Man admits he has lied to the Boy several times throughout the book the Boy has no chance other than trusting the Man to have enough knowledge and insight to keep them safe and fed. Having only his father as a role model, the Boy still does not give up on the whole concept of religion. The Boy however, isn't sure wheter there is a holy being watching over them or not and consequently decides to talk with the spirit of his father rather than God at the end of the novel.

CONCLUSION

Cormac McCarthy has been known for his considerably dark and post-apocalyptic style of writing where he combines various literal demeanours and creates stories that are set in intriguing atmospheres and are full of emotions. In his novel *The Road*, McCarthy keeps his unique style and fuses it into a story where a father and his son travel through the vast land of the US which has been burned and abandoned after some kind of catastrophic occurrence. With such dire conditions at hand, the few people left to survive are obligated to witness, and sometimes even commit great inhumanness, which leads to the query of how should one behave when stuck in between the animalistic desires to survive and the will to hold on to the last pieces of humanism they have left. With all the order of today removed from the scene and replaced with a Darwinist life style where one must kill in order to ensure their survival, the setting of *The Road* allows McCarthy to test the father and son to see if they would be able to cease their primitive instincts and preserve their humanness. Exploring the themes of death, parental affection, faith, the haunting past and the way they separate good from bad, it can be seen that no matter the severity of the situation, the devilish people they come across and the pernicious occurrences they go through, their humanity is able to survive. Since as long as humans are existent, their humanity is ever present.

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