

The road: hope for an obliterated world?



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The post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, explores the perseverance of a man and his son to survive in an obliterated world. The novel is a modern quest demonstrating faith in man's power to rejuvenate himself through trust and perseverance. The bitter, hostile setting of the novel is set in a gray world without meaning, without color, reflecting the grave hopelessness of modern times. The novel takes place in the aftermath of an unknown catastrophe: the skies grey, the rivers black, and color only a memory. Perpetual ash falls from the sky, already covering the ground. The only possessions worth having are food and clothes. Corpses, charred or burned, are littered throughout the road, and the dreams of the man and the boy are "ensepulchered within their crozzled hearts." Their destination is the coast, although they don't know what, if anything, awaits them there. This destroyed world coincides with the traits of the father and the son; it is difficult for the characters to find purpose in a world with no color or light leading them. The father is an active representation of hopelessness for the future: "With the first gray light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent godless." The colorless, barren land that the boy and the man travel emphasizes their bleakness within. As the man listens to the "water drip in the woods" and the "bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void," he says with a trembling voice, "If only my heart were made of stone." The father establishes his desire not to feel pain, coldness, or death; he cannot bear the sting of this "cold and silence" of this barren, hopeless environment. The father's existential angst towards his life and the world questions his will to survive. Yet the father does find a purpose, or at least he questions one; in the midst of destruction; the father "knelt down in the

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ashes. He raised his face to the paling day.” Here, he asks, “ Are you there? Will I see you at last? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God.” In this bleak environment, the hope in God or a higher being is hard to find. The father can only question why this God has not killed him; if this God had a heart, why is he still living? The lack of punctuation and dialogue between the man and the boy makes some reading difficult, yet it bolsters the confusion of the described world and the loss of identity. The neglecting of commas, apostrophes, quotations, and even names often makes the reading confusing, yet it adds to the uncertainty of the journey. The continuation of the language of the novel emphasizes the continuation of the journey. In this father-son relationship for survival, there isn’t much time for small talk. They discuss deep topics in short choppy sentences: I wish I was with my mom. He didnt answer. He sat beside the small figure wrapped in the quilts and blankets. After a while he said: You mean you wish that you were dead. Yes. You musnt say that. But I do. I cant help it. I know. But you have to. How do I do it? I don’t know. In this passage, the dialogue between the man and the boy can become confusing, as are their thoughts. The man often says “ I dont know” or “ Okay” when he speaks to his son. It’s this vast emptiness that allows the reader to focus on the relationship of the two characters. These short phrases and fragments emphasize a poignant fatigue in the characters. The characters are mentally and physically exhausted from being quick on their feet to escape danger, scavenging for survival, and on the look out for harmful strangers. Furthermore, punctuation in this novel, besides the occasional needed comma, is for the ending of phrases. Ending punctuation has the ability to set two thoughts apart, rather than connecting their thoughts and words. These periods and questions

marks convey how the characters cannot connect their thoughts and memories; they cannot remember the past. Moreover, the abrupt, colloquial word choice is sparse, yet there are moments of sparse poetry. In the last paragraph of the novel, a “ brook trout in the stream of the mountains” is described. Their “ backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again.” The fine lines of the “ world in its becoming” illustrate the subjectivity of man’s reality. Each choice is individual, creating an existential angst and anxiety for the future. This description of the fish, after the death of the father and a new family for the boy, reiterates the existential beliefs. The world, most likely destroyed by humans, cannot “ be made right again.” Nameless characters that still maintain a civil virtue in *The Road* reveal the necessity of maintaining identity in a dying world. The characters are described as “ the boy” and “ the man” throughout the novel—names are never mentioned. The one man who actually tells the man and the boy his name is “ Ely,” yet he later claims this isn’t his name. He told them “ I couldn’t trust you with it. To do something with it. To say where I was or what I said when I was there.” This so-called Ely is not capable of giving his identity to strangers, showing the distrust of human to human interaction. Although names are a thing of the past, the father and son are still able to maintain an identity as they “ carry the fire.” In fact, one of the only aspects of color in this world is fire. The fire that literally “ burned orange and blue in the fire’s heart” is carried throughout the story, representing the continuation of a civilization and goodness of mankind. The literal color, too, is a disclosure; “ carrying the fire” may actually give hope that life, an enjoyable life, could be in the future. In the father’s final conversation with his son, he requires him

to “ carry the fire.” The boy claims he doesn’t know how, yet the father tells him, “ yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it.” Although neither of these characters has a name, the boy can still maintain his internal goodness and lack of savagery. In fact, the son is what kept the father from becoming savage throughout their journey. The father’s savage actions for survival depict the aimlessness of the journey in a universe without any moral values. When all of their material goods are stolen, the two search for and find the robber down the road. The father forces the robber to return the shopping cart and take off all of his clothes, literally stripping him of any remaining dignity. The boy begs his father to stop, as this will cause the death of the robber. Yet, “ they set out along the road south with the boy crying...” “ Oh Papa,” he sobbed. As the man and boy move farther and farther away from the naked man in the road, the boy continues to sob and tells his father, “ Just help him, Papa. Just help him... He’s going to die...He’s so scared, Papa...” Here, the boy keeps his father in line, instead of becoming a ruthless savage like many untrustworthy people in their world. After the son convinced his father to stay a good person, “ finally he piled the man’s shoes and clothes on the road.” Savagery displayed by the father and by numerous other characters in the novel is partly because of the lack of food. In this world without morals, it is clear that cannibals, who make humans and fetuses suffer a slow, painful death, have lost a sense of human goodness. These actions convey the individual responsibility of existentialism. As Satre said, “ existence precedes essence,” meaning that humans could possibly act in any manner to survive—all before thinking of their actions. These actions define lives—the lack of savagery in the boy and the man delineates their “ fire” and goodness still within and

their battle against the world's savagery. In addition to the struggle of maintaining identity, the man and the boy, these nameless people, create an "everyman" hero type and quest. This uncommon hero, devoid of specific traits of individuality, allows readers to imagine themselves in the same situation, while still possessing the same very human flaws. One flaw, such as the sickness that the father suffers with (which ultimately brings his death), creates this abnormal hero. The father does not have any super powers or abilities; he simply struggles to live and, more importantly, keep his son from seeing the danger of the world. The father apologizes to his son when they encounter "a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit." The father cannot bear to let his son see and experience this savage, unnatural behavior. The father, this hero, is trying to protect his son from the world; he does not want to fail as a parent or protector. He is not trying to save the world; it is already destroyed. There are, however, moments when the father almost "gives up" and makes it obvious where they are. The first is when they found a "brick loggia" house in the country. They stayed at the house four days, eating and resting, but, most importantly, built a large fire in the fireplace. Not only did the man and boy stay in the same area for four days, but they also constructed a fire, making it obvious as to where they were. Although they were never discovered, this fire may have been a signal to someone who was following them. The second time when the two characters let up their guard was on the beach in the South. The father allowed his son to shoot the flare gun in a celebration. This beam of light that he shot over the ocean was clearly a message to anyone around them. The father may have possibly "let his guard up" because he knew someone was following them—someone who

could rescue his son when he died. With only one direction of travel and a remote meaning for the journey, an ambiguous goal for the father and son on their quest of survival is created. The only direction for the quest is “south,” there is no specific destination. And when the two characters reach the southern coast, there is not much to be thankful for. The gray sea was “like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of.” There was a “gray squall line of ash” along the horizon. The father “could see the disappointment in his face. I’m sorry it’s not blue, he said. That’s okay, said the boy.” After the innumerable struggles of the son and the father: the pain, the cold, the lack of food, there was not much at the end of their journey. The beach was “Cold. Desolate. Birdless.” But, at the true end of the quest (when the father dies), there is hope for the future. A new family that “doesn’t eat people” and that may have been following the man and the son, has agreed to let the boy travel with them. Although the quest of the father has come to an end, the boy still has the chance to finish his life and create his own path. The Road is hardly fiction—it is an ominous, realistic description of what could be the future. The unknown completion of the quest and the future life of the son questions the point of the seemingly meaningless journey. Yet, maybe this complete destruction could bring about a fertile breeding ground for change; everything that once seemed impossible could now happen on a daily basis. The world would be free of rules, limits, and preconceptions, allowing any individual to shape his own path.