

Father and mother
figures as two
opposites of the new
world: family in 'the
road'...



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In Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, family becomes the central theme that shapes the world in the novel. A reader follows the story of the single-parent family: the father and his son travel across the post-apocalyptic land and fight for their survival day by day. While the father is a loving and caring person devoted to his child, the mother prefers to retreat and commits suicide. In this dog-eat-dog world, these characters reveal their nature and turn out to be polar opposites through a broader lens. The author contrasts the paternal and maternal roles and presents them as two possible attitudes toward the life hardships. While the mother is the person who cannot stand ordeals and escapes, the father figure is the one who manifests unconditional and invisible love through typical family activities, the new world behavior, and guidance.

The image of the mother is blurred, and a few details suggest that she is the personification of those who are unable to adjust themselves to brutal external conditions and choose to give up. From the first moments of the story, one can see her absence, and there is always some gap that the characters feel deeply. One night, after another coughing fit, the father talks to the boy saying he is sorry he has woken him up, and the boy suddenly admits he wishes he were with his mom. Although the father and the son rarely mention her aloud, they both often think about her. This memory is torturing, but it gives them a chance to keep moving because they have nothing else left. For the father, this memory is a reminder of his inability to take care of his wife and letting her die alone somewhere, and the vivid dreams intensify the suffering. For the son, again, it is natural to dream of her presence, just as any motherless child does, even though he tries to

keep face straight. Thus, the figure of the mother becomes the evocation of the past that fuels the characters.

However, beyond the family yearning, there is one more idea associated with the mother figure - the attitude towards struggle and hope. The woman expects the worst - being captured, raped, and killed at some point of the family existence, and she can only seek comfort in controlling her own life via suicide: "As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness." It is the lack of faith in the face of no hope that distinguishes the woman from her husband. She is unable to go beyond the present because there is no evidence of future wellbeing. In other words, the maternal role is specific because it implies protection, as the woman actually believes, that objectively has nothing to do with motherly love. By means of the mother figure, the writer pictures the opposite of hope rather than genuine motherhood.

Unlike the woman, the man possesses the best qualities of a father. The multiple situations described in the story identify him as a person of sincere love, courage, and self-sacrifice. The book contains several moments in which the writer exhibits the ideal relationship between a father and son that belong to a normal, untouched by the catastrophe world rather than the post-apocalyptic, hostile environment. For instance, it is a common practice for a father to teach his child how to swim - in the present world. In *The Road* setting, such events are extraordinary, and their value increases. In this episode, the father acts as a caring, supportive parent who encourages his son and makes sure there is no threat: "The man went back and got him. He held him and floated him about... You're doing good, the man said. You're <https://assignbuster.com/father-and-mother-figures-as-two-opposites-of-the-new-world-family-in-the-road/>

doing good.” This moment proves that the characters’ family bonds are strong, and the simple activity becomes a substantial evidence.

Another illustrative example of the father and son’s closeness is the moment when they encounter a bunker with many useful supplies. Although both of them are on their guard since “ bad guys” might appear, it does not prevent them from having a rest. The father shaves and cuts his own and son’s hair, and these seemingly ordinary activities turn out to be a precious moment of the long-hoped-for tranquility and uneasy family happiness. Such episodes prove that the father’s attempts to delight his son are sometimes successful, even though it is a momentary success. On the one hand, the book does not offer anything in the way of escape or comfort. On the other hand, one cannot ignore such moments because they provide a reader with the firm evidence that the man managed to do much for his child.

Further, the father not only engages his son into pleasant activities but also guards him throughout the story till his last breath. Indeed, it is the only possible way of survival for a small child, and the man has been taking care of him since his birth. It is peculiar that he has to deliver the baby when the catastrophe is taking place, and the fact that the clock stopped may be the powerful symbol of the new time marking – now taking into account the son’s presence and caring of him. Since this moment, the appalling conditions and greater responsibility require specific behavior, and it is not always about being heroic or having fun together. Practical affairs, for instance, looking for food, become one of the most urgent activities. In the new world, there are still some opportunities to find forgotten places where cans and other supplies are available. The father worries not about himself – <https://assignbuster.com/father-and-mother-figures-as-two-opposites-of-the-new-world-family-in-the-road/>

his main concern is about the food for his child. The minor details demonstrate that he catches at every straw when it comes to obtaining food as it happens in the old apple orchid: " He felt out the spaces about the trunks and filled his pockets full and he piled apples in the hood of his parka behind his head and carried apples stacked along his forearm against his chest." As the man of the new world, he understands that he should use every opportunity because he has to feed his son.

In addition to these prosaic details, the author also demonstrates that the father's behavior modifies when some circumstances expose his son danger. The most telling example is probably the moment when he shoots one of those bad men who were threatening his son and uses a valuable bullet because, as he tells the boy, his job is to take care of him: " I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you." Indeed, the boy is the only reason for the father to live, consequently, he should keep his boy alive no matter how. Overall, it is the new world reality that makes the man use every opportunity to survive regardless of the costs. He is not afraid to go down in his son's estimation and kill someone because, in his worldview, his son's life is the most precious thing.

Finally, the father serves as the teacher for the boy, not only in terms of material matters but also shaping his worldview and answering his questions about life. The dialog in the darkness helps a reader scrutinize the father and the son's relationships:

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.

In this example, one can see that the man cannot imagine his life without his son, and he tells it him directly. As he sees the son as someone sacred, he tries to shepherd him despite the unavailability of food, home, safety, company, or hope. By his own example, he teaches him to be honest, admits he does not have all the answers, and still tries to provide the explanation why the life is sometimes so hard. As the father feels he is going to die, he reassures the boy and remains a good father until his last moment. To conclude, the novel's characters, the man, and his wife represent two alternatives. The author illustrates how different they are not only in terms of parenthood but also their perception of the harsh reality. The father figure is the parent-fighter type: despite the challenges the family has to face, he makes every endeavor to protect his child whom he views as his reason for being. He is strong and determined, and love is what gives him the power to continue the way. In comparison with her husband, the woman exemplifies the weakness as she cannot accept the new world in which danger and death lurk in every corner. This feeling is more powerful than the motherly feelings that one could expect of a mother. Thus, the fraternal and maternal roles are notable for their ambiguous meaning: they pertain to real people's relationships and simultaneously are abstract forms of the worldview.