

# The road to adulthood



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The Road by Cormac McCarthy is a piece of literature that depicts the possible effects of a post-apocalyptic world on a man and his son. From a surface-level reading, the novel portrays the bond between parent and child and the struggle to survive unforgiving scenarios. However, upon closer study, McCarthy's true intentions to warn humanity of the possible consequences for the world's development are revealed. This story not only suggests that our fate is a violent and bleak one, but also predicts the self-destruction of humanity. It would be incomplete and insufficient to read this book without considering what it suggests about the evolution and structure of our mortality, representation, and beliefs. Under the clarity of a psychoanalytical lens, The Road can be read as a novel about the development of the individuality of a young boy in a post-apocalyptic world. The insights of fear, loss, and personality theory brought to light by psychoanalysis are prominent components of the boy's path to becoming an individual and distinguishing himself from his father. It is through these ideas that it becomes apparent that "the road" is not just the literal one that the man and son walk, but the figurative road that the boy takes to become who he is at the end of the story.

Psychoanalysis, which explains much of how McCarthy's novel operates, is a study founded by 20th century psychologist Sigmund Freud. This field explores the unconscious mind, instinct, repression, desire, and sexuality. The concealed part of the mind, which Freud called the "unconscious," is a dimension of the mind that is consciously inaccessible, yet in indirect ways influences our behavior and components of our personalities. Part of this unconscious includes the personality theory of Freud's work in which he

explains the movements between our instinctual and moral decisions: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id is the site of the uncontrollable instincts in the mind, the ego is the part that controls the id to keep our behavior in line with what is appropriate socially, and the superego has a moral influence on the ego. These parts that influence morality act symbolically in *The Road*, as manifested in the characters themselves. Another of the central features of psychoanalysis is Freud's idea of fear, which he defines in his *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*: "the occasions, the objects and situations which arouse fear, will depend largely on our knowledge of and our feeling of power over the outer world" (Freud, 4). The boy's fears prove to be compatible with this definition as we study their manifestations. His knowledge of and control over the outer world is weak due to the nature of the devastated and unforgiving world around him. He initially feels no power over the outer world and clings to his father, but then gradually develops his own voice and influences their path during the novel. The fear that the boy most clearly expresses is that of being alone, which is explained by Freud as originating from the separation of the child from his mother's womb at birth. This fear is then expressed throughout life as the fear of being alone (Freud, 5). This fear is intensified for the boy because he loses his mother a second time, to death, which is more powerful than the separation at birth because the boy is conscious of the situation. These parts of psychoanalysis allow the reasons for the boy's behavior during his maturation to become clear and comprehensible.

Fear of separation is immediately apparent in the first conversation of the novel, when the boy wakes and calls for his father: "hi, Papa, he said. ' I'm

right here.' I know" (McCarthy, 5). This shows that the boy needs reassurance that his father is still with him after having woken up one morning to find that his mother has left (58). It is evident that the two need each other, and this interaction comforts the boy. As revealed by Freud's work, the first fear that people experience is an initial separation from mother at birth, which reverberates throughout life. The boy is a more extreme case of this because he experienced such a crisis twice: once at birth, and once with his mother's death. This puts him in constant separation anxiety and affects his behavior during the novel. This behavior gradually reveals that his fear of being alone overpowers his fear of death. This is most intensely evident when the father asks the boy if he wants to die as a result of seeing someone else die, and the boy responds with " I don't care, the boy said, sobbing. I don't care" (McCarthy 85). This complete submission to his anxiety is powerful because it parallels his mother's suicide. Having both severances from his mother so close together (a disruptive occurrence in Freud's theory) caused the boy to reveal some issues he may have as a result of the apocalypse. After this behavior, the father becomes concerned and tells his son that he " musn't say that." The way that the father quickly becomes calm in order to comfort the boy reveals that this reminds the father of his wife; he fears that the same suicidal idea may be manifest in his son. This is the first occurrence which shows that the boy has a separate mind from his father's, launching the boy's development of his own path.

The id, ego, and the superego appear in *The Road* in a way that is symbolic and extremely important to the boy's role in the novel. Rather than these components of the unconscious being significant in the boy himself, they are

significant to the relationship between the boy, his father, and the world around them. As the boy matures, he is shown to recognize the importance of morality in this new world. He often questions his own father's decisions to keep him tethered to his values. A simple example of this is when the two are sharing hot cocoa and the father pours more into his son's cup. The boy catches him, playfully reminding his father of his promise:

I have to watch you all the time, the boy said.

I know.

If you break little promises, you'll break big ones. That's what you said.

I know. But I won't. (McCarthy, 34)

By keeping his father in line, the boy acts as a reminder of his father's principle of not breaking promises, despite his father's initial motive to give his son a larger share. This is symbolic of the interaction between the ego and the superego. According to psychoanalysis, the job of the superego is to be like a parental influence on the ego and counteract the innate instincts of the id. With the boy's role as the father's superego, he serves as a constant keeper of their morality. When the father abandons these morals in order to keep himself and his son alive, the son refuses to speak to him (52).

However, as he grows up, the boy learns to rationalize with his father rather than keep silent. He shifts his tone from questioning to pleading: "just help him, Papa. Just help him" (259). The repetition in this phrase underlines the boy's realization of his ability to sway his father's thinking. This shift is parallel with the boy's growing separation from his father.

While at the beginning of the novel we saw the boy and the man as one agreeable pair, we now see individuality in the boy. The final separation of the two occurs at the most powerful instance of the boy's development: the father's death. Despite his previously evident fear of being left alone, the boy shows acceptance of the fact that his father is dying. He asks his father if a little boy who is lost will be okay, and his father responds "goodness will find the little boy" (281). This exchange is the boy's way of asking his father what will happen to him personally when he is left alone rather than what will happen to another little boy. He is no longer crying and pleading with his father to not leave him, but instead understands that he can receive reassurance in his father's final words. It is in this moment that the boy takes responsibility for himself as an individual and completes his development. Now that his father is gone, he is expected to make his own moral judgements and speak for himself with the lessons that his father taught him. In truth, the boy has progressed immensely as an individual since the beginning of the novel. With this final separation completing the boy's formation of his superego, he can battle the post-apocalyptic world on his own.

The Road is not simply a story about a family's struggle in the apocalypse. Under the insights provided by psychoanalysis, it reveals itself as a symbolic novel about overcoming fears, defending morals, and creating a new path. The boy's development throughout the story is directly correlated to psychoanalytical ideas about the result of growing up under various conditions that suggest the importance of understanding humanity's values. We can use this lens to inspect our own paths and discover the roles they

have in deciding our principles and values. It is important that we know how we became who we are as a society so we can prevent becoming as barbaric and merciless as so many of the characters in *The Road*. Such analysis, furthermore, poses many more questions about how the story could have changed. What if the man had lived? Would the boy still eventually detach himself from his father? What if the mother had lived; would the boy have experienced his separation fear much less intensely? An interesting exploration would be to use this criticism to reveal why the father acts as he does throughout the novel, and why he did not become savage like the others. The incredibly bleak and hopeless nature of the apocalypse poses more questions about what it means for the boy as he grows into adulthood. These are just some possible analyses to pursue, since McCarthy leaves the novel open for many future debates. Yet regardless of future critiques, it is safe to say that *The Road* serves as a symbolic tool for decoding the mysteries of humanity: how we develop personality individually and why we do the things we do.

Works Cited  
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