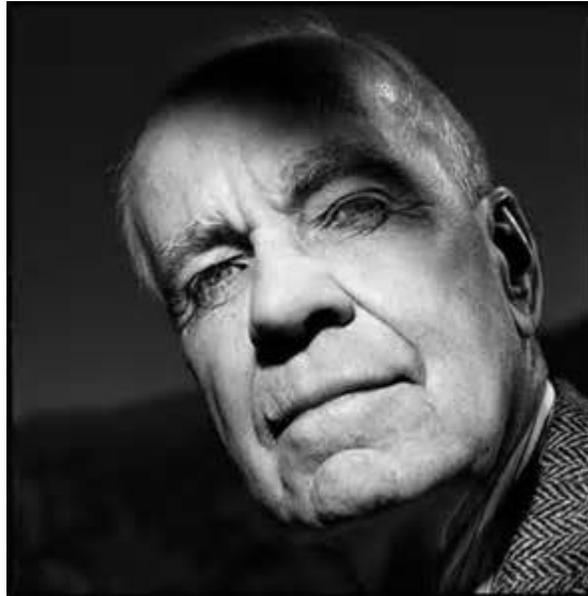


## ANALYSIS IN DETAIL

*The Road* (2006)



Cormac McCarthy

(1933- )

The first sentence establishes the mission of the protagonist—"the child." This is politically incorrect in our Feminist age of subordinating a child to the interests of the parents. At the outset of *The Road* the reader must ask, Where is the mother? This is the first indication that the novel is an indictment of contemporary American culture. McCarthy is countercultural in making the child a supreme value above all others, in the tradition of Victorianism. The environment is "Like the onset of some glaucoma dimming away the world." The simile introduces the theme of losing sight and is followed by loss of light: He "looked toward the east for any light but there was none." Light in the east would indicate a new day and raise the hope of a better one. McCarthy turns the familiar genre of the post-Apocalyptic adventure story into an allegory of human life in a Postmodernist age of spiritual death, extending the literary tradition of the "Waste Land" (1922) originating with T. S. Eliot.

In his dream the man is *led* through a cave by a child "like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost." Deep in the cave, an archetypal image of the unconscious mind, they come upon a blind naked beast from the age of dinosaurs—primitive Nature in the depths of the psyche. The characters are nameless because names do not matter anymore and this makes them archetypal representatives of the human race. The narration is full of sentence fragments and is further broken into segments, a characteristic of Postmodern fiction that is organic here in conveying a fragmented consciousness in a shattered world. The style is bare like the landscape: "Barren, silent, godless." The narrator is silent on pertinent facts such as what disaster has occurred, generating the suspense of a mystery. The light is dim and awareness is limited to what the characters know, a technique of Impressionism, with a sinister Gothic atmosphere. Furthermore, much of what they know is withheld, as in Faulkner, and literary allusions and other implications are submerged, according to the iceberg principle of Hemingway. Narrative simplicity intensifies emotion impact, as when the man embraces the boy, and it makes the archetypal symbolism stand out clearly—light, dark, warm, cold, road, fire.

The landscape ahead is “godless,” as it was before the evolution of humanity and belief in gods or God. “He knew only that the child was his warrant: He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.” He does not question the existence of God, only his own responsibility. In a godless world, God only exists within himself. He is on a divine mission to save humanity represented by the child. He is following a road south to escape the winter cold. “There’d be no surviving another winter here” indicates that the disaster must have occurred months or years ago. They have been miserable for a long time now. The reference to “soft ash” and dead trees suggests a volcanic eruption, wildfire, or atomic blast.

The grocery cart is an image associated with homeless people and suggests the ironic possibility that now everybody is homeless. The reference to the boy having “pulled away his mask in the night” indicates the possibility of chemical or biological pollution. “This was not a safe place. They could be seen from the road now it was day.” They are like nocturnal animals, like prey. “An hour later they were on the road.” The phrase “on the road” is simple and might be no conscious allusion at all, but the writer deserves credit. McCarthy knows what he is doing better than we do. The simple phrase “on the road” resonates through American literature from Walt Whitman to Jack Kerouac and Ken Kesey and is grimly ironic since their romantic tradition has been obliterated like the vegetation in this post-apocalyptic world where they are “shuffling though the ash”—a literal waste land. When “he picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father’s house in that long ago”—his nostalgia is for all he has lost forever.

Throughout the story, humanity and hope are reaffirmed every time the man touches the boy: “The man sat with his arms around the boy trying to warm him.” The scale of the disaster is implied by “The ashes of the late world” and by the reduction of a city without lights to a “gray shape that vanished in the night’s onset like an apparition,” replaced by their “little lamp.” All around them “There was nothing.” They, however, mean everything to each other: “If you died I would want to die too.” Yet the man wishes he felt nothing: “If only my heart were stone.” Paradoxically, this increases our sense of how deeply he feels. He is also sick, and “he coughed for a long time.” His coughing is repeated as a motif, indicating that he is trying with all he has left to complete his mission before he dies.

The brevity of the speeches, the simple sentences, the fragments and the minimal punctuation all express fatigue, misery, and near despair. In contrast, the longer compound sentences rendering consecutive actions are assertions of will and grace under pressure that become heroic and no doubt deliberately recall the famous style of Hemingway. McCarthy’s style also differs in that Hemingway avoided sentence fragments and abstract diction. The man kneels in the ashes and prays to God in the questioning spirit of Job and Melville and the agony of the later Twain: “Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul?” Like Twain, he is angry at God in particular over the suffering of children.

When they pass through the dead city a corpse in a doorway is “dried to leather,” indicating that the disaster happened years ago, but not decades, as indicated by the reference to “second growth timber.” For how long has this man been a single parent? Nostalgically he recalls fishing at the lake with his uncle, “the perfect day of his childhood.” Now the boy, presumably his son, has painted fangs on his face mask, adapting to a savage environment. “He held the boy shivering against him.” It is raining soot. “If they got wet there’s be no fires to dry by. If they got wet they would probably die.”

For weeks they move south along the road. Has the human race evolved into nothingness—“Upright to what?” The boy catches a gray snow flake in his hand “and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom.” The world has regressed from civilization to barbarism: “He thought the bloodcults must have all consumed one another. No one traveled this road. No road agents, no marauders.” On this road there is still hope. They build a fire and he “sat working on the wheel.” This evokes the evolution of the human race, which must now be repeated if possible—“reinventing the wheel” of civilization. The competence and will of the man—the human race—are hopeful signs, as he fixes their vehicle: “It ran fairly true. The boy sat watching everything.” The mentoring relationship of the dying man to a boy who represents the younger generation parallels the relationship of the old man and the boy in Hemingway’s allegory of human endurance *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). The younger generation riding on the shoulders of the older is a literal motif in *The Road*.

In a barn they come upon “three bodies hanging from the rafters” that do not bother the boy at all. He pays no attention to them, as if he is used to bodies by now. They find a ham that is “Deep red and salty meat inside. Rich and good. They fried it that night over their fire, thick slices of it, and put the slices to simmer with a can of beans.” Again like Hemingway, after prolonging his characters’ deprivation and hunger, McCarthy is able to make a reader salivate, taste and savor. This vicarious experience is Realism. After eating the man dreams of a “pale bride” who comes to him out of refreshing pastoral greenery and holds his hand. Waking up is always a nightmare. He tells the boy “There’s nothing in the lake.” Likewise the farmland—“everything dead to the root.” The interstate highway exchanges are “like the ruins of a vast funhouse.” This recalls the guests who come to Gatsby’s parties and behave as if they are in an amusement park--America before the Apocalypse. Now there are “mummied dead everywhere” and America is like ancient Egypt. The man takes the boy to visit “the house where I grew up... This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy.” Lost in nostalgia with a broken heart he lingers, but the boy is scared and the man decides, “We shouldn’t have come.”

“In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees... Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland.” The man anticipates the worst--that he may have to kill the boy with his pistol: “Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?” Finally we are given a glimpse of the missing mother: “He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart. But he knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death.” The boy is his heart. If it comes to the worst and he must kill his son—an echo of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac—then he will probably kill himself. “He said that everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and no substance to it. There was a good chance they would die in the mountains and that would be that.”

Pushing the cart up into the mountains through the snow “it was hard going and he stopped often to rest.” For the first time, he coughs up blood, then “He pushed the cart on through the snow.” His prose style—simple and fragmented, his repeated words and rhythms, his relentless syntax of subject-verb-predicate--all contribute to the increasing sense of his fatigue, his force of will, his love for the boy, and his capacity for sacrifice. The emotional power of the story steadily builds, as in *The Old Man and the Sea*. The man dreams of a woman he cared for when she was sick, but in reality “He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell.” He is driven by guilt to atone by sacrificing himself now for the boy. “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left.” He is a grieving father carrying on the last light of civilization. “By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp.”

“Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road.” The ash is so thick in the air the snow is almost black. “All the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later. But not on us.” He must encourage the boy with faith. His son “woke whimpering in the night and the man held him.” The boy dreamed of a mechanical penguin that stopped working, like civilization. They find a pastoral sanctuary and bath in the pool of a waterfall, build a fire and eat mushrooms and beans. “This is a good place, Papa, he said.” The man tells the boy stories, passing along civilization through literature. “Old stories of courage and justice.” However, their pastoral retreat is only temporary, like Eden.

Moving on they come upon the wreck of a truck blocking the road that “had been there for years.” Inside the truck trailer the man finds human bodies in rotted clothes. Then they pass a man who has been “struck by lightning”—more or less like everyone else in this post-Apocalyptic world. The boy wants to help him but the man says there is nothing anybody can do, which applies to other people in general. “The boy was crying. He kept looking back.” The man uses his head but the boy is his heart, now that his wife is gone. Going through his worn billfold he finds “A picture of his wife.” Trying to move on emotionally and not look back, he leaves her behind on the road.

Finally we are given the apocalyptic moment: Years ago, “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions.... What is it? She said.” The power is out and there is a glow in the distant sky. His wife is pregnant, “cradling her belly in one hand.” Now the boy, his only hope, has

fantasies that life will improve in the south, but he also wishes he was dead. The man “coughed till he could taste the blood and he said her name aloud.” He cannot forget his wife.

The key scene in the novel is the remembered argument between the man and his wife over whether to kill themselves and the boy. She insists that “we’re the walking dead in a horror movie.” She has already given up: “I should have done it a long time ago.” Over half a dozen times he begs her not to kill herself, but she is adamant: “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it.” This shocking possibility is one of McCarthy’s main themes throughout his fiction, that human beings are not basically good as the liberals pretend to believe in order to buy votes, that people are on the contrary very much inclined to evil. What to do? The woman opts for suicide.

The father and the son have been established as archetypal figures, but the woman rejects her archetypal roles. Animal mothers are known for their ferocity in defending their cubs to the death. They do not kill their babies and run away. Victorian mothers were comparable in their elevation of their children above themselves. This woman expresses the priorities and exhibits the characteristics of a modern Feminist: (1) She is unfaithful to traditional values: “You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I’ve taken a new lover”; (2) dissociated from humanity like a sociopath: “I don’t care if you cry. It doesn’t mean anything to me”; (3) refuses to accept any responsibility to her family: “I can’t help you”; (4) claims to be a victim with no free will: “I didn’t bring myself to this. I was brought”; (5) is willing to terminate her child: “I’d take him with me [kill him] if it weren’t for you”; (6) is in the dark, willfully ignorant: “You can’t even see”—“I don’t have to”; (7) is an Atheist: “For the love of God, woman”—“As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart”; (8) *all* her heart is invested in herself; (9) she is more averse to being raped than to killing herself; and (10) she underestimates her husband: “You can’t protect us.” In *The Road* McCarthy is holding women accountable for Feminism, for abandoning the traditional human values that sustain civilization. He has already depicted the man as guilty for not taking adequate care of the woman, who is “sick.” It goes without saying that men are primarily responsible for whatever may destroy physical civilization. This wasteland represents both physical *and* social Apocalypse.

In this novel, in contrast to a post-Apocalypse movie, few facts are given about what caused the disaster because that is not the subject. The cause is beside the point. The physical catastrophe, apparently nuclear, is a metaphor—literary hyperbole—for social catastrophe: Families and Feminists have been replaced by rapist gangs of cannibals in hoods, “Slouching along with clubs in their hands, lengths of pipe.” Their hoods give them an ironic resemblance to monks, illustrating in one image the consequences of destroying families, religion and belief in God. Monks are replaced by murderers. Feminism alienates and inverts the evolution of males, undoing the progress made by religious Victorian women in turning brutes into gentlemen. Fortunately this man remains brute enough to shoot the marauder who grabs his son. They get away and “He held the boy close.” They have to keep moving all night until “the boy fell and would not get up again.” The man has only one bullet left in his pistol.

The father transcends gender in mothering his son, “holding him, rocking back and forth”—while also considering whether he will be able to end his suffering, if necessary. In contrast to his wife: “This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That’s my job.” He promises the boy, “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you.” Just ahead “The truck people had camped in the road itself.” The man insists that while he goes to reconnoiter the boy must take the gun. Their disagreement is between a pacifist liberal and a conservative: “I don’t want the gun,” says the boy. “I didn’t ask you if you wanted it,” says his father. He leaves and the horrible reality of the situation is immediately felt when he “went back” and apparently finds the remains of his son—“the bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them. A pool of guts.” It appears that the boy has been boiled and eaten. As it turns out, it is only a matter of chance that this is not, in fact, his son. He rushes “to where he’d left the boy and knelt and put his arms around him and held him.”

McCarthy is like Melville and Hemingway in recognizing the survival value of ritual, as when the man “tousled the boy’s hair before the fire to dry it. All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of air and breath upon them.” He has a dream like the earlier one about the reptilian beast in the cave, this time about finally seeing another human being:

“My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh.” His apparent brother is revealed to be a cannibal. Contrary to the self-conception of liberals, human beings are not by nature good, by nature they are predatory savages. In another gesture of passing along what remains of culture and beauty, the father carves a flute for his son—“perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin.”

The father encourages his son to have faith that, as the boy says, “nothing bad is going to happen to us.... Because we’re carrying the fire.” He gives the boy something to believe in, that they are the Good Guys, with a mission from God. Fire has been a symbol of civilization for millennia, as exemplified by the Olympic torch, and is also a symbol of freedom, as exemplified by the Statue of Liberty. McCarthy is contradicting the secular elite academics—the Feminists, Marxists and other totalitarians—who since the 1960s have been characterizing Americans as the Bad Guys. McCarthy is carrying the fire. For example, his themes and submerged allusions sustain American literary tradition, defying the efforts of Feminists to stamp out literature by males. The boy grieves over a stray dog and a little boy they must leave behind. Like his father, he must adapt to his environment, learn to use his head as well as his heart and leave his inner little boy behind, a theme in Melville’s *Billy Budd* (1891) and other classics.

The man recalls being followed by a dog for two days: “I tried to coax it to come but it would not. I made a noose of wire to catch it.” Then he refers to having only three bullets left. “None to spare. She walked away down the road.” This she is his wife. “The boy looked after her and then he looked at the dog.” His feelings of losing his mother are transferred to the dog and his father promises him he will not hurt the dog. But later they come upon the hide of the dog, apparently caught and eaten by some “little boys,” who are adapting to their environment. The elision of dog into wife in this passage suggests how the woman felt about her marriage, as it takes a “noose” to pull her into it. She lacks commitment and her independence proves suicidal.

The come upon a wall topped with a row of human heads, “all faced alike,” as individual identity is lost in a brutal state of Nature. Their bodies had been “devoured.” Now along the road come marchers four abreast “all wearing red scarves at their necks”—an “army in tennis shoes, tramping” along the road with bludgeons and spears. Red has been the color of Leftists for a century. These marchers in red scarves are descendants of Communists and politically correct professors. Their wagons are pulled by slaves [teaching adjuncts] and their women, some pregnant, are behind the slaves. Last in the march, only the boy slaves for homosexuals are lower than women now in the red social order. McCarthy here is equating Leftists with other barbarians. Their models include Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Hitler the Socialist.

The boy is “Standing there with his hands in the pockets of his oversized pinstriped suitcoat.” He is trying to be a man. He is a “child,” is small enough to ride on his father’s shoulders, and calls his father Papa—as Hemingway was famously known—but he grows increasingly brave and seems to be maturing from experience as indicated by his questions to his father. When they come upon a decaying mansion with doric columns, they have reached the South: “Chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays.” Now, after the Apocalypse, savages rule and all races are slaves on the menu. Everywhere there is a smell of death. Cows have gone extinct and there is nothing left to eat. Huddled cowering in the dark basement of the mansion are naked people trying to hide from the cannibals. The man pushes his son away up the stairs and the boy does “his little dance of terror.”

They have to run and hide again and the man reminds the boy how to put the pistol in his mouth and shoot himself if necessary. But the boy would not be able to do it and his father, in contrast to his mother, declares, “I wont ever leave you.” The boy sleeps and “In the night he heard hideous shrieks coming from the house and he tried to put his hands over the boy’s ears and after a while the screaming stopped.” Then the cannibals ring a dinner bell “for their companions to come.” Atavism, regression to an animal state, is a common theme in Naturalistic fiction. This man overcomes deterministic forces and retains his humanity, as by refusing to eat a dog. He assures his son that they will never be cannibals either and the boy has faith “Because we’re the good guys... And we’re carrying the fire.” Under the circumstances they cannot afford to set the standard of civilization very high: They agree not to eat anybody.

Starving and desperate, the man despairs: “He saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable.... The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover.” This is the traditional Gothic vision that extends into Naturalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. But he transcends this vision in “Rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from. Things no longer known in the world.” In particular he remembers his wife “crossing the lawn toward the house in the early morning in a thin rose gown that clung to her breasts”—pastoral imagery embodying in her all that he most values—all beauty, tenderness and love. Once, for awhile, he had it all.

Suddenly coming upon themselves reflected in a mirror, the man almost raises his pistol, as if he can no longer distinguish himself from the barbarians. “It’s us, Papa, the boy whispered. It’s us.” When he looks into the boy’s face “he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again.” By continuing to encourage the boy, he raises his own spirit: “This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up.” He is rewarded for reaching deeper into himself, for never giving up, when he uncovers a buried hatch to an underground bunker stocked full of canned goods. Seek and ye shall find. “Oh my God,” he says three times, then a fourth time, including a line that conflates his Christ-evoking son with God: “Oh my God. Come down.”

What they discover is more hard-won than what Robinson Crusoe and Friday find on their island or what Huck and Jim find in the house floating on the river. They have found another sanctuary—a “tiny paradise”—always temporary of course. Significantly, the man finds what he needs not by praying to God in the sky but by having the guts to be self-reliant and keep digging. Preparing to eat a meal, it is the boy who prays, thanking the people who stored this food and hoping “that you’re safe in heaven with God.” The man awakens from a dream of being “visited by creatures of a kind he’d never seen before.... He thought that they’d been crouching by the side of his cot as he slept and then had skulked away on his awakening”—an experience of the spiritual or paranormal. The “creatures” may be (1) hallucinations, hence meaningless; (2) space aliens who might save or exploit what remains of the human race; (3) the spirits of the people who stored the food in the underground bunker; or (4) since the word “skulked” may have a negative connotation, they may be cannibal spirits.

Further along the road they come upon the opposite of spirituality: They overtake a bent old man with a cane who “smelled terrible” and personifies Postmodernism, as he: (1) rejects the past: “not one for looking back”; (2) is rootless: “You can’t stay in one place”; (3) isolated and solipsistic: “It’s better to be alone”; (4) selfish: “I wouldn’t have given him mine”; (5) anti-human: “Things will be better when everybody’s gone”; (6) Atheist: “There is no God”; and (7) amoral: “I live like an animal.” In contrast the boy has a heart and persuades his father to be generous to the old man because they are the Good Guys. The bitter old Atheist is suspicious of the boy’s goodness: “Maybe he believes in God.... He’ll get over it.” The Postmodernist is virtually blind: “with his cane, tapping his way.”

That night after a coughing fit, the man realizes that he too is soon going to die and that he needs to figure out how to do that. He has estimated that they have about 200 miles to go to reach the southern coast. In *Blood Meridian* (1986) the relentless horrific trek westward to the ocean ironically named the Pacific is historical and represents the Westward movement of “civilization” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *The Road* (2006) the relentless horrific trek southward to the Gulf is prophetic and represents the effort to preserve true civilization. The boy discovers an abandoned railroad train, a relic of civilization that used to symbolize Progress, but now “no train would ever run again.” All stores of food had given out and “The world would soon be populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes.” This is illustrated by the most degenerate horror in the novel, one night when they come upon a deserted campsite: “What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit.”

The burned landscape confirms a nuclear holocaust—gray cities tilting, tall buildings softened by the heat from the blast, long rusting lines of cars on the interstate with melted tires and incinerated drivers. The man continues to hope it will be brighter at the southern coast though “for all he knew the world grew darker daily.” For the sake of the boy he must have faith, and he is inspired by another memory of his wife: “When he went back to the fire he knelt and smoothed her hair as she slept and he said if he were God

he would have made the world just so and no different.” Now, having lost his wife and the world, “There were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead.”

When the boy gets sick, in contrast to the mother the father holds him all night and promises not to kill him or himself with the last bullet: “No matter what. I will not send you into the darkness alone.” The boy continues to act as a conscience, a voice of the heart pleading for the life of the thief who stole their cart of belongings: “He was just hungry, Papa. He’s going to die.” The boy is also developing a larger vision, as he realizes that his father likewise is going to die. Now he is beginning to “worry about everything.” He takes moral responsibility for abandoning the thief to starve: “But we did kill him.” Coughing all the time now, anticipating his own death, the father sees his son as “standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle.” The boy is holy.

Near the coast they leave their cart behind. They reach a crossroads and the father knows that “this was the place where he would die.” Now, reversing roles, the boy takes care of his father, who gives him final instructions: “You need to find the good guys... You have to carry the fire.... It’s inside you.... You’re the best guy.... Just don’t give up.” When the boy expresses concern again for the little boy they left behind, his father assures him, “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again.” These are his last words, expressing a faith that is confirmed by the plot of the novel. The boy is saved at least twice by providential goodness: when they are starving to death and find the underground bunker of food and at the end when a family of good guys finds him on the road.

After all the horrors, after the relentless heroic efforts of the man for almost 300 pages, his death in the arms of his son is understated, increasing the pathos: “He slept close to his father that night and held him but when he woke in the morning his father was cold and stiff. He sat there a long time weeping and then he got up and walked out through the woods to the road.” The plain style is stoical, evoking more deeply the grief of the boy, according to the “iceberg principle” perfected by Hemingway: understatement elicits compensatory feeling from the reader. This is one of the scenes in American literature that is most likely to bring tears to your eyes—unless you are a Postmodernist.

This moving death scene is an example of what T. S. Eliot defined as the “objective correlative,” the concrete details of a situation that correlate with the specific feeling to be evoked. Throughout the novel McCarthy achieves effects through: (1) appeal to basic almost universal human emotions such as love of children and fear of death; (2) relentlessly straightforward linear narration; (3) concrete plain style enhanced by Expressionism; (4) detailing of many consecutive particular actions that evoke the illusion of real life; (5) authenticity of diction and specific knowledge; (6) virtuous sympathetic characters who are Good Guys; (7) surrounded and outnumbered by roving hordes of Bad Guys who eat people; (8) the pure unselfish motive of a hero who dies without knowing he has succeeded in saving his son.

After three days of mourning, the boy returns to the road. The “road” is a metaphor of current history, the prevailing “way” of life at the moment, an artificial contrast to the Tao, the divine way of Nature. At this “crossroads” a bearded man with scars and a shotgun upsidown over his shoulder approaches the boy and smiles. He has known the boy was there in the woods with his father and did not bother him. He expresses compassion and the boy asks, “Are you one of the good guys?” The man pulls back his hood from his face and “He looked at the sky.” The sky is the archetypal space of transcendence. The birds are dead now, but hope survives in human form. The boy feels he can trust this man because he has children and did not eat them. The road of this man “crosses” the barbaric main road, forming a cross evoking Christ, who said “Suffer the little children to come unto me.”

This good guy is leading an archetypal family—the basic unit of human civilization—gender balanced including a woman, a boy and a girl. The reader is relieved to see this woman redeem womankind from the mother who abandons her child. This woman is introduced embracing the boy, a child not even her own: “Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you.” His mother had only one child, this woman is welcoming a third. Also unlike his mother the Atheist, this woman “would talk to him sometimes about God.” And she encourages him to talk to the spirit of his father.

The last word of the novel is “mystery.” In his own voice the narrator is agnostic as objectivity requires, but his story emphasizes that from belief in God the man derives: (1) the strength to endure; (2) humanity and morality—“the fire” of civilization; (3) faith in providential help for the Good Guys; (4) inspiration not to “lose heart”; (5) the basis for comforting and maintaining communion with his son as a spirit after death: “I’ll talk to you every day, he whispered.” The boy “tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget.” (6) His father saved him by teaching him to internalize the power of God through faith. Confirming the novel, scientific studies have consistently shown that belief in God significantly improves mental health. Faith empowers.

Unlike the hero of *The Road*, in interviews McCarthy has expressed a bitter rejection of immortality: “As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart.” Ironically, these are almost verbatim the words of the mother in the novel who abandons her child. McCarthy is a religious Existentialist, humanist and theist who does not “abandon the child.” Humane and practical, he carries the fire out of duty as a man, despite his feeling that ultimately “The point is there ain’t no point.” The fire, the God within—that is the point in *The Road*.

Michael Hollister (2014)