

The Road



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

McCarthy was born as one of six children, and he grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, where his father worked as a lawyer. McCarthy pursued creative writing at the University of Tennessee, but he never graduated. He has been married three times, to Lee Holleman, Annie DeLisle, and Jennifer Winkley, and has two children. He moved to Santa Fe with Winkley to raise his young son John Francis. McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, was published in 1965. Overall he has written ten novels and is now one of the best known contemporary American writers, but McCarthy remains a reclusive figure. He was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship in 1981, the National Book Award in 1992, and the Pulitzer Prize (for *The Road*) in 2006. Several of his books have been made into feature films, including *No Country For Old Men*. McCarthy still lives and writes in Santa Fe.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Road takes place in a hypothetical post-apocalyptic world, but the disaster leading to civilization's collapse is never explained in the novel. Members of the environmentalist movement have claimed *The Road* as a valuable tool in warning about the dangers of pollution and climate change, especially the fact that without plants and animals, humans will inevitably die off too. Several churches have also embraced the Christian and religious themes in the novel.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

McCarthy's works span several genres and often cannot be categorized, but some are considered Westerns, thrillers, or science-fiction. McCarthy's earlier, "Southern Gothic" works were influenced by William Faulkner, the author of [The Sound and the Fury](#) and [As I Lay Dying](#). McCarthy has also been influenced by Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick*. Other post-apocalyptic literature includes Margaret Atwood's [The Handmaid's Tale](#), Stephen King's *The Stand*, and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Road*
- **When Written:** 2003-2006
- **Where Written:** El Paso, Texas, Ireland, and Santa Fe, New Mexico
- **When Published:** 2006

- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American Literature
- **Genre:** Post-Apocalyptic Fiction, Science Fiction, Horror
- **Setting:** Post-apocalyptic America
- **Climax:** The man's death
- **Point of View:** Third person limited, occasionally first person

EXTRA CREDIT

Oprah. McCarthy is known as a reclusive writer, but when *The Road* was selected for Oprah's Book Club, McCarthy broke his silence and gave one television interview with Oprah Winfrey.

The boy John Francis. McCarthy's son John Francis, who was born late in McCarthy's life, was the main inspiration for *The Road*. Supposedly much of the dialogue is taken verbatim from McCarthy's conversations with John Francis.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Road takes place after some unknown apocalyptic event has nearly wiped out the earth. In this landscape everything is dead and burnt, the sun is blotted out by ash, all plants and animals are extinct, and most humans are either lone travelers or members of cannibalistic communes. The protagonists, a **man** and a **boy**, his young son, are never given names. The plot begins as they are traveling south down the **road** towards the coast, somewhere in the Southeastern United States. They plod along in the darkness with a shopping cart, two knapsacks, and a pistol. The man sometimes coughs up blood and the boy constantly asks for comfort and reassurance. They suffer from cold, exposure, and frequent starvation as they travel the road and search abandoned buildings for food. The man sometimes has good dreams about the past and his **wife**. His wife had killed herself, trying to escape what she felt was inevitable rape and murder.

The man and boy cross a mountain range, where they suffer through snowstorms. On the way observe a truck of "bad guys," the gangs on the road who rape, murder, and eat other people. The man and boy accidentally encounter one of these strangers. The **stranger** lunges for the boy but the man shoots the stranger in the forehead. The man and boy then escape, with the boy wondering if they are still "good guys." Soon afterward they run out of food and desperately search a big plantation house that is clearly inhabited. They find a basement full of human prisoners who are being kept as livestock. Horrified, the man and boy flee just as some "bad guys" return.

They keep traveling, following the man's map. They are on the verge of starvation again when the man finds an apple orchard

and a well. After that food runs out, and once again starving, they find a bomb shelter full of canned food and supplies. They stay there a few days and bathe, cut their hair, and stock up. They set off again and encounter an old man named **Ely**, who stays one night with them. After more travel and starvation they find a house with more canned food. They finally reach the coast, but are disappointed to find the ocean just as gray and lifeless as everything else. The man sees a wrecked boat offshore, and inside he finds more food and a **flarepistol**. They shoot the flarepistol off one night, feeling abandoned by the “good guys” and God.

One day the boy gets a fever, and the despairing man won't leave his side. After the boy recovers, they explore the beach and return to find their cart and supplies stolen. They pursue the **thief** to the road, and the man threatens him with the pistol. The boy cries and pleads, but the man makes the thief strip naked and then takes back their cart, leaving the thief shivering in the road. The boy is upset by this, saying that they have killed the thief. They set off south on the road again, and as they are leaving a town someone shoots the man in the leg with an arrow. The man shoots his **attacker** with the flarepistol, but he is left with a limp and a bad wound.

The man and boy travel inland, and their progress grows more torturous as it gets colder. The man's wound worsens, and he coughs up more and more blood. One night he realizes he cannot get up again. The man had planned on killing the boy if he himself were to die (to save the boy from the cruel world), but the man finds he cannot go through with this. He tells the boy to keep going south down the road, and to keep “carrying the fire.” He dies with the boy by his side.

The boys spends three days with the body of his father, then sets off alone, and immediately encounters a group of “good guys” – a **man** and **woman** with a little **boy** and **girl**. The boy chooses to trust them when they invite him to join their family, and they set off together. The book ends with a lyrical memory of the brook trout that once lived in the mountain streams.

the “good guys” and to keep “carrying the fire” of humanity and goodness, but he is not afraid to use violence, especially to protect the boy. The man has some kind of respiratory disease that makes him cough up blood, which worsens throughout the book and ultimately kills him.

The Boy – The man's son, a young boy who was born just after the nameless apocalypse. The boy is defined by his relationship with his father, on whom he depends for survival, and his own innate kindness and innocence. The boy constantly asks the man questions, looking for reassurance and some kind of order in the world. Despite the horrible circumstances he has grown up in, the boy is the most compassionate and pure character of the book. He trusts almost everyone he meets on the **road**, and wants to help them by taking them along or giving away precious food. This is mostly childish naiveté, but the boy also feels like he is bearing the moral responsibility of the pair, making sure he and the man act ethically and remain as the “good guys.” The man looks at the boy as a kind of religious figure, a golden-haired angel who is a last bastion of humanity and purity, while the man himself is willing to use violence to protect the boy's life. When the man dies the boy continues on, though he continues to talk to the man in his head.

The Woman – The man's wife and the boy's mother, in *The Road* she only appears through the man's memories and dreams. While the man reacted to the decline and destruction of humanity with a dogged perseverance, the woman eventually gives in to despair. She believes that it is inevitable that she will be raped, murdered, and eaten, so she decides to escape that fate by committing suicide. The man begs with her to reconsider, but he has no reasonable argument against hers. The woman leaves without saying goodbye to the boy and kills herself with a piece of obsidian. Contrasted with this bleak death are the man's memories of their happy marriage and life together before the apocalypse.

The Gang Member – The first “bad guy” the man and the boy meet in the novel, a member of a gang of murderers and cannibals who patrol the **road** in a truck. The gang member leaves his group to go to the bathroom and accidentally encounters the man and boy. After a tense negotiation the stranger lunges at the boy with a knife, and the man shoots the stranger in the forehead. Later the man returns to the scene of the crime and discovers that the stranger's companions have eaten him.

Ely – An old man the man and boy meet on the **road**. He says his name is Ely, but later admits that this isn't his real name, as he doesn't want people talking about him or knowing where he is. He says he has “lived like an animal,” and is struck by the sight of the boy. At the boy's convincing, the man shares some food and their fire with Ely, but the next morning they leave him.

The Thief – An outcast from a commune who steals the man and boy's cart and supplies while they are exploring the beach.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Man – The nameless protagonist of *The Road*. It is never explained what position the man held in the pre-disaster world, although he does know the scientific names of parts of the brain and is an excellent shot with a pistol. Throughout the novel the man is mostly defined by his extreme devotion to his son and his resourceful perseverance in surviving. He is haunted by memories of his wife, who committed suicide rather than face the apocalyptic world in which the characters live, and the pre-disaster world, but he has made the rare decision to keep surviving and “going down the **road**” despite the horror of the post-apocalyptic world. The man resolves to be one of

They catch up with him, and the man makes the thief strip off his clothes at gunpoint. Despite the boy's protests, they then leave the thief shivering in the **road** with no chance of survival.

The "Good Guy" Man – A scarred, shotgun-carrying "veteran" in a ski parka, the man who finds the boy soon after his father's death. The man says he is one of the "good guys," and he offers to let the boy join his group/family, which consists of him, a woman, a boy, and a girl. It is not definitive that the man is in fact good, though the boy chooses to trust him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Burnt Man – The first person the man and boy encounter in the novel, a lone traveler on the **road** who has been injured by fire or lightning and probably won't survive long. He only lowers his eyes in shame as the man and boy pass.

The Archer – A stranger who shoots the man with an arrow as they are leaving a coastal town. The man then shoots the stranger with the **flarepistol**, wounding him badly.

The Little Boy – A boy in an oversized jacket that the boy sees in a city. The little boy disappears without a word, but the boy calls out to him and is very distraught to leave him behind.

The "Good Guy" Woman – A woman who is part of the group of "good guys" that take in the boy at the end of the novel. She talks to the boy about God, but tells him that it's okay if he finds it easier to talk to his father than to God.

Uncle – The man's uncle, with whom the man, when he was a child before the land was devastated, once spent what he considers to be the perfect afternoon on his uncle's farm.

Woman with the Archer – A woman who the man finds cradling the archer, after the man has shot the archer with the flarepistol.

The man, too, is slowly dying, as he coughs up progressively more blood. The entire setting and plot of *The Road* illustrate the apparent entropy of the earth and all life, and death must be taken into account in every action the characters take.

The violence of this post-apocalyptic world adds to the horror of death, as in the face of disaster many humans have reverted to terrible behaviors of murder and cannibalism. Therefore the choice inherent in living in this world is having to deal with violence. The woman chooses to kill herself rather than be eventually raped and eaten. The man is a rare case, however, in that despite the ubiquity of death he still chooses to live, and to live without violence (unless it is necessary to protect the boy). The death and violence of *The Road* create an oppressive mood, but also cause the characters and readers to confront the most basic aspects of humanity.



FAMILIAL LOVE

As there are only two main characters, a father and a son, *The Road's* principal relationship is one of paternal love. The man and boy are "each the other's world entire," and it is only the man's love for the boy that gives him the will to persevere. Their love is generally of the stark, silent kind, as the pair's whole existence consists of surviving from one day to the next. Never in the book does either one say "I love you," but when he has the chance the man shows his love in other ways, as by giving the boy a Coca-Cola. For his part, the boy constantly looks to his father for reassurance, safety, and some kind of order in his chaotic world. Briefly contrasted with this paternal love is the maternal love of the boy's mother. The woman elected to kill herself rather than be raped and eaten, and she suggested that the man kill the boy too, as death would be better than the hellish world they now occupy. The woman is also offering a kind of familial love, but she tries to "save" the boy by protecting him from pain instead of helping him survive at whatever cost. The man and the woman both love the boy, but in such a bleak world they can only show their love out of the depths of their own hope or despair.



SURVIVAL AND PERSEVERANCE

Much of the action of *The Road* consists of the protagonists' daily struggle to survive. This creates a mood of constant suspense as death looms always overhead, and most other humans have turned to cannibalism. One of the novel's central questions then is why to persevere in such a hellish existence. The man's reason to keep struggling comes to him as the idea of "**carrying the fire**": an idea that seems to consist, for him, of preserving the goodness or civilization of mankind by maintaining his basic humanity, having the strength to refrain from murder and cannibalism, and prioritizing a sense of love and protection for the boy's



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



DEATH AND VIOLENCE

In the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road*, almost all animals, plants, and humans have died off because of some unnamed disaster. Because of this, death is a constantly looming figure – the land and sea are covered in darkness and ashes, nothing grows, and dead bodies litter the landscape. Death is so universally present that it is often personified as a character, like the woman describing her decision to commit suicide as taking death as her "new lover."

compassion and naiveté. The woman, on the other hand, considers death better than living in the post-apocalyptic world.

Over the course of the novel the man creates more immediate goals to justify his survival, like reaching the coast or going south. In this way the **road** becomes the great symbol for the struggle to survive. The man has no reason to persevere except his love for the boy and his natural, human desire to keep going down “the road.” In the end, the going on itself is reason enough to go on. Even when the man dies, he gives up his earlier plan to kill the boy so as not to send him into the “darkness alone.” Instead he opts to pass on the “fire,” and he advises his son to keep going south and to remain as one of the “good guys” – the last humans to persevere against brutality.



FAITH, TRUST, AND DOUBT

In the harsh world of *The Road*, everything depends on trusting or distrusting each other. On one level, there is a constant tension regarding whether or not the man should trust anyone he meets on the **road**. Some people are cannibals and rapists, while others will still steal to survive. The boy is more trusting than the man, as he is always trying to help people and give away precious food. This trustingness is part of both the boy’s naiveté and purity – he has a basic faith in humanity that transcends his immediate world of brutality.

Trust also extends to the spiritual level, as in such horrible times people often need a God to blame or believe in. The man feels abandoned by God, but he still talks to God as if he exists, even threatening him. The man’s love for the boy often becomes spiritual as well – he describes the boy in religious terms, as if the boy himself were a god or had some purity about him that was sacred. The boy’s own faith is left nebulous, but after the man’s death he is taken in by a group of “good guys” who talk to him about God. The boy tries to pray, but finds it easier to talk to his father’s spirit. In the end, boy’s love for his father also takes on a spiritual element, and his trust in the man becomes a kind of religious faith.



DREAMS AND MEMORY

The present world of *The Road* is dark and full of death, and the only real color appears in the man’s dreams and memories. When he or the boy have nightmares they are just an extension of the present, where the worst has already happened, but in his good dreams the man returns to his happy memories of the past, and the world of nature and his wife. The boy never experienced the pre-apocalyptic world, so he has no such memories. The man’s dream-memories offer him a kind of escapism that he often avoids, as they seem like a temptation to “give up” or die, but at the same time these memories are one of the reasons the man

keeps persevering. For him, part of “carrying the fire” means carrying the memory of a better world.

Part of memory in the novel also involves names, as the characters are conspicuously unnamed. Their anonymity makes the boy and man seem more archetypal, but it also offers another glimpse of how the present world has robbed people of their basic humanity and histories. True names, like birds, and plants, exist only in the past and in dreams. The book ends with a beautiful memory of brook trout, but the man, the only protagonist who could remember such things, is dead by then. This lyrical final scene, then, shows that the remembering of the past has become a separate entity in itself. There is only the dark present of *The Road*, but part of that present can still involve memories and dreams of peace and life.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE ROAD

As it makes up the title of the novel and its main setting, the road is the most important symbol of *The Road*. The roads are one of the few things that couldn’t be destroyed by whatever disaster destroyed the earth, and the man and boy spend most of their time on a road leading to the coast. As a unifying place for travel, the road is a place of both transience and danger, and in the novel it comes to symbolize the human drive to keep moving and keep surviving, no matter the circumstances. The man is defined by his perseverance in living despite the hellish state of the world (as opposed to the woman’s despair and suicide), and his endless journey down the road symbolizes this dogged endurance. He has no clear goal in mind – except heading south and reaching the coast – but he keeps going anyway, and he teaches the boy this same lifestyle of the road. In the end it seems that the road itself is the destination, as the man tells the boy to keep “carrying the fire” and heading south, moving ahead with the human will to live and go forward.



THE FLAREPISTOL

The man finds the flarepistol in an abandoned boat. He and the boy later shoot it off over the ocean just to see the spectacle, but they have no hope that any “good guys” will see it. The flarepistol thus becomes a symbol of the man and boy’s existential abandonment in the world – not only are they cut off from other kind humans, but it seems as if God himself has turned away from humanity. The boy even suggests that perhaps God could see the flare, but he admits that it would be unlikely. Later the flarepistol becomes a weapon, as

the man shoots it at someone who shot him with an arrow. This is also symbolic, as in the post-apocalyptic world of death and grim survival, a flare – a tool of communication and salvation – is transformed into a violent weapon.





“CARRYING THE FIRE”

The man often uses the phrase “carrying the fire” to describe his dogged perseverance in surviving the post-apocalyptic world. While the woman killed herself in despair, the man commits to being a survivor, and he encourages the boy to “carry the fire” whenever the boy feels like giving up and surrendering to death. This phrase is never fully explained, but the fire seems to symbolize the basic decency that has been destroyed in the world of *The Road*, along with the natural human desire to keep going and hoping for something better. The fire is the man’s love for his son, his moral code to refrain from murder and cannibalism, and also the kindness and purity that still exists in the boy. The discovery of fire has traditionally been linked with the flowering of civilization, and in some sense “carrying the fire” refers to the man and boy’s efforts to preserve their civilized natures in the uncivilized world around them. Before the man dies, he tells the boy to keep carrying the fire and going down the **road** – basically, to keep hope alive in a seemingly hopeless world.

There's also a more desperate side to the Man's love for his Boy, as we'll see later on. It's often suggested that the Boy is the Man's only reason for living and maintaining hope and sanity, so part of the Man's fierce love for his son is almost selfish--trying to maintain his own survival, his own sense of meaning in a brutal, chaotic world.

●● He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.

Related Characters: The Man, The Boy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Why continue living in a post-apocalyptic world, where even breathing the air is painful? In this passage, McCarthy gives a possible answer to the question. The Man chooses to keep on living, in spite of his pain and sadness, because of his love for his child. The Man thinks of taking care of his child as a “religion”--to take care of the Boy is to protect the “word of God.”

Everyone needs something to believe in. Furthermore, belief and worship become particularly important in times of crisis, like those portrayed in the novel. The Man's sole reason for living is his Boy--his wants to make a better life for his child. Notice also that McCarthy, in his typically spare way, alludes to Christ here--the Man says that his Boy is the word of God, the traditional description for Jesus. (At the end of the novel, McCarthy will double down on the Christian symbolism, we'll see.)

●● Are you okay? he said. The boy nodded. Then they set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash, each the other’s world entire.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker), The Boy

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Gradually, McCarthy begins to show us how the Man and the Boy get along from day to day. The Man and Boy don't



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Road* published in 2008.

Pages 1-29 Quotes

●● When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him.

Related Characters: The Man, The Boy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening scene of the novel, McCarthy establishes the close relationship between the Man and the Boy. The chapter, and almost all of the book, is narrated from the Man's point of view--not the boy's. There's something sweet and gentle about the Man's love for his child, but there's also something unshakably sad. As we soon learn, the Man is living in a hellish, post-apocalyptic America, and the Boy is all he has--his wife has killed herself.

talk much to each other--here for instance, their dialogue is extremely minimal. And yet McCarthy suggests that their dialogue--or lack of dialogue--is evidence of their love and trust for each other; in other words, they don't *need* to talk, because they're secure in their affection.

The passage is full of nightmarish descriptions of futuristic America--even the light is grim and suggesting of violence (gunmetal). Notice also the self-consciously old-fashioned phrasing that McCarthy uses--"each other's world entire"--has the ring of the King James Bible to it. McCarthy's literary style reflects the themes of his book: in post-apocalyptic America, civilization has reverted to its somber, stripped-down, worshipful past.

☛ He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death. He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this complicated passage, McCarthy describes the Man's vivid dreams. The Man dreams of his wife--who killed herself--and the old world--which is now in ruins.

What function do the Man's dreams have? On one hand, the Man seems to enjoy returning to an idyllic past for a night's sleep. And yet the Man also mistrusts his own memories--he recognizes that focusing too much on the dream-land of memory distracts him from the day-to-day of life in a post-apocalyptic America. The Man, in short, refuses to surrender to the easy nostalgia of memory--which he sees as intimately associated with "giving in" to death. Instead the Man constantly chooses to work hard and be vigilant, so that his child can have a better life for himself.

Pages 29-60 Quotes

☛ 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.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 29


Explanation and Analysis

The Man and Boy face a problem throughout the novel: what to do? They have to constantly search for food and shelter--but even more basically, they have to find a direction for their lives; something more fulfilling than eating and sleeping. The Man tells the Boy that they need to journey to the ocean. But deep down, he knows that the journey is just a folly: the ocean probably isn't any better, safer, or more spiritually satisfying than the rest of the country.

Why, then, does the Man continue journeying to the ocean? In part, it's suggested, he accepts that he needs something to do, somewhere to go, whether or not that goal is itself worthwhile. This is why the novel is named after the road--the Man and Boy's lives are defined by a dogged perseverance, the perceived necessity of continuing down the road, hoping (if not really believing) that something better might lie ahead.

☛ A forest fire was making its way along the tinderbox ridges above them, flaring and shimmering against the overcast like the northern lights. Cold as it was he stood there a long time. The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McCarthy reinforces the double-nature of happiness. The Man is walking near a forest, which he notices to be on fire. As he watches the flames, it occurs to the Man that fire is the only source of light and color in his life: put another way, the only light in his life comes from sites of destruction, like a forest fire. As we see, the fire inspires the Man to remember his own past: the world of color, his relationship with his wife, etc.

McCarthy implies that the Man's pain is inseparable from his joy: he seems to have loved his wife, yet can't remember her without getting horribly sad. Fire, the symbol of joy,

warmth, and affection, is also a symbol of destruction and pain--and thus an apt illustration of the Man's own divided nature.

☝ They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant... We used to talk about death, she said. We dont anymore. Why is that?
I dont know.
It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about.

Related Characters: The Woman, The Man (speaker), The Boy

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback scene, the Man confronts his wife, who is about to kill herself. Darkness has fallen on the United States--all sense of order and humanity has broken down, so that criminals, murderers, and cannibals control everything. Rather than wait to face the inevitable--being raped, murdered, and eaten--the Man's wife decides to kill herself quickly and painlessly.

The Woman's decision is both brave and cowardly. She's smart enough to realize that she'll inevitably be attacked, and won't be able to defend herself. Rather than risk letting her own child witness such a monstrous event, or experiencing it herself, she decides to kill herself quietly, to take her fate into her own hands and use the last bit of "freedom" she still has. And yet the Woman's decision is also the cowardly way out--she'd prefer to surrender to nothingness than take care of the Boy or try to keep "carrying the fire" of survival and hope, as the Man goes on to do. One gets the sense that the Man's knowledge of his wife's suicide is what motivates him to be strong, never giving into the nihilism that ended his wife's life.

☝ The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together a passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), The Man

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis


In the same flashback scene, the Woman makes a series of arguments that the Man is powerless to disagree with: she points out that they'll be attacked and killed soon enough. And yet the Woman also seems to respect the Man's desire to keep on living, even if she can't agree with it: she points out that the Man will live to protect his Boy. Indeed, without the Boy, or *someone* to protect, there's no way the Man will survive--he'll surely give in to despair just like the Woman. In effect, McCarthy suggests that the Woman is basically interested in herself at this point, while the Man is basically interested in his child.

The passage sums up the two approaches to life: living for oneself and living for other people. In the nightmarish world of the novel, it's the former life philosophy that dominates--people eschew all morality and order in favor of pure appetitive destruction (or lonely despair, in the Woman's case). The Man, on the other hand, represents the last bastion of right and wrong, a life lived for the good of his family, not for himself.

Pages 60-91 Quotes

☝ This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blankets and carried him to the fire.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker), The Boy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

The Man has just defended his child from a mysterious man, a member of a violent gang. After a tense showdown, the Man shoots his enemy right in the forehead, spattering brains all over his child's face. The Man is horrified by what he's just done--in the process of trying to defend his child from pain and danger, he's traumatized his child forever. And yet the Man remains convinced that he's doing the "right thing"--keeping his Boy safe.

The line between right and wrong grows thinner and thinner as the book goes on, and here the Man seems

almost bemused by how "normal" horrifying things have become in his life. The Man continues to be intensely loyal to his child, and yet he's also willing to murder and steal in the name of feeding and sheltering his child--and to accept that this is just his "job" as a father in such harsh times.

☛ You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. 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 cowed in the blanket. After a while he looked up.

Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We're still the good guys.

And we always will be.

Yes. We always will be.

Related Characters: The Man, The Boy (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Boy brings up an important point: what is it, exactly, that separates the Man and Boy from the other people on the road--people whom the man claims are "bad?" The Man insists that he is still a "good guy," but as the Boy has seen first-hand, the Man is willing to do some pretty wicked things (like shooting someone in the head).

Because the Boy has been taught to think in terms of binaries (good vs. bad, for example), he continues to believe that he and his father are "good" and the rest of the world is "bad." In fact, we can already tell, the line between good and bad is disappearing, and may have disappeared already. The Man and Boy don't eat human beings, like most of the people who've survived in America, but that doesn't necessarily make them moral, upright people. It's suggested that anyone with moral scruples probably died long ago. This is what makes the Boy's innocence so special, and why the Man seems willing to sacrifice his own morality for his son's sake--doing "bad things" in order to keep the Boy "good."

Pages 91-124 Quotes

☛ Do you think I lie to you?

No.

But you think I might lie to you about dying.

Yes.

Okay. I might. But we're not dying.

Okay.

Related Characters: The Man, The Boy (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

As the Man and Boy go on to the ocean, they face the facts: they don't have much food, and could easily starve to death. The Boy asks his father if they're going to die of starvation. The Man replies that they won't, but the Boy seems skeptical. The Man insists that he's telling the truth, and will always tell his son the truth.

The spare, minimalistic dialogue in this passage is characteristic of McCarthy's literary style. But beneath the spareness of the words, there's a lot of emotion and thought. The Boy seems not to trust his father entirely (hence his single word, "Okay"), but perhaps he's decided to trust his father for now, because he can see no other option. Even when they're on the point of starvation, the Boy and Man remain loyal to each other; their loyalty stands in stark contrast to the cruelty and disorderliness of the rest of the country.

☛ They lay listening. Can you do it? When the time comes?

When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesn't fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker), The Boy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Man faces the ultimate test of his love for his son. There is a group of dangerous men nearby--probably rapists, murderers, and cannibals. Knowing full-


well that if the Boy is captured, he could endure a fate worse than death, the Man prepares to kill his own child, thereby saving him from more pain later on.

The passage poses a stunning ethical dilemma--is it "right" for the Man to kill his child, rather than let him be captured by murderers? The Man believes it is right, but he also wonders whether he's even *capable* of doing it--whether such a brutal, if ethical, being lives within himself. McCarthy reinforces the fine line between good and evil, gentleness and aggression, in the passage: he describes the way the Man thinks about killing *and* kissing his son in the same paragraph. Brutal as it might seem, killing the Boy is an act of love.

Pages 124-156 Quotes

☝ Rich dreams now which he was loathe to wake from. Things no longer known in the world. The cold drove him forth to mend the fire. Memory of her crossing the lawn toward the house in the early morning in a thin rose gown that clung to her breasts. 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.

Related Characters: The Man, The Boy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the Man continues to dream about the past. Every time he dreams, the memory changes a little bit. For example, here he remembers his beautiful wife when she was still alive--the Man fears that he is idealizing or changing things in his memory, like a game of "telephone" at a party. He seems to believe in a kind of Platonic "form" of memory--that there is a reality of truth (and true recollection) that exists somewhere, whether "known or not." Thus he wants to retain the truest, most precious memories possible, and that paradoxically means trying *not* to think of them often (because thinking of them means altering them).



The passage also provides more evidence for the way that memory can be a distraction from one's duty--for instance, the Man's duty to take care of his child at all times. And it is *also* perfectly clear that memory is a vital part of being a human being--it's only because the Man remembers a time when he was happy that he has the courage and optimism to strive on behalf of his Boy; he wants to give his Boy the kind

of life he himself used to enjoy.

Pages 156-189 Quotes

☝ It wouldn't make any difference. When you die it's the same as if everybody else did too. I guess God would know it. Is that it? There is no God. No? There is no God and we are his prophets.

Related Characters: Ely, The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Man has given shelter to a mysterious old man named Ely. Ely sits with the Man, discussing the sorry state of the world. As they talk, it becomes clear that Ely is wise, and has his own unique view of the world. Ely's views are deeply paradoxical; he admits that life is painful and horrible, and yet claims that he will live "as long as I'm alive." Ely's paradoxical ideas are epitomized by the idea that "there is no God, and we are his prophets."

Ely's theory of God is both cynical (there is no God) and hopeful. The idea here seems to be that human beings foolishly continue to obey the rules of right and wrong, even after the original basis for such a morality has disappeared. And yet there's also an optimistic, even heroic side to Ely's statement, whether he means it or not. Even if the world has now become a horrible, meaningless place, people like the Man continue to abide by a set of laws and rules of behavior that they believe to be right. In an era when all people seem to be violating the laws of right and wrong, the Man still tries--with great difficulty--to obey them.


●● I never thought to see a child again. I didn't know that would happen.

What if I said that he's a god?

The old man shook his head. I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men can't live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone... When we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He'll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He'll say: Where did everybody go? And that's how it will be. What's wrong with that?

Related Characters: Ely, The Man (speaker), The Boy

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 170-171

Explanation and Analysis

Ely's beliefs are difficult to understand--Ely himself seems not to understand them completely. In this scene, the Man tries to tell Ely that he believes his own Boy to be a god or an angel. The Man might not be speaking literally, and yet there's a serious point here: the Man thinks of the Boy as his reason for living; the cornerstone of his own, private religion. Without the Boy, the Man would give up on life altogether.

Ely, by contrast, doesn't believe in any such "religion." As he sees it, the world is in a state of decline, for better or worse. One day soon, all human beings will be gone--and then, the world will be a lifeless, strangely beautiful place. Ely could be called a cynic: he seems to embrace the power of death and destruction, rather than believing, like the Man, that it's possible to find a better life and rebuild the world. And yet Ely also seems to want to defy death, too: here, he talks about getting the "last laugh" against death, tricking death by disappearing first. Ely both accepts *and* sneers at death and destruction.

●● By then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters... Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Man and Boy come across a road on which pilgrims long ago scrawled signs and messages discussing the decline of the world. McCarthy stops to give some (rare) background info on the past decay of the country. The passage is interesting, because it's arguably the closest McCarthy comes to providing a coherent explanation for what, exactly, happened to the world leading up the events of the novel--was there a nuclear war? Even here, though, we're given no real information about what the disaster consisted of; McCarthy's focus is the resurgence of the ancient forces of destruction--forces locked inside every man's soul.

The passage has a dark, eerie beauty in the way it contrasts the chaos of post-apocalyptic America with the sublime indifference of the Earth itself--regardless of what happens to human beings, the Earth continues moving around the sun, just as it has for millions of years, and just as millions of other "unremarked" planets do throughout the universe. The suggestion would seem to be that good and evil aren't "real" in a cosmic sense--they're just ideas that humans invent for themselves to get through life.

●● The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto to illuminate its darker recesses.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 186-187

Explanation and Analysis



In this eerie scene, the Man remembers an episode from his childhood in which he witnessed a group of men killing a swarm of snakes by burning the snakes with gasoline. McCarthy notes that the men were burning the "image" of evil, not evil itself. (Snakes are a traditional symbol of evil in Judeo-Christian morality.) We're left to wonder if the men who think they're fighting evil by killing the snakes are *themselves* evil--they're clearly capable of remorseless destruction of innocent creatures. True evil, sure enough, doesn't come from a snake--it comes from the depths of the human soul.

The passage helps us understand the Man's moral struggle in the novel. In trying to defend his child from evil, the Man is forced to confront his own capacity for evil--his innate capacity to murder, lie, and steal.

Pages 189-246 Quotes

☞ When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker), The Boy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 187


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Man teaches his son a valuable lesson: don't dream. To dream about better times and places, the Man argues, is to give up on the present-day. Thus, if the Boy spends too much of his time dreaming of fantasy-lands, then he won't take care of himself in the real world, and he'll die.

The Man's lesson might seem callous--what kind of father doesn't let his son enjoy his own dreams?--but there's a serious point here. When life itself is painful and frightening, there's a great temptation to give into one's natural instinct to escape. But of course, in this environment such an instinct is suicidal--by resorting to fantasy, the Boy would be wife did).

☞ The boy shook his head. Oh Papa, he said. He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. I'm sorry, he whispered. I'm sorry.

Related Characters: The Boy, The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

In this gruesome scene, the Boy and the Man discover a group of travelers who have just fled their cooking fire. Left behind is what they were cooking--a human baby. The sight of the baby, as we would expect, has an immediate impact on the Boy--he's horrified that human beings could be so barbaric. (Although his horror is expressed in McCarthy's typical sparseness--only the words "Oh Papa.") Afterward, the Man carries the Boy away, apologizing to him again and again.

Why is the Man apologizing for other people's acts of evil? As we've already seen, the Man sees himself as being totally responsible for his child--taking care of the Boy is his only reason for living. Furthermore, keeping the Boy innocent and good is a kind of religion for him--he holds the Boy to be a sort of god, the last remnant of and hope for a better world. The contrast between the Man's love for his child and the travelers' consumption of their own kin reinforces how rare and powerful the Man's love really is.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, the Man and the Boy have arrived on the beach--a dreary, depressing place that's nothing like what the Man and Boy hoped it could be. Bitterly, the Man remembers an episode from his life long before the world plunged into chaos: he was sitting with his wife, and thanked God for making the world be so "perfect."

The contrast between the man's memories and the present day couldn't be clearer: the Man now curses God for making his life miserable and hard, and for letting the world dissolve into such horror. And yet the memory has one thing in common with his present situation: a loved one. Even before the harsh post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, the

Man was already drawing all his strength and meaning from his almost worshipful love for his family. At this point, the Boy is the Man's sole reminder of a better time, when he wasn't so bitter or pained. By caring for his child, then, the Man protects his family and protects the past, too.

☛ They trekked out along the crescent sweep of beach, keeping to the firmer sand below the tidewrack. They stood, their clothes flapping softly. Glass floats covered with gray crust. The bones of seabirds. At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as eye could see like an isocline of death. One vast salt sepulchre. Senseless. Senseless.

Related Characters: The Man, The Boy

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

In this moving passage, the narrator describes the spectacle of the beach, post-apocalypse. Unlike the tranquil, beautiful beaches that many people enjoy today, this beach is ugly and full of signs of death, particularly the endless trail of dead fish washed up to shore. While the narrator is usually dispassionate and neutral as he describes the horrors of the futuristic world, even the narrator seemingly breaks down here. The Man and the Boy have spent most of the novel aspiring to reach the ocean--now they're here, and it's just as miserable as the rest of the world. With nothing left to hope for, and surrounded by such mass death, the narrator can only repeat the word "senseless." In a way, the entire plot of the book has been "Senseless"--the Man has embarked on a quest with no discernible payoff and no greater meaning.

☛ Inside was a brass sextant, possibly a hundred years old. He lifted it from the fitted case and held it in his hand. Struck by the beauty of it... He held it to his eye and turned the wheel. It was the first thing he'd seen in a long time that stirred him.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, McCarthy describes a mysterious object that partly redeems the Man and Boy's quest to the ocean, and yet also reinforces how senseless the quest has always been. The Man discovers a sextant, an old navigational device that uses the position of the stars to guide ships across the oceans. The Man is wowed by the sextant because it's a symbol of the civilization that used to exist in America--a civilization that celebrated order, mathematical precision, and cooperation. Furthermore, it's simply a beautiful, complex object in a world of horror and ugliness.

The sextant is both inspiring and depressing, then: like the Man's dreams, it's a reminder of how miserable the world has become (there aren't even any more stars to chart with the sextant), and yet a sign that the world could conceivably return to its former glory.

Pages 246-287 Quotes

☛ 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, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared. 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.

Related Characters: The Boy, The Man (speaker), The Thief

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis



At the end of the novel the Man truly compromises his moral principles for the "greater good" of survival. He and the Boy have their possessions stolen by a Thief. They track him down, and he threatens them with a knife. The Man points his gun at the Thief and forces him to surrender his possessions, including his clothes and shoes. The Boy begins to cry as they walk away from the Thief, pointing out that the Man has surely killed the Thief, since the Thief won't be able to survive for long without food, clothing, shoes.

The conversation between the Boy and his father is

interesting because it shows the Boy has become the true moral center of the novel. Even while the Man looks out for his child, he's sacrificed some of his moral principles for the sake of survival. The Boy, then, has the job of guarding the rules of right and wrong ("worrying about everything")--he is the very embodiment of morality. Notice that McCarthy continues to portray the Boy as a godlike figure ("the one").

They went on. In the nights sometimes now he'd wake in the black and freezing waste out of softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel nears a close, the Man is gravely wounded. Walking on becomes a burden to him--a stranger shot him in the leg, making it difficult for the Man to move. A sure sign of the Man's declining health comes in this passage: McCarthy notes that the Man is now having vivid dreams of his wife, birds, and the sun. Throughout the novel, the narrator has associated dreaming with dying: to give in to one's dreams is to turn one's back on the real world. Here, at the end of the novel, the Man is finally breaking his own rule. He seems to be "giving in" to the sheer seductive power of the dreams--he senses that his life is at an end, and doesn't have as much strength to resist the seduction of fantasy and memory.

You have to carry the fire.
I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it.

Just take me with you. Please.

I cant.


Please, Papa.

I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but

I cant.

Related Characters: The Man, The Boy (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

In this climactic scene, the Man finally succumbs to his injuries and dies. For a long time, the Man has contemplated what would happen in this situation--he's always believed that the "right" thing to do would be to murder his child, ensuring that the Boy won't die a more gruesome death on his own later on. But here, it becomes clear that the Man doesn't have the strength to kill his Boy--furthermore, he no longer thinks that killing the Boy is the right thing to do.

The Man tells the Boy that he must "carry the fire." While the Man (or narrator) doesn't explain what this "fire" is, it's possible to interpret this important symbol. The fire could symbolize the sheer power of morality, cooperation, and civilization. It could also be something as simple as hope and progress, the basic human instinct to keep going down the road and hoping for something better. In the final chapters of the novel, the Boy has become a leader--the embodiment of goodness and hope, on whose shoulders the future of human civilization depends.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PAGES 1-29

A man and a boy sleep in the woods, the man comforted by the boy's presence. Every night is pitch black and the days are gray and sunless. The man dreams about the boy leading him into a cave. In the cave there is a dark underground lake, and on the far shore is a blind, monstrous creature. The man wakes up and goes to look at the **road**. He thinks it might be October, but "he hadn't kept a calendar for years." He wants to keep moving south, as they need to be somewhere warmer when winter comes.

The morning gets vaguely lighter and the man looks down the **road** with binoculars. All the trees are dead and colorless, and the wind moves ash across the road's surface. The man wears goggles and a cotton mask over his face to protect from the ash everywhere. He thinks about the boy as "his warrant" and "the word of God."

The man returns to find the boy still asleep. The man takes out his pistol and their breakfast of cornmeal cakes. He watches the boy until the boy wakes up. The boy calls the man "Papa." After breakfast the man and boy set out on the **road**. They both have knapsacks and they push a shopping cart full of all their possessions. On the cart is a motorcycle mirror so the man can watch the road behind them. The pair shuffles along, "each the other's world entire."

They come to an abandoned gas station and the man searches it for food or tools but finds nothing. He picks up the phone behind the desk and dials the old number of his father's house, but nothing happens. They set off down the **road** but then the man remembers something and makes them go back. He collects all the leftover oil from the gas station, as they can use it to light their lamp during "the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns." Then they leave again.

The first sentence shows the importance of the man's relationship with his son, as he is comforted just by being together. Neither of these protagonists will ever be named. The man's dream also sets a sinister tone, which will continue throughout. Years have passed since whatever nameless disaster occurred.



McCarthy begins to illustrate the bleak setting of this post-apocalyptic world. He never explains what happened to destroy civilization, but in the years since everything has been burned and the sun is blotted out. From the start the man recognizes that he is only surviving for the boy's sake, and he sees something holy in the boy that is worth saving.



In this harsh, lonely world the man and boy live with a constant alertness, keeping the pistol on them at all times. Their situation becomes more clear – everything they own is in this cart and knapsacks, and they are traveling south down the road to try and escape the coming winter. The whole landscape is dead and empty, and the man and the boy have only each other.



McCarthy slowly reveals more details of the post-apocalyptic world – most everything has been looted years ago, there are hardly any humans left alive, and the man and boy have been reduced to an extremely primitive form of existence to survive. The man dials the number of his (presumably dead) father, not expecting anything but only indulging in a memory of a happier past.



They cross a river and pass a burned house and some faded billboards. All the trees are “charred and limbless.” It starts to rain and they cover the cart with a tarp and hide under a ledge of rock, huddling together for warmth. When the rain stops they climb a hill and look for any sign of light or fire, but there’s nothing. They make camp and eat dinner.

Much of the early novel consists of traveling down the road and making stops to explore various abandoned buildings. Some part of the apocalypse has involved fires that even now still sweep through the forest, covering everything in ash. Nothing grows anymore, and the charred trees are only good for firewood.



They try to fall asleep and the boy asks the man questions for reassurance. The man says that they won’t die and that they are going south to be warm. The boy asks what would happen if he died, and the man says he would want to die too, so they could be together. The boy falls asleep and the man lies awake, wishing his “heart were stone.”

Part of being each other’s “world entire” involves an extreme level of trust between the man and the boy, as the boy totally depends on his father for survival. Because of their harsh situation, they are bound together much closer than a normal father and son.



The next morning the man whispers a vague prayer, asking to see God so he can “throttle” and “damn” him. Then they set out on the **road** and pass through an abandoned city. They see a shriveled corpse in a doorway and the man tells the boy that “the things you put into your head are there forever.”

Religious faith also becomes a recurring theme of the novel, as in such harsh times many people need a God to blame or hope in. The man seems to believe in God, but feels that God has abandoned or cursed the earth.



The man remembers walking with his uncle on his uncle’s farm as a child. They walked through an autumnal forest to a lake and rowed a boat across the lake and back. The whole day passed without the man or his uncle speaking, but the man considers this “the perfect day of his childhood.”

While the boy tries to avoid the permanent memories of his world’s horror, the man has memories of the happier, pre-apocalyptic world. These memories can bring him pleasure but also a special kind of pain, as he can contrast the past with the present.



The man and the boy keep going south for more weeks, passing through a hilly country. Everything is cold, dark, and ashy, and the man thinks about the lonely, abandoned earth. It starts to snow one day and the boy catches a gray snowflake in his hand, watching it melt “like the last host of christendom.”

More religious imagery is associated with the boy, as the man sometimes idealizes his son as a kind of holy figure. McCarthy relates the man and boy’s plight to that of the earth itself, alone and lost in an endless darkness.



They keep moving and the man notices the lack of marauders on the **road**. He hopes the “bloodcults” have all killed each other off. The man fixes a loose wheel on their cart and the boy watches silently. They come to a barn and find three bodies hanging from the rafters. In a smokehouse they find a shriveled old ham. They fry it and eat it.

The plight of civilization becomes more clear – not only are most humans dead, but murder (and worse, as we will see) is rampant among the survivors. The man and boy’s desperation for food is also clarified. As there is no sun, nothing can grow, and so no new food can be produced.



The man dreams of his wife emerging as a bride from green leaves. Sometimes he also dreams of walking through a “flowering wood” with the boy, surrounded by birds and blue sky. The man doesn’t trust these good dreams, though, as he thinks of them as “the call of languor and death.” He worries about the old world fading from his memory, but he still tries to wake himself up from the good dreams.

They continue down the **road** and the man thinks about his wife, remembering her smell. He finds two brooms and attaches them to the cart to clear the road ahead of it. Then he pushes the cart down the hills like a sled, and the boy smiles for the first time in a long time. They pass a gray lake and the boy asks about the lake and the dam that made it. The man says there is nothing in the lake, not even fish. The man remembers being by this same lake long ago, watching a hawk and some cranes.

It starts to rain one day but they keep walking, holding the tarp over themselves. The man has more color-drenched dreams, and thinks of them as death calling him. The man and the boy eventually reach a wide valley and an abandoned farm. They see an old billboard saying “See Rock City.” The man leaves the pistol with the boy and he goes to explore. He enters a house and finds various artifacts covered with ash, but nothing is useful to him except some extra blankets.

They reach the outskirts of a city and explore a wrecked and looted supermarket. The man searches through a fallen soda machine and finds one last Coca Cola. He gives it to the boy to drink as a treat. He makes the boy sit down and enjoy all of it at once, as it might be the last time he ever drinks a soda again.

The next day they reach the city and explore it. There are dead bodies everywhere, all of them with their shoes stolen. The next day they leave the city and come to the house where the man grew up. It is abandoned and decayed like all the other houses. The man wants to go in, but the boy is suddenly scared of it.

The man goes into the house and the boy comes with him, holding his hand. The man reminisces over the ruins of his childhood. The boy asks to leave, saying he is “really scared,” but the man lingers, looking at his old bedroom. He remembers his dreams as a child, how he never dreamed of the way that the world would actually turn out. Finally they leave and return to the **road**.

The man has a complex relationship with his memories of the old world. He often tries to avoid them because he sees indulging in them as a sign of “giving up,” but they can give him some relief from the harsh present, and they also are a vital part of the humanity he is trying so hard to preserve – the memory of a better world which could someday return.



Little is ever revealed of the man’s past, but he seems to have been happily married before the disaster. It appears that no animals remain alive, as they have all been eaten or died out from lack of food. Part of the tragedy of the novel is seeing the boy try to grow up as a normal child despite his harsh, desperate situation.



This billboard places the characters somewhere in the Southeastern United States (Rock City is in Georgia), and it seems that the mountain range they are approaching is the Appalachians. McCarthy effectively drains the present world of color and light, only allowing it to appear in dreams and memories.



This last Coca Cola seems almost surreal, a splash of color, sweetness, and capitalism in a sea of darkness and collapsed civilization. In this the Coke takes on the quality of a dream or memory, and a gift of the past given from father to son.



The collapse of civilization seems to have been gradual (following the initial, mysterious disaster), and for years now bodies have been left unburied to be looted by survivors.



It is never explained where or how the man and boy have been living the last few years, but the pre-apocalypse past is still fresh in the man’s mind. The boy says he is “really scared” many times throughout the book, even in unreasonable circumstances, showing how his childhood is defined by a constant fear of death and violence.



Three nights later they are asleep when the ground starts to shake. Something seems to pass beneath them like an “underground train.” The boy is terrified but the man comforts him, saying that it was an earthquake. The man remembers the first years after the unnamed disaster, when the **road** was filled with refugees wearing masks and goggles.

One day they stay in an abandoned house and the man reads old newspapers while the boy sleeps. The man wonders if he will be able to kill the boy “when the time comes.” Later they eat rice and beans squatting in the **road**, and then sleep huddled together for warmth. The man recognizes that “the boy was all that stood between him and death.”

PAGES 29-60

More long weeks pass as the man and boy keep traveling. They come to a mountain range and the man wonders if they will be able to survive crossing it. He pins all his hopes on reaching the coast, but he recognizes that “all of this was empty and no substance to it.”

They reach the mountains and pass through lifeless forests and burned resort towns. They cross a stream and the man remembers seeing trout there long ago. It gets colder as they get higher, and there is gray snow on the ground. There are still fires burning in the distance, somewhere in the mountains. The man and the boy make campfires every night to keep warm. Sometimes the man stops to cough up a fine spray of blood.

One day they walk near a forest fire, and the color of it reminds the man of the sun. He resolves to “make a list. Recite a litany. Remember.” They keep going uphill, looking for the mountain pass, and they are cold and hungry. The man dreams that his wife is sick and he takes care of her. He wakes and remembers the reality of it – he could not take care of her, and “she died alone somewhere in the dark.”

The man remembers the first days after the nameless disaster, and then months later when there were “fires on the ridges and deranged chanting.” Soon there were murders and the dead impaled on spikes by the road. The man thinks about crime and punishment in the world. They keep going up the mountain and their pace slows. Finally they reach the summit of “the gap,” where there is a parking lot for the scenic overlook.

The earthquake seems another subtle connection to the earlier apocalypse, as if an aftershock of a nuclear blast or meteor strike. McCarthy never fully explains the situation, but only gives hints like these through the man’s memory. The ash has been present for years.



The true threat of violence has not been explained yet, so the man’s musings seem overblown – it seems that he and the boy are alone in this ashy world. The man has always recognized that he is living only for the boy, as otherwise he would give in to despair.



This mountain range is probably the Appalachians. The man sets a concrete goal of reaching the coast, but he knows that there is no reason to hope the coast is any better than where they are. It is the journey—continuing on—that matters.



The man’s memory of trout in the mountain streams foreshadows the book’s lyrical ending. All the human survivors wear masks and goggles now because of the ash, but the man still has gotten some kind of respiratory disease. Coughing up blood is McCarthy’s hint that he is dying of something.



The only real color and light in the present comes in the form of a forest fire, the very thing that has left behind so much ash and darkness. The man only seems to reject his good memories when they come as dreams, as these are the “call of death,” but otherwise he is obligated to bear the memory of color, light, and happiness.



In McCarthy’s bleak vision, humanity devolves into the worst parts of itself when faced with disaster. Only a few “good guys” like the man remain, who are unwilling to murder to survive. It seems that many of the fires that destroyed everything came after the disaster itself. The gap is probably the Cumberland Gap.



The next morning they move on and drink their last packet of cocoa. The man tries to give all of it to the boy but the boy makes them split it. They start traveling downhill and they hear trees falling. The man assures the boy that no trees are going to fall on them. Often they come across trees fallen across the **road** and they have to unpack the cart and carry everything over the tree trunks.

One night the boy has a nightmare about a wind-up penguin toy. Four days later they come out of the snow and find a river. They travel farther and reach a waterfall, which amazes the boy. The man jumps into the pool below the waterfall and swims around. The boy takes off his clothes to join him and the man notices how terribly thin the boy is. The boy jumps in and the man helps him as he tries to swim.

They get dressed and walk up to the top of the waterfall, and the boy is frightened by the long drop. They walk through the forest and the man remembers the names of the trees that used to live there. He finds some shriveled morel mushrooms and they eat them. They make a fire and sit eating, and the man tells the boy old stories of “courage and justice as he remembered them.”

The man checks for other people, as the waterfall is a “good place,” and he remembers seeing trout in a similar waterfall pool. The boy wants to stay by the river but the man says it isn’t safe, and they have to keep going south. The man takes out his tattered map and points out their route to the boy. They will be following the state **roads**. The boy asks about them and the man says there aren’t states anymore, but the roads remain.

They leave the river and set out on the **road** again. They come to a tractor-trailer wedged across a bridge. They have to unload the cart to go under the truck, and it starts to rain. The truck has been there for years. The man searches the tractor, and they sleep that night inside. The next day the man tries to find out what’s in the trailer. He climbs onto the roof and sees that there is an uncovered skylight. He drops a piece of burning paper through the hole, and by the light of the small flame he sees that the trailer is full of dead bodies.

Though their love is generally silent and based on perseverance and survival, the man does try to show his love in other ways, as by giving the boy the treat of the coke or the cocoa. The boy must trust the man implicitly, but the man often exaggerates when comforting the boy.



This is a small scene of relief in the often oppressive bleakness of the novel and the protagonists’ lives. The boy is a product of the post-apocalyptic age, as he was born after the disaster, so he lives in a nearly constant state of starvation.



The boy’s fear is ever-present, as he gets “really scared” even by the waterfall. The man (and the reader) starts to recognize that the old world is now an alien place – there is little opportunity for such things as courage, justice, and the names of trees in the harsh present.



The man again thinks of trout, foreshadowing the novel’s end. The map is the only thing left to order the chaotic world, and so the man bases his goals (like reaching the coast) on physically reaching a place on the map. The man gives more hints about the nature of the disaster –government in the form of states has disappeared. The only remnant of that civilization are the roads that once connected places that no longer exist.



Death is ubiquitous in this setting, and there is no way to protect the boy from the random horror of the post-apocalyptic world. The man has to search every possible place, regardless of danger or fear, because they are so desperate for food at all times.



That night they make camp and a storm breaks over them. The next day they travel through a “haze of woodsmoke,” as a fire has recently passed through. The **road** is still melted and soft, and they see footprints in the tar. Soon they come upon another traveler shuffling down the road. He seems burnt and wounded, and he just looks down silently as the boy and the man pass by. The boy wants to stop and help him, but the man says there is nothing they can do.

As they go on the boy starts crying and keeps looking back. The man assures him that they have nothing they could give to the burnt man, and the boy nods. They cross another river. One day the man takes out his wallet and leaves all its contents spread out across the **road**. He lingers over a photograph of his wife, but then he leaves that on the road too. The next day the boy is still silent and sad, and the man again tells him that the burnt man’s death is inevitable.

The man remembers the disaster, which is only described as “a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions.” The clocks then stopped and the power went out. The man immediately started filling up the bathtub with water, and his wife, who was pregnant, asked why he was taking a bath. The man then remembers another day, years later, watching migratory flocks of birds pass overhead and wishing them “godspeed.” That was the last time he heard birds.

The man and the boy play cards sometimes and the boy asks questions about “the world that for him was not even a memory.” The boy has dreams about a better life in the south, which the man halfheartedly tries to tame. One night the man watches the sleeping boy and thinks about how the most precious things “have a common provenance in pain.”

One morning the man wakes up coughing blood. He says his wife’s name aloud and feels like he may have said it in his sleep. The boy wakes up and says he wishes he was with his mom – that he was dead too. The man says the boy shouldn’t say that anymore. The man then remembers the night of his wife’s death. They were arguing about whether she should kill herself. The man said they were “survivors,” and his wife said they were “the walking dead in a horror film.”

This is the first other human the protagonists have encountered, and they do not speak. The burnt man seems almost ashamed of his plight, as he has been living the same lifestyle as the man and boy, but he has failed. There is also a mutual understanding between the travelers, that there is no help to be given.



The boy’s extreme sympathy and compassion becomes evident at this first human interaction. Despite being raised in a constant state of fear, danger, and starvation, he always wants to help everyone they meet on the road. The man symbolically gives up the happy memory of the past to the road itself, which has become his hope and means of persevering.



This is the closest McCarthy comes to describing the event that caused the collapse of civilization. We never learn what kind of job the man had in his old life, but he clearly was already a consummate survivor, as he immediately knew what to do and gathered water in the tub. Birds are often a sign of hopefulness and the life of the old world, or in this case perhaps the loss of life and the old world.



To give the boy hope and a practical reason to keep going, the man has built up the goal of reaching the coast and moving south. The man’s extreme love and closeness to the boy is based in their shared suffering and the bleakness of the world. The boy is like a precious, holy figure to the man, the promise of innocence and goodness that was lost and, perhaps, a hope for the future.



Even at such a young age, his harsh surroundings cause the boy to feel an existential weariness of life, which the man tries to discourage with optimism and relentless travel down the road. This last memory of his wife illustrates the end of their relationship, but also has far-reaching effects for the man and boy’s lives.



The man begged his wife not to kill herself, but she said she should have done it back when they had three bullets in their pistol instead of two. She said that inevitably they will all be raped, killed, and eaten, and she doesn't want to wait around for that to happen. She said that they used to talk about death, but they don't anymore because "it's here" now. She told the man she was taking a new lover – death.

The man said he couldn't go on alone, and his wife agreed, saying he would only survive if he lived for the boy. But this was no longer enough for the woman, so she hoped now for "eternal nothingness." The man begged her again, but she went off into the blackness, refusing even to say goodbye to the boy. The man assumes she killed herself with a piece of obsidian, and he thinks "the coldness of [her suicide] was her final gift." He recognizes that he had no argument against her reasoning. The next morning the boy had said "She's gone isn't she?" and the man affirmed it.

The man then thinks about how the boy is totally a product of the post-apocalyptic world, and the fact that he was so unsurprised by his mother's suicide. The man remembers the boy being born by candlelight while they watched cities burning on the horizon. In the present the boy asks the man if he had any friends. The man affirms that he did, but says that they are all dead now. He assures the boy again that they are going south.

PAGES 60-91

One morning the man is wakened by a noise. He grabs the pistol and then sees a group of people coming down the **road**. They are all hooded and masked and carrying lengths of pipe as clubs, and behind them is a diesel truck. The man hides the cart and then he and the boy run off into the trees with their knapsacks.

The man and boy hide in a ditch and watch the group pass. The man can see several people with rifles, and he wonders what the truck is running on. He hears it rumble on and then come to a stop. He hears the group trying to get the truck started again. Then the man raises his head to look and he comes face to face with a bearded man from the group, who is approaching them and unbuckling his belt.

The woman and the man offer contrasting responses to the collapse of the world. The man chooses to keep hoping and surviving, even if there is no reasonable hope that anything will get better. The fear of constant violence and cannibalism is now inherent in choosing to survive, so the man's decision seems even more bold.



Death is so overwhelming in this world that it is often personified, as the woman describes it as a lover, the only thing that can ease her suffering and give her peace. With her suicide the woman gives in to that weariness and despair that the boy now feels, she escapes the violence and horror of the present, and she tries to take some control of her chaotic life by determining the means of its end.



The boy is like a new breed of human, one that lives in constant fear and starvation and calmly accepts the ubiquity of death, even when his own mother kills herself. We see that years later the boy is still torn between his parents and their divergent love – part of him wants to be with his mother (escape pain through death), while part wants to keep hoping and traveling with his father.



These are the "bad guys," the violent men who have turned to murder and cannibalism to survive, and exploit the broken state of the current world. Even though a few humans remain alive, they have mostly turned on each other.



After the monotony and bleakness of daily life on the road, this sudden action builds up the tension and danger again. McCarthy narrates it in the same dispassionate voice as the rest of the book, and we see how close to death the man and boy constantly are.



The man points the pistol at the bearded man and tells him to keep walking quietly forward. The bearded man says he was just trying to go to the bathroom, and the man asks him where the truck is going. The bearded man says he doesn't know. The bearded man says the man won't shoot, as the rest of the group will hear the shot. The man says the bearded man won't hear the shot though, as his "frontal lobe" and other parts of his brain will be gone by then.

The bearded man asks if the man is a doctor, and he invites him to the truck to take care of his hurt companion. The man sees the bearded man looking at the boy and threatens to shoot if he looks at him again. The bearded man says the boy looks starving, and he invites them to the truck to have something to eat. The man threatens to kill the bearded man but says he would rather lead him up the road a mile and turn him loose.

The bearded man calls the man "chickenshit" and pulls out a knife. The bearded man runs towards the boy, dives, and comes up with his knife at the boy's throat. The man aims his pistol and shoots the bearded man in the forehead. The man then picks up the boy, whose face is expressionless and covered with blood and brains, puts him on his shoulders, and starts running.

The man runs through the woods until he collapses from exhaustion. That night he hears the group, and he fears he is going to cough and give them away, but he stays quiet and the strangers pass by. The boy is shivering so the man takes him stumbling through the woods to keep warm and alive. Finally the boy collapses and the man holds him, recognizing that there is only one round left in the pistol now.

The next morning the boy won't speak at first. The man finds where the truck group camped, and he sees bones in their firepit. Then he leaves the pistol with the boy, who protests, and goes back to where he killed the bearded man. The man finds their cart but the boy's knapsack is gone. The remains of the bearded man are there too, except for his flesh which has been eaten. The man goes back to the boy and holds him.

The man's speech about the brain is one of the few clues we get to his previous occupation, which was perhaps a doctor or scientist. The tension heightens as the man and boy are almost discovered by a murderous, cannibalistic gang. With every stranger they meet they must decide whether or not to trust them.



The man is trying to be one of the "good guys," the humans who avoid violence and cannibalism, but he is willing to do almost anything to protect the boy. The boy is sacred to the man, as the man threatens to kill the bearded man just for looking at the boy.



McCarthy intersperses the long, lonely traveling sections with these scenes of extreme tension. The man is also an excellent shot with the pistol, making his past life even more mysterious. The boy remains expressionless, just like after his mother's suicide.



The man and the boy are on the verge of death at all times, but in this scene the tension is especially high, as they are at the mercy of the elements while being hunted by murderers. The man's cough grows more persistent, again illustrating the characters' tenuous hold on life.



The marauding gangs have no loyalty even to their own members, as they eat their fallen comrade. The man always leaves the pistol with the boy when he goes off alone – his idea being that if the boy is attacked he can easily kill himself with the pistol, while the man will risk capture. The man is always trying to protect the boy's innocence.



They travel all day and then the man leaves the boy to go find firewood, but the boy keeps repeating that he's "really scared." The man gathers up some wood and builds a small fire, and he and the boy eat. Then he takes the boy down to the edge of the partly-frozen river and washes the blood and brains out of the boy's hair. The man thinks to himself that this "is my job." Then he carries the boy back to the fire and the boy falls asleep. The man rubs the boy's hair until it is dry. All these actions feel like "some ancient anointing," a new ceremony for the post-apocalyptic world.

The man wakes up and strokes the sleeping boy's golden hair, thinking of it as a "golden chalice, good to house a god." He realizes that the bearded man he killed was the first human other than the boy that he had spoken to in a year. He thinks of the bearded man as "my brother at last," and remembers his face with his gray teeth which had eaten human flesh.

They travel all day and that night the man apologizes to the boy for not being more careful. He tells the boy that he was appointed by God to take care of him, and he'll kill anyone who touches the boy. The boy asks if they are still the "good guys," and the man says that they are and always will be.

The next morning the man gives the boy a rough wooden flute he carved. Soon the boy falls behind playing it, "a formless music for the age to come," or else "the last music on earth." The man watches him play, thinking of him as announcing a troupe of traveling players, unaware that they have all been killed by wolves.

Later they come to a town and the man scans the horizon with binoculars. He sees nothing, but the boy can see a distant wisp of smoke. The man suggests they go investigate, as they desperately need food. First they search through an abandoned store and find a few coats. They scour through some houses but everything has been looted. They climb up a hill and look down at the town, and they hear a dog barking. The boy worries that they will kill the dog, but the man assures him they won't. He kisses the boy's forehead.

In this new, post-apocalyptic world everything must be reinvented – an acceptable father-son activity is the man washing blood and brains off of the boy, and the man tousling the sleeping boy's hair becomes a sort of religious ceremony. Humans crave ritual, especially in chaotic times like these, as with the "deranged chanting" of the "bloodcults" after the apocalypse and the man's anger at God.



Their recent brush with death makes the man appreciate the boy all the more, and affirm his vow to protect the boy's sacred life. One of the great tragedies of McCarthy's post-apocalyptic vision is that though there are so few humans left, they still distrust and turn on each other.



In this world everything has been boiled down to its essentials, to the point that the man can divide everyone into literal "good guys" and "bad guys." The man and boy are good guys in that they don't murder or eat humans, but the man begins to blur the line when he kills to protect the boy.



Music is absent from this world just like light and color, so the boy's flute-playing seems significant and archetypal, a remnant of an old, lost world, or a reinvention of art and civilization.



The boy begins to prove himself as adept at surviving as well, as his youthful eyesight is often better than the man's. The boy's faith has been shaken by the gang member's death, and he now doubts that he and the man are still "good guys" who would naturally spare a dog's life. The boy shows both his naiveté and his compassion for all living things.



They sleep in a car that night and see lights in some of the windows in town. The man wakes up at night and vaguely wonders where they are. The boy asks him question for reassurance, and the man says that they will be okay because they're "carrying the fire." In the morning it's raining, and they search through some more houses. They don't hear the dog anymore.

The phrase "carrying the fire" comes to symbolize the man's drive to persevere and maintain something of what was lost in the catastrophe, to both survive in the face of despair and remain a "good guy" in the face of violence and depravity. This phrase is never fully explained, but over the course of the book its symbolic meaning fleshes itself out.



While the boy is sitting on the steps of a house he sees another boy, about the same age. The strange boy watches him and then runs away. The boy calls out that he won't hurt the stranger and for him to come back, but then the man comes out of the house and gets angry at the boy. The boy starts crying and saying he wants to go see the strange boy, but the man angrily pulls him away, asking if he wants to die. The boy says he doesn't care anymore, and he sobs.

The boy is naïve – yelling in an inhabited town could be deadly – but he is also naturally compassionate, and wants to help the strange boy. The ideas of "goody guys" and "carrying the fire" start to diverge for the man and the boy, as the boy still has a pure idealism while the man is cynical and practical.



They wander through the town, the boy worrying that the strange boy doesn't have anyone to take care of him. The man reassures him that he must. Then the boy starts crying again and says he wishes they could find the strange boy and the dog and take them with them. The man tells him to stop and he takes out the map to show him their route, but the boy won't look.

The boy has never met another child, and he has only his father for companionship – he longs both to help someone in need and to have some semblance of normality in his life, like a friend. The man tries to comfort him with the map, a different kind of order.



They make camp that night and the man thinks of the last dog they saw, the one the boy is probably remembering. It was a starving dog who followed them for two days, but it never came too close. The next morning they eat some raisins, the last of their food, and the boy asks if they're going to die of starvation now. The man assures him that they won't. He says they're going to drink some water and then "keep going down the road."

They now come closer to starving than they have yet in the book, and their situation grows more desperate. The man keeps setting reachable goals – not just going south or heading for the coast, but one step at a time, like drinking some water and walking down the road.



They travel all day and then make camp. The man feels a dull despair and can't think of anything to say. He imagines the names of colors, birds, and "things one believed to be true" fading away into oblivion. It keeps getting colder and darker. The next day they scavenge a barn and eat some unknown grain, raw. They go further and see a row of human heads, tattooed and flayed, next to a pile of viscera. The man puts his arm around the boy and leads him away.

Though the man keeps up his optimism in front of the boy, he too suffers from the depression and existential despair that is natural in such a situation. In his memory he begins to connect names with the happy past. The name of something has power over the thing itself, so if the names of colors (and the characters) are forgotten, then somehow their essence might fade away too.



PAGES 91-124

The next morning the man wakes up to see a group of strangers coming down the **road**. They are all wearing red scarves of some kind and marching in rows of four. The man wakes the boy and they hide and watch. The strangers are all bearded and carry lengths of pipe or spears. Behind them comes a group of slaves dragging wagons full of food, then a group of women, some pregnant, and then a group of collared young boys. When the caravan finally passes the man affirms that those are the “bad guys.”

It starts to snow that afternoon and the man and boy trudge on. Soon they are freezing and exhausted, and the boy asks if the man would tell him if they were going to die. The man says “I don’t know. We’re not going to die.” They make a nest under a tree and start a fire. The boy falls asleep and the man watches him, suppressing his rage at their helpless, hopeless situation.

They are awakened by the sound of trees falling all around them. They move their camp to a clearing, then dig a tunnel under a fallen tree and fall asleep again. When they wake up the man feels like he can’t concentrate, and he has a hard time getting the boy to follow him back to the cart. When they find the cart the man makes new shoes for them by lashing pieces of the tarp and a coat around their feet.

They set out on the **road** but it’s very slow going through the snow. The boy asks if they’re going to die, and wonders how long they can live without food. The man says that as long as they have water it takes a long time to starve. The boy says that he thinks the man might lie to him about dying. The man admits that he might lie, but he also reassures the boy that they’re not dying.

They keep going, eating snow and growing weaker. That night the man watches the sleeping boy and notices the “strange beauty” of his thin face. The next morning they see wagon tracks in the snow, and the man fears it is the “bad guys.” The man and boy wander around in circles, leaving confusing footprints so the bad guys can’t follow them. They make camp at a high place and then the man sees two strangers going down the **road**. One turns and almost sees the man, but he blends into the background wrapped in his gray blanket.

This is a more organized group of “bad guys” than the gang in the truck, and it shows the brutal societies being formed in this post-apocalyptic world. This is what the woman killed herself to escape – being captured by violent men and either murdered for food or used as a sex slave. We now see the true horror and violence that the man is risking by choosing to survive.



The boy has no choice but to trust in the man, and he often asks questions for comfort and reassurance. The man keeps up his optimism, especially regarding death. The only thing that will keep them both alive and sane is to keep going down the road.



Death is so ubiquitous in this world that the man and boy’s plight often seems hopeless. The man rages against factors he cannot control, but he does not give up his fight against death and violence. The man is a very resourceful survivor, but it is unclear if he learned these skills before or after the disaster.



The man is the boy’s source of order and the only thing keeping him alive, but the man is also living for the boy’s sake, so in their conversations the man is comforting himself as much as the boy. They both choose to keep up their faith – the boy to trust the man even in his doubtful optimism, and the man to keep up his hope despite the circumstances, despite knowing better.



It is mostly when the boy is asleep that the man thinks of him as something sacred and “other.” When he is awake the boy is a human to be taken care of and reassured, but while he sleeps he seems like an angel trapped in such a depraved world. They continue to risk violence and a fate worse than death by choosing to persevere and continue down the road.



They keep traveling, and after five days without food they come to a big plantation house. The boy is scared and doesn't want to go in, but the man says they have to, as they need to find food. They walk onto the porch and the man imagines the slaves that must have worked there once. They go into the house and see a pile of mattresses and clothes. The boy is terrified and clings to the man's hand.

The man finds a locked hatch in the floor and then looks for a shovel to pry it open with. He breaks open the lock, ignoring the boy's frightened protests, and goes down the wooden steps, holding a lighter. There is a terrible stench in the darkness, and the man sees a huddled group of naked people and a dismembered man lying on a mattress. The people whisper for the man to help them, but the man grabs the boy and hurries back up the stairs, panicking.

The boy points out the window and the man sees six strangers coming across the yard towards them. The man grabs the boy's wrist and sprints out of the house. He pulls the boy to the ground in the yard, hiding in some leaves and thinking "this is the moment." The man feels he is going to cough and he uses all his willpower to stifle it. He can hear the strangers talking in the road.

The man pushes the pistol into the boy's hand, telling him to put it in his mouth and fire if the strangers find him. The man says he is going to run and try to lead the strangers away from the boy, but then he changes his mind – he decides he can't leave the boy. The man wonders if he could find the strength to kill the boy if the moment comes. If the pistol doesn't fire, he wonders if he could "crush that beloved skull with a rock." He kisses the boy and promises to never leave him.

They stay in their hiding place until night falls and the boy falls asleep. Later they hear screams coming from the big house and the man covers the boy's ears. Then the man makes them get up and set out through the black woods. The boy is weak and exhausted and the man carries him for a while. Finally the man collapses too and they both sleep. They wake up and move a little, and the man wraps the boy in blankets, noting that he looks like "something out of a deathcamp."

The boy falls asleep and the man considers whether he should leave him alone to go look for food. He decides to leave the pistol with the boy and he sets off. He finds a house and barn and explores them, at first finding only a powder of grape flavor for drinks. In the barn he finds a screwdriver and a boxcutter. The barn still smells like cows, and the man thinks about how cows are probably an extinct species now.

This is clearly a very dangerous move, but the man feels driven by hunger to desperate measures. The man's musing on slaves shows how the horrors of the post-apocalyptic world are not random – there has always been a part of humanity willing to commit atrocities.



The boy's terror seems justified in this situation, and it transfers itself onto the reader as McCarthy builds tension. This is one of the book's most horrifying scenes, and truly shows the depths to which humanity has sunk – these prisoners are being kept as livestock and being killed off one by one for food.



This moment is almost unbearably tense, and is a testing point for the man's decision to survive instead of to kill himself with his wife. If they are caught, then the man has kept the boy alive and hoping only to end up captured, raped, and eaten.



This is the moment of truth, where death is truly better than living as a captive to the bad guys. The man has reached the point of true desperation, as he might be forced to commit the ultimate act of paternal love – to kill his own son and save him from a fate worse than death, or to allow himself to be captured and eaten to possibly save the boy.



McCarthy delves into the horror genre in these scenes, as he builds up suspense and dispassionately describes the worst things that humans are capable of. The boy as a deathcamp victim is another reminder that these atrocities are not limited to the post-apocalyptic age – they have precedence in history.



Despite their narrow escape their hunger situation is still the same, and the man is forced to take more risks. It seems that almost all animals are extinct now, as there is no sun to grow anything for herbivores to eat.



On the way through the yard the man finds some old apples. He eats a few, seeds and all, and gathers up the rest for the boy. He goes back into the house for a basket and then finds a cistern of pure water. He drinks some and it tastes better than anything he can remember. He fills up some mason jars with water and then carries them and the apples back to the boy. The boy is still asleep, and the man waits for him to wake up. They eat the apples and then set off on the **road** again.

Their travel down the road starts to fall into a pattern, where the man and boy near starvation and then make a lucky find that keeps them alive and hoping. Despite the bleakness of their situation, they do seem to have good luck in terms of finding food at opportune times.



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In the evening a storm breaks over them and they stop for a long, cold night. In the morning they wrap themselves up like “mendicant friars” and set out again. That evening the boy wants to have a fire, but the man confesses that he dropped the lighter. Later the boy asks if the bad guys were going to kill and eat those people, and the man admits that they were. The boy accepts that they couldn’t help the people because otherwise they would be killed and eaten too.

The man is generally a skilled survivor and a dependable source of strength and comfort for the boy, but he is still a human in a bad situation, and so he makes mistakes. The boy has to wrestle with his own compassion even in such a terrifying circumstance, as he reasons with himself about helping the prisoners.



They keep traveling, and pass through towns with billboards that have been painted over to warn people away. They stop to eat the last apples, and after some coaxing the boy asks if they would ever eat people. The man assures him that they wouldn’t, even if they were starving – which they are now – because they are the “good guys,” and they’re “**carrying the fire**.” As they move on the man starts fires by raking pliers against rock. Several days pass without food and the boy is so thin he looks like an “alien.”

The man clarifies “carrying the fire” by associating it with being “good guys” and refusing to resort to cannibalism. The fire now symbolizes a kind of basic human decency and adherence to the most essential rules of civilization, which most of the remaining survivors have discarded. The boy again seems like an “other,” some heavenly being.



The man starts to think that death is near and he finds himself sobbing sometimes at night. He realizes he isn’t crying about death but about “beauty or goodness,” things he hasn’t thought about in a long time. He dreams that the boy is dead and he wakes up in terror, but the boy is fine. They search through charred, empty houses and find nothing. One day the man steps out of a house and suddenly sees the “absolute truth of the world,” that the earth is lonely and cold in an endless black universe, and the man and the boy are just “two hunted animals” crawling across its surface on “borrowed time.”

The man’s memory of the old world and concepts like beauty and goodness is another part of “carrying the fire,” and he finds himself breaking under the weight of these almost-forgotten concepts. His grim insight is similar to the mood McCarthy creates with the book in general – everything has been stripped away and there is only life and death, darkness and light, and the darkness seems to be winning.



The man starts dreaming about his wife again and now he doesn’t want to wake up. He thinks about how the act of remembering changes the memory somehow, so he must be careful with the precious past. One day they walk through a house in a field and the man sees their reflection in a mirror. He raises the pistol at first but the boy stops him, saying “it’s us.” The man finds some morning glory seeds in a shed and pockets them, but he doesn’t know why. He finds a can of gasoline too.

The man recognizes that the present is the only changeable time, but it can be changed by the act of remembering the past – an insight that foreshadows the novel’s end, where memory seems to become its own entity outside of the person doing the remembering. The man still has some blind hope despite his weariness and depression, as he saves the seeds.



The man walks back towards the house and then stops in the yard, feeling faint and wondering how many more days they have until death takes them. As he lingers he feels a hollow space in the yard. He digs up the dirt and finds a locked hatch in the ground. The boy is terrified and begs the man not to open it. The man says it's okay, but he takes the boy onto the porch to calm down for a while first. The man makes a new lamp out of a bottle. He sees the boy's face and fears he has been irrevocably damaged.

Finally the man goes back to open the hatch door. He lights the lamp first and gives it to the boy. He reassures the boy that this door isn't like the other one, and that because they are the good guys they have to keep trying. The man breaks the lock with a shovel and opens the door. He kisses the boy's forehead before he climbs down the stairs.

The man descends into a concrete bunker, and he whispers for the boy to follow him down. The bunker is filled with canned food, supplies, and cots. The man and the boy stare in wonder. They find a lantern and the boy reads the words on all the different cans, the "richness of a vanished world." The boy wonders aloud if it's all real, but then he worries that the owners of all this food are still alive, as he doesn't want to steal. The man assures the boy that the owners are dead, and they would want them to take the food and supplies, as they were "good guys" too.

They have pears and peaches for dinner, and the man notices that the boy is still wary, probably fearing that he will wake up in the darkness at any moment. After dinner the man puts the boy to bed in a cot and jams the hatch door shut with pliers. Then he starts going through all the cans and supplies, sorting everything. He finds some gold coins and some rifle shells, but no gun. He eats some chocolate and goes to sleep.

The man and the boy sleep for a whole day and a half. When he wakes up the man has to change his perspective, as he had been prepared to die before they found all these supplies. He makes coffee and cooks breakfast for the boy, who wakes up and looks "drugged" with wonder at the bounty. The boy suggests that they thank the people who left all these supplies. The boy says a makeshift prayer thanking them for the food and hoping that they are "safe in heaven with God."

Though this hatch is clearly not the same as the last one, the boy's terror has carried over from the plantation house and he now fears entering any unknown chamber. The man is not just trying to survive at any cost, but also trying to preserve the boy's purity and innocence, and to give him some semblance of a childhood – but now he fears that that has been lost.



The man associates being a "good guy" with persevering and taking risks. This connects to the larger symbol of the road, which represents the desire to keep moving forward and hoping for something better – part of the basic human nature the man is trying to preserve as "the fire."



This is the man and boy's great windfall of the book, and a momentary reprieve from their constant danger and starvation. The bunker contains only some cans and basic supplies, but to the characters these are impossible riches, showing just how far the world has fallen. The boy still tries to stick to his ideals as a "good guy."



The boy has never experienced comfort like this, so he is afraid it is another happy dream tempting him to give up. This bunker could have been built and stocked decades before, as in every generation there is a fear of some kind of apocalypse – and in this case the owners' preparations still did not save them.



This sudden bounty almost makes their inevitable future struggle more heartrending and desperate – they had been ready for death at any minute, but now that they have had a glimpse of peace and hope, it seems that they have more to lose. The boy's religious beliefs are never explained, but here he seems to find some comfort and order in the idea of heaven and a good God.



Later they leave the bunker and go up to the house, carrying water and a little stove. The man fills a hot bath for the boy, and the boy says he is “warm at last.” Afterward they wash their jeans in the water and then return to the bunker. The man says they can only stay there another day or two, because it’s dangerous, but he also reassures the boy that no one will find them. After the boy falls asleep the man drags a mattress over the hatch cover to hide it. Then he whittles five wooden bullets and puts them in the pistol so it looks fully loaded. He kisses the boy, looks around at “this tiny paradise,” and goes to sleep.

The man and boy explore the nearby town and find a new grocery cart to carry supplies. The boy wishes they could live in the bunker forever, but the man says someone might find them. The man says they probably won’t meet any “good guys” on the **road**, so he has to stay scared and cautious most of the time.

They return to the bunker and the man cuts the boy’s hair. Then he cuts his own hair and shaves off his beard. They eat a “sumptuous meal by candlelight,” play checkers, and go to sleep. It’s raining when the man wakes up, and he remembers that he dreamed about strange creatures. The man thinks about how he is like an alien to the boy, “a being from a planet that no longer existed.” He recognizes that he can never rebuild the memory of that lost world for the boy. He partly regrets finding the bunker, as a piece of him always longs for death.

The man jury rigs a tank of gas and they spend the rest of the day eating and sleeping, delayed in their exit by the rain. That night they pack the grocery cart with supplies. The next morning they bathe again, eat breakfast, and leave the bunker to set off on the **road** again.

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They stop to eat lunch and the boy asks where they are. The man says he thinks they are about two hundred miles from the coast “as the crow flies.” The boy asks about crows, and whether any are left alive, or whether they could have escaped by flying to Mars. The boy asks if people could escape to Mars, but the man says there isn’t any food there either. The boy accepts that there aren’t any more crows except in books, but he asks the man if someone could see the sun if they flew high enough. The man says yes, and then he asks what happened to the boy’s flute. The boy says he threw it away.

The man cannot truly relax even in this situation. He is constantly acting as a support system for the boy, reminding him that they cannot stay in the bunker forever in case someone finds them, but at the same time reassuring the boy that no one will find them. The man shows more of his extraordinary resourcefulness in making fake bullets.



The man wants to take control of his fate rather than let it come to him, a desire that requires returning to the road instead of waiting in uneasy luxury. This is similar to his wife’s reasoning, but they reached opposite solutions—she to give up completely; he to continue on and face the terrible world as it comes.



The man has thought of the boy as an alien or holy figure before, but now he realizes that he too is like an alien, remembering a home world that no longer exists. Despite their extreme closeness, the man and the boy are still fundamentally separated by their relationship to the world itself. He is relentlessly optimistic with the boy, but the man still feels the appeal of just giving up.



The man exhibits more clever resourcefulness, which is probably what has allowed him to survive for so long. They leave the comfort of their bunker – which almost seems like the comfort the woman found in suicide – to return to the harsh life of the road.



The boy still has the curiosity and imagination of a child, but for him even the sun is an impossible fantasy. With his questions the boy seems to answer himself, as he briefly indulges in speculation and fantasy but then accepts his situation as it is. It is perhaps for a similar reason that he threw away the flute – music was something for the old world, a false hope that he cannot indulge in or connect with.



They cross a river and reach a black, abandoned city. They stop on a hill and the boy asks about their “long term goals,” a phrase he heard the man use long ago. The man says he still doesn’t know. They turn a corner and see an old man shuffling along the **road** ahead of them. They catch up to him and he warily says he doesn’t have anything to steal. Then he sinks to the ground. The boy asks the man if they can help the old man. The man is suspicious but he agrees.

The man opens a can of fruit and the boy gives it to the old man. The old man eats all of it, and then the boy suggests they stop for the night and eat more food with him. The man agrees, but flatly refuses to take the old man with them in the morning. They help the old man up and he acts confused by their presence. He can’t see well, and he asks if the boy is a “little boy.” The old man says his name is Ely.

They make camp and light a fire. Ely says he has always been on the **road**, and that he knew some kind of apocalypse was coming. The man asks if he wished he was dead, and Ely says he wishes he had died, but as long as he’s alive he is going to live. He says “nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave.” He says no one cares if you live or die, as “there is no God and we are his prophets.”

The man asks Ely about how he eats and stays alive, but Ely only answers vaguely. He admits that Ely isn’t his real name, as he doesn’t want people talking about him “in times like these.” Ely says he has lived “like an animal,” and he hasn’t seen a fire or a little boy in a long time. The man suggests that the boy is an angel or a god, but Ely says if men can’t survive then gods won’t either. He says it will be better when everyone is dead, as even death himself will die too then.

In the morning the man relents to the boy and gives Ely a few more cans of food. Ely doesn’t thank the boy, but the man says the boy isn’t kind so he can be thanked – he isn’t even sure why the boy is kind at all. Ely suggests that the boy might believe in God, but the man says he doesn’t know what the boy believes in. Ely doesn’t wish them luck, as he wouldn’t even know what luck meant anymore in such a world. They part ways and the boy doesn’t look back.

The boy is sad that they left Ely but he accepts that the old man will probably die. That night the man wakes up coughing and feels like he is going to die, and he asks aloud “Tell me how I am to do that.” The next night they discover that the gas tank is empty, as the boy forgot to turn off both valves, so they can’t have a fire. They keep traveling on, “thin and filthy as street addicts.”

The man only seems to make short term goals like traveling to the coast, as his only “long term goal” is to keep on surviving and going down the road – hoping for something better without imagining what it might be. The man indulges the child’s compassion, recognizing that this is part of the “fire” he is fighting so hard to carry on.



Ely is the first (and only) named character of the book. It is mysterious how such an old and confused man has survived so long. As with every character they encounter on the road, the man must decide whether or not to trust Ely, but this time he gives him the benefit of the doubt.



Ely articulates some of the man’s struggle, as he fights so hard to survive even in the face of such an unhappy existence. Ely also offers another view on religious faith – he rejects any kind of God that would allow such a hellish world. Like the woman, he hopes for the peace of “eternal nothingness.”



Even Ely, the only proper name McCarthy gives, is not the old man’s real name. This confirms the idea that names give a kind of power over the thing named, as Ely doesn’t trust anyone else with his name. The man voices his ideas about the boy’s “alien” holiness, but Ely still chooses to accept death’s dominion instead of clinging to hope.



The man seems strangely unconcerned with the boy’s religious beliefs, but the man’s religious beliefs basically revolve around the boy himself. The boy is often naïve, but he also has a compassion beyond his years, doing good without asking for thanks in return. Ely implies that it might be better luck just to die.



The boy continues to struggle with his own ideals, again accepting that he cannot offer all the help he wants to because of their own desperate situation. The man (and the reader) begins to recognize that his cough is getting worse and is another incarnation of ever-present death.



They come to a coastal plain and some marshy land. One morning the man wakes up and the boy isn't there, but the boy soon appears and says there's a train in the woods. They go investigate it and find a diesel train stopped on some tracks. The man looks inside but finds nothing. Then they go up to the controls and the man pretends to operate it, but the train noises he makes mean nothing to the boy. Both of them know that "no train would ever run again."

The man tries to play a pretending game with the boy, but again he realizes that he is like an "alien" trying to summon up a lost world. They both accept that the world cannot return to the way it was (as represented by the train), but they still keep "carrying the fire" and persevering on, even without any real, practical hope.



They go on and start to see small cairns and old messages scrawled by the side of the **road**. These were left by people leaving the cities after the food ran out. Soon after this the world was overrun by "men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" and looters who lived in the tunnels of cities. The pilgrims on the road died off, and the earth kept circling the sun like any other unknown planet.

The cairns echo those of many ancient cultures, as the world devolved into a primitive state after the disaster. McCarthy offers more vague hints about the nature of the apocalypse - after the food ran out, the brutal and violent took control, leading to the current state of distrust and fear.



The man realizes that they will run out of food before they reach the coast, as all the houses in this region were looted years ago. He shows the boy the map and the boy asks if the sea will be blue when they reach it. The man says he doesn't know. The boy keeps looking at the map, finding his place in an orderly world. That night the boy wakes up from a bad dream but he won't tell the man about it, except that in it he was crying and the man wouldn't wake up.

The boy now starts to pin his hopes on the blue ocean, on seeing some light and color in the world when they reach their goal. They need some more good luck if they are to survive the journey to the coast. The boy has probably dreamed about the man dying.



They sleep in a shed, listening to the rain, and the boy asks the man if there are other "good guys." The man says that there are, but that they're all hiding from each other. He is afraid the boy doesn't believe him sometimes, but the boy says he always believes the man - he has to.

The man recognizes that his dogged optimism is often unrealistic, but at the same time the boy knows that he totally depends on the man for survival. The trust between father and son is a matter of life and death as well as love.



The next day they enter a small town and are confronted by three men holding lengths of pipe. The man raises the pistol, trying to look tough, and the men slink away. The man and the boy keep going and eventually they make camp. The man is feverish when he wakes up the next morning, and the boy worries that he will die. The man has fever dreams about his dead family members, a cat, and books. The fever lasts for four days, and then the man wakes up and goes out to a hill and looks into the empty blackness.

The sickness is yet another reminder of how close to death the protagonists are at all times. In his illness the man cannot resist his memories, and he returns to the world of the past. These vivid fever dreams are then contrasted with the total darkness and emptiness of the present, where there is not even a single fire from a fellow human.



The man remembers when he was a child standing with a group of men digging a hole to expose a huge nest of serpents. The men poured gasoline on the snakes and burned them, "having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be." After the snakes writhed silently to death the men dispersed without speaking.

This potent memory becomes another sign that the evil and brutality of the post-apocalyptic world has been lurking in human nature the whole time. We can only destroy the "image" of evil, not evil itself, as evil does not come as external serpents, but from within ourselves.



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One night the boy wakes up from a bad dream and he won't tell the man about it. The man tells him that if he tries to escape into a better world of dreams he will have given up, and the man won't let him give up. They finally set out again, but the man is weak from his sickness and feeling "faint of heart" despite his encouraging speech.

As they go down the **road** they come to a place where dead bodies are trapped in the melted blacktop, their faces twisted in pain. The boy accepts that "what you put in your head is there forever" with a strange calm. He asks why the people didn't leave the road when it was melting, and the man says because everything else was on fire too.

They go further and the man has a bad coughing fit. Then they sit in the **road** and eat and the boy says he thinks someone is following them. The man agrees, and suggests that they hide and see who they are. They hide the cart and go up a hill to watch. The boy falls asleep and then the man sees four people, three men and a pregnant woman, coming down the road. They cross a bridge and disappear down the road.

The man studies the map and the boy suggests that they haven't gone as far as the man thinks they have. The next day they see smoke in the distance and they go investigate it, as the man says they are desperate for food again. When they reach the fire the strangers have fled. The boy is scared but they come closer to see what the strangers were cooking, and they find a human infant roasting over the coals. The boy looks away, traumatized.

The man worries that the boy won't talk anymore. They make camp and the man checks the map again. They're still far from the coast, and the man doesn't know what they'll find there if they make it. They pass through a mill town and then stop to rest. The boy wishes aloud that they could have saved that baby and taken it with them. They find a creek and the boy goes off to drink from it, running for the first time in a long while.

They go a few days without food and start getting weaker, sometimes sleeping right in the **road**. The boy sees a distant, well-camouflaged house and they set off for it. On the way the man finds three arrowheads made of white quartz on the ground. When they come to the house the boy is scared to go in, but the man eventually convinces him.

The man himself has wanted to give up and escape through good dreams, but as usual he puts up a braver face in front of the boy. His perseverance in hoping and traveling down the road is as much of an ideal as reaching the coast or "carrying the fire."



The boy again proves himself a product of the post-apocalyptic age, as he straightforwardly accepts the horrors of his surroundings. More vague references are made to the mysterious fires that destroyed everything.



The man's cough gets worse, bringing greater attention to his respiratory ailment and the frailty of his health. Again they must decide whether or not to trust these new strangers. They are seeking "good guys" while still being wary of "bad guys," so the man usually suggests waiting and watching.



They have no real way of knowing where they are, but the boy recognizes the man's tendency to be over-optimistic in his presence. The cooking infant is perhaps the most horrifying image of the book. These travelers did not seem to be the violent kind of "bad guys," but they have still sacrificed all humanity and decency for survival's sake.



The memories the boy is creating are all of horror and death. The boy deals with his trauma by again returning to compassion and selflessness - he does indeed seem saintly compared to the rest of humanity. The man worries that the bleak world is crushing "the fire" out of the boy.



The boy proves his usefulness again in spotting a house that the man (and most other travelers on the road) overlooked. The arrowheads offer another glimpse of both the beauty and horror of the past world.



They wander through the empty rooms and find some cans of vegetables. The man says they might be poison so they have to cook them very well. They bring wood into the house and start a fire in the fireplace. The man takes off the boy's shoes and whispers words of comfort to him. The man cooks the food and the boy falls asleep at the dining room table.

This house is the next streak of good luck in the man and boy's traveling pattern. Just when he is on the verge of breaking down the boy gets this respite, and the man is able to offer some more substantial comfort and love.



The next day the boy insists that they not go upstairs, but the man wants to search for food or blankets. The boy argues but then gives up, accepting that the man will have his way. The man does find more blankets upstairs and they stay in the house for four days. They take baths and the man cuts their hair. It rains the whole time. The man finds a wheelbarrow and some new shoes for them.

The boy experiences more irrational terror (of the upstairs here) because of his traumatic experiences. As in the bunker, the man uses their relative safety and comfort to bathe them and cut their hair – part of “carrying the fire” of basic civilization involves looking the part.



The man thinks about his goal of reaching the coast and realizes that he has no reason to hope the coast is better. He can't tell but it seems like the world is getting darker every day. They leave the house and go through a small town grocery store, where the boy stares at a mounted deer head for a long time. They spend long days traveling through open, ashy country.

The man realizes that his goals and optimism are basically futile, but at his most essential core he can't help traveling onward and hoping for something better. The boy has probably never seen a live deer.



One day they catch their first sight of the ocean in the distance. It is gray and lifeless, filled with ash and slag. The boy looks disappointed and the man apologizes that it isn't blue. They make their way down to the ocean and sit on the lifeless beach. The boy asks if there could be ships out there, or another father and son sitting on the other side of the ocean. The man says it's possible.

McCarthy describes this anticlimactic encounter in his usual dispassionate voice. The product of all their hardships and endless slogging is just a new landscape of ash and death. Immediately they try to look onward to the next goal or fantasy.



The boy asks if he can go swimming and the man allows it. The boy runs out and plays in the freezing surf, and when he comes back he is crying, but he won't tell the man why. At night they make a fire on the beach. The man wonders if there are still “deathships” out at sea, or maybe giant squid miles below the ocean's surface. The man remembers a night long ago, before the disaster, when he cooked crabs on the beach, and watched his sleeping wife, and felt that God had made the world a perfect place.

The boy's mysterious tears could be joy at experiencing the sublime in the ocean, or disappointment that the thing he longed for is so lifeless and cold. The man's memory illustrates how much his inner life has changed. Years before in a moment of joy, he had felt that the world was perfect, but now he curses God for the state of the world and his own life.



The next morning they search the beach and the man calls them “beachcombers.” They come to a rock jetty and see a large sailboat on its side a little ways offshore. The man makes them wait and watch for a while, and then they walk further along the beach, among the “senseless” tideline of fish bones and rubble.

The usually emotionless narrator offers more of a critique here, as if he too were angry at God and humanity for all this “senseless” death, even of innocent animals.



The man decides to explore the boat. He gives the boy the pistol and tells him to wait on the beach, and the man strips and swims through the icy water. He reaches the boat, which is called “Pájaro de Esperanza” (“Bird of Hope”), and climbs aboard. He finds the boat looted only by the waves and “some terrible force” that swept everything away. He expects something horrible but there is nothing. The man finds some new seaworthy clothes and puts them on.

He finds some books and papers written in Spanish, and then a waterproof bag that he fills with odds and ends. He regularly checks on the boy, who sits huddled on the beach and eventually falls asleep. In a locker the man finds a heavy box and inside is an old brass sextant. It is in perfect condition, complex and beautiful, and it is “the first thing he’d seen in a long time that stirred him.” He puts the sextant back in the locker.

The man gathers up some rope and examines the galley. There are lots of cans of food, but only a few seem unspoiled. He notices that he is being especially practical about this “windfall,” but at the same time he isn’t sure that it’s good luck at all, as “there were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead.”

The man swims ashore and greets the boy with his finds. He tells the boy that they have to find shelter, as it smells like rain is coming. They travel a while and then realize that the boy left the pistol on the beach. The boy sobs and apologizes, but the man comforts him. They turn back for the pistol, eventually find it, and then get caught by the darkness on their way back to the cart.

They stumble forward in the blackness, which is occasionally lit by flashes of lightning. It starts to rain, and eventually the man hears the rain against the tarp, and they find the cart. They fall asleep under the tarp, and when they wake up there is a corpse washed up by the waves. They spend the morning offloading the ship, with the boy staying on the beach and dragging the seabag in by the rope.

Afterward the man has a coughing fit and tastes blood. He recognizes that he is dying. Later he decides to make one last trip out to the boat, even though the boy says he’s scared. The man explores the boat again, and after some careful searching he finds a first-aid kit, a **flarepistol**, and some flares.

The man has associated birds with hope and the past before, and the boat’s name then becomes the ultimate tragic irony. This boat is unique in that it seems untouched by looters, and it also contains no dead bodies. The “terrible force” is probably a storm at sea, but it might also relate to the disaster itself.



The man has experienced great depths of horror, fear, and despair in the past years, to the point that he is “stirred” by the sextant like nothing else. The tragic beauty lies in its complexity, its purity, its status as a tool of civilization, as well as the fact that it has been untouched by any post-apocalyptic horror – it is a device for charting your course based on stars that are no longer visible.



This is the next lucky find for the man and the boy, but with each new extension of their lives the man feels some regret as well – part of him is still filled with the weariness and despair that took his wife.



The boy makes another childlike blunder, but they manage to survive despite this. The man feels naked without the pistol, which was their means of quickly escaping into death should disaster strike.



They have made it to the coast, but their lives have not improved from the hardships of the road. Much of the plot continues to involve the constant struggle to survive against the unfriendly elements.



The man’s realization forecasts his ultimate fate. We already knew that the protagonists are living in an incredibly dangerous situation, but the man’s respiratory illness now seems terminal.



The man swims back to shore and tells the boy about his finds. The boy asks if the **flarepistol** is to shoot someone, and the man says that it might set them on fire. The boy realizes that there is no one to signal for, but the man offers to shoot it off that night “like a celebration.” The boy asks about the people on the boat, and whether they are dead. The man says they are probably dead, as he knows the boy worries about taking things from living people.

The boy asks about how many people there are in the world, and the man says he doesn’t think there are very many. The boy asks if humans could be alive somewhere other than on earth. The man says probably not. After a while he assures the boy that there are other people, and that they will find them. While the man makes dinner the boy builds a town in the sand. The boy asks if they could write a message for the “good guys,” but the man says the “bad guys” might see it too, which makes the boy sad.

That night the man loads the **flarepistol** and fires it over the ocean. It explodes like a firecracker in the darkness. The boy says it would be hard for anybody to see it from far away, and the man realizes that by “anybody” the boy means both the good guys and God.

The flarepistol becomes a symbol of the man and boy’s existential abandonment and desperate situation on earth. A flare should be a tool of communication and salvation, but they can only use it as a personal spectacle or as a weapon against other humans.



The boy is constantly asking questions, but there are certain subjects he seems to avoid until important moments like this. They finally get down to some of the hard truths of their current situation – the world might be empty of all humans except for murderous cannibals. The boy’s sand-town is like his examination of the map, a chance to step outside of his own world and find order.



This is the ultimate image of the man and boy’s existential loneliness, as they fire the flare over the ocean without any hope of it being seen by any friendly eyes. They have been abandoned by both God and people.



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In the morning the boy feels sick and has a fever. The man tries to comfort him but the man himself is terrified. He holds the boy all day and night, but the next morning is no better. The man whispers that he will not send the boy “into the darkness alone.” He goes through the first-aid kit and gives the boy some expired antibiotics.

The man feels like it is the “last day of the earth.” The boy keeps sleeping feverishly. One night the man goes out to the beach and falls down sobbing angrily. In the morning the boy’s fever has broken, and he is very thirsty. That night the boy drinks some soup and the man watches him lovingly. The boy asks him to stop, but the man doesn’t.

Two days later they wander up the beach and back, and when they return they see bootprints in the sand and find all their belongings – cart, blankets, tarp, and shoes – have been stolen. The man curses to himself and the boy starts to cry. The man follows the bootprints up to the **road** and then he sends the boy to look for any trace of sand on the road ahead.

The man realizes that despite all his struggling, death is still without reason or pity. The man’s promise means that if the boy dies he will kill himself too, but the “darkness” could also mean the harsh world. Either way he vows that they will never be separated.



The man rages against God, death, and cruel fate. He has struggled so hard for so long, but despite that it seems that the world is ending all over again. Just like a normal adolescent, the boy starts to feel embarrassed by his father’s intense love.



This single mistake, like the boy’s random illness, could be the difference between life and death. Again all their struggle is rewarded only with more suffering and bad luck.



The boy finds some sand and the man hurries ahead, but soon he starts coughing and has to slow down. In the evening they overtake the thief, who turns and wields a butcher knife at them. He is an outcast of a commune and has had the fingers of his right hand cut off. The man threatens to shoot him and the thief lays down his knife and backs away.

The thief has been one of the “bad guys” before, but now he seems like a traveler in a similar situation to the man and the boy. In this last violent encounter the man again skirts the line between being a good guy and a bad guy.



The boy starts crying and begs the man not to kill the thief, but the man tells the thief to take off his clothes and shoes. He makes the thief put them in the cart. The thief protests that he was starving just the same as they were, and the boy pleads with the man, but the man resolves to leave the thief just as the thief left them. The thief stands shivering in the **road** and the man and the boy leave him, the boy sobbing.

The man is overcome by his anger and fear on behalf of the boy, and he ends up acting in a way that upsets his son. It would have been fair to take back their cart, but making the thief take off his clothes crosses the line into a cruelty that seems antithetical to the boy's purity and compassion.



After they go a ways the man tells the boy to stop crying, but the boy can't. The boy begs the man to help the thief, because “he's so scared.” The man says that he's scared too, and he's the one who has to worry about everything, but the boy says he has to worry about everything too. The man relents and they go back, but the thief is gone. They call to him but there's no answer. They travel on and make camp. The man says he didn't want to kill the thief, but the boy says that they *did* kill him.

The man has assumed all the responsibility of surviving, but he doesn't realize that the boy has also been assuming a great responsibility – that of making sure they act morally and remain as “good guys.” Again the boy is capable of great empathy, seeing a common fear and suffering even in the thief, who would have left them to die.



In the morning the man goes to look at the **road** and feels an earthquake in the distance. He wonders how old the boy is now. They travel on along the coast for a few days and the man starts searching for some Vitamin D so the boy doesn't get rickets. They pass through a port town that seems abandoned.

The man's interaction with the thief seems to have opened up a new rift between the man and the boy. Now the man wonders more abstractly about things like the boy's age and health (humans get Vitamin D from sunlight, which is now nonexistent).



On the way out of town the man hears something whistle over his head and he throws himself on the boy. He sees a stranger in a window with a bow, and the stranger shoots the man in the leg with an arrow. The man curses and shoots the stranger with the **flarepistol**. The man hides with the boy as they hear the stranger screaming.

The symbol of the flarepistol now broadens – what was supposed to be a means of communication and salvation is transformed into a weapon to wound other humans. Again random chance and bad luck overcomes all the man's struggling.



After a while the man leaves the boy hiding and limps into the stranger's house. He finds a woman holding the stranger in the corner, and she curses at him. The man leaves and gets the boy, and they make camp in a store building. The man examines his leg, which is bleeding badly. He asks for the first-aid kit but the boy doesn't move, and the man curses at him.

Like the thief, these strangers also seem like less sinister “bad guys” than the cannibal gangs, even though they would have killed the man and boy just the same. This is the first time we see the man get angry at the boy, a sign of new distance between them.



The boy gets the kit and the man disinfects and sews together his wound. The boy watches the whole time. The man apologizes for yelling at the boy. The next morning he goes out to look at the ocean, and notices that his leg seems worse. He offers to tell the boy a story, but the boy says he doesn't want one because the man's stories aren't true – in the stories the man and the boy help people, but in real life they don't.

The boy is always watching the man, learning survival skills as well as the ethics and optimism that the man verbally reiterates. The boy's faith in the man is shaken again, and once more he doubts whether they are truly the "good guys." In the boy's experience, stories are always happy and used to escape from reality.



The man asks the boy for a story, or to tell him about his dreams. The boy says his dreams are all bad, just like real life. The man says it isn't so bad as long as they're alive, but the boy says being alive is just "okay." Then he asks the man some questions about his cough, crying at night, and whether his leg is getting worse.

The man tries to keep up his optimistic front, but the boy reveals that he knows the man often despairs too. After all the terrible things he has seen at such a young age, the boy starts slipping into that weariness and depression that led his mother to suicide.



Two days later they leave town, the man limping badly. They travel a while along the sandy **road** and then turn inland the next day. The man sits in the road and cuts the stitches out of his leg, and the boy says he is brave. The man says the bravest thing he's ever done is "getting up this morning." The man starts having good dreams again at night, dreams of "human love, the songs of birds, the sun."

Despite all his struggling and encouraging speeches, the man's health rapidly declines and he senses the approach of death. He has little strength left to fight off the "siren worlds" of his dreams, luring him to give up and stop going down the road.



The man coughs up more blood and has to stop and rest more often than before. The boy watches him, and the man realizes that the boy is old enough that in another world he would be becoming independent and willful now. More long days pass, and they travel past lines of cars filled with burned bodies. The man coughs and spits blood constantly. The boy watches him, "glowing in that waste like a tabernacle."

As the man prepares to die he starts to examine the boy as someone who could live independently, someone who is holy and worth protecting but also could potentially survive on his own – despite the man's promise that they would be together in death. Perhaps also the man is simply unable to find it within himself to kill his son.



Their pace slows and winter starts to descend. They come to a tidal river where the bridge has collapsed, and they make camp there in the rain. The next day they pass through a place where burned flowers and plants have been preserved from the wind. More days pass, and one night the man lies down and knows that he will not get up again.

It is unclear whether it is the man's wound or his respiratory disease (or a combination of the two) that finally overcomes him. The area of burned flowers is like a graveyard of mummified beauty from the old world.



The boy tries to split a can of peaches with the man but the man makes the boy save his half "until tomorrow." The boy wants to make a tent but the man doesn't want anything over him, as he wants to be able to see everything around him before he dies. The boy gathers wood and makes a leanto.

The man is still showing his love in whatever small ways he can, sacrificing any last meal for the boy's future. The boy takes over the business of surviving and making camp, becoming more of "the man."



The man tells the boy that the boy needs to keep going down the **road**, to keep surviving and moving on, as he might find some more luck somewhere. He tells the boy to keep going south, to keep the pistol with him, and to look for the “good guys” but not take chances. The boy refuses, saying he wants to stay with the man, but the man says the boy has to keep “**carrying the fire**.”

The boy asks the man to take him with him, but the man refuses. He had thought he could kill his son so they would die together, but now he realizes he can't. He tells the boy to keep talking to him even after he's gone. The next day the boy asks the man about the little boy he saw back in the far-off town, and the man says that “goodness will find the little boy. It always has.” When the boy wakes up the next morning the man is dead, and the boy says his name over and over, crying and holding his hand.

The narrative shifts to follow the boy. The boy stays with his father for three days and then sets off on the **road**. Immediately he sees someone following him and he waits with the pistol. A man carrying a shotgun appears, a scarred “veteran of old skirmishes.” The scarred man smiles and tells the boy he's sorry about his father, and he offers to take the boy along with him. The boy asks if the scarred man is one of the “good guys,” and the scarred man says he is.

The scarred man asks about what the boy has, and the boy says he only has some blankets, but they're still wrapped around his father. The man tells the boy that he can either stay with his father and die, or come with him and his companions and “be all right.” He says he can't prove that he's a “good guy,” but the boy will have to trust him. The boy asks if the man is “**carrying the fire**,” and the man is confused at first but then affirms that he is. He says they have a little boy and a little girl in their group, and that they don't eat people. The boy agrees to go along.

The scarred man tells the boy to go out in the **road** and wait for him to fetch the blankets. The boy requests that they leave his father wrapped in one blanket, as he doesn't want people to see him. The man agrees and he soon appears with the blankets and the boy's suitcase. The man offers to wait while the boy says goodbye, and the boy goes back to his father's body. He cries for a long time and then promises to talk to his father every day.

This deathbed scene is the culmination of the themes of the book, as the man passes on his last wisdom to the boy, telling him to keep traveling down the road and hoping for something better, and “carrying the fire” of decency and humanity. The going on itself has become reason enough to go on, and the persistence of hope reason enough to keep hoping.



Even as he finally succumbs to death, the man's hope seems only strengthened. He sees the goodness in his bleak world and passes it on to his son. The boy wants to do the easy thing and die with the man, but he also has too much of the man in him – so he too will struggle against death and fight to remain a “good guy” in the midst of a brutal world.



That the boy stays with his dead father for three days links him in a way with Jesus, who rises from the dead after three days. In this case, of course, the man does not return to life, but after three days the boy takes on the inheritance of “carrying the fire” that the man has passed down to him. The man, in a sense, is resurrected in the boy. And the novel does end on a relatively hopeful note as the boy immediately finds some of the “good guys” they have been searching for for so long. The boy has gone from being on the man's pedestal to becoming the protagonist of the novel and the new carrier of “the fire.”



The boy has always been more trusting than the man, but now it seems that his intuition is correct. The new man probably isn't used to the phrase “carrying the fire,” but he can decipher its basic meaning. The fact that he is traveling with a little boy and a little girl is another sign of his trustworthiness, and fulfills the boy's desire to find companions of the same age.



The boy offers a symbolic sacrifice of a blanket – something useful for his survival – to honor his father's death, just as his father sacrificed so much for the boy. The new “good guy” seems like a similar character to the boy's father, a protector of children and morality who is also a “veteran” of violence and death.



The boy goes out to the **road** and a woman embraces him. Later she talks to him about God, and he tries to pray but finds it easier to talk to his father instead. The woman accepts this as another way of talking to God. The book ends with a description of the brook trout that once lived in the mountain streams. They were beautiful and delicate, and of a mysterious place “older than man.”

The boy’s implicit trust in his father transforms into a kind of religious faith, as he finds it easier to “pray” to the man than to a God who seems distant. The achingly beautiful trout scene closes the book on a more hopeful note, but it also raises a question – the man, the only one capable of remembering such trout, is dead, so it is unknown who is remembering these trout. It may be the narrator taking a more forward role, implying that life will always find a way despite humanity’s interference, or possibly a comment on how the man’s memory of beauty and nature (one aspect of “the fire”) has taken on a life of its own and perhaps been passed along to the son. Remembering the past has become a part of the present.





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