

# Surviving *The Road*

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Among contemporary literary visions of the near-future, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*<sup>1</sup> numbers among the bleakest. McCarthy's novel earns this position through its nearly absolute destruction of the world, after which only a few straggling people remain where there are no animals, no vegetation, and no sun to see. The story follows a father and his son as they journey through the ashen wasteland towards the dim hope of a better existence. The journey model, which is possibly as old as narrative itself, is particularly suited to the representation of survival in a world that produces nothing new and requires that sustenance be found only in what has been preserved. If food sources consist primarily of canned goods leftover from the old world, the narrative appropriately consists of recognizable forms that evoke the past while becoming vulnerable to the destruction of the post-apocalyptic setting. Furthermore, embedded in the journey is an expectation of transition. Whether or not the journey lives up to its promise of progression beyond the wasteland, the movement itself perpetuates a feeble but defiant hope. Fiction writer Michael Chabon writes in a review:

The only true account of the world after a disaster as nearly complete and as searing as the one McCarthy proposes [...] would be a book of blank pages, white as ash. But to annihilate the world in prose one must simultaneously write it into being.<sup>2</sup>

The paradox that Chabon notices in the dialectical relationship of destruction and creation parallels the novel's refusal to be resolutely pessimistic. Even as McCarthy's world looks towards an impossibly dark future, it offers the truest test for optimism: can we believe that out of darkness, the approaching unknown future still has the potential to be better? As readers, we are given the choice of what to bring back to our world: the pessimism of certain doom or the optimism of our capacity to determine the path we take.

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<sup>1</sup> McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Random House, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Chabon, Michael. "After the Apocalypse." *The New York Review of Books*. 54.2 (15 February 2007) 01 March 2008 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19856>>

The road.

We know even before opening McCarthy's novel what "the road" signifies because we have internalized the metaphorical relation of the physical road to notions of movement, exploration, progression, or development. Within the first few pages, McCarthy's description of the road clarifies the nature of that exploration:

When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. (4)

The road is one distinct element that emerges from the gray, ash-covered landscape, but it only appears in sections and even then partly obscured by the swirling ash. When the father gazes ahead, he sees a broken path in a barren place, where everything – whether dangerous or beneficial – is hidden. In the physicality of the road is embedded a series of spatial metaphors: a line, a surface, and a space. A guideline connects two points and defines the shape of the journey. The surface determines the method of movement: the speed and relative ease of travel. The space in the road may be one of safety, danger, freedom, or containment. The road that the father and son must travel is not a straight and continuous line, nor is the surface clear and even. Already there is a sense of anxiety in the father's study of the valley that suggests danger most likely waits for them in the dark or foggy sections. The first glimpse of the road shows us that this will undoubtedly be a difficult journey. It will be an exploration into the unknown along a course where the smallest details matter most.

The journey.

The journey builds upon the spatial metaphor of the road to add additional layers of complexity. The road defines the shape of the path, but the journey develops the goals, the motivations that push or pull characters along the path, and the hazards that act as barriers to impede motion. The journey may be optional or unavoidable. Characters may elect to go on a quest if the goal seems worth the struggle, but they may also have no choice but to travel if moving is their only means of escaping danger. Motivation is connected to a sense of what will be gained or lost by success or failure. If the goal is unclear, the journey will test the travellers' commitment, and if the path

is unclear, the travellers must rely on guides to find their route. The general frame of the journey in *The Road* is the father and son's journey across the southeast corner of the former US towards the east coast. When the novel opens, they are already on the road and consequently already familiar with some of its hazards. On the literal level, their goal is the sea, but on the abstract level, the sea represents the possibility for change. At each stage, the journey is the struggle for survival and the father's challenge to preserve his son's life.

The journey occurs as a series of episodes of looking, as their movement is determined by searching for basic necessities. As the father notes early on, "Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food" (17). Cold and starvation are hazards that continually threaten them. Each day becomes a fight against the conditions of the road. When it snows, the father protects their feet by wrapping them in strips of material cut from coats and then covering them with squares of plastic from a tarp (99). Since there is no hope of growing food, and most of the food stores have long been stripped clean, they must rely on what they can find in corners or on high shelves that have been passed over. Their pickings are sparse and often barely sustaining: "In the barn they scavenged a few handfuls of some grain he did not recognize out of the dusty floor of a metal hopper and stood eating it dust and all" (89). McCarthy prepares us early on for the necessary thoroughness of their searches when he details the process needed to get a half quart of oil. The first time they search the gas station, they find nothing, but when they go back and look deeper, they find a trash can full of empty cartons, from which they then painstakingly drain the last remaining drops (7). This early episode sets the pattern for the remaining journey, as with each place they encounter, they must probe every hidden space in search of the smallest resource.

A significant portion of the narrative is devoted to describing the process of scavenging. Many passages are essentially lists of things the father finds: "A spoon in a bedside drawer. He put that in his pocket. [...] He sorted through tools. Rakes. A shovel. Jars of nails and bolts on a shelf. A boxcutter" (120). Other passages describe his methods with astonishing detail. Opening a jar becomes more than a simple, familiar action:

By the light of a candle standing in a glass he knelt and placed the first jar sideways in the space between the door and the jamb and pulled the door against it. Then he squatted in the foyer floor and hooked his foot over the outside edge of the door and pulled it against the lid and twisted the jar in his hands. (208-09)

The specificity in descriptions like this continually emphasizes the sheer physicality of their journey. Frequent repetitions of these episodes of searching include the reader in the minutia that defines the journey, as the process of reading must similarly scan through lists of items and detailed processes.

The looking for food is contrasted by the need to hide, as seeing opposes being seen. The road presents other hazards than cold and starvation, in the form of “bad guys,” the term the father uses for any other people who might cause them – the “good guys” – harm. Though the road is a space of movement, it is also one of danger, as being in the middle of the road makes them vulnerable to other travellers. There is no place to hide along the public space of the road. Whenever they camp, they pull off the road and hide their cart from sight. With the first bad guys they encounter, the sound of the truck only barely wakes them in time for them to run for the cover of the trees (60-61). After the father shoots the man in coveralls, they spend the entire night moving through the trees to keep from being found (68).

If both remaining in the road and staying still where they could be found are equally dangerous, and their only option is to run blindly through the trees past the point of exhaustion, movement is clearly a significant factor in keeping them alive. The necessity of movement means their journey is unavoidable. They have no choice to abandon their quest and thereby avoid the dangers of the road, since they are in danger no matter where they are in this world. The journey becomes the only means for finding potential safety, and the greatest task of the journey is enduring through to the end. Endurance becomes a daily struggle, both physically and mentally, as it tests their faith in the journey. There remains for them only one alternative to travelling – death – as one exchange reveals, when the boy says:

I wish I was with my mom.  
[...] You mean you wish that you were dead.  
Yes.  
You musnt say that.  
But I do.  
Dont say it. It's a bad thing to say.  
I cant help it.  
I know. But you have to.  
How do I do it?  
I dont know. (55)

The father has difficulty voicing a compelling reason for continuing to struggle through the journey, but he stands by their need to. In this story of physical extremes, the hazards continually threaten no less than death. Even when the outside hazards abate, death looms over them, substantiated not slightly by the mother's suicide. As Chabon notes, "In this impossible land the mother's choice is clearly the only sane one, and nothing that occurs in the course of the novel up to the death of the father argues against the suicide" (sec. 2). As the mother herself says, "You have no argument because there is none" (57). Perhaps no logical argument can counter the sheer desolation of the world, but the father refuses to accept that rationality as the only answer. His only response is simply to keep going: "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up" (137). The perceived futility of the journey leads the mother to despair, but the father sees in their son all the reasons he needs to continue trying. "He knew only that the child was his warrant" (5); forgetting cold rationality, the only important thing to the father is carrying his son towards safety.

From the beginning, the father maintains a clear goal for their journey: the coast. They have a map, and they trace their progress across the country. They know where they are and where they want to end up, but what they do not know is what the road will look like along the way and what they will find at the coast. The journey begins with a practical goal, to move south and avoid the cold, for as the father thinks, "There'd be no surviving another winter here" (4). Beyond warmth, they hope for more light, fewer clouds, and less ash. Perhaps the father hopes for a sunrise. If conditions are kinder to the south, they have a better chance of meeting other people there. They hold onto their dreams for the coast as a hope that has little grounding in experience. There is no reason to believe that the clouds end at the sea, but they need something to look forward to. Right from the beginning, the father senses the fragility of their goal: "He knew that he was placing hopes where he'd no reason to. He hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily" (213). Even the prospect of warmth is dubious, as it assumes the old world climate rules, which may not apply equally in a world where the sun is never seen.

Fragile or not, the goal of the coast lends a structure to their wandering. More than the vision itself, having a goal may give them motivation to keep moving, especially as they have no choice but to move. In dark moments, when the father has time to think, he doubts the plan: "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” (29). Yet even if the coast does not offer salvation, having no goal would reduce their movement to endless wandering without purpose.

Though the novel sets up the suspense that they may not reach the coast before they freeze, get lost, or are killed by cannibals, they do make it. They succeed in their literal goal, but the reward ultimately disappoints. After the repetition of the same gray hills and charred trees, the sea might at least offer a change of landscape, but the grayness washes out everything. The description of the ocean, “vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash” (215), retains the same dull, cold bleakness of the rest of the landscape. “Cold. Desolate. Birdless” (215): three simple words amount to what the sea offers.

The unrewarding arrival at their goal is an anticlimactic use of the journey model, but it follows the pattern of the journey so far. Although their journey is defined by movement, any sense of advancement is undermined by the regularity with which they are reduced to starvation. They spend a few comfortable days in the fully-stocked shelter, and experience for the first time the luxury of having enough food and blankets: “Warm at last” (147). The time in the shelter allows them to rest, bathe, cut their hair, refit their clothing, and stock their cart full of supplies, but the episode proves to be merely a temporary reprieve. Not long afterwards, their supplies run short and again they go days without food (202). Their arrival at the sea occurs undramatically, as though it were merely another episode along the road: “Then they came upon it from a turn in the road” (215). The beach even becomes an extension of the road, as they turn their travelling south along the coast. The one notable thing they find, the ship, also proves to be similar to any of the country homes they search. Instead of looking through cupboards and closets for home-canned goods or blankets, the father looks through the cabins:

Blankets, foulweather gear. He came up with a damp sweater and pulled it over his head. He found a pair of yellow rubber seaboots and he found a nylon jacket and he zipped himself into that and pulled on the boots. (225)

A distinct nautical theme characterizes his findings, but otherwise, his exploration of the ship is no different from his scavenging of any building. What matters most is the material function of what he finds. If their journey hoped to move them beyond a place where basic needs were only ever barely within grasp, the sea does not offer that change. Instead, the sea only seems to reiterate the fear of limitless desolation that the landscape promises.

Setting.

*Post-apocalyptic* is the term used for the genre of dystopian fiction set in the future after an incident of widespread devastation. In regards to the incident itself, *apocalypse* may be the most appropriate term, but *calamity*, *annihilation*, *holocaust*, or *catastrophe* each has its own connotation that may enable us to understand the sort of setting in *The Road*.

*Calamity* lacks the powerful punch of the others, since it refers mostly to crop devastation, but it does relate to the agricultural associations of *The Road* and starvation owing to the earth's no longer being able to produce food. Although we do not know the nature of the event, the consequences were annihilation; the remaining world is left sparse and decaying into nothingness. The use of *holocaust* as a burnt offering imagines an entire world destroyed by fire. To envision the world sacrificed for some divine power leaves the father, as a survivor, to both imagine and doubt God: "Are you there? [...] Have you a neck by which to throttle you?" (11-12). Incidents of religious reference like this allow for the concept of the biblical *apocalypse* as a revelation of the future, which is what the novel itself professes to be. As a particular sort of widespread and sudden disaster, *catastrophe* is the best description of the event itself, since *catastrophe* is also an overturning, an end to one world and the beginning of its opposite. Considering McCarthy's deliberately ambiguous source and nature of the catastrophe, his world becomes vaguely post-apocalyptic in that it represents devastation both generic and all-encompassing.

In a post-apocalyptic world, survival is fundamental to the narrative because, on one hand, only survivors of the catastrophe have a story to tell, and on the other hand, surviving is a daily challenge. In the single description we receive of the catastrophe, we learn less about what is happening than about the father's ability to react. The event is nothing more than "A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (52), which sound out an ominous doom with few definitive details. At the first glimpse of the "dull rose glow in the windowglass" (52), the father "dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go" (52-53). He does not stop to wonder at the strange occurrences before he acts, and he does not need to know the cause to figure out what is required in the moment. His reaction to the immediate catastrophe demonstrates the necessary instincts for survival. Throughout the story, we see how his instincts and resourcefulness become the tools that keep them alive. In one farm house, his eye for detail uncovers not only basketfuls of apples, but pure

drinking water. “What had he seen? A drainpipe. A trellis” (121); under the drainpipe is a concrete tank, and below the floor of the tank is a cistern full “with water so sweet that he could smell it” (122). Mason jars from the kitchen also allow him to carry the water with him. When they arrive at the orchard, they are starving, but the father cannot afford to sink into misery or give up in frustration. Their survival depends upon deliberate and persistent searching; the father simply keeps going until a solution is found.

What the setting means for the journey is that any progression must be made in a dead world. When the earth itself leaves no opportunity for regeneration or growth, the very idea of progression is put into question. The world occurs in segregated moments:

No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. (54)

The unmarked passage of time dissolves the links between one episode and the next, when each moment exists only for itself. Just as the pervading layers of gray ash cover every surface and penetrate every hole, the devastation inherent in the post-apocalyptic setting affects everything within it. When anything of distinction is inevitably coupled with the flat, unrelenting grayness of the world, development is compromised by an inability to move beyond the stasis of death.

The post-apocalypse narrative inherits the journey model, but alters it in the same way it dismantles the old world. The inheritance is necessary, since they must begin with something when the world offers nothing: “Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breath upon them” (74). In the vast nothingness, they find their way using what remains, but always the dim, gray landscape conceals all except what is immediately around them. Every step carries the weight of what they cannot know about the rest of the world: how far does the destruction extend? are there others out there in the world? At one point, the father wonders which way men veer when they are lost, but then gives up “the notion that there could be anything to correct for” (116). In a world that is slowly fading into gray obscurity, how is the journey able to sustain itself? Even when they are on track, mapping their route along the state roads, they are lost in the wider world.

Time.

The combination of the journey model with the post-apocalyptic vision evokes a linear conception of time. The journey, with its emphasis on movement and speed, is already concerned with elapsed time on a small scale, and the futuristic setting is notably a projection from a contemporary moment forward into the unknown, not unlike the journey itself. A conception of linear time places past, present, and future along a path, where forward movement along the path is marked by time passing. We can look back to the past or forward to the future from our present position along the path.

In *The Road*, the old world surfaces through the father's recollections, but the memories are no more relevant to the immediate moment than dreams. Both occur in brief glimpses that momentarily pull the reader away from the cold reality of the present. The father provides a reason for mistrusting dreams:

And the dreams so rich in colour. How else would death call you? Waking in the cold dawn it all turned to ash instantly. Like certain ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day. (21)

The old world was irreparably separated from the post-apocalyptic present in the instance of the catastrophe, when the overturning meant permanent change. Like the crumbling frescoes, the memories cannot be reconciled with the historical changes. McCarthy suggests that only one can exist; either the dreams fade in the face of reality, or they carry the dreamer away from the world forever. In either case, the contrast makes the past ethereal while the present world is firmly located in the material day-to-day moments.

The present world's relation to the future is not clear cut, but graded. The future is obscure, characterized by numerous moments of looking out into the darkness, never knowing what is to come. In one such moment, the father leaves the camp for a moment to look out over the land alone:

If the lamp should blow out he could not find his way back. He sat in the leaves at the top of the hill and looked into the blackness. Nothing to see. No wind. In the past when he walked out like that and sat looking over the country lying in just the faintest visible shape where the lost moon tracked the caustic waste he'd sometimes see a light. Dim and shapeless in the murk. (188)

In the vacant night, the "nothing to see" is both the nothingness and the unknown. If knowing is seeing, the "cold autistic dark" (15) of the world obscures their ability to know. How can the

father predict what might come in a world where one's vision is limited to daylight hours and the immediate surroundings? The sparks of light recall the lost stars and the uselessness of the sextant found on the ship (227) for navigation. Based on what the father can see, the future does not seem to contain much of anything. As everything slowly dies away, and the lights disappear one by one, the future of their world becomes more and more empty.

The father and the boy survive by finding food and tools leftover from the old world. In this relationship is the idea that the past is responsible for the future, in the best and worst ways. We do not know the circumstances of the catastrophe. It was perhaps ecological or militaristic, and the direct fault of humanity, or alternately outside human control, and geographical or cosmological. In a sense, the old world gives birth to the apocalypse, but is also the only thing that sustains the new world afterwards. Lacking anything for itself, the new world inherits what it can from the old world, but the inheritance mostly consists of crumbs, rusty saws, and broken down trains.

A few different views of birth and the promise of a future compete in the novel. In the darkest moments of the novel are the "bad guys" who roast newborn infants over campfires. They destroy the only new life that the world can produce for momentary sustenance and thereby commit the future to one of slow decay.

The boy symbolizes new life, but the mother and father have different ideas about what his birth signifies. The divide in their logic may emerge from the difference between the moment of conception and the moment of birth. To the mother, who bore the child in her womb, he belongs to the old world. "My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born" (57), she says, whereas, to the father, the child becomes his heart. If the boy belongs to the old world, his presence to the mother is like the father's dreams of colour; they are dangerous because they show too clearly what has been lost. She is haunted by a vision of the world the boy can never have. The bleakness of the gray world cannot be sustained unless the old world is let go. The mother will never be able to do that, and she falls into despair. The father's first physical contact with the boy happened after the catastrophe, at the moment of his birth, so the father sees the boy as belonging to the new world. The boy is what keeps him going; knowing there is life and potential and something to care for, even in a ruined world, prevents him from despairing.

Metaphorical journey.

The journey is entrenched in literature and language as a metaphor for any kind of progression or development. It has become so familiar that it can be difficult to describe processes without using terms like moving forward, taking the next step, following a path or a train of thought, or arriving at the conclusion. The metaphorical journey is commonly invoked in stories such as spiritual journeys (where movement of travelling or exploration describes the development of personal spiritual understanding) or growing up as a journey (where the trials of the journey or the ability to chart a course through the unknown describe learning life lessons and building a sense of personal identity).

Journeys often appear as individual stories. In *The Road*, the journey is essentially the father's story. He sets up the journey with his decision to head for the coast, and he lives according to methods of survival that are suited to his constitution. The boy is always with him, but the father is clearly the one who sets the path and makes the decisions. Numerous times, the boy does not want to follow the father's exploration of a house ("We dont have to go upstairs, do we?" [205] ) or even continue with travelling ("I always want to stop" [93] ). Perhaps this is why the journey does not end when they reach their goal of the sea, but only stops farther down the road with the father's death. The father's story follows his determination to be both a survivor and his child's protector. Whether or not he succeeds in the end depends not on his death, which was inevitable from the start, but on how his lasting influence affects the boy's future.

The boy's development follows its own metaphorical journey, but it shares in the ambiguity of progression apparent in the overarching journey. It is unclear if the boy progresses beyond what he was in the beginning. The father tries to train him to follow his way of surviving, but the frightening trials of the journey seem ready to erase those teachings. The father has shown him how to operate the gun, but when they are hiding from the cannibals, the fear paralyzes him and he cannot remember: "I dont know what to do" (113), he repeats. His fear is justified, especially in this case, but fear tends to severely inhibit him every time they come across something new. When they come to the stocked shelter, which echoes the cellar in the cannibal house through the similar doors and padlocks, the boy does not want to open it. He transposes the memory of his terror from the first cellar onto the second, even though the conditions are otherwise different. As easy as the boy's fear is to understand, the stocked shelter proves to keep them alive and restore their health better than any other find. Left alone, the boy

would be too scared to explore any place as his father does. The fright at the cannibal house causes considerable damage to the boy's mental state: "when he bent to see the boy's face under the hood of the blanket he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again" (136). The struggles of the journey take away more than they contribute to the boy's development.

When the father dies, the boy must take on the journey himself. When he first ventures out to the road alone, he hears someone coming down the road, and contrary to his father's teachings, he remains in plain sight to see who approaches. The man turns out to be one of the elusive "good guys." Does this demonstrate some new instinct in the boy as he finds his own means of survival? Or is this another episode of good luck, which we have already been told may be no such thing? (230). If the father's journey ends with his death, the boy faces the future with the potential to define his own narrative. Perhaps the journey is no longer necessary. Considering the boy's resistance to exploration, his survival surely depends upon adopting a different pattern of living from the journey.

Other characters they encounter substantiate the idea of alternate ways of thinking about survival beyond the journey. The man at the end says to the boy, "You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me. If you stay you need to keep out of the road. I dont know how you made it this far" (283). The man's insistence that the boy avoid the road undermines the father's decision to follow it, and suggests that the journey may not be the best means of surviving. "Go with me" echoes the boy's personal understanding of the journey's symbolic role in survival. The boy's answer for saving everyone is to bring them along. The boy says, "If we had that little baby, it could go with us" (200). He feels a similar sentiment about the little boy and the dog (86), and the father warns him against suggesting that Ely go with them (164). His desire to include others on their journey reflects a collective approach to survival. After they pass by the burnt dead bodies in the road, the boy says, "I'm sorry about what I said about those people" (200). Neither the father nor the reader learns explicitly which statement he was referring to – "I didnt know you said anything bad" (200), the father says – but the boy could reasonably be regretting his suggestion, "Why dont we just go on" (191). This is one rare instance in which the boy initiates movement. He does not think to literally bring the bodies with them, but saying the words of dismissal may feel like a kind of betrayal. Perhaps the boy simply feels guilty that they can go on, while the people who died were trapped and could not.

The boy's collective journey contrasts with the father's individual journey. The collective journey is less about pressing forward towards a distant goal and more about preserving all forms of life in the moment. It exemplifies the way things should be, and for that reason, perhaps the collective journey belongs to the better future that might exist, whereas the father's journey firmly embodies the present world. The father's mistrust of all other people makes their journey that of the individual, the lone man on "some last venture at the edge of the world" (48). The father's separation of good guys versus bad guys may create the isolation, but it is necessary in a world where the father must distinguish their journey from the doomed path of those who eat babies. The question of whether the father is successful in his journey may be the wrong question; he did what he could at every moment to keep them moving towards something better.

The larger question introduced in the novel is that of survival. The father insists upon it: "We're survivors" (55), he tells his wife, conscious of how they fit into the role. She, however, has a different idea of what role they are playing: "We're the walking dead in a horror film" (55). The father's ability to continue living when she submits to death suggests that his willingness to be a survivor plays a large role in his ability to be one. What constitutes surviving, however, is put into question by Ely, the wandering old man they meet on the road. He says, "If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we'd have something to talk about. But we're not. So we dont" (172). According to Ely, they may have lived through a catastrophe, but they have not survived yet. To the father, survival is the daily defence against death; each day they live, they live as survivors. Ely and the mother, however, suggest that survival of that kind is not enough. The distinction might be visualized along the journey path, where one kind of survival is the ongoing process of travelling and the other is the safe place at the end of the journey. According to the latter theory, if that safe place does not exist, the journey is not progression as advancement, but rather empty movement, a type of stasis. There is no reason we should suddenly doubt the father's faith in the journey to believe Ely ("I lie"?), but his words haunt the novel nonetheless, and the darkening world that confronts them daily offers no clear sign of hope for a brighter future. Ultimately, the question of survival edges between the pessimistic and optimistic forces in the novel.

Hope.

Within McCarthy's bleak vision, there is only a dim future. If the world can promise anything but the slow descent of absolute darkness, it is a slim hope that rests not on what we can see in the world, but what could yet be, despite all probability. An overwhelming sense of futility fights against any sense of optimism, but buried in the novel is a message of hope in the idea that hope can exist when there are no promises left.

Coming across shelves of books, the father thinks, "He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation" (187). We depend upon the future to give us a sense of purpose, but when it does not exist, it renders the meaning of things inconsequential. Yet at the same time, the space and the potential still persist and will continue to do so until the physical expectation itself is removed. The father and son establish their presence in a similar way. Continuing to move and live and persist in the world becomes a relentless hope that assumes the possibility of something better. Even if the world gives them every reason to doubt anything but a darker and darker future, their physical presence alone pushes against that inevitability. The father may feel that they are needed as representations of "the good guys," but they are also needed simply as people whose existence allows for a future, since a future can never occur without any living thing to experience it.

The hope is fragile, located in the frail body of a young boy. In spite of overwhelming odds, the father hopes against hope that there is a future for his son. When the final moment arrives in which he knows he will die, and he cannot kill his son, the father gives his son over to that hope. It may not follow the logic that he conceived of rationally, but it is all he can do as a father. He comes to realize that the most important thing they have to do is to continue to trust that goodness can persist.

There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn't about death. He wasn't sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he'd no longer any way to think about at all. (129-130)

If the heart of the novel lies anywhere, it is here, in the father's love for his child. Trained to find the smallest things of value in the ruin, the father recognizes how precious beauty and goodness

are in a world nearly bereft of their examples. He sees them embodied in the boy, who himself holds all the potential for the future.

21<sup>st</sup> Century.

*The Road* is a novel born out of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is not the post-apocalyptic vision that makes this so, as the threat of nuclear war envisioned this sort of world decades earlier. The way McCarthy deliberately avoids commenting on the causes leading up to the catastrophe or the nature of the catastrophe itself emerges out of a culture that has become used to the idea of potential worldwide destruction. Our capacity for environmental damage is by now common knowledge to the point where a novel will not surprise us by showing the possibilities of global devastation. We are already acutely aware of the possibilities, so something other than the knowledge is needed to alert us. This novel emerges from a perspective that the world is heading down a road that can only end in something catastrophic, and the biggest fear today seems to be for the momentum that awareness has done little to slow.

Perhaps instead of big ideas and hypotheses about how the world will end, the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs instead an example of how it would feel to inhabit that world. This is the age of individual and personal narration, and nothing makes a larger impact than the story that brings to life the texture of experience. McCarthy does not give details about the catastrophe, but his vague apocalypse is not a challenge to understanding the novel. The value of the novel is found in the power of small material details to construct the world of McCarthy's vision.

At the base of every metaphor is the physical embodiment that first informed it. We may understand the journey metaphorically, but we also cannot forget the actuality of the journey as the father and son experience it. The continual attention of the text to the simple physicality of the journey allows for metaphorical connections but simultaneously returns us to the materiality. McCarthy does not want us to forget the material presence of the world, when he includes passages like the following:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals

trembling like ground foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (130)

What it all comes down to is the simple presence of the world and the experiences of those who inhabit it. The “absolute truth” is physical existence at its basic level: the earth in the solar system. Humanity is just a small part of the picture, never destined to see the full extent of it. “Intestate” is dying without a will; the earth prescribes no future for its inhabitants but what they can make on their own.

The father believes, “the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death” (18). If *The Road* is a future vision emerging from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, perhaps it is the appropriate bad dream for a world in peril. When global devastation is an old concept in the memory of readers and the idea of the dystopia is familiar and unsurprising, McCarthy’s bad dream manages to shock through sheer austerity, as he creates his world with the barest minimum of substance needed to still make it a world. The novel sets up the ruinous setting, yet at the level of plot, it continually attempts to steer away from the gloom. At no point does the narrative deny the cold reality, but the father’s determination and persistence in the form of the journey create a resistance to nihilism, to the point where he can say to the boy, “Dont lose heart. We’ll be all right” (177). In this world, “all right” tends to equal barely avoiding death, but the survival the father promises becomes the only promise that matters. To hope when there is no reason to hope prevents pessimism from overtaking the world as thoroughly as the ashen landscape. *The Road* draws a line, without choosing sides, between optimism and pessimism, progression and stasis, and hope and despair. What readers must realize lies at the end of *The Road* is a return to our world – and our sun and trees and animals, suddenly brighter and livelier than ever. McCarthy’s vision is only a fiction, but it faces readers with the pressing question: which road do we want to follow?