

McCarthy's The Road and Ethical Choice in a Post-Apocalyptic World

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**Jingjing Guo,**

**"McCarthy's *The Road* and Ethical Choice in a Post-Apocalyptic World"**

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**Abstract:** In her article "McCarthy's *The Road* and Ethical Choice in a Post-Apocalyptic World" Jingjing Guo analyses ethical choice and its implications in McCarthy's *The Road*. After examining the deterioration of the ethical context and the prevalence of evil reflected in cannibalism, Guo highlights the father's ethical choice and dilemma. Different from most others, the father chooses to keep alive to protect his son, and to stay man and stay good in a physically devastated and morally bankrupt world. Through discussing the meaning of the metaphor "fire" and "carrying the fire," Guo further explores the significance of the father's choice in passing the "fire" to a new world.

Jingjing Guo

### McCarthy's *The Road* and Ethical Choice in a Post-Apocalyptic World

Different from his other "bleak and rather pessimistic novels with characters who do little to enhance our belief in the inherent goodness of human beings" (Søfting 704), Cormac McCarthy's tenth novel *The Road* (2006) tells the story of an unnamed father and son who, struggling for survival in a world in which even the most basic cultural prohibitions are no longer in force, hold their moral ideal to be "the good guys" who are "carrying the fire." In an interview about his film of "The Road," director Tony Hillcoat claims that McCarthy "explained to [Hillcoat] that [Blood Meridian is] very much about the worst in human nature and this book [*The Road*] for him is very much about the absolute best" (Collett-White <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venice-road-idUSTRE5823TZ20090903>>).

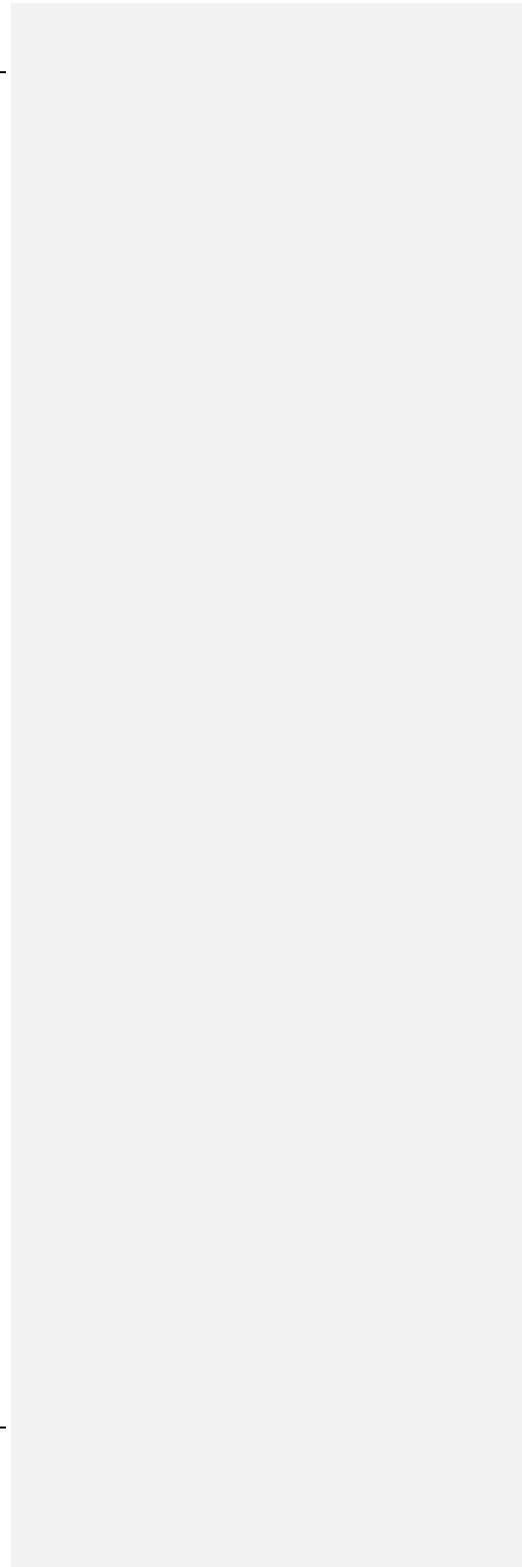
As a novel about "the absolute best," it draws attention and interest of many critics to discover its meanings of ethics. While some question whether or not morality has been realized as they can still observe the "moral ambiguity" that has been found in his previous writings (see Parini), others see McCarthy's ethical concern in it and explore it from different perspectives. For example, Edwin T. Arnold suggests that despite the "exuberant violence ... there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious" (46) and Rune Graulund posits that "this need for a moral order has never been clearer in McCarthy's authorship than in *The Road*" (75). Further, Graulund discusses the father's attempt to keep "little truth" alive in a "desert" world, and also displays "the man's survival regimen" (73) to explore McCarthy's philosophy. Lydia R. Cooper examines the link between moral heroism and prophetic narrative, and maintains it is the difference between the external hopefulness and heroic storytelling of the father and his internal despair that makes him, a post-apocalyptic hero and the head of a new type of religion that he hopes will be carried forward by his son (see *Cormac McCarthy's*) and Randall S. Wilhelm explores the "moral message" (134) in the novel from the perspective of "still life," pointing out that "the father's struggle ... evokes the sense of the beautiful implicit in human sacrifice for moral ends" (138). Euan Gallivan examines the father's use of violence and reluctance to help others from Arthur Schopenhauer's concept of "will" and "wrong," asserting "the father is fundamentally egoistic" and glorifying the child as the ethical center. The use of ethical literary criticism as an approach to discuss the novel is not without precedent in China. Xinzhuo Liang focuses on the reconstruction of the protagonists' moral selves from the aspects of human-society relationship, human-other relationship, and human-self relationship to explore humanity in *The Road*. Despite the different perspectives used, few studies focus on ethical discourse in the novel. When the father's choice is discussed, the emphasis is put on the father's principle of survival disregarding of his effort to remain good while trying to keep alive in a wasteland where the ideals of courage and justice disappear.

*The Road* is set in a post-apocalyptic world some eight years after an enigmatic catastrophe set off a severely cold winter that has choked the land with a ubiquitous gray ash, killed the vegetation, and spared a few humans. Different from the nature that once fed the people with living creatures and vegetation the devastated nature ceases to give anything for the survivors, only providing last shelter for the dead: "the blasted landscape, with its 'wasted country' and its stagnant fiver choked with 'dead reeds,' seems haunted by Eliot's 'dead land' with its 'roots that clutch'" (Cooper, "Cormac McCarthy's" 220). And the world seems to be abandoned by god disregarding of the fact that the world and its people are going down to their end. Along with the destruction of the world is the collapse of society. Because of shortage of provisions, relentless competition for survival causes the moral disintegration and loss of humanity. Consequently, society regresses to its primitive state when people driven by instincts fight for food and struggles for survival like animals. As Robert Brinkmeyer notes, in that wasteland "all questions of right and wrong, of the ethical and spiritual are subsumed in the everyday struggle to survive" (41). If civilized behavior is a mark of society, "its institutions, laws, its demands for compromise and restriction, its cultural refinement and emphasis on manners, its industrial development, and its class distinctions" (Busby 227), then civilization collapses now with the destruction of its social foundations. In the story the boy never experienced pre-apocalyptic society or known any other kindness than bestowed on him by his parents, the father acts as an instructor and plays an important role in nurturing him. Different from most others, the father chooses to keep alive to protect his son and I discuss the meaning of the metaphor "fire" and "carrying the fire" explore the significance of the father's choice in passing the "fire" of human race to a new world. When "the old world has been destroyed, the forces of chaos roam unimpeded, and the presence or influence of God can't be discerned" (Swartz 46), people fail to show any initiative in improving their situation and their weak moral selves cannot provide a moral force to regulate their actions in chaos. Thus violence and evil become rampant: "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" (*The Road* 152). The remaining humans betray the value system and ethical principle of the old world and even give up their principle as men and degenerate to beasts who would eat the other humans, enslave the weak

**Commented [BB1]:** The everyday struggle to meet needs of food, shelter, and safety take precedent over the abstract concepts of our psyche. Profound moral and ethical considerations are only ideas whereas survival instincts are evolutionarily ingrained behaviours.

and rape women and children. Thus, it is unusual to pass the blighted landscape without seeing "claggy" human flesh in the

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gaps between other characters' teeth, "gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away" (*The Road* 76). The horrifying scene of massacre makes it clear that the crime of "bad guys" has become widespread and survival of "good guys" is threatened every day.

Ethics is a basic human principle: what distinguishes humans from other living entities is reason, the core of which is ethical consciousness and ethical consciousness is to some degree reflected in obeying ethical taboos (see Nie 17-18). According to Zygmunt Bauman, because of the social division of labor in modern society, people become fragmented instead of a complete whole (*Postmodern Ethics* 19). They rely on outer institution or mechanism to supervise their morality, but neglect their own responsibility for their moral action: when god "dies," "there is no force stronger than human will and more powerful than human resistance, capable of coercing human selves to be moral" (Bauman, *Life in Fragments* 18) and "relying on the rules has become a habit and without the fatigues we feel naked and helpless" (Baumann, *Postmodern Ethics* 20). Separated from social community and devoid of the outer authorities which may monitor their conducts, these survivors wandering through the dead country suffer the inner battle between rational factor and animal factor (see Nie, "Ethical Choice"), and the prevailing violence and the horrible scenes resulting from it everywhere reveal that they have failed to check their animal factor. In sharp contrast with the prevailing moral degeneration is the holding of moral principles and reconstruction of the moral selves, exemplified by the unnamed father and son. When survivors of the catastrophe tramp the land searching for whatever they can eat and "bands of thieves, murderers and cannibals, all intent on maintaining their own essentially futile existences at the expense of the weak and vulnerable" (Gallivan 99).

In trying to fulfill his parental responsibility, the father displays virtues in human nature like responsibility, love, perseverance, and self-sacrifice. After his wife's death, he is forced into the role of sole guardian, protector, and teacher of their son. He views his identity "Papa" as his most important identity and seems to take protecting his son as the "sole, divinely appointed function" (Vanderheide 111). When shortage of food becomes more severe and his physical condition deteriorates, he struggles to survive although "there were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead" (194). Although his wife believes that he would not survive (49), he survives because of his son, he survives for his son protecting him and instructing him. In order to keep his son and himself alive, he does whatever he can regardless of his own safety. When there is not enough food for both of them, he leaves it to his son, and even his son begins to protest "You promised not to do that" (29) and decides "I have to watch you all the time" (29). Surviving the wasteland requires more than food and shelter. When starvation, coldness and violence threaten people's life, loss of hope also kills. Thus on the journey, while the father tries to find things for them to eat, keep them warm, and get away from cannibals, when death troubles the boy he encourages him in spite of his own moments of doubt and despair and pass hope on to him. Thus, their journey is a journey to find hope and sow hope in the boy's heart, for the father makes the boy believe there is a more favorable climate in the south. However, from the moment the father decides to keep alive to protect his son, and to stay good, he begins to face the conflict of his two obligations: parental obligation towards his son and social obligation towards other humans, because sometimes keeping alive in this devastated world can only be achieved by hurting others directly or indirectly. This is the ethical dilemma he must face: to protect themselves sometimes needs to resort to violence and even killing and killing violates the basic principle of ethics.

The choice the father makes in order to protect his son exposes another side of human nature: self-preservation. Consequently, he fails to show compassion to others while driven by survival needs. Although he decides to follow the principle of ethics, he sometimes betrays his moral principle when confronted with bad people. For example, when they have a chance encounter with one of the members of the cannibalistic blood cults: when one of them holds the boy against his chest with the knife at his throat, the father does not hesitate to shoot him (56). For the father, living in such a world the set of rules "boils down to a simple credo of 'survive first, ask questions later'" and "any one such act of compassion, no matter how small, will constitute an unpardonable lowering of his guard" (Graulund 73) and hence killing is the only way to save his son. If it is not too difficult to choose to kill for self-defense, it is difficult to choose whether help should be offered to the unfortunate. After all, the man in the scene mentioned above is the one who intends to injure others for his own advantage. For the father, to kill is to stop wrong behavior motivated by his desire to protect his son; however, refusing to help is unacceptable because "how selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fate of others" and even "the greatest ruffian, the most harden violator of the laws of society is not altogether without it ... Of this kind is pity or compassion" (Smith 9).

At one point, the father and his son meet a man struck by lightning. In spite of his son's appeal "can't we help him Papa?" (42) he refuses to help because "he's going to die. We can't share what we have or we'll die too" (44) and they leave the man dying on the road. Likewise, when they happen to get into the cellar of a plantation house where captives are kept waiting to be slaughtered and eaten,

**Commented [BB2]:** Class distinctions in our society have resulted in most people relying on external institutions to oversee their morality. Their moral guidance is dictated by, or at least given direction from, social structures. Once we find ourselves in a world in which society's framework has collapsed, people have no rules to rely upon.

**Commented [BB3]:** The supposedly more favorable climate of the south is almost a metaphor for a better future. The man keeps the boy's hope alive to empower him to move forward and reach that better world.

**Commented [BB4]:** The father is as willing to kill as he is to protect his son. He follows a code of ethics, but feels that there is a moral justification to kill if it is a matter of the boy's wellbeing.

despite their imploring for help, he turns and grabs his son and runs leaving them to their fates (93). It must be admitted that helping those people they too may be caught in the cellar, but leaving them there the father fails to fulfill his duty for others because "goodness is to protect lives, promote lives and to support the evolvable lives to achieve the highest value" (Schweitzer 59). For the father, out of human instinct for self-preservation and out of love for his son, he sometimes chooses to act irrespective of others' feelings. Although his struggle against his moral weakness is not displayed directly, it is evident at the very beginning of the novel when he has a dream. In the dream, "he had wandered in a cave" where a creature stands by a lake "who stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders" (3). The creature is "pale and naked and translucent" so that the father can see its bones, bowels, heart, and brain (3). As Barbara Bennet suggests, when added to the other references made in the novel, "McCarthy is alluding to Yeats' often-quoted poem, 'The Second Coming' in which a beast with 'lion body and the head of a man' with a 'gaze blank and pitiless as the sun' 'slouches towards Bethlehem to be born' (2). His dream is symbolical: the cave in which he wanders seems to be the ethical dilemma he is trapped in and from which he struggles to get out. He wanders in the cave where "the child led him by the hand" seems to suggest that he is confronted by an ethical dilemma because he cares much about his son. The dream is his subconscious fear and struggle not to succumb to instincts against the principle of ethics.

Although the father's goodness is questioned because of his self-preservation, it should be recognized that he never surrenders himself to barbarity. He promises that they would never eat a human, even if they were starving (107). For humans, "it may still manifest an effort of generosity and magnanimity of which the greater part of men are incapable; and though it fails of absolute perfection, it may be a much nearer approximation towards perfection, than what, upon such trying occasions, is commonly either to be found or to be expected" (Smith 26). The father's promise demonstrates his decision and determination to cling to the principle of ethics. Meanwhile this also suggests that "the primary means of defining who is good and who is bad comes, at least in part, from how humans react differently to hunger" (Mullins 80). While some are willing to do anything to survive, he reassures his son that they will never resort to cannibalism, even if it means sacrificing themselves to hunger: "The refusal to satisfy hunger by eating humans signifies the adherence to a foundational set of beliefs that stipulates a good and bad, a right and wrong way to be human" (Mullins 80). In light of this distinction of who is good and who is bad, despite the father's failure to define goodness, as Ashley Kunsu argues, "the main characters are the 'good guys,' and this they are because they hold fast to those rigidly human qualities that the novel posits we are very much not 'post': love, hope, courage" (68). Further, apart from this self-command, the father tries to offset a son of moral nobility against his own moral failures by story telling. Throughout their journey, the father and son take with them the boy's book of heroes and the father's tales of chivalry. When a hard day for food and against cold closes, the father reads stories for the boy before sleep (7). Although the father sometimes doubts that his stories have any capacity to "mean" in their morally bankrupt universe, he keeps telling the "old stories about courage and justice as he remembered" (35). Through story-telling the father passes on indirect experience of morality a set of values which will preserve this one instantiation of humanity (see Cooper, "Cormac McCarthy's"). The stories of moral goodness shape the boy's ethical vision, making him a boy of moral nobility "superior even to the father who had first inculcated these values in his son" (Wilhelm 142). If human beings experience the humanizing process by telling stories confirm a communal values and function as a means to test our moral decisions (see Rosenstand 157-58), the formation of the boy's moral self is attributed to the tales and stories his father tells.

Lengthy question-and-answer dialogues is another attempt of the father to instill goodness in his son. There are roughly thirty lengthy dialogues between the father and son, among which twelve are concerned with the boy's puzzlement about ethics. In these discourses, the boy puts forward his questions and seeks answers from his father. His questions "address complicated issues of responsibility toward others and the practical application of compassion in a morally rancid world" (Cooper, "Cormac McCarthy's" 230). The dialogues, especially those about ethics, is crucial to the development of the boy's moral self as the narrative not only reconstructs the past which the son knows little of, but also passes "references to norms, standards, and values so that the moral ideal self becomes part of the child's autobiographical narrative" (Lapsley 94). Therefore, if the father is not "the man of the most perfect virtue," he makes his son one "who joints, to the most perfect command of his own original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the original and sympathetic feelings of others" (Smith 152) by which his moral failures are remedied to some extent and his moral ideals are realized. The choice of the father and the subsequent moral transcendence of the boy once again proves "we are not merely victims of circumstances, determined by our environment and our heredity, or selfish creatures doomed to do wrong to the contrary, we have the potential and capacity to rise above our situation and choose something other than ourselves and the easy answers" (Rosenstand 159). The fire they are carry is moral goodness, but moral

**Commented [BB5]:** Here, it is suggested that Cormac McCarthy makes an allusion to a poem written by W.B. Yeats. This poem was written in the context of the Great War ending, but its words are nonetheless applicable to an apocalypse. It is worth noting that Yeats' work utilizes Christian imagery, a feature shared by *The Road*.

**Commented [BB6]:** At the beginning of *The Road*, the man has a dream that symbolizes his struggle to navigate his complex moral dilemma. The cave, an environment as dark as the man's surroundings, represents the internal conflict that he finds himself lost in. This conflict revolves around his love for his son and as such, he is guided through it only by his desire to protect the boy.

**Commented [BB7]:** Though the man doubts the ability of stories to hold meaning in a meaningless world, he continues to share tales of courage and justice with the boy. In doing so, he helps to build up the boy's ethical framework. These stories, with themes of courage and justice, presumably contain ethical implications. It could be argued that the contributions of these stories to the boy's moral nobility proves storytelling has not lost meaning.

**Commented [BB8]:** The author includes numerical figures that display the presence of ethics in dialogue between the man and the boy. In my own personal essay about *The Road*, it may be helpful to include such statistics. This would help to emphasize the prevalence of ethical discussion to somebody who has not read the novel.

goodness is not all its signification as an important metaphor in this narrative. As fire once gave mankind progress over other living beings, it matters much to the father and his son trekking on the road through the bleak world. Closely related with "fire" is the phrase "carrying the fire." It is a significant refrain, repeated at four key moments in the novel between the father and son and one between the boy and the family he meets after the man's death (see, e.g., 70). "Carrying the fire" is a repeated topic between father and son. At this point, the father is trying to make the boy believe they will survive because they are "carrying the fire," which seems to suggest that people carrying the fire are blessed and can get away from misfortune. In the second scene after they witness how the unfortunates are being kept as a human food stock in the cellar, the boy, terrified by what he saw, asks his father whether they would eat anybody. The man replies that they would not and emphasizes that they would not even if they were starving because they "are the good guys" and they are "carrying the fire" (109). "Carrying the fire" is used to judge whether there are other good guys like them and whether others are good guys as they are. The father implores his son to keep "carrying the fire" and convinces his son that the fire is held somewhere within him: "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (234). He insists that he should stay alive and never give up because good guys keep trying and they do not give up (116). Thus "we are carrying the fire" can be understood as we are "the people chosen by God to carry the light on through the darkness, to preserve humanity within as examples" (Softing 711).

Another instance are passages in the novel which feature different meals (there are forty such scenes involving eating and drinking [see Wilhelm]). The most impressive one is given when they come upon a bunker filled with crate upon crate of canned goods, hundreds of gallons of water, and other everyday commodities. After a good sleep, the father prepares a meal for his son: "He dragged a footlocker across the floor between the bunks and covered it with a towel and set out the plates and cups and plastic utensils. He set out a bowl of biscuits covered with a hand towel and a plate of butter and a can of condensed milk. Salt and pepper" (122). The father puts the footlocker in the middle of the bunker as an improvised dinner table, spreads the towel on it for a table cloth, and then "he looked at the boy" and begins to serve him. "He brought the frying pan from the stove and forked a piece of browned ham onto the boy's plate and scooped scrambled eggs from the other pan and ladled out spoonfuls of baked beans and poured coffee into their cups." As he does this, "the boy looked up at him" (122). This would be a daily scene in an ordinary family, but it is unusual in their desolate world. The boy watches how a meal is prepared and served, he does not eat at once, and sits there seemingly lost: "although the child may not know how to butter his biscuits, he does have within him the knowledge of prayer, charity and gratitude, qualities that must have been embedded in the stories the father has told him" (Wilhelm 138). Before enjoying the meal, with the encouragement of the father he prays and thanks the people who left food to them. This scene with the father's preparation of food and their exchange of gaze shows the father as a teacher not as a protector (Wilhelm 138). Through this performance of the ritual of preparing meal and serving food, the father demonstrates how a formal meal goes and passes the decorum and gestures of a world irrevocably lost to the boy. Claude Lévi-Strauss explains: "in preparing food for ... consumption, by symbolic understanding of the ritualness of eating, and by the evolution of table manners, we crossed over from the wild to the tame, from nature to culture" (Lévi-Strauss qtd. in Davenport 11). Since culture has been destroyed in this narrative, the father's recreation of a familial tableau from an era vanished before the boy's birth along with his repetition of other ritualized acts seems a strategic attempt not only "to maintain a sense of dignity" (Wilhelm 132), but also to retain memory and pass it to the next generation.

Disappearing with traditions and customs like table manners is language: "Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true ... The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever" (*The Road* 75). Losing its referents, language itself comes to its extinction, but the father saves it by teaching his son to read. One of their limited belongings is the boy's book. When they run into something that has letters or words, the father will encourage the boy to read it. In their daily dialogue, the father may use some words that are unknown to the boy and explain the words. In this way, the boy is gradually acquainted with language and its referents, something lost in the dead land resurfacing, some words losing their original meanings because of the extermination of the world are passed on until someday they can regain their referents in a new world. Adam Smith wrote that "every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care" (82): in the case of *The Road*, the father's choice proves human beings are not self-serving creatures even when faced with depravity. As a combination of natural and social beings, they can override their instincts and restrain their selfishness and display their moral sentiments like love for others, responsibility toward others, compassion to the weak, self-sacrifice for higher ideal and hope in harsh environment. Just because of this can they multiply and prosper in the universe and pass the civilization they have created from generation to generation.

**Commented [BB9]:** Prior to reviewing this segment of the critique, I had not interpreted the mantra of "carrying the fire" as making reference to the pair's ability to "get away from misfortune". Being that Guo later describes carrying the fire as an indication that the boy has been chosen by God to preserve humanity, perhaps the suggestion that the boy can escape from misfortune is a given.

**Commented [BB10]:** Softing's account of what it means to carry the fire aligns with my interpretation of the phrase. Those that carry the fire are on a divine mission to find light in the desolate darkness and preserve the moral values of human civilization.

**Commented [BB11]:** In this example of the man's role as a teacher, he guides the boy through the customs of eating a formal meal. In my opinion, the particular emphasis on praying to show gratitude highlights how traditional behaviours can have a direct pertinence to virtuous traits.

**Commented [BB12]:** The father's teaching of language and literacy not only enriches the boy's knowledge, but is a broader effort to carry on such information. Language must retain its significance so that in a reborn world of the future, a core component of human culture is not lost. Though the boy is learning English in this specific case, I believe the theme of preserving culture to extend to all of the world's languages. In fact, perhaps it applies best to languages and customs that are already considered "endangered" in today's world.



In conclusion, setting his story in a post-apocalyptic future, McCarthy asks how survivors, if not socialized by education and institutional agency, will choose to behave when faced with sustained deprivation? McCarthy suggests that the choice human beings make will determine human culture and its ethical principles. If humans choose to survive like "animals," they will disappear, but if they choose as the father and son do in McCarthy's *The Road*, humans will adhere to ethics.

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