

Daniel Vieyra

Professor Thomas Laughlin

ENG101

December 6, 2023

Good Guys and Gospel: The Stories, Godlessness and Christ Figure as a Means of  
Redemption in Cormac McCarthy's 'The Road'

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is a novel that can be best summed up in the words of its own wandering man - the novel's only name - Ely, "[t]here is no God and we are his prophets" (118). *The Road* is an account of a father and son who traverse the roads of a post-apocalyptic American hellscape in search of food and shelter but all the while question their goodness in a world that appears to be "godless" (2). Despite the godless nature of the hellscape the man preaches stories of heroes and 'good guys' to his son; he becomes the preacher of a gospel which has no referent. In this essay I argue that *The Road* features a semantic internalism (the reality of things are born as a result of their linguistic and cognitive conception) that is in constant flux with the absence of God and that the boy is an opportunity for redemption. This disparity between the stories "of courage and justice" (41) and the reality they inhabit is key to understanding the novel as a questioning of God's existence. I will present this analysis of linguistics and morality in *The Road* by articulating various examples of explicit reference to God and morality, the significance of the boy as a christ-figure, and highlighting specific aspects of the relationship between the boy and his father.

The novel makes no hesitation in establishing that the man feels God has forsaken humanity if there were ever a God to begin with. He describes the world as "godless"(2) and dictates in regard to his son "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (2). This is the first intersection between language and morality. The narrator refers to the boy as the possible "word of God". In response to this quote, Erik J. Wielenberg writes "[t]he book of Genesis depicts God

as creating through speech (Genesis 1:1-31); a God that does not speak is a God that does not create” (2010). This interpretation of ‘word of God’ is reminiscent of other origin stories in which the verbal or cognitive recognition of the word brings it into reality (i.e, Spiderwoman in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*). It draws our attention to the fact that things in this world may exist as a result of our believing and articulating them. Another example of cognition becoming reality is the fire the man tells the boy they carry. The fire they carry is mentioned several times throughout the novel and serves as a symbol of righteousness in them. It is also the belief that they are in God’s favour and will be protected from the ‘bad guys’ (i.e, cannibals). In the man’s dying moments he tells the boy “[i]t’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it” (196).

Naturally, we can maintain that the man says he can “see” the fire in the boy as a means to get the boy to believe it and continue the journey, but I also think the man does believe in the divine protection the boy will receive because the man breaks his promise of taking his son with him to death which thereby runs the risk of the boy being captured by cannibals. The egregious risk he is taking by not killing the boy demonstrates a real belief in some kind of transcendental force that will protect his son. Another example of speaking words into meaning is the constant refrain of whether they are still ‘the good guys’. There is no qualitative definition of what it is to be a ‘good guy’ as the man maintains he is a ‘good guy’ who carries the fire but in reality he does extremely questionable things in the name of survival and therefore inhabits a morally gray area. In the absence of God, morality appears as a strictly cognitive idealist endeavor that is passed down through word of mouth through the generations.

We see morality as a cognitive and cerebral function brilliantly demonstrated in symbolic form in *The Road*. When the man is in the perfect dark of night “[h]e rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outstretched for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings... to seek out the upright” (9). The man uses his inner eardrum to gain uprightness in a world completely devoid of anything and entirely impartial to him. This is significant in that it depicts the use of the ear to relay to the brain something that is

imperceptible to any of our senses yet is required to determine how we should position ourselves in the world. While the man seeks out the upright his arms are “oaring” out to his sides creating a Christ-like cross. McCarthy appears to be implying some direct relationship between the ear and moral uprightness. Another example of auditory processing’s importance in morality is during the man’s early confrontation with the cannibal when he says “the bullet travels faster than sound” (43). The man soon after uses terms like “colliculus” and “temporal gyrus” which refer to parts of the brain that are directly involved in auditory processing. Without a colliculus or temporal gyrus, the cannibal will not hear the stories of good guys and bad guys. Without his brain the cannibal cannot create an image of God. In addition to this, the technical terms “colliculus” and “temporal gyrus” actually stem from Latin, a dead language. This invites us to think of the ways in which the naming of things creates them and the risk of losing these names. This takes on greater relevance when we reconsider the fire of morality they claim to carry that will be lost forever if lost by a generation, as with Latin. The man adopts this role of the purveyor of the lost languages through his knowledge of Latin and also through his knowledge of morality as it related to the world prior to the apocalypse. The stories the man told the boy were fictional but after going through the boy's ear and then auditory processing and cognition he measures his own moral uprightness against these stories. By virtue of measuring himself against the stories, the boy becomes a Christ-figure in both his suffering, “I am the one [who suffers]” (182) and in his adherence to moral virtues in the face of physical suffering as demonstrated when he convinces his father to go back to the thief that attempted to steal their things and “[j]ust help him, Papa” (181).

The theme of speaking to and hearing are in constant focus throughout the novel and take on Biblical meaning when laid out plainly. Early in the novel the father asks the boy “when are you going to talk to me again?”(35). Much later in the novel the boy wakes up afraid on the beach and calls out to his father but his father did not hear him (153). Before the man dies he tells the boy they can still talk after he is dead, he just has to “make it like talk that you imagine”

(196). Without saying it, McCarthy structures the ending so that the boy is praying to his dead father. By using the cognitive function that is imagination, he is keeping a very real aspect of his father alive. We can apply this same thinking to the inhabitants of *The Road* in their relationship to God and morality. By virtue of their ceasing to believe in God, God has abandoned them. It is a fitting progression that the boy comes to believe and pray to a father he cannot see when the novel begins with the man believing they have been hopelessly abandoned by God. Evidence of the man believing in their being abandoned is rife throughout the text but is most powerfully situated in the dream described in the very first paragraph where the man enters a cave holding the boy's hand and "a creature... its eyes dead white and sightless... pale naked and translucent... its alabaster bones... gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark" (1). While initially the creature serves to describe the tone of the novel, it also presents a challenge as to what it represents. I posit that the alien creature described in the dream is a manifestation of God, and when it lopes away from them it is the man giving up on God and God simultaneously abandoning him. Interestingly the creature is described as pale and naked with its bones visible through the skin and the description seems to indicate that the creature is alien in nature. The understanding of that creature being the manifestation of God is further solidified when we compare it to descriptions of the boy. The boy is referred to as having "[c]andlecoloured skin [which] was all but translucent" and "great staring eyes [with] the look of an alien" (89). The boy also dips into water like the dream creature once they reach the ocean. As he swims he is described as "[s]o white. Knobby spine-bones. The razorous shoulder blades sawing under the pale skin" (153). The boy with his alien eyes, pale skin, and visible bones appears to be the metaphoric hybrid of this god-creature and man. In that way he again assumes the Christ figure, being the manifestation of god in the form of a man.

Given the half-alien Christ figure that we have established the son to be, it becomes all the more intriguing that the narrator never refers to the boy as his "son", except on two key

occasions. The first being when he is born, “[h]e held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and cut the cord with kitchen shears and wrapped his son in a towel” (40) and the second at the very end of the novel when he refuses to take the boy with him into death, “I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant” (195). This observation is given further depth when we consider the man “knew only that the child was his warrant” (1). Given the profound emotions felt during the birth of a child and at one’s own death it makes sense that he would acknowledge that the boy is his son, but it implies that throughout the entire novel the man rejects the boy as his son. A surface reading may suggest that the man rejects the boy as his son for psychological distance considering he may die but considering the boy’s connection to God and his virtuousness it becomes further evidence that the boy is a Christ figure and the son of God rather than the man’s son.

The boy as a Christ figure allows for the possibility of redemption. As discussed, the initial abandonment of God is contrasted with a renewal in faith as demonstrated by the boy praying to his father. The stories we pass on from generation to generation offer a cognitive map of where the upright is and the proper way to conduct oneself. But there is nothing to gauge the upright against; McCarthy’s imagery of darkness and abandonment see to that. It is all an attempt to reconcile what should have been, and what was lost when humanity was abandoned - the old dry apples nobody was around to eat. The woman the boy encounters at the end says it best when she says “that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (201). His voice and eyes are the missing sound and sight of the uncaring God of a time long gone - blind and silent. His stories are gospel. His brain is the means to form breath and breathe life into the Father.

Works Cited

McCarthy Cormac. *The Road*. Alfred A Knopf, Random House Inc. 2006. New York.

*The Bible*. Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 1998.

Wielenberg, Erik J. "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's 'The Road.'" *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–19. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42909407>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2023.