

The Road Study Guide

The Road by Cormac McCarthy

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Plot Summary

An unnamed father and son walk south in search of the good guys, the people that are not raping, killing and eating other humans to stay alive. They ransack abandoned houses for clothes and food, which they push around in their cart, moving from place to place to avoid detection. America, and, as far as they understand, the rest of the world, has been wiped out by a virus. A few people remain, but the ones that do, fight desperately for their own survival.

The father and son travel by foot. The father pushes the cart that contains their food and other useful items, while the boy often takes a broom and sweeps away debris in the road so the cart can run smoothly. Ash covers everything. Occasionally they come to a house or town. The first house they see is the house the father grew up in and he reminisces about old times.

The weather changes from rain to snow and rarely relents. The father has an awful cough from this weather; every time he has a coughing fit, he moves away from his son so the son cannot hear the coughing. Nevertheless, the specter of death hangs over both of them. However, death would be a release from what is an awful life. The sight of bodes has become such a normal occurrence that it rarely effects them.

Occasionally they meet or see a live person, but often the father is always too paranoid to trust anyone. This is particularly apparent when they have food. At times they are starving to death, but when their cart is loaded they are in danger from travelers on the scavenge. For such cases, they carry a pistol, which more than once comes in handy.

As they move through the towns and the mountains, the father's sickness becomes worse. The warning signs are there in the mountains when he coughs up blood. However, given that the father has the chance to recover in a shelter that offers food and heating, his decision not to stay costs him his life.

Towards the end of the novel, a stranger fires an arrow into the father's leg. He fixes the wound, but the loss of blood saps all his strength. Giving the boy his last bit of advice, he finally passes away. However, with the paranoid father now gone, the boy meets new companions.



1-5

1-5 Summary

The novel begins with a father looking over his child as he sleeps. It soon becomes apparent that they are sleeping outside, and the father questions whether they can make it through the winter. He takes his cart and pushes his child and their knapsacks along the road. Before long, they reach an abandoned gas station. The father tries calling his old house, and his son asks what he is doing. A moment later, they leave the gas station but turn back to get some oil. Further down the road they reach the city, and the father comments that there is no smoke coming from the city, so presumably there is no life there. It starts to rain, but once it finishes, they set up camp and fall asleep.

Still awake the child asks his father about death, and the father gently reassures his son that they will not die just yet. In the morning, the father steps away from his son, so the son will not hear the father's coughing fit. At this point, the father prays to god. Father and son make their way down to the city and arrive by noon. The city is deserted and ash and dust covers everything. In one of the doorways lies a dead, dried-up body. Again, the father reassures his son.

The father remembers his own childhood when he used to go boating with his Uncle on a lake. He recalls the scene vividly, claiming it was the perfect time of his childhood. Father and Son now travel south, but the weather is getting colder and the cart needs fixing.

Lying in the rain the father claims the two of them could die if they get wet, so he pulls the tarp around himself and his son. In what seems to cover a long period the father talks about the impenetrable blackness. At the end of the section, a snowflake lands on the child's hand.

They come to another garage and the father builds a fire. He then fixes his cart and they both fall asleep. The next day they come to a barn with three bodies hanging inside. The boy thinks there may be corn nearby, but the father decides to leave immediately.

1-5 Analysis

The novel has a sparse, bleak feel that McCarthy communicates through language, as well as through the story. From the beginning, the sentences are fragments, rather than the flowing writing a reader would usually expect. This fragmented style fits the novel well; as the father looks at his son, the fragments show that, though the father is naturally negative, he feels any completed thought will prove prophetic. Instead, McCarthy uses the descriptions of his surroundings to portray their hopeless situation. Even the days, the author explains, give out little light. The darkness is unrelenting and as the father feels for his son's breath, the reader immediately understands he is seeing



if his son is alive. Through the bleak descriptions, even at this early stage, neither the father nor the reader would feel any shock if the boy was dead.

This sets the tone for the remainder of the novel. The situation comes across as so depressing, the reader probably wonders why they carry on. Even the boy is aware of his own mortality and in the morning asks his father if they going to die. The boy repeats this question throughout the book. That they do not kill themselves seems to have to do more with the father's stubbornness and past memories than anything with present reality. The father shows this fixation when he attempts to phone his old house, though there is no point. The son asks his father why he his using the phone, but the father does not reply. This raises the question as to how much the father is in control of his own mind and if it is the boy's toleration of his father's behavior, rather than the father's obsessive need to keep going, that keeps them alive.

In this first part the Father thinks about his Uncle's lake, and the times he spent boating there as a child. He calls it the best times of his life, and he wants to have a similar life for his son. The problem is that the idyllic early life of the father is gone, and even the boy accepts this fact. Later on in the book, McCarthy tells the reader the boy can neither read nor write. The father tries to teach him, but such learning has little relevance when their main aim, probably for the rest of their lives, is to survive in the most basic of ways. In this respect, the father is failing his son. The father never shows the son what he needs to know, for example, how to build a fire or how to cook food.

In this section, the father protects his son, wrapping him in the tarp when he is asleep in the rain and holding him to keep him warm. Such over protection becomes a major theme when McCarthy throws into question just how young the boy is. He foreshadows the fact that the son is older than it first seems in this section by showing the occasional role reversal between father and son. One time the father gives the boy too much water, not leaving enough for the father, and the boy says he has to watch his father all the time. Another example is when they enter a house and the father asks if the son wants to stay outside while he looks around. In reply, the boy asks the father why he always asks that. The father does not have an answer and can only apologize.

Such over protection does not make sense, and seems to merely be because the father is trying to cling onto a life that is, unfortunately, no longer. At the end of the section, they find three bodies hanging in a barn. The father wants to leave immediately, but the boy suggests that maybe the barn holds some corn somewhere, showing that the son is becoming immune to the sight of the death and problems they see everywhere. The father maintains the one thing that keeps the father alive, which is control of his son. At the end, McCarthy shows the reader how much the father holds back his son, when after the father's death, the boy finds exactly the sort of company he needs in order to live.



6-10

6-10 Summary

They find a ham in a smokehouse that is fresh enough to eat. Later the man dreams of a woman he once knew, but he soon wakes, claiming that dreaming is not good. The next day the father fixes some brooms to his cart so they can sweep away limbs when they move down the road. A while later they come to the edge of a city, and the father finds some blankets inside a house. The next stop is a supermarket where they try in vain to find a new cart; however, the father does recover a can of coke, which he gives to his son. They then come to the house where the father grew up. The boy is scared to go in, but follows his father anyway. At the end of the day, the father looks upon his sleeping son and asks when it comes down to it can he really do it?

They eat fermented rice and beans prepared a few days before and the father notes how thin his boy is getting, questioning whether he is a good father. In the morning he remembers it is the end of the year, and they have to get through the mountains, though it could well mean their death. In the mountains, they travel slowly, building fires and leaving them alight, so no one can know exactly where they are. At the end of the section, the father has a coughing fit and coughs up blood.

They are running out of food, and the father dreams of the woman again, who it turns out is dead. By the end of the section, the father claims that there are no more godly men left in the world.

The snow is getting worse and pushing the cart through the mountains is becoming exhausting. Just when the father is thinking of leaving the cart, he sees their destination, which he names the Gap. He knows it when from he was a boy.

The father begins to wish they had something to use as a sled runner for the cart. There is no chance of finding anything in the mountains, so they end up resting. The boy finds some toys when they take things from the cart, but later on, he has a bad dream about a toy penguin. At the end of the section, they find a river.

6-10 Analysis

Ironically, the boy is more disposed to surviving against the elements than is his father. As the reader has seen in the previous chapter, the boy is only reacting to his father's fears, which are generated more from the father's past than the boy's past. Previously the boy was willing to go into the barn to look for corn among the dead bodies, and here the reader might ask why the father cooks all the ham at once when they are so short of food. In fact, later they have nothing left to eat other than fermented rice and beans, and this just before they have to make a treacherous journey through the snowy mountains. It is likely that the father's dreams of better times he experienced are blinding him to his current reality. In comparison, the boy has a dream of a toy penguin moving towards



him, despite the fact that it has not been wound up. The dream may be a metaphor of them moving forward, but without them ever functioning properly, showing the boy's mind is firmly in the present. The boy has no real desire to know about the past. When they come to the father's old house, he asks if the boy wants to go in. The boy replies no, prompting the father to say "Don't you want to see where I used to live." Again, the boy says no.

The father is now developing a bad cough, which he tries to hide from his son. However, later on in the novel the reader finds out that the boy always heard the coughing no matter how far away his father walked; it is likely the boy hearing the cough was why he constantly asks if they are going to die. In this section, the father thinks of a time when his wife told him the only thing between him and death is his son. This emphasis on his son is accentuated by the father's belief in God and his claim here that everyone on the road, besides himself, is godless. The father thinks God put him on the earth solely to protect the boy. Such ideas are only holding the boy back from interacting with other survivors. The father is not functionally psychologically very well and one clue of that is that he leaves an area he knows for the snowy mountains with nothing but tattered shoes on their feet.



11-15

11-15 Summary

They leave the cart in a parking lot and walk down to a waterfall. Both the father and son wash themselves before heading back into the woods. In the woods they find mushrooms and enjoy a good dinner

They come to a road, which the father calls the States roads, but then says States do not exist anymore. Along the road they come to a jackknifed truck. It is raining, so they stay the night inside the truck. When they wake, the rain has stopped. The father looks to see what is inside the trailer and it is full of dead humans. They move on.

The father finds some fresh footprints. It is not long before they come to a man, limping down the road, his body burnt. The man collapses in the road, and the father tells his boy the man has been struck by lightning. Much to the boy's dismay, the father leaves the man where he lies and they walk on.

The father dreams about his wife again. The next day he and the boy play cards. He cannot remember the old games so he makes up new ones. He reflects on his wife; she shot herself just before they started their road trip. A while later they spy a group of people climbing out of a truck and wearing gas masks. They hide in a bush, but when one of the men walks towards their hiding place, the father pulls out a pistol. The man grabs the child and puts a knife to his throat. In reply, the father shoots the man in the head.

11-15 Analysis

The father's love for his son is not in doubt. In the previous section, the reader sees he always puts his son's life before his own, giving him the last of the food, water and even the coca cola he finds in the garage. In this section, he save the son's life instinctively and without thinking; an action that could result in dire consequences for both of them. When they are camping out in the woods, a group of men wearing gas masks appears nearby. They hide, but one of the men comes towards them to urinate, forcing the father to threaten him with his gun. The man grabs the boy holding a knife to his throat, and the father shoots the man in the head.

The father shooting the man accentuates the father's paranoia, which no doubt stems from feeling he must protect his boy at all costs. While the father points the gun at the man, the man makes an offer for them to join his group. He says they have an injured man, and with the father showing some medical expertise, claims he could be a great help. This proposition could completely change their current situation for the better, but the father shows a lack of trust for people that continues throughout the book. Even earlier in this section, they meet a man badly burned but still walking, and the father refuses to stop and help him despite the boy's protests. Again, this shows how much the



father restricts the boy from the boy's humanitarian instincts. If it were not for his father, the boy would have probably gone with man with the gas mask even though it could have led to death—the fact is that they are expecting to die anyway.

Nevertheless, it is difficult for the reader to make a proper judgment, as McCarthy never lets the reader know exactly what is the situation in the world. Here he tells the reader that America is no more, and the reader can guess from the number of dead bodies burned along the way that people are probably trying to prevent an epidemic from spreading. It is difficult for the reader to truly assess the situation because the father is an unreliable witness. The father insists that there are good and bad guys in this new world, leading us to believe a "bad" group of people are responsible for the destruction. This certainly explains the father's mistrust of people. Yet whatever the reason for the disaster, not explaining it to the reader accentuates the paranoia and confusion the father feels.



16-20

16-20 Summary

They camp near the men in the truck, but out of sight in the woods. The father goes off to find some wood, leaving the boy where he is, so they do not lose the cart. In the morning, the father washes the blood from his son's hair and they move on. They come to an inhabited town but continue walking through, as they are desperate for food. The only food they find is cornmeal to make cakes. They sleep the night in an old car; the next day a boy comes up to the son. The son calls out to the boy, but the boy runs away. The father then drags his son out of the village despite his protests at having to leave the boy.

They wander on. The boy has some raisins in his pocket and they eat them, but it is the last of their food. The boy asks his father if they are going to die and he tells him no. They come to a stone wall. Hanging from the wall are human heads and they move on quickly. Further down the road they hear people and hide. A large number of people march by, some are pregnant women and slaves. The father says that these are the bad guys.

It is snowing and the boy is becoming increasingly cold. The father wonders how long the father can last. The boy asks again if they are dying. Eventually they find somewhere dry enough to sleep in the woods, but in the middle of the night, trees begin to fall and they have to run to safety.

They look for the cart, which they left outside the woods. The boy is really struggling as the snow reaches his knees. At one point, the boy falls in the snow and the father has to pick him up. Eventually they find the cart, and the father makes some wrappings for their feet out of an old coat and bits of tarp.

16-20 Analysis

One theme in this novel is the repetition of all their problems. The repetition creates the bleak feeling of the book, making the situation seem hopeless. For example, the bad weather never lets up. Throughout the book, they have to cope with the cold, the rain and then the snow. Food is constantly an issue, and in these chapters, they find themselves with none whatsoever. The boy has a few raisins, showing his ability to survive better than his father who feeds them whenever he finds anything, but in general they are constantly scavenging and close to starving to death. However it is arguable that the constant struggle for survival keeps them going, and in this respect, the father comes into his own. He knows, unlike his son, that life can be better and now as they walk through the roads deep in snow with little chance of finding anything to ease their pain, this viewpoint comes to the fore. In fact, in the next section, they find a

refuge that comes close to promising some sort of happiness, and it is father's perseverance gets them there.

McCarthy presents the boy as increasingly vulnerable to the elements. For example, the boy struggles to walk along the road with the snow up to his knees, and only the father's greater physical strength stops the boy from giving up. At one point, the father has to pick his son up when he falls down in the snow. Towards the end of this section, the father makes shoes for them from the tarp in their cart. At the beginning of the section when the father washes the blood from the boy's hair, what would have seemed like overprotection earlier in the book, is here the father saving the boy as the boy's strength wanes. It is interesting that the stronger the boy gets, the weaker the father becomes until the father dies at the end of the book.



21-25

21-25 Summary

The father continues to tell his son they are not going to die; however, they have no food and they eat snow. The snow is so deep that the father camps on the road thinking no one could possibly come by in such bad weather. In the morning, he is worried about their tracks, so they create false tracks before setting off again. Eventually, they come to a town and a nice looking house, so the father decides to risk going inside. They find a locked pantry door, which the father uses a shovel to pry open. Unfortunately, it is full of barely alive, naked people, so the father and son run away. Outside they see six people walking towards the house, so they hide. The father gives the boy a gun to kill himself if the people find them.

Both of them are increasingly weak. The father tries to carry his son, but he cannot carry him very far; finally, they sleep in the woods. While his son is asleep, the father feels for his son's heartbeat.

The father carries his son across a field, but he has to stop every fifty steps. Finally, they rest for the night. The father sees a house and decides to take a risk to explore the place while the son sleeps. The father leaves the pistol beside the boy.

The father goes to the barn where there are bales, and he munches on corn seeds. He then makes his way to the house where he finds a few useful items such as a screwdriver. Back outside he finds some apples and fills a basket with them. He suddenly looks back at the house and realizes that there is a cistern of fresh water.

The next morning the father and his son wrap themselves in blankets, eat the apples and drink the water. The next day, they collect more apples and then head back onto the road. Unfortunately, it rains and the father says it is their worst night so far on the road.

21-25 Analysis

In this section, McCarthy covers a period when they are close to starvation. Considering their predicament, the father decides not to take any risks. For example, when they come upon a nice house, they find a locked pantry. The father breaks the lock only to find naked people, some of their body parts burnt black. It is obvious to the reader that these people are harmless, but the father insists that he and his son run away. As they run a man appears at the foot of the stairs begging for their help, but the father and son continue to run. This is another example of the father's mistrust, yet this time his view proves correct when outside they see six people approach the house. It is not clear whether these people are with those in the pantry or are the ones that locked the other in the pantry. The fact that McCarthy keeps the reader in the dark about who is good or bad lends credence to the father's paranoia. We only see the story from his point of view, so it is difficult to question whether he is making the wrong or right decision.



However, when he eventually dies, the man who discovers the boy, comments on the boy's mental state, implying that the starvation and exposure to the elements had a severe effect on their minds. Also because McCarthy tells the story mostly from the father's point of view, it is difficult to gauge how weak and naive the boy really is. As mentioned earlier, perhaps the father needs to keep the boy helpless in order to make himself stronger. The boy asking such questions as why they did not help the people in the pantry suggests that he is naive about their current situation and would not survive on his own. He accentuates this apparent naivety when he cries about the event later at their camp. There is no doubt the boy needs other people, as foreshadowed in the previous section when he is unhappy about his father showing mistrust towards an innocent boy they see through the window of a house.

Ironically, when the father decides to take a risk, it proves productive. In this section, as when the father checks out a nearby house. However, the reader has to ask if it is not more risky to leave his son alone and asleep rather than the father taking the boy with him and keeping the gun at hand as he explores the house and yard.



26-30

26-30 Summary

They sleep under a bridge. The boy wants a fire, but the father says he has lost the lighter. The boy talks about the naked people in the cellar and he asks the father if they could not possibly have helped them.

They finish the last of the apples, prompting the boy to ask if they will ever have to eat a human. The father reassures his son that this will never happen. Later, they are sitting in a truck surrounded by billboards, one of which warns of death. After their rest, they find a house, and the father looks through a tool shed and finds gasoline. Realizing there is something under the ground outside, he uncovers a locked trap door. The boy begs him not to enter, which makes the father wonder how much more the boy can take.

With the gasoline and some bottles, the father makes lamps. He tells his boy good guys do not give in to fear and leads him to the hidden door in the garden, where they break the lock and walk down the steps. The section finishes with the father saying "oh my god."

In the cellar, they find everything they could possibly need. Obviously, someone had stocked up before the disaster, and they have left hundreds of tins of food and drink. There is also heating and a second room with a toilet. The boy wishes they could stay forever, but the father thinks it would be dangerous. Nevertheless they enjoy it for a while filling their stomachs, relaxing and even taking a bath.

They leave on a full stomach and high spirits. The boy in particular talks about spaceships and traveling to Mars, the first time in the story he acts with childlike enthusiasm. When they stop for the night, the boy asks what their long term goals are, and his father asks where he heard such a term.

26-30 Analysis

This section begins with the father admitting he has lost the lighter and cannot light a fire for the night. The boy's answer shows not only the reliance they have on each other, but also foreshadows events later on when the boy becomes a stronger figure. He says, though obviously disappointed, that it does not matter, and they can he can cope without a fire. To prove to his father that there are no hard feelings, he buries his head in his father's lap, playing to his father's need to protect him.

However, the boy is becoming increasingly aware of what his father is capable. The father deals with such questions such as will we ever have to eat anybody with a simple no, but the boy is questioning his father's judgment for the first time. He has now seen him kill a man and run away from three people he could have helped. The boy had



always asked questions, but it is becoming increasingly difficult for the father to give a short answer to the questions, The longer the father answers the son like a little boy, the more defiant the boy becomes. McCarthy foreshadows this defiance in this section when they shelter from the rain in a truck. The father asks his son what is wrong and he refuses to say, though it is obvious the boy has been crying.

This section also details a major turning point in the story when the two find the locked shed. For the first time, the father shows the boy something useful in demonstrating how to make a lamp from with the gas and some bottles. This proves he is aware that the boy is growing. Their positive frame of mind pays off when they decide to go into the cellar. However, the father again shows his paranoid attitude by saying that they cannot stay here, despite his son's protests.

They leave in high spirits and the boy, for the first time, acts like a child. He talks of spaceships and Mars with great enthusiasm, behaving in the childish way he knows his father will enjoy. McCarthy emphasizes this at the end of the section when the boy asks what are their long-term goals. The father's reply is defensive, questioning the boy on where he heard such a term. This shows that the father has a fear of the boy growing up. He knows once that happens, the boy will no longer need him.



31-35

31-35 Summary

They meet an old man on the road, and the boy begs his father to give him food. Once the old man has eaten, he becomes more talkative and they decide he can stay with them for the night. The old man and the father talk about God, in whom the old man says he no longer believes. He also tells the father he does not trust him and most of what leaves.

The father has a coughing fit and thinks about dying. They set up camp, but when the father wakes up, the boy is gone. He is about to go and look for him when he spies the boy rushing across the field. The boy tells him he has found a train. They look around the train, but they find nothing but a few paper plates.

Things are now not so great. They are running out of food and all the houses they come to are empty. They find a telephone directory in a gas station, and the father uses it to find out where they are. They are fifty miles away from where he thought they were. They continue down the road until three men stop them, asking what they have in their cart. The father pulls out his pistol and the men leave them alone.

The father's cough is getting so bad that the boy asks if the father is dying. The father says he is not, but he needs to rest so they camp in the same place for three days.

The father spies some boys burning snakes. He says they are just a little older than his son, but still calls them men. The father's son is becoming much stronger as a person and offering his point of view about things. When they both agree someone is following them, the boy suggests they hide and wait to see who it is. Three men and a pregnant woman walk past. A little further down the road, they see the group's fire and smell food. When they go into the woods, the three people have disappeared, but an infant is cooking on the fire.

31-35 Analysis

The boy shows his increasing influence on the father in this section. First, they meet an old, blind man walking down the road. The father wants to just leave him and continue on, but the boy persuades the father to stop and give the man food. At the same time the father finds it difficult to accept his boy is growing up, so when the boy holds the old man's hand to guide him along the road, the father tells him not to do so, despite the fact the old man's blindness and age makes him harmless. This shows that the father cannot accept that the boy has the ability to lead and protect someone, which is an adult thing to do. The father treats the old man with disdain probably because the father is upset that the boy takes such an interest in the old man, as if the father is jealous that the old man could take the father's place in the boy's affection. The fact that the old man



refuses to thank the father the next day probably has more to do with the father's behavior than any nastiness on the side of the old man.

The boy then goes off on his own when the father is asleep. He finds an abandoned train and rushes back to tell his father. The father questions the boy on his find but eventually goes along to have a look. After finding some paper plates, they walk to the front of the train, where the father plays around with the controls and makes train noises. This demonstrates the father's obsession with his childhood, which McCarthy presents as one reason the father is leading them Southward. However, the boy is not impressed with his father's antics and asks if they can leave.

The third time the boy shows his influence is when they both realize that people are following them. At this point, it is the boy who suggests they hide and wait, and the father does not even protest, but instead agrees. When they hide, they see three people walk past. Later on, it seems the father finally accepts his son is growing up when the father spies some boys burning snakes. He states that they are no older than his son, but still he calls them men. When they see some smoke from the woods, they go to see if anyone is there, but all they find is an infant cooking over a fire, such an awful event symbolizing the end of the boy's innocence.



36-40

36-40 Summary

They move on and come to a house. The father wants to keep on walking, but they have not eaten for two days. He worries that the three people they met earlier may be inside but in the end takes the risk.

The door to the house is propped open and the boy worries it is because someone is inside. The father reassures him and they enter. Inside what is a very nice house, they find tins of food. The father thinks the food could be poison, but will be edible if they cook it well. They stay in the house for four days and find some new clothes and a wheel barrel. Soon after they leave the house, they come upon a gas station and find some gasoline. At the end of the section, they arrive at a beach.

They sit on the beach, and the boy goes for a swim. When he comes back, he is freezing, so the father warms him up with food and a fire. The boy wants to stay here. They comb the beach, but all they see are the bones of dead fish and cattle. However they finally come upon an abandoned boat. The boy reluctantly stays on the beach, while his father swims out to see what is inside.

36-40 Analysis

The infant burning over the fire must have an adverse effect on the boy, as in this chapter the boy returns to the fearful version of himself. When they come to a house and the door is propped open, the boy worries that the three people they saw earlier are inside. The father reassures him and they go in, but not without his son asking if he can hold the father's hand. Inside the house, the boy shows fear of going upstairs and again the father has to tell him everything will be fine. They find some jars of food and here the father, for the first time, voluntarily asks the boy for advice on whether he thinks they are poisonous. It seems the boy realizes his father is becoming more reliant on his opinion so the boy is not as forthcoming, suddenly realizing his response could mean life or death. The boy says it is up to the father, but the father says they have to make the decision together.

The boy suddenly seems scared of their changing relationship. When they come to a beach, the boy asks if he can go for a swim. The father tells his son that the water will be freezing, and the boy replies that he knows this fact. That said, it is hard to understand why the boy goes into the water. It appears the main reason is for his father's attention and that the boy wants his father to treat him like a boy again. In fact, the father says that he does not want to have to go into the water to get him, but the boy does not reply, suggesting that that is exactly what the boy wants to happen. When the boy is out of the water, he allows his father to dry and warm him by the fire. This new reliance on his father foreshadows the illness the boy suffers in the next chapter.



41-End

41-End Summary

The man finds some clothes in the boat and puts them on and walks out on the deck to wave to the boy. The boy does not recognize him. When he goes back inside, he finds some soap and Spanish books. The man continues to look through the boat.

Finally, the father swims back to his son, and they walk back to their campsite. The boy cries because he has forgotten the pistol, but they go back and it is still there. Unfortunately, it is raining and a storm is approaching. The man knows they need to get away from the beach, but they cannot find their campsite. Finally, he hears the rain falling on the tarp and they follow the sound.

The man makes repeated visits to the boat bringing back food. On his final visit, he finds a flare gun. The boy says there is no one to signal, but the father tells him will use it to shoot at people.

The boy falls ill. The father uses the first aid kit from the ship, but he is very worried and he refuses to let him die. Eventually the boy gets better and starts to eat again.

On day, they arrive back at their campsite to find everything gone. The father and the boy go looking for the thief, finding him through the sand he leaves on the road. When the thief sees them, he pulls out a butcher knife, and in response the father pulls out his pistol. The man puts down the knife and gives back their cart; however, the father demands the thief take off all his clothes. The boy protests but his father is insistent, and they leave the man naked at the side of the road. Later on by a fire, the father tells his boy he did not kill the thief, and the boy tells him he did. After a few days, they come to a port town. As they are walking past the last house, someone shoots an arrow in the father's leg. The father shoots a flare in retaliation and hits his target. When he goes inside the house, a woman is nursing the man and he leaves. The father fixes his leg, stitching up the wound; however, he is now really suffering, constantly coughing up blood.

The father dies, but tells the boy to keep moving on. The boy struggles on South. Sometime later, he is face to face with another man. The man asks the boy to put his gun away and come with him. He says that he has two children and a wife. The boy is afraid and asks how he knows if he is one of the good guys. The man says he will just have to take the risk. Eventually the boy goes along, and everything is as the man promised

41-End Analysis

The boy is getting increasingly hysterical and cries when he leaves the pistol behind. The father, who has resumed his position as the dominant partner, reassures him



everything is fine. Later he shows his trust in the boy by offering to let the boy fire the flare gun. However, the boy declines.

It is no surprise when the boy falls ill. It is at this point the father comes into his own, refusing to let his boy die, and it is through his strength that the boy survives. When the boy is better, they go for a walk back to the boat, where the father found the pistol. Unfortunately, when they arrive back their cart has disappeared. They go in search of the cart and eventually see a man pushing it along the road. The man pulls out a knife, but in reply, the father pulls out his pistol and tells the man to undress. Of all the inhumane acts the father has committed, this is the worst and signifies the severing of the father and son relationship. Despite the boy's protests, the father leaves the man at the side of the road to freeze to death. The father claims later that he did not kill him, but the boy's blunt reply is that he did, indeed, kills him, which suggests that the boy has lost faith in his dad.

The father's illness and subsequent death is therefore timely. It comes about when the father gets shot in the leg, and though he stitches up the wound, the loss of blood is too great to prevent him from falling ill. The boy looks after the father as best he can, but eventually the father dies. This proves to be a blessing because without his father, the boy can now act upon his natural love of people. When a man approaches him, he pulls out his pistol as his father trained him to do, but unlike his father, he listens to what the man says. The man tells him he has a family including a son and daughter, which the boy can join. The boy is unsure, but in the end decides to go and finds what he always wanted, a whole family who can provide him with security.



Characters

The Father

The unnamed father is an inherently good man with a strong belief in God. He thinks that it is his duty to look after his son and will kill anyone that tries to take his son away. This is no more apparent than when another man puts a knife to his son's throat and his father shoots the man in the head. There is no doubting the father's love for his son, but sometimes this love serves as an excuse for the father's strange, paranoid behavior. This comes to a head when someone steals the cart loaded with food, and, though the thief returns the cart, the father, pointing his pistol, demands that the man takes off all his clothes. The Father tells his son he did not kill him, but in such cold weather, the son rightly replies "yes you did."

His paranoia is no doubt the father's downfall. He sees everybody but his son as an enemy and the two of them constantly move from camp to camp, so no one will find them. At times, they meet people and the boy begs him to be easy on them. Usually this does not work, but one time the son does persuade the Father to give food to an old, blind man. However, the father does so with little grace. The reader even gets the impression the father is getting some satisfaction from the desperate situation they find themselves in and sees it as a chance to prove himself to his son. This is most apparent when they find a shelter with everything they could wish for including food and heating. Yet the father says they can only stay a few nights, as he is worried someone will find them. Such reasoning seems illogical, particularly as later they camp on a beach in the rain four nights and actually do get their cart stolen.

His attitude is pure stubbornness. In the parts about his wife, it becomes apparent she killed herself to get away from such a life and suggested the father did the same. In a life where they expect death to come any day through starvation, thirst, the weather or a fellow human, it is hard to understand why he does not follow her advice.

The Son

The boy is a sensitive individual and takes great offense at some of his father's inhumane acts, wondering at times of what his father is capable. He articulates this by constantly needing reassurance, for example, by asking if they are going to eat any fellow humans. The father always says no, but it never stops the boy from asking again.

To cope with his father, the boy allows the father to dominate and play the hero. However, the boy is quite capable of pulling his father up on something, most notably when he persuades his father to feed the old blind man. In fact, occasionally the reader questions how young this boy really is. He seems young in that everything scares him, although this fear no doubt is partially due to his father's paranoia. However, towards the end of the book, the boy offers an increasing amount of input, particularly when he



suggests they should hide and wait to see who is following them. Interestingly when the father looks down on some men burning snakes, he states they are not much older than his own boy, so presumably the boy's complete lack of education in comparison to his father makes him seem younger than what he is.

In many ways, his father holds him back. The boy, unlike his dad, is willing to take a chance with people. He questions his father's decision not to allow him to talk to another boy, and though his father's caution often saves them, the boy never loses his trust in people. When the boy's father dies, he takes a chance with a stranger and finds the family he craves

Wife/Mother

The father often dreams about her. She committed suicide because she could not live on the run.

Man with gas mask

He arrives with a group of friends near where the son and father camp. The father shoots him in the head when he takes a knife to the boy's throat. He is wearing a gas mask, which indicates he was one of the bad men.

The Boy in the Window

The boy comes face to face with someone his own age as he peers out of a window. The father does not allow the boy to go looking for the boy in the window. Nevertheless, the boy often brings him up again and when the father is dying, the son asks him what became of the boy.

Old Man Ely

They pass the old man on the road, and the son persuades his father to feed him. Ely says is 90 and blind but later claims he was lying. When he leaves, he refuses to thank them or wish them luck.

The Thief

He steals their cart, but he is soon found. To punish the thief, the father takes all his clothes. The son persuades his father to take the clothes back, but it is likely the thief dies of cold.



The Bowman

He shoots the father in the leg with his homemade bow, and then the father shoots him with a flare gun.

The Bowman's Wife

She is comforting her husband upstairs when the father runs up to the house.

Man With Rifle

This is the man who saves the boy by taking him in when his father dies. McCarthy describes him as war scarred and probably the perfect companion. The man also has a wife and two children.



Objects/Places

The Binoculars

The father often "glasses" towns to see if they are safe

The Cart

The push all their belonging around in a cart.

The Pistol

They own a pistol to warn off fellow travelers and also for the boy to kill himself.

The Tarp

Shelters them from the rain when they camp out.

The Road

Most of the time they make their way South down a road.

Shoes

Shoes become increasingly important the further they walk and the worse the weather becomes.

The Flare Gun

The father finds the flare gun in a boat.

The Refuge

By a garden shed they find an underground shelter with everything they could possibly need. They decide not to stay because the father thinks it is too visible from the outside.

The Father's House

The first house they visit is the father's house as a child

The Beach

They spend a while on a beach where they find an abandoned boat and have there cart stolen.



Themes

Death

Death pervades over everything in the book. The characters expect to die at any moment, and the father often checks if his son is still breathing. Right from the beginning, the father has a bad cough, and as the weather gets worse, the coughing fits become more frequent, and the father begins to cough up blood. He tries to hide the coughing fits from his son, but at the end, the boy admits that no matter how far away the father went to cough, he always heard him. No doubt, this prompts the boy's constant questioning of whether they are going to die.

It seems strange the father thinks he can keep his son in the dark about dying. Already the son knows his mother shot herself, and the father has even trained his son to do the same in order to prevent a slow, painful death if it comes to that in the future. In addition, the boy sees death every step of the journey. Dead bodies lie at the side of the road, and they even find an infant cooking over the fire.

It is not only people who are dying, but the whole world is falling apart. The sun hardly shines and the moon is never visible at night. In such an environment, there are few animals or fish alive, and the trees in the forest are beginning to fall down. This destruction extends to the morals of the human race. The father claims all men left on the planet are godless, and no one in the story ever contradicts this view. With people more out for themselves, they go so low as cooking humans. Even the father thinks nothing either of killing somebody or leaving them to die. When death finally comes to the father, it is more of a relief than a surprise. Only the father's memories of a better life keeps them struggling through elements as he searches for something that no longer exists. Consequently, his death is a release for both him and his son.

Survival

This book looks at life where each day is a struggle to survive. In fact one of the reasons they continue is not necessarily a promise of a better life, but that around the corner there might be a warmer blanket or a house full of food. Interestingly, when they do find a shelter with everything they could possibly need, they do not stay because the father worries someone may discover them. However, more than anything, this shows that trying to survive the elements is the only thing that shapes their lives and gives it meaning. The father knows they are going to die, but seems to need to be able to say that "at least I tried." It is this attitude that gets them both through some of the worst moments. For example, when it begins to snow, and they are stuck in the mountains with nothing to eat, the father pushes them on, picking up the son when he falls and generally acting as his strength. This survival instinct pays off when on the other side of the mountain they find refuge.



However, the father's instinct to survive develops into an obsession, and in the end contributes to his downfall. He thinks everyone in the world shares this will to live, but without the God he believes in, they will do anything to survive. Consequently, he refuses to talk or help anyone he comes to and sometimes questions if the food they find has been poisoned. In comparison, the boy has few past memories that can blind him to current reality. What he now sees is what he has always known; for him, survival is just a way of life; he is therefore better equipped to deal with the rigors of survival mentally. In fact, the son lets his father dominate and protect him, as the son understands instinctively that that is the only thing keeping his father alive.

Father and Son Relationship

Everything in the novel is a backdrop to the relationship between the father and son. The father is insistent that God put him on the earth to protect his boy and consequently he rarely lets the boy out of his sight. However, as the novel progresses, the father becomes overprotective and problems begin to develop in their relationship. One reason for these problems is that the boy is growing up quickly, and he often seems much older than the age that is implied by the way his father treats him. In fact, the father seems intent on holding the son back for the simple reason that protecting his son is the only meaning he has left in his life.

The situation becomes more complex when the father accepts the boy's increasing maturity. At this point, the father starts to listen to what the boy has to say and even asks for his advice. Yet the boy suddenly seems to crave his father's parental protection again, and he eventually stops offering his opinions. When they arrive at the beach, he asks his father if he can go for a swim. The father warns him it will be cold and says he does not want to have to have go in and fetch him. The boy's ensuing silence suggests that is exactly what they both want and need.



Style

Point of View

McCarthy writes *The Road* in the third person and mostly from the point of view of the father. However, towards the end when the father is dying, McCarthy writes passages through the boy's eyes. Once the father dies, the book's perspective switches to his son. Consequently, the point of view is unreliable and telling the majority of the story through the father's point of view makes their situation, perhaps, bleaker than it may actually be.

The boy is actually quite a positive and emotional person, but with the focus on the father, the boy comes across as overly sensitive and unhelpful to their struggle for survival. In comparison, the father initially comes across as the strong, self-sacrificing figure, battling against the elements. When the father dies, the readers' understanding of the novel and the father's character changes. The boy, immediately meets someone else, who takes him in and his life is much better. When his father is alive, he refuses to let his boy go near anyone. They do make friends with an old man on the boy's insistence, but the father has a real problem with his son holding the old man's hand. Due to the lack of information McCarthy gives the reader, the reader may presume that the problem that affects the world is contagious, hence that the father does not want the boy to touch the old man. However, with the father gone, the reader now sees that it had more to do with the father's fear of losing the boy to someone else. As the man who finds the boy at the end states "you are weirded out," throwing into question the father's mental state. From this perspective, the reader now has to ask how much that the father did was through paranoia and the unconscious desire to hold back his boy.

Setting

Fields and woods surround the road. The boy and father often sleep and build fires in the woods as the trees provide good covering from both the rain and other travelers on the scavenge. However, one feature of the countryside is the lack of wildlife. There are no animals anywhere, and one time at a river, the man remembers a time when it was full of trout, but he knows they are extinct. The reader presumes that this is the case for most animals. Even the trees in the wood are dying, and the father and son have to run away from their camp when the trees begin falling around them.

McCarthy dedicates one section to their travels through the snowy mountains. Again, the biggest feature of the setting is the lack of wildlife.

Occasionally they come to town with remnants of the past. In one garage, the father finds a coke and outside another town, they look at the billboards. Other than that, the towns are usually deserted. Occasionally they come to a house with no people living there, but even these houses have been ransacked for food and clothing. At the



beginning of the book, the father spies a town through his binoculars that has signs of life, but decides not to try his luck. His reasoning becomes apparent when later on they open a locked parlor full of naked people waiting to be eaten. If they are lucky, they find food and blankets in the houses. At one point, they even find a shelter stocked with everything they could possibly need, but they decide not to stay.

Towards the end of the book, they stay on a beach. The sand is full of the remains of cattle and fish, and in the water, the father finds a capsized boat. In the boat, he finds clothes and a flare gun. They have to stay at the beach longer than the father wants because the boy becomes ill and almost dies.

Language and Meaning

The language of the book communicates a very dark world from the beginning. The first paragraph claims that "nights dark beyond darkness" and even the days are gray. This bleak language never lets up as McCarthy even describes the snow as black. This empty dystopian vision is relentless, and even though the sentences are short and often just fragments, they constantly communicate the desperate surroundings. In McCarthy's world the country is not empty, but "barren, silent and godless." There are moments when the depression lifts, but these fleeting occasions only serve to make reality even worse when they return. For example, the father finds a smoked ham and decides to cook it immediately, McCarthy livening the scene with such phrases as "rich and good." However, McCarthy follows this description with the father waking up in the dark silence.

Another feature of the language is McCarthy's use of dialogue. The dialogue takes place almost entirely between the boy and the father and is short, simple and repetitious. For example, every time they stand outside a house, the boy always says he is too scared to enter. On the surface such repetition says very little, but the father's refusal to admit facts to his son and answer the question directly slowly builds a mistrust between them that gets worse the more the son searches for an answer.

Structure

McCarthy does not split the novel into chapters, but instead signals the end of each section with three dots. In total, there are 48 parts and 300 pages. Some of the sections are just a page while others run far longer. Usually the shorter sections communicate a feeling or a moment between the father and son. The longer sections detail when they find a house or meet another person. Sometimes the author even breaks up a relatively unexciting event into three or four sections. For example, when the father searches inside a capsized boat, he divides only a few pages into four sections. This heightens the drama as the reader always expects something around the corner, but that it is not the only effect on this unusual structure. By dividing such a small event into many parts, McCarthy is showing that in this book, time means nothing. A few days' walk can cover one small section because nothing on the way changes; the scenery is the same, and everything around them is dead, and therefore it goes past like a dream. In comparison,



McCarthy breaking up of what is would seem like one part into many, shows the character's excitement at something new.

The narrative itself is very direct and moves forward constantly. Surprisingly considering the novel's subject, McCarthy rarely uses flashback and instead chooses to detail the father and son's relationship. In fact, this is the main point of interest and the one thing that keeps the story moving along. They meet one or two characters along the way but rarely do they stay and chat. Similarly, their surroundings are much the same and only bad weather and illness affects their progress.



Quotes

"Can I ask you something
Yes of course
Are we going to die?
Sometime. Not Now"
P.2

"Just remember the things you put into your head are there forever he said... You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget"
P.8

"Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all."
P.17

"Dark of the invisible moon. The night now only slightly less black. By day the banished sun the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp."
.P.20

"We used to talk about death she said. We don't anymore.
Why is that?
It's because its here. There's nothing left to talk about"
P.34

"Were those the bad guys
Yes they were the bad guys
There's a lot of them those bad guys"
P.55

"They passed a mirror and almost raised his pistol. It's us papa the boy whispered. It's us."

"The faintly lit hatchway lay in the dark like a grave yawning at judgement day in old apocalyptic painting."
P.92

"Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before"
P.5

"He cut into it with his knife. Deep red and salty meat inside. Rich and good. They fried it that night over the fire, thick slices of it, and put the slices to simmer with a tin of



beans. Later he woke in the dark and thought he had heard bulldrums beating somewhere in the low dark hills"

P.11

"They'll rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you can't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I can't. I can't"

P.34

"What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackened on the spit."

P. 117

Topics for Discussion

How does the father and son's relationship change through the book?

Do you think the father is mentally stable?

How does the end of the book change the reader's perspective of the father?

How does the father's memories of the past affect his decision making?

In what ways does the father hold back his son?

Does the father need his son more than the son needs him?

What effect does McCarthy's use of fragmented sentences have on the tone of the story?