

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

The Rise of An Existential Hero in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts in English

By

Swaroop G.C.

Class Roll No: 01/067

Exam Roll No: 480340

T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-48-42238-2007

Department of English

Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara

December 2015

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Department of English

**Supervisor's Recommendation**

This is to certify that Mr. Swaroop G.C. T.U. Regd. No. 6-2-48-42238-2007 has prepared this thesis entitled "The Rise of An Existential Hero in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" under my supervision, following the format as specified by the Research Committee, Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara. I, therefore, forward it to the Research committee for final evaluation.

.....

Pabitra Raj Baral

Teaching Assistant

Department of English

Prithvi Narayan Campus

Pokhara

Date: December 2015

TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

**Approval Sheet**

This thesis entitled “The Rise of An Existential Hero in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” submitted to the Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara by Mr. Swaroop G.C. has been approved by the undersigned members of the Evaluation Committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

-----

-----

Supervisor

-----

-----

Expert

-----

-----

-----

Head

-----

Department of English

Prithvi Narayan Campus,

Pokhara

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Acknowledgements**

I express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Pabitra Raj Baral, Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, for his comments and support in the course of this study. Without his scholarly guidance and encouragement, it would not have been possible to bring my study into the present form.

Similarly, my gratitude goes to Prof. Rajendra Prasad Tiwari, Head, Department of English for his encouragement. My sincere thanks are also due to the Research Committee for giving me permission to write the thesis in the areas of my interest.

December 2015

Swaroop G. C.

## Table of Contents

	<b>Pages</b>
Supervisor's Recommendation	ii
Approval Sheet	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Abstract	vi
Chapter 1: The Rise of McCarthy's Hero	1-7
The Problematic	1
Review of Literature	4
Outline of the Study	7
Chapter 2: Existentialism and the Study of Literature	8-17
The Existentialist Approach	8
The Construction of Individual Existence	12
Chapter 3: The Existential Hero: Striving against Adversity	18-43
The Apocalyptic Setting	18
The Absence of God in Adversity	23
The Existential Quest	26
The Hero's Resilience and Hope	34
Chapter 4: The Mark of Heroism	44-46
Works Cited:	47-50

## **Abstract**

This thesis entitled as “The Rise of An Existential Hero in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” is about existential struggle of an unnamed man to get the boy, his son rescued from apocalyptic situation in America. It deals the challenges that the man confronts and introduces problems for his existence. Existentialism is used as a theoretical tool. It focuses on the man’s continuous effort and his resilience by highlighting how the adversity plays a vital role in enforcing him to act as a hero. The objective of the study, thus, is to show the man as an existential hero and interpreting his life and self directed actions from the existential point of view.

## Chapter 1

### The Rise of McCarthy's Hero

#### The Problematic

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is a grim tale of a journey made by an unnamed man and his son on a post-apocalyptic scenario for several months in America. He faces a problem living there and by virtue of his sheer resilience and actions, he asserts his existence by rescuing his son out of the hostility. The reason of apocalypse is unspecified and the environment looks miserable with the destitute people, dead remains of plants and animals, and the total destruction everywhere. The novel traverses the struggle of father and son to survive in the catastrophic condition. The father sets a mission to save his son from the apocalypse. This study projects how the man struggles against the adversity out of his self-directed choice, accomplishes his mission of saving his son and proves himself an existential hero.

The interesting fact of *The Road* is that the author was visiting El Paso, Texas, with John Francis McCarthy, one of his sons, in 2003 when the initial idea for the novel was born. The author envisioned how the city would look in the future and thought that the environment would be likely to get devastated in years to come. The apocalyptic setting is central to the novel. He has dedicated this novel to his son, John.

The setting is presented with utterly destroyed and devastated environment. Emphasizing the dismal situation, McCarthy narrates, "Night dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one that what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (1). With the cold winter and incinerated wasteland, the man and his boy choose to walk southwards the coast. Andrew Keller Estes describes wasteland, "In *The Road* we are presented with the world as junk heap, the world as scavenger yard" (197) amidst severe winter and scarcity of resources. The post apocalyptic novel portrays the existential catastrophe focusing on

the travails of the survivors. The path of the father and son is not predetermined. They are no longer restrained by cultural norms or societal conventions attached to them as these institutions and their fetters are non-existent. The man and his son have bizarre experiences.

The father and his boy choose to fight against the adversity. During their journey, they encounter “good guys” and “bad guys” as labeled by the boy. The “good guys” refer to those who survive without harming others while “bad guys” (136) refer to those who practice cannibalism to survive. They choose to starve out of hunger rather than to kill others for the food. The boy wishes to help those needy whom they meet in the journey but his father loathes to do so. This phenomenon indicates the innocence of the child which contrasts with the skeptic mentality of the man. The man is aware of the vile intention of the encounters. So, he ignores his son’s intention to help other survivors on the trail. His duty is to protect his son from the hardship. He acts as a shield to save his son from the unfavorable surrounding, “the chary dawn, the cold illucid world” (123). He grows sicker as the novel progresses. He does not get any help from other survivors, not even from his wife. Eventually, he dies at the end because of his persistent cough and deteriorating health. Despite his death, he finally fulfills his mission as his son is rescued by a family “good guys”.

The man is a true hero because he displays the characteristics such as fortitude, bravery and courage. As a brave father, he turns around the fortune and fate with sheer resilience and indomitable courage. His heroism helps his son get the second life. The journey in aftermath of post-apocalypse reflects upon the man’s struggles against the adversity. The post-apocalyptic setting is bleak and the adversity works as a catalyst to make him emerge as a hero. He undertakes actions rather than waiting for the things to happen in his life. He faces an incident where his wife commits suicide to avoid the sinister. She expresses death as her lover and accuses the



man for choosing life over death, "I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot" (58). After losing his wife, the responsibility to look after his son falls in his shoulder. In order to accomplish this mission, he rises from a normal man to a redemptive figure. Ultimately, as a hero he completes his mission by helping his son to be rescued.

McCarthy's novel depicts the theme of alienation, solitude, despair, angst and psychological aspects of a person in relation with the societal conventions, norms, and values by promoting the essence of humanity. The struggle of the man and his son without losing moral dignity is in fact the intrinsic projection of the novel. The novel deals with the binary opposition such as good versus evil highlighting the most important facet of life. The universal humanity has been torn to shreds because of the red reality of the blood-cults and people's indulgence in cannibalism "The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh" (79). People turn into cannibals due to scarcity of food but the father and the son never lose moral dignity by killing others for food. The novel seeks to display the struggle of the man and his individual morality against the societal conventions.

The man is physically weak and alienated but due to his paternal love, hope and effort, he is able to quench his inner quest. His health gets worst with the unfavorable circumstances "He coughed all the time and the boy watched him spitting blood" (292). The boy is hopeless with his father's deteriorating situation but the man retorts the possibility of existence of self even in the world, which is devoid of meaning. In struggling for existence he exerts his own consciousness and his own values. His struggle appears to be pointless but he chooses to transgress the societal conventions. He even kills an attacker with a gun to avoid his son get killed from the cannibal (68). Thus, it marks his heroism as he claims his existence by enjoying his individual freedom. He chooses to save his son and proves his existence. This is self-

directed choice and responsibility for self. He bravely accepts the abnormality and absurdity of life and struggles against the adversity.

This study particularly focuses on the challenges and the absurdity the man confronts. It highlights the strategies employed by him to overcome the adversity. His resilience as a prime factor to conquer his existential motive is a matter of discussion in the study. The study not only focuses on his psychological aspect and his self-directed actions but also highlights how the adversity and absurdity play a vital role in enforcing him to act as a hero. It aims in showing him as an existential hero and interpreting his life and actions from the existential point of view.

### **Review of Literature**

McCarthy's *The Road* has been a subject of fascination for readers and critics since its publication. *The Times* has ranked the novel on its list of the hundred best fiction and non-fiction books of the last ten years. The author has been increasingly mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature for the novel. Oprah Winfrey, a media mogul, has selected this novel in her book club in 2007. Many critics and reviewers have interpreted this work from various angles.

Alan Warner observes the trust and filial love between the man and the boy in the abandoning circumstances by emphasizing on the existential setting:

*The Road* is a novel of transforming power and formal risk.

Abandoning gruff but profound male camaraderie, McCarthy instead sounds the limits of imaginable love and despair between a diligent father and his timid young son, "each other's world entire". The initial experience of the novel is sobering and oppressive, its final effect is emotionally shattering. (4)

Warner claims that the post-apocalyptic scenario provides an opportunity for the man to showcase his paternal love and diligence to overcome the adversity. He only talks

of emotional attributes and his study remains incomplete without the sufficient discussion of the existential struggle the hero projects and makes his son tackle the apocalyptic scene.

According to Paul Sheehan, the novel provides the picture of the American society, which has degraded rapidly with the lack of empathy and of communal bonding among people. Presenting the reality of American society, he states, “A novel that redescribes American achievement as so much cultural and industrial detritus, and exposes communal bonds as at best a cover for naked self-interest, nevertheless brought to the fore some tendentious and rarefied commentaries” (90). Sheehan has interpreted the novel from the social point of view and seeks for the communal bonding among individuals. He has presented the stark reality of the American society. He has discussed the cultural degradation and malfunction of American society but has not clearly observed the existential quest underlined in it.

John Cant analyzes the literary figures and techniques that McCarthy has devised in his novel. He points out that the significant number of nouns and lack of verbs and pronouns in the novel are for clarity, but not for the flow of the events. Talking about the use of paragraph, description of place and landscape, Cant states:

The Road . . . consists of a continuous sequence of discrete paragraphs, some only a few lines in length, none occupying much more than a single page. There are no chapters; paragraphs are separated by space that would occupy their lines of text. (McCarthy's). His description of place and landscape are characteristically eidetic, an effect that is produced by sentences that are rich in nouns but devoid of verbs. (267)

Cant studies only the stylistics and literary techniques but ignores the thematic concern of the novel based on the existential foundation.

Ron Charles states that McCarthy's work has given a new impetus to the Western novels depicting existential features such as bloodbath, violence and apocalypse in his work:

In Cormac McCarthy's new novel, *The Road*, the bloodbath is finally complete. The violence that animated his great Western novels has been superseded by a flash of nuclear annihilation, which also blasts away some of what we expect from the reclusive author's work. With this apocalyptic tale, McCarthy has moved into the allegorical realm of Samuel Beckett and José Saramago and, weirdly, George Romero. (1)

Charles contrasts the work of McCarthy with the work of Samuel Beckett and José Saramago. Like Saramago's writing style, he also writes the entire conversation in one long sentence. This style is effective in telling a story orally. Charles claims that McCarthy has talked about the history and tradition of Western literature related to apocalypse but has not mentioned man's struggle to claim his existence in the face of apocalypse.

Terry Gifford gives an eco-critical reading to the novel. He focuses on the awareness of environmental crisis raised by McCarthy. Pondering over the importance of survival of the species sustainably, Gifford states, "The community of contemporary readers of *The Road* share an awareness of environmental crisis, a strong sense of the possible death of nature and an appreciation of the importance to ask, not so much how we got here, but what are going to be the keys to the survival of our species" (11). Gifford has discussed how the nature has been destroyed and what are the impacts of it on the species. But, he has left the question of existential quest of the man in relation with the environment unanswered.

Thus, various critics have interpreted the novel from different perspectives. Some of them have interpreted from the eco-critical, socio-realism and stylistics point

of view. Some critics have discussed the existential setting but have not seriously highlighted the heroic action performed by the man. Also, some critics claim that love between the father and the son is a prime factor for their survival in the apocalypse but their critical analysis remains incomplete without mentioning the resilience and continuous effort of the man. But, none of the critics have viewed the man as an existential hero. The present researcher finds this topic new, fresh and interesting to study.

### **Outline of the Study**

This study has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents the background to the topic, literature reviews and a brief outline of the entire thesis. The second chapter is the theoretical overview of existentialism and the discussion of its issues. The third chapter provides the textual analysis, which illustrates how the man by his sheer resilience and continuous effort could save his son from apocalypse. The fourth chapter concludes the entire study restating the man's act as an undefeated hero.

During the course of study, *The Road* has been used as a primary source of information. Other library sources like reference books, journals and criticisms have been studied as the secondary sources. Web and online sources of information have also been consulted. Suggestions from teachers and concerned experts have also been taken into consideration.

Since the research study is based on the existential quest of the man, the following chapter presents an overview of theoretical framework of existentialism.

## Chapter 2

### Existentialism and the Study of Literature

#### The Existentialist Approach

Existentialism is the twentieth century philosophical movement devoted to the interpretation of human existence in the world. The term “existence” is derived from the Latin word “ex” which means “out” and “stare” “to stand”. It seeks for the existence of an individual by emphasizing universal subjectivity over objectivity. It focuses on the individual existence, freedom and choice despite living in an irrational world. It repudiates the adequacy of any ethics, laws and belief that is universal explanation. It eventually promotes in finding self and the meaning of life by exercising free will, choice and personal responsibility. Rejecting the traditional philosophies such as rationalism, empiricism and positivism that seek to unravel the universal meaning of human life, it celebrates individual decision, and free will that has meaning to individuals rather than what is rational.

To define existentialism by means of a set of philosophical formulas could be misleading. The basic tenet of existentialism is that individuals should create their identity and meaning of life by using their own consciousness. Because of the diversity of interacted facets of existentialism, no single strict definition is viable. Highlighting individual choice and reevaluation of the established values, Sebastian Gardner defines existentialism:

In the broad sense in which the term is usually employed, existentialism denotes a movement of thought whereby established values, and the world-pictures associated with them, are subjected to radical, skeptical revaluation and the individual, thrown back on himself as final resource, seeks to avoid nihilism by extrapolating from his bare self-awareness a normative orientation. (6)

Individuals create themselves by their own moral actions. The consciousness should be used for the reevaluation of preconceived notions of society. Thus, with the use of self-directed choice, individuals remain in the stage of becoming rather than in the state of being.

Tracing the root of existentialism, its foundation is based on the philosophical investigation of finding the meaning and the significance of life or existence of human beings. Although there is a huge number of a proposed answer to the question of existence, Socrates is accredited to have propounded the outset of existentialism for the very first time by his famous dictum “Know thyself” (*New Encyclopedia* 612). Later, Saint Augustine paves the way to existentialism by claiming that individuals must not go outside but should seek in themselves in the quest of truth; for it is within themselves that truth abides. Similarly, Blaise Pascal advocates the struggle of an individual against the meaninglessness of life and the use of diversion to escape from boredom. In the contemporary era of Pascal, John Locke vocalizes the individual autonomy and self-determination, but in positive pursuit of liberalism in individualism rather than in response to an existentialist experience. Rene Descartes gives a new turn to philosophy by his dictum that glorifies the rational thinking of human, “cogito ergo sum” meaning, “I think, therefore I am” (qtd. in Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* 23). It celebrates the ability to form thoughts and exercise to claim the existence of self.

Existentialism in its currently recognized form is inspired by the nineteenth century philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka. The response against William Hegel and Arthur Schopenhauer has a crucial impact on the growth of existentialism movement. During the eighteenth century, reason and nature were given more value that is objectivity was more emphasized leading to the

industrial boom. To counteract against this deteriorating situation of human beings, existentialism came into light that celebrates the supremacy of human individuality. Dostoevsky and Kafka introduce existentialist themes in literature. Heidegger makes an analysis on the mode of existence of individual human beings, authenticity and anxiety in the modern era.

Nietzsche emphasizes other subjective human experience and rejects the existence of God by claiming, "God is dead." He believes that in the absence of God, every individual is provided an opportunity to exercise his/her own will "Man no longer obeys God but has the opportunity to create his own values, a morality without supernatural sanctions" (qtd. in Lewy 45).

Existentialism is devoted to the interpretation of human existence. It claims that human being is an isolated existent into an alien world. Its prominence came after the great world wars. The world wars promoted despair, alienation, void and segregated individuals from the traditional established order. At the onset of world wars, human beings realized that individuals should create their own values as the traditional values are revised.

John K. Ryan opines that people are free to make their choices. He stresses on concrete individual existence. Pointing out how absurdity rises in individuals after the realization of the existence in meaningless universe, Ryan asserts:

Man is free and responsible, but he is responsible only to himself. As with Nietzsche, man creates moral values. Besides being free, man is finite and contingent being, existing in a world that is devoid of purposes by Camus doctrine of The Absurd. Absurdity or contradiction arises from the chaos between hopes, desire and meaningless universe into which man has been thrown. (639)

Every individual is free to choose. The problem of an individual is central to



existentialism. Truth is subjective. What is true for someone may be false to another as truth is relative. It opposes the traditional mind-set, which claims that truth is objective and universal. So, human beings do not have fixed nature that determines their choices.

Existentialist thinkers are divided into Atheistic existentialists and Christian existentialists. The atheistic existentialists are the ones who reject religious belief, transcendental or metaphysical relation with philosophical existentialism thought process. So they do not appeal to God or supernatural salvations to save from existentialist anguish. Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simon De Beauvoir, Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche are the atheist thinkers who disregard the existence of God and claim that it is the individuals who should struggle to define their existence. Similarly, theistic group includes Kierkegaard, Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel who believe that the existential despair of individual leads to a knowledge or understating of God's infinite existence. They also claim that individual is viewed as a necessary synthesis of finite and infinite elements. The atheist thinkers consider that individuals encounter despair when they do not realize the infinite characteristics of God.

Camus holds a belief that when an individual's desire for sequential life patterns collides with the real world's lack of order, it results into absurdity, "Absurdity involves ridiculous incongruity, extreme irrationality, a striking disharmony or discrepancy between states of affairs, and unrealistic pretension" (qtd. in Belliotti 51). So, his principal theme is the absurdity of human existence. Human beings are, therefore, the subject in a disoriented and absurd world, in which meaning is not provided by natural order, but rather can be created through their sole action and their interpretations.

Sisyphus is condemned to roll a rock up a hill, only to have it roll to the

bottom again each time to exemplify the pointlessness of existence, but shows the significance and purpose in his task by justifying the continuity of life. Camus asserts:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always find one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe hence for the without a muster seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of the night -filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (70)

Despite the meaningless existence, Sisyphus keeps on struggling against the absurdity. The main point is to keep on living with no possibility of external justification. Thus, Sisyphus exemplifies the act of struggle against the absurdities to claim his existence.

### **The Construction of Individual Existence**

The core aspect of existentialism is the construction of individual existence. Every individual is entitled to practice self-directed choices. It is the very choice of an individual that makes his/her identity and which separates from one individual to other. Jean Paul Sartre speaks for the individuality and self-directed choices. He claims that 'Existence precedes essence' which means that acting, free will or conscious act "existence" is prior to essence such as preconceived ideas, labels or societal conventions. He highlights on the actions of an individual to create one's identity, "Each man is a blank slate on which he will, by his actions, come to define his own being" (qtd. in Willey 152). He points out the fact that human beings, by using their own consciousness, should create their own values and determine a meaning to their life by rejecting stereotypical roles that is imposed by the society.

Jostein Gaarder remarks that one must create one's own nature of essence

because it is not fixed in advance. Commenting on how individuals are condemned to decide the life they choose to live, Gaarder states:

Since man has no such eternal nature to fall back on. It is therefore useless to search for the meaning of life in general. We are condemned to improvise. We are like actors dragged onto the stage without having learned our lines; with no script and no prompter to whisper stage directions to us we must decide for ourselves how to live. (457)

One should create one's essence by opting the kind of life one wishes to live. Since there is no God as such one has to use self-consciousness for existence rather than molding the self into the preconceived modalities of society. Thus, lack of innate nature provides every individual a chance to use consciousness to find meaning of life.

Sartre posits the idea that the identity of any person or essence should not be examined by comparing with other person as every individual has a different meaning of his life. The action performed by every individual defines the meaning of life. As humans are hurled into the world, without the assistance of God or divinity, one has to claim one's existence. One must choose and act from within whatever situation prevails. Sartre believes, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes himself" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 28). Thus, the individual is free to choose and define existence by the meaning he or she gives to himself or herself.

Individuals are condemned to choose their destiny without the divine intervention. The philosophers Gunnar Skirbekk and Nils Gillje have compared human lives with the situation when an individual has to make a performance without a script. They affirm that a person can be a hero or villain depending upon the activity he/she chooses:

We are like actors who suddenly find themselves on stage in the

middle of a performance, but without having a script, without knowing the name of the play or what role they are playing, without knowing what to do or say- yes, without even knowing whether the play has an author at all- whether it is serious or a farce. We must personally make a decision, to be something or other- a villain or a hero, ridiculous or tragic. (444)

Human beings exist in the world devoid of purpose and with their action, they give meaning of their existence. So, each individual is a blank paper and by the action of writing by using self-consciousness one defines one's being.

An individual is the creator of his or her own destiny. Every time one proves that one exists no matter what the circumstances prevail. Sartre holds that one's life is measured by the choices one makes: "Man presents himself as a choice to be made" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 60). He argues that every individual's existence is not predetermined, "Man is defined as the choices he must make. Very well, Above all else, he exists in the present moment, and beyond natural determinism; he does not define himself prior to his existence, but does so according to his individual present" (*Existentialism is Humanism* 59). There's no predetermined destination of an individual as such. So, one has to claim existence with self-directed actions.

Sartre argues that the individual consciousness is responsible for all the choices that one makes. The consequences pertaining to the individual action is liable to opting to choose. He claims that to deny the responsibility is bad faith. Individuals are condemned to be responsible for their freedom of choices as they are the masters of their choices and freedom. Emphasizing the individual freedom, he asserts:

Existentialism shows the connection between the absolute character of free involvement, by virtue of which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of mankind, an involvement always comprehensible in

any age whatsoever and by and by any person whoever, and the  
relativeness of cultural ensemble which may result from such a choice.

*(Existentialism and Human Emotions 40)*

It is the very action of human beings that they create their individual identity. Sartre believes in the essential freedom of individuals as free beings and the people as responsible for all the elements of themselves by the use of their actions and consciousness.

Harry J. Gensler et al. opine that without the help of God, one has to find the essence of life. They forward that the action a person chooses defines the meaning of life:

It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. (127)

Human beings do not possess any inherent identity or values. So, one should not mere live but should strive to exist. Since there is no God to guide the human nature, every individual should define self through the act of living.

Existentialists focus on the phenomenon such as boredom or anxiety. When a person realizes self-consciousness, it grows dissatisfaction to the prevailing tradition and values of the society. The dissatisfaction leads to boredom. Stephen Priest explains that when an individual disguises to the traditional mindset rather than realizing the independent self-identities, a bad faith is introduced in life:

The reality of our freedom is so unbearable that we refuse to face it.

Instead of realizing our identities as free conscious subjects we pretend

to ourselves that we are mechanistic, determined object. Refusing to freely make ourselves what we are, we masquerade as fixed essences by the adoption of hypocritical social roles and invert values system. This denial of freedom is called Sartre's 'bad faith.' (*Jean- Paul Sartre: Basic Writings* 204)

An individual is free to choose essence and accepting the fixed essence leads to bad faith. Sartre opines that a bad faith involves in involvement of intentional deceit of others, or self-deception.

Anxiety escalates when human beings become aware that their destinations are not predetermined. The void of undetermined future has to be fulfilled by a person by making independent choices and should be responsible for whatever consequences befalls. Sartre believes that human beings try to negate anxiety by using bad faith, "Bad faith is an attempt to flee from our responsibility" (qtd. in Catalano 89). The free authentic human beings must be involved in own actions and should be responsible for creating his/her own being.

Identity is one of the important issues in existentialism. It is a multidimensional word. In psychology and sociology, it is a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations (such as national identity and cultural identity). It may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. It is not inherited but is made by an individual with the action that one performs. Every individual is set free to define identity. One must bear the responsibilities that come automatically with the actions one performs.

Sartre opines that every person is free to choose their his/her own identity and the destination that is not inherited and predetermined, "Since existentialism defines man in terms of action ... Since man's destiny is within himself and that action is the

only thing that enable a man to live” (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 35-36).

The struggle that a person does to claim identity, thus, defines being. As the living animals breathe and live, but they do not exist with the distinctive identity whereas every person can live existentially by achieving the distinctive identity. One has to struggle to achieve identity as it is not something that a person gets easily. The tireless effort of an individual to create his/her identity helps a person to live a life with an existential meaning.

Identity is associated with an individual’s beliefs, values and the ways of perceiving the world. It is the fact that in life, one commits oneself, draws one’s own portrait that is distinct with the other person. It is also constructed by the use of self-consciousness and individual morality. The illusion and imagination of self is mere a self-deception. It is the act that defines oneself. Sartre posits, “I am responsible for everything, in fact except my very responsible for everything, in fact except my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being. Therefore, everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible” (*Being and Nothingness* 574). Sartre claims also that human choice is subjective rather than objective. In making one’s own choices, one is free and is completely responsible for one’s choices. Apart from that, every individual is responsible for the very desire to flee from responsibilities.

The existential hero is the one who disregards the established norms and follows the path by exercising self-will. This is the central issue to McCarthy’s *The Road*. In other words, the novel is a dramatization of existential quest and fulfillment. The following chapter offers the discussion and the analysis of the man’s struggle to claim his existence while saving his son from apocalypse.

## Chapter 3

### The Existential Hero: Striving against Adversity

#### The Apocalyptic Setting

The apocalyptic setting is the heart of McCarthy's *The Road*. The novel is based on the journey of a man and the boy, his son, in the aftermath of post-apocalyptic condition in America. The man and his son are forced to face the devastating circumstances. The linear survival story unfolds with the encounter of man and his son with hordes, thieves, scavengers and cannibalistic tribes. The situation is doom and grim as the apocalypse plays an intrinsic role in defining the traits of the man and his son during their journey.

The man and his son keep on treading towards south to the coast. The situation is quite bleak. With their shopping cart and backpacks, which carry most of their necessary belongings, they walk in the desolated land. On the road, they encounter abandoned gas station, destroyed houses and dead remnants everywhere. The land is brutal and barren "cauterized terrain" (13). The horrible scenario is described as: "He shifted the pack higher on his shoulders and looked out over the wasted country. The road was empty. Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds" (4). It shows the dreadful scene that the man and his son are facing. Robert C. Clark describes the picture as dismal aftermath of post-apocalyptic situation, "McCarthy's desolate, burned out setting in *The Road* is also a world destroyed by combat" (146). Thus, the setting of the novel depicts the physical agnostic crisis of man.

The father and the son's struggle in the grim scenario gives the impression of the apocalyptic setting. The road is empty because most of the people are dead and vehicles are also not in the road. Janet Maslin hints to the horrid situation of post-apocalyptic world that the father and the son face. Reflecting upon the devastating



environment, she notes: “In *The Road* a boy and his father lurch across the cold, wretched, wet, corpse-strewn, ashen landscape of a post-apocalyptic world” (1). The environment escalates the troublesome period that the father and his son are facing. In the face of the cold weather and the wrecked environment, the man and the boy keep on struggling for existence.

The devastation is portrayed with the description of the havoc in the environment. The gray river gives the impression that it is polluted with the trashes and dead remnants thrown into it. Gray color in the river is due to the extensive amount of charcoal found in it. Everything in the nature is dead “Dust and ash everywhere” (5) which is clear evidence that the apocalypse has led to dire consequences. Kenneth Lincoln believes that the father and his son are forced to rely on their companionship in the wasteland because they have no privilege to trust other individuals. He posits, “There’s nobody left besides them in this wasteland, anybody is nobody” (166). The wasteland reveals the disaster that the man and his son are going through. Actually, they have no company with them in such adversity. Anyone that they meet up on their way are enemies because everyone cares for himself/herself only.

During the journey, the father and his son encounter charred landscapes, desolated and abandoned. The whole city stands in the grayness with ashes and remains of charcoals. Rotten items, trashes, and debris everywhere have horrified man and his son. But they choose to neglect it and march forward. Observing the bleak atmosphere, the man literally feels the idea of hell. The narrator describes:

Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened light poles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands

stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay  
abandoned. (6)

The discoveries of charred and limbless trunks of trees, ashes are some of the evidences of petrifying effect of apocalypse. The dreadful scenario is bitter reality for the man.

The sense of alienation prevails in the psychology of the man with the horrifying condition in front of him. He is not only alienated from society but also from the cosmos of living things. Despite the reality being disheartening, the father and the son keep on trekking without any definite destination. Everything is abandoned. To add to their misery, the month is December. Dark is implacable “autistic dark” (14). This shows the grim face of catastrophe. The bitter coldness “sustained by breath, trembling and brief” (10) further escalates their trouble. With a single blanket, poor meal and no place to sleep, the father encourages his son to struggle against the devastation. They starve of hunger as every edible thing is dispersed, rotten and abandoned. Inhumane practices and human degeneration prevail in their journey due to unusual circumstances and now once friends become foes. So, the man and his son depict the societal alienation that they are forced to face.

Warner remarks that the devastation is creating a miserable condition for the man and his son. Demonstrating the toll of apocalypse in the lives of survivors, he states:

The centre of the world is sickened. Earthquakes shunt, fire storms smear a “cauterised terrain”, the ash-filled air requires slipshod veils to cover the mouth. Nature revolts. The ruined world is long plundered, with canned food and good shoes the ultimate aspiration. Almost all have plunged into complete Conradian savagery: murdering convoys of road agents, marauders and “bloodcults” plunder these wastes. (6)

The depiction of horrible scene implies the hardship the man and his son undergo.

The ruined world is the bitter reality for the survivors.

There is no sign of life in the nature. The situation is so dismal that the land looks barren, lifeless and living things behave out of utter dismay, “Barren, silent, godless” (2). The situation implicates the lifeless environment. The man and his son encounter only the remnant of dead corpses, ashes and charcoal. The misery is further escalated when the remaining people turn into cannibals “The black skin stretched upon the bones and their faces split and shrunken on their skulls. Like victims of some ghastly envacuuming” (204). With the scarcity of food, people trick and kill other people for their food. The toll of apocalypse is so immense that there are instances where they encounter near death experiences. People turn into savages to cope with the catastrophe. The survivors behave as animals by rejecting the essence of humanity.

The father whole-heartedly accepts the dire situation and bravely faces it. He also cajoles his son to follow him to struggle against the animosity. They keep on living by scavenging their food and camping. The author permeates the death and desolation:

The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk, their faces of boiled sheeting, the yellowed paling of their teeth. They were discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen. (23)

The people trick and trap other people in padlock and kill them for food. The human degeneration is prevailed. Accidentally one-day, the father and his son encounter padlock that is covered with the skin of dead humans hanged on the wall. It gives a psychological distress to the boy.

McCarthy further delineates the journey as a horrid and abhor with as the father encounters bunch of dead people half immolate and smoking in their clothes. He sees a small fire burning in the floor and checks the box lay in the floor but hurriedly masks his son's eyes with his hands. The narrator describes the despicable situation in which the man and his boy are forced to face, "Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotted clothes" (48). The vivid description of the particular incident gives a poignant effect to the father. The physical atrocities and the psychological damnation attack the man at the same time. Having seen "a corpse in a doorway dried to leather" (11) and immolated person the father is worried about the son's psychological torture. But, at the same time, he wants his son to face the grim reality with gallantry.

The apocalyptic setting highlights the social malfunction and crisis in humanity. Emily Lane observes the apocalyptic setting in the novel that epitomizes the social defunct and crisis in the human nature. Highlighting the dark aspects of society and the human behavior, she asserts, "McCarthy represents society in crisis mode. Readers glimpse the darkest corners of human nature, such as selfishness and violence, as well as the darkest social practices, such as slavery and gangs, that bubble to the surface in *The Road's* post-apocalyptic scenario" (2). The apocalypse marks the degradation of human nature and the society by promoting slavery and cannibalism.

The apocalyptic setting plays a pivotal role in man's life to showcase his mental strength. The father and his son are forced to struggle in the devastation. Despite the adversity he does not get distressed and lose hope. In contrast, the father takes adversity as an opportunity to assert his existence. With the encounter of catastrophe, he does not get bogged down. He feels his fatherhood is under question, so he performs every activity just to protect his son. In the novel, the man personifies his fatherhood while the apocalyptic setting acts as a catalyst to surface out his actual

character. Had not the apocalypse been in the story line, the father's heroism would have been subdued with the worldly responsibilities. Thus, apocalypse is in fact the soul of the novel.

### **The Absence of God in Adversity**

In McCarthy's *The Road*, the man is forced to lead a life in utterly meaningless circumstances. He raises questions against the divinity and the essence of God. He vehemently attacks the spiritual attributes and suspects the existence of God. As the scenario is morbid, his questions suggest his frustration towards God. He is in dilemma and doubts the existence of God because he could not feel it.

Due to the injection of adverse circumstances in the father and his son's life, the father pensively doubts the omnipresence of God. He challenges the supremacy of God. During his gruesome days, with angry tone, he questions God, "Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul?" (10). The man directs the rage and frustration towards God. He believes that there is no God because he thinks that had there been God, God would not definitely have let his children be doomed in catastrophe. The soul here is associated with the compassion and love. With the cruelty in the environment, he feels that the people have turned into soulless creatures: "On this road there are no godspoke men" (32). Furthermore, he accuses that God has no heart and no soul because if He had, the divinity surely would not have let humanity remain in the frail position.

The man believes that one has to claim existence without the divine intervention or some external forces. He doubts God for his non-availability and suspects the attribute of omnipresence. First, he suspects if there is God but as the reality gets even much worse, he gets frustrated and goes against God. The atheists view that people create imaginary stories or Gods so that they will be able to fill up

the void of reality. He also talks of his dream in an attempt to fill up the void of his grim reality. The father and the son are living in hell and the threat of vindictive God of eternal damnation holds no ground. So he keeps on challenging the parameter of God and His divinity.

The father considers that there is no God to save humanity from the dreadful reality. So, he challenges God and opts to struggle without the expectation of divine intervention. There are several instances when he suspects the fundamentals of God. He questions the existence of a higher power and of an afterlife. One day, he sarcastically presents his idea about the God as he questions, “Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledger book? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground” (209). The remarks are the words of a person who is suffering from frustration and eternal damnation. He rejects the idea that God from heaven watches humans. For him, the idea of vice and virtue does not hold the truth.

The man’s experiences are explicitly shown by giving a proper attention to his mindset against God. The focal point remains in the act of the father and his son being able to rescue them without the divine intervention. The concept that justifies without the visible heaven or hell where morality exists, the humanity is left to a complete freedom in such situation. Similarly, the man also faces the sense of complete freedom. Mandy Chi Man Lo considers that in the novel there will be no longer restriction of cultural, moral values, ethics as these institutions and their fetters are non-existent. Portraying the human behavior in the absence of controlled authority, he states, “The absence of divine and human governance in the post-apocalyptic land is portrayed as the situation of godlessness in the sense that human behavior is no longer governed or constrained by any external authoritative forces” (73-74). The absence of divinity in apocalypse allows single individuals in the novel a freedom to exercise

their independent will.

Due to the extreme adversity, the father believes that when the humanity is frail, the existence of God and his attributes are null. Christianity holds that every individual is born sinner. So for salvation one has to go through penance. It is also believed that God watches every individual and judges them according to the action of vice and virtue. Christians believe that God's judgment is well documented in His account book. In contrast, the man holds that there is no God as such and His ledger book, in which the human actions are supposed to be judged, never exists. He believes that humanity is lying dead in the ground, so purgation and reward is just a big hoax. The book refers to Bible and Father refer to God, which according to him are just dead and non-existent.

One day on a trip, the father and the son encounter a filthy old man named Ely. Ely claims to be ninety years of age. Actually, he is lying to guile the attackers. They camp and settle down for a night. The old man seems agitated and exhausted due to severe circumstances. The son gives some meal to the old man. The man and Ely start talking about the God and his existence. As God abandons both of them, they suffer from the sense of alienation. Ely rejects the notion of God and states that every individual is alone and abandoned, with no God or pre-existing essence, values or moral system.

Ely doubts the existence of the God and divinity. Revealing the existential angst, he condemns, "Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave" (180). He explains that without intention humans are hurled into this catastrophe. People do not only not want to stay but also can-not run away from the situation. He further asserts "There is no God and we are his prophets" (181). Ely believes that God does not exist so every individual is left in the world with abandonment and with a discernible sense of morality to conduct himself or herself ethically as a prophet without expecting

reward or punishment from God. He affirms that individuals are born without their consent so the existence of God is worthless. Ely supports the idea that if there were God, humans would be reduced to a mere artifact of God.

Erik J. Wielenberg contends that people who have survived in the devastation is through their actions rather than the divine support. Depicting the absence of God in adversity, he comments, “This old man has survived not through divine assistance but rather through random chance; he and all the other survivors of the catastrophe are prophets of atheism, bearing witness to the absence of God from the universe” (2). The God’s prophets in the novel hint towards atheism or the absence of God. Ely survives without the divine intervention but rather by his strong will and his action which culminates the absence of God.

To Ely, the world is so indifferent to humans in the prevalent scenario of the adversity that humans need to honestly confront the reality. Here, the reality is null existence of God or supreme power. He says, “When we’re all gone at last then there’ll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He’ll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to” (184). Ely confronts that God is made by the mere imagination of people.

Since the apocalypse has created a heavy toll on the remaining people on the earth, Lincoln postulates that God cannot prove his existence, “Gods cannot fare where men can’t live” (171). It clarifies that with the absence of human in the world, the existence of God is also under threat. The relation between God and human is interpreted in such a way that it is based on relativity.

### **The Existential Quest**

In the novel, McCarthy presents an unnamed man, the father as an existential hero. He lives in a world, which is full of fragmentation, absurdity and frustration. He does everything to protect his son. Acting as a savior he exhibits resilience and



indomitable courage. Despite the unfavorable situation, he does not give up but further consolidates his only aim of saving the son. This achievement, he believes, will give meaning to his life. As his choices are independent, he prepares himself to struggle against adversity for mental and physical survival.

The man acts according to his personal decision and choices. He exercises his free will without taking help of preconceived ideas, ethics, laws or tradition. He struggles against the societal conventions to affirm his own existential meaning to his act. His act is autonomous and directed towards the well being of the boy.

The man believes in self-morality and makes his independent choices. During the journey, he encounters many instances where he opts for self-morality over societal conventions. The concept of universal humanity has been torn to shreds by the stark reality of the blood-cults as the remaining survivors indulge in cannibalism and degenerate themselves into the act of animalistic behavior. However, the innocent son is subjected to face the lack of historic existence, which is entirely limited only to the aftermath of post-apocalyptic happening because the boy is born after the apocalypse. The boy does not have the idea of environment before the apocalyptic period. The difference between normal and abnormal environment is unknown for the little kid. Also, he is not able to trace out the facets of humanity. He is ignorant to the malfunction of the society so, he cannot clearly dissect the situation that he and his father are facing.

One day the man encounters a truck driver. After exchanging help, suddenly the driver grabs the neck of the boy and threatens to kill him up. To protest the attacker, the man chooses the violent means. He promptly shoots the driver up on the head, killing him instantly. The murder is narrated as:

He dove and grabbed the boy and rolled and came up holding him against his chest with the knife at his throat. The man had already

dropped to the ground and he swung with him and leveled the pistol and fired from two-handed position balanced on both knees at a distance of six feet. The man fell back instantly and lay with blood bubbling from the hole in his forehead. (68)

The man does not kill the driver for malice or for food but to protect his son. His act of murder suggests his priority of moral obligation over societal obligations. His wariness towards other, killing other can be justified as provided only option to him to safeguard his son from ravages.

The man holds the belief that he has to save his son's life. He does not only value his son's life but also values the belief in providing a life force. Thomas H. Schaub presents the man as a person who believes in giving continuity to a life force. Projecting on the man's self-belief in prolonging his son's life, Schaub states, "In sustaining his son's breath, he sustains not only his own capacity for life but for some belief in life's continuance, in the value of life" (158). The man wishes for the continuance of his son's life with a hidden belief in a life force mechanism.

An individual is responsible for making oneself into the essence, of lifting self above the mere level of existence. The man believes that people are not born with the fixed nature. So he seeks for the meaning of existence. His moral duty is to evade his son from the attacker no matter what the societal norms, inhumane or societal conventions rose against him, and he chooses to do the things that guarantee his son's survival. He even agrees to kill other person if it works for his son's life. Simply, he does not follow the social parameter imposed upon him by the society, as the act of killing is heinous from the social perspective.

The father stands between his son's death and life. He struggles against the attackers and cannibals in order to justify his responsibility towards his son. His self-directed choices include killing of other people not for food but to protect the boy

from them. He does not care if his morality does not fit into the social standards. In fact, he is a murderer but he is not apologetic for what he is doing because he values his own individual morality over societal norms and values.

The boy is naive and innocent but the father is skeptic and is wary of the potential danger. As they tread their way, they see a man with burnt face who is struck by lightning and looks exhausted. The boy innocently asks his father to help man:

What is wrong with the man?

He's been struck by lightning.

Cant we help him? Papa?

No. We cant help him.

The boy kept pulling at his coat. Papa? he said

Stop it.

Cant we help him Papa?

No. We cant help him. There's nothing to be done for him (51)

The father is psychologically distraught and whenever he encounters other people, he sees them as a potential enemy. So, he turns down the offer to help victim and exerts his individual morality, which claims son's life is more important than the victim's.

The father and his son disagree with different matters. They have a moral conflict between them but the man does everything that he wishes for. He feels that he knows better than his son to safeguard. As a result, his actions reflect his self-consciousness. His consciousness is directed towards the quest to save the boy.

In Cant's view, not only self-consciousness but also, the paternal love plays a vital role in the man's struggle in the devastation. He claims that the heroic mission of man is based on his paternal love, "The entire novel is devoted to a journey motivated by the father's heroic quest for a place in which his young son can survive. And this quest, undertaken in the certainty of his own impending death, is motivated by

paternal love” (188). The man is able to rescue his son because of his unflinching love and indomitable courage to assert his consciousness. He even accepts death because only his struggle can bring change in their life. Thus, the paternal love plays a vital role in getting his son to be rescued from the apocalypse.

As mentioned in the text, the only thing that separates between the life of the boy and his father is the existentialist quest of the father. To justify his own existential quest or his own self-morality, the man goes against the societal norms or essence no matter if it has to do with the killing of other. He creates his own value and determines the meaning of life by taking responsibility to guard his son from malice. Lydia R. Cooper observes that the man loves the suffering because it gives a window of hope to rescue themselves from the adversity. The father wholeheartedly accepts the doom that he has to face as Cooper explains, “In his love for his son, the father constructs a worldview in which suffering becomes the source of beauty, rather than its doom” (226). The father takes suffering as penance and finds beauty in the devastation that he could give a life to his son.

It seems a pointless struggle of the man and the boy against the catastrophe, as the scenario looks quite absurd and bleak. The father is strong willed man who performs every activity to prevent the inevitable death. The essence of his life lies in guaranteeing a life to his son. During his conversation with his son, he clarifies his intention, “My job is to take care of you” (80). The father expresses the strong determination to shield his son. He further explicates, “I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?” (80). The duty for him is to save his son and thereby confirm to the existential meaning of his life. There are several incidents where he chooses to kill the persons who are likely to harm his son because he is indebted with the responsibility to protect his little boy.

The man is fully aware of his responsibility that comes along with his

sacrificial love. The existential quest gives him an inner power to struggle against the adversity. Highlighting on man's love for his child deeply embedded with responsibility, Robert C. Clark explains, "The man's sacrificial love for his son generates emotional depth and power, and it is remarkable how the tenderness of their relationship transcends the violence and poverty of the world they inhabit" (qtd. in Clark 122).

The father is determined to impose his individual morality rather than molding himself into societal norms or values. He believes that one should not kill others for food. The father and the boy are presented as the "good guys" because they do not kill others for food but on the contrary the other survivors "bad guys" prey other humans for food. The survivors get degenerated by involving in the competition of killing others, as they believe each other as potential threat to their life. In the brink of annihilation, the father and the boy choose to die rather than to turn into cannibals which signifies their mental strength to remain as "good guys".

With the scarcity of food, people turn into cannibals. But the father is against it because it does not fit into his moral framework. He aspires his son to be a good guy who does not kill other human beings for the food. As the good guys they refuse to eat humans for survival. Reflecting upon their faith in humanity, Mathew Mullins clarifies, "The refusal to satisfy hunger by eating humans signifies the adherence to a foundational set of belief that stipulates a good and bad, a right and wrong way to be human" (80). The man and the boy refuse to eat other humans despite their hunger. They appear as good guys or good human beings.

McCarthy portrays the mentality of the father and the boy as the good guys in the novel. The father-son conversation exemplifies their good attributes:

We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?

Even if we were starving?

We're starving now.

You said we weren't.

I said we weren't dying. I didn't say we weren't starving.

But we wouldn't.

No. We wouldn't.

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys. (136)

The conversation evidences the benevolent attitude of the father towards the humanity. So, he chooses to starve rather than to turn into cannibals and also aspires the boy too, not to turn into cannibal.

The adversity has affected the life of the man's wife. His wife turns pessimist to the adversity. During the apocalypse, she gets scared that she might get raped, tortured and put into death. So, to escape from the reality, she chooses the nihilistic approach. She commits suicide. She does not choose to struggle unlike the man. His mentality is totally different from his wife's because she chooses death while the man chooses life. Out of fear of approaching potential threat, she expresses, "No, I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant" (58). The man's wife cannot fight against the catastrophe. She can-not struggle for free existence and inner morality, and loses her perseverance to save her son from disaster. In contrast, he grabs misfortune as an opportunity to affirm his existence.

The man's wife considers that struggling in the devastation is vain. She is a hopeless character who has no faith in human perseverance. She does not opt to struggle as she asserts, "As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope

it with all my heart” (59). The man’s wife promotes nihilism and pessimism as she wishes her son to receive death “Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock?” (120). She believes that prolonging death is actually fooling them. So, she chooses death as a remedy while he protests it with his act of struggling. He prefers to struggle rather than to surrender against the adversity. Lincoln views that the man bears pain and moves on rather than surrendering to the adversity. Highlighting on the man’s character, Lincoln states, “The man’s Sisyphean choice is to bear pain, to go on, to believe in the boy as humanity’s narrowing future” (167). Acting as Sisyphus, the man agrees to struggle in the meaningless circumstances instead of being submissive to the situation.

After the death of the man’s wife, the responsibility to look after his son falls upon his shoulder. He is aware of his subjectivity because he realizes that he is nothing but which he makes of himself. The man is responsible for what he has opted for in his life and he chooses to act. The narrator describes, “Her cries meant nothing to him” (61). He is so focused on asserting his own subjectivity that even his wife’s tears could not brittle him as he confronts, “I dont care if you cry. It doesnt mean anything to me” (57). Though he had to bear the pain of losing his wife, abandoned in the incinerated wasteland, he chooses to struggle. Lincoln states the grief and eternal damnation that the man faces as morbid, “Once again a persistent McCarthy chord laments a world without women, Orphic grief, the eternal loss of the feminine, the surviving male sorrow of endless blues, canticles of abandonment and widowed anguish” (168). The grief does not hinder the man’s determination to protect his son but makes him realize his responsibility to act as a shield for his son.

There is in fact nothingness in the struggle of the father and his son. It seems vain in looking for life in such devastation. It is the feeling of deep responsibility based on the realization that the father performs every activity is to make sure his son

survives. The narrator explains it, as “The boy was all that stood between the man and death” (29). The man’s entire world is his son only. His actions fit into the role model of the humanity. The man suffers from anguish that what happens if he fails as a father to protect his son. Erik Hage opines that the duty to protect his son was the only thing that stood between him and death. Emphasizing the duty of father, Hage explains, “Mostly, however, what defines the man is a sort of personal manifest destiny to protect the child. He knows that this is his duty and moreover the only thing standing between him and death” (103). The man is fully aware of his self-constructed duty to protect his son.

At the end only, death separates the father and his son from the physical world although the father remains in his son’s memory fresh and alive. He accomplishes the responsibility of saving his son from the adversity. The duty to save his son from the devastation is a personal manifested destiny but it turns out to be a fine lesson for the humanity and the fatherhood. He redeems to be a savior after the good people rescue his son.

### **The Hero’s Resilience and Hope**

Hope is the plausible explanation of the man and his son’s struggle. The man demonstrates indomitable courage and hope to fight against the plight. In spite of bleak situation, he opts to find the meaning in it. He ignites the fire of hope inside him. He has full of optimism and hopes that one day he will be able to rescue his son. He also encourages his son to take actions in order to get out of the devastation that they are facing.

The man believes that one has to struggle as long as one lives. On the other hand, the boy is fed up with the struggle for their survival. He becomes weak physically and mentally. After losing his mother, the boy’s confidence is shaken. The boy is so innocent that he wants to die rather than to struggle. At this point of time,



the father lights a ray of hope in him. The ray of hope is that they are going to survive if they give continuity to their struggle. Rambo Shelley L. postulates that the man regards death as inevitable and accepts it whole-heartedly. Pictorizing the situation of death in human life, Shelley asserts, "Death is inevitable, if not welcomed" (99). The man injects a hope in his son's life by making him accept the attributes of death.

The boy gets emotional after his mother's death. He thinks that death can be a solution for running away from problems:

I wish I was with my mom.

He didn't answer. He sat beside the small figure wrapped in the quilts and blankets. After a while he said: You mean you wish that you were dead.

Yes.

But mustn't say that.

But I do.

Don't say it. It's a bad thing to say.

I cant help it.

I know. But you have to. (56)

This shows the boy's reluctance to struggle and his father's spirit to fight. Although the way he has chosen is tough in the dismal situation, he advises his son not to lose hope and keep on struggling.

The father displays resilience and virtuous moral conduct although his physical condition is pitiable, "Filthy, ragged, hopeless" (292-93). He urges his son that celebrating life and prolonging death is the best idea of defying the fatalistic thought that states death is at the hand of God. When his son wishes to die, his dreams are shattered. He aspires his son to know the value of life because he believes that life is not inherently meaningless, but rather than possessing an intrinsic importance its

meaningfulness is the function of what is put into it.

The novel postulates that were it not for the son, the father would have lost the reason to make himself alive. The hope to rescue his son leads him to fight against the bizarre world. The man tackles atrocities with vigor and resilience. Human beings have inquisitive instinct to find the meaning of life and when they are unable to encounter it, they face absurdity. The man and his son are in the state of myth of Sisyphus. They embrace absurdity of human existence but defiantly explore the real essence of life in this meaningless world. Although their struggle is totally useless with the circumstances that they are going through, they do not stop their effort. This is the hope with them that catalyzes to fight against the harsh reality.

The son is a sole happiness for the father. The father does not even care of the atrocities that they have to face. Schaub asserts that it is the love for his son that generates a meaningful life for the father. Reaffirming the meaning of father's life, he states, "*The Road* is unique in locating the basis for meaning in the father's love for his son, and even suggesting that this meaning transcends the father's efforts to affirm and protect his son's life" (154). The hope is intermingled with the effort to overcome from the devastation.

The world is a void for the man but he does not escape. He rejoices happiness in bits in his life. The author narrates the son and his father's actions:

He rose and let the blanket fall to the sand and then stopped out of his coat and out of his shoes and clothes. He stood naked, clutching himself and dancing. Then he went running down the beach. Knobby spinebones. The razorous shoulders blades sawing under the pale skin. Running naked and leaping and screaming into the slow roll of the surf. (232-33)

The man's action is sufficient to present the fact that he is rejoicing moments without

thinking of his present horrible scenario and the dire consequence that he should face in the future. He celebrates each and every moment of his being. The actions such as dancing, singing, screaming and jumping in spite of being in adversity thus culminate the act of embracing the absurdity in life.

As the boy cherishes the life, it gives new hope for the man to give extra effort for his task. The son also helps to pull the cart, to mount the tent and assists in various activities. The support to his father suggests that the son gets motivation from his father. The boy learns the importance of actions. Though the man is cautious for the safety of his child but he does not allow that alarming caution hinder their enjoyment. He is also satisfied to know that his son is able to realize the value of struggle. Shelley postulates that the father wants his son to follow his father's footsteps. Accentuating the value of the father's footsteps for the son, which is full of resilience and struggle, Shelley articulates, "The father provides a way of viewing the world that will sustain the boy as he outlives his father. The memory of the father will live on in the boy; he will transcend his suffering and move ahead into a more promising future" (106). The father wants his son to accept the suffering and march forward towards the better future by following his footsteps.

As the novel progresses, the son grows into a mature person. He develops vigor to strive against such devastation and motivates his father to struggle:

Could they fly to Mars or someplace?

No. They couldn't.

Because it's too far?

Yes.

Even if they wanted to.

Even if they wanted to.

What if they tried and they just got half way or something and then

they were too tired. Would they fall back down? (166)

The boy's metaphorical question motivates his father to strive forward against the devastation. The conversation marks the fighting spirit of the father and his son.

Despite the hardship, the man and the boy demonstrate indomitable courage to rescue themselves out of the nightmare. He chooses to protect his son from calamities and deformity and ultimately lands the responsibility in his shoulder by choosing to rescue his son. Struggle itself gives meaning to his life.

During the later phase of the man's life, his son wants to be with him. The innocent kid does not want to leave his dad. He advises his son to have fire in him. The word "fire" (298) stands for zeal and the father advises his son to carry fire in him, which will lead him to get out of the devastation. Cant defines "fire" as the spark in human beings that ignites the vigor to lead the life in spite of the adversity that one has to come across. He explains, "The fire signifies that vitality that burns within the ardent heart, the mystery that is the spark of life itself and that needs no reason to exist" (188). It is because of the fire inside the man that he fulfills his duty of protecting his son. Thus, the fire plays a vital role in his struggle in the atrocious environment.

The father is concerned with the safety of his son and he knows that through the son's action only the chance of survival is optimal. So, he hints towards fire that represents the human resilience to fight against the adversity. He knows that anytime soon he was going to die, but he wants his son to survive and lead a life by continuous effort. He realizes that they have survived due to the effort. He values diligence and encourages his son to know the value of determination.

The man's love for his son is the sole thing for his survival. This is the fire for him and implicitly it is his son to ignite fire in him to struggle for life. McCarthy uses the term "Carrying the fire" to mean that human ignorance is driven off with the fire

in the man's heart (298). Cooper presents the idea of carrying a fire is the act of replacing the darkness of incivility with intellectuality, "A metaphor for the practice of civility and ethics, this darkness seems to represent a willful dullness of emotion and intellect" (221). The man and his son carry fire, which spreads the civility and ardent love that human civilization is endowed with. The practice of cannibalism depicts the incivility part of humanity while the father-son carrying the fire portrays the bright side of humanity and human civilization.

As the death approaches to the man, the boy wants to die along with his father but the father advises him to live with a fire in him to struggle against the adversity:

I want to be with you.

You cant.

Please.

You can't. You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (298)

The man injects courage in his son by creating a metaphor "fire" which means that one should have strong urge to lead a life no matter how the adverse situation be.

The man always listens to his inner voice and he wants his boy to practice as well. He wants his boy to find the importance of never giving up attitude. There is continuous psychological tussle between the father and the son because the son portrays the naïve part while the father displays his proficiencies regarding their life. During a conversation between the father and his son, he advises his son about the

tricks to survive in this world, “When your dreams are of some world that never was or some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you” (202). He advises his son not to give up no matter how adverse the condition is. Not only as a father, he also acts as a pathfinder for his son. He encourages his son to struggle and strive for the betterment in life. He boosts his son’s confidence with high-spirited words, “You’re the best guy. You always were” (298).

The man does not give up under the bleak circumstance. It is the never surrendering mentality of him that saves them from such hostility. As the boy is worried about the fact that his father is going to die, he asks if he could join him. The man advises his son to have faith in oneself and keep on struggling:

Will I hear you?

Yes. You will. You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you will hear me. You have to practice. Just dont give up. Okay?

I’m really scared papa.

I know. But you’ll be okay. (299)

The father admonishes his son not to give up. He wants his son to listen to his father’s advice. The father knows that his son’s struggle can only pave the way for his survival in the devastation. He encourages his son never to lose hope.

The hostility in the environment is not a big concern for the man because he feels that humanity must live in a world that is or can be hostile or indifferent to theirs. Thus, the man encourages his boy to have fire in him. Mullins expresses that the encouragement should pass from one individual to another individual in order to flourish humanity. For instance, he remarks, “While the fire is certainly something within each individual, it must be carried because it is also external to the individual, something that need to be passed on from person to person” (90). The father wants the

fire to be transferred from him to his son, which signifies the importance of being ardent and devotion to fight against ignorance and incivility. The transfer of fire also hints the bright future for the human race because he guides his son towards civility and humanity.

The persistent harsh weather leads the heavy toll in the health of the father. He grows sick day by day “Ghostly pale and shivering” (39). He spits blood. He lies in bed as his death approaches. He takes death into his life, acknowledges it and faces it squarely; he is now free from the anxiety of death, the pettiness of life. In fact, he has become himself. In the final hour, he advises his son never to lose hope no matter how appalling the truth might be.

The man empowers his son to fight against the adversity. Despite his death, the son acts as a mature person and moves forward. The novelist describes the poignant scene of the father’s death, “He slept close to his father that night and held him but when he woke in the morning his father was cold and stiff. He sat there a long time weeping and then he got up and walked out through the wood to the road” (300-1). After leaving his dead father behind the boy resumes his journey. He follows the footstep that is set by his father. He understands like his father that his continuous effort can only save him from the devastation. The boy’s continuous effort personifies the best teachings by his father.

The boy walks on the road for a while. He sees some people coming towards him. The people whom he sees are a single family consisting of old men, his wife and children. The men and women ask if the boy would like to join with them in the journey. He wants to join them but doubts whether the family are good people or bad people.

The boy remembers the advices of his dead father about carrying fire and being good guys. He asks the family whether they are carrying fire or good guys:

How do I know you're one of the good guys?

You don't. You'll have to take a shot.

Are you carrying the fire?

Am I what?

You're kind of weirded out, aren't you?

No.

Just a little.

What, carrying the fire?

Yes.

Yeah, We are.

After getting confirmation that the family do not practice cannibalism and are good human beings, he joins them for a journey ahead.

The man's effort of giving a new life to his son get fulfilled after the family adopts the boy. He practices self-morality and does things, which are oriented by his self-will. He realizes that upbringing his child in hostility is difficult, but he does not surrender to the societal convention. He chooses to fight against evil practices such as tricking, cannibalism, and killing by using his consciousness. He is dissatisfied with the loneliness, despair and existential angst, which are the by-product of catastrophe. But, he chooses to struggle. He even protests against the societal conventions and the norms that go against the safety of his son. He does not care if he is defeated by the circumstances but he wants to struggle and die. He affirms his individuality and subjectivity as his actions lead to the burst of the voice of humanity. His struggle till his death, thus, provides an evidence that he is an existential hero. By creating his own essence and finding a meaning of life, he rises above himself as an ordinary man.

The father completes his mission after his son gets a new company of good people to pursue the remaining journey. After fulfilling his duty, he becomes the



father figure for the human civilization. The identity of an unidentified man turns into an angel and the real meaning of fatherhood is revealed by his action. So whatever actions he performs pave a way to the construction of his identity. A dreamer or an ordinary man turns into an existential hero because of his ability to identify his meaning of life which is interwoven with the duty of protecting his son.

## Chapter 4

### The Mark of Heroism

This study tries to showcase the man as an existential hero who struggles for the existence in the post-apocalyptic environment. He fights against the unfavorable condition physically and mentally. The intrinsic force of the study is the successful adaptation by the man and his son in the face of devastation. It is because of his indomitable courage and resilience against the catastrophe, ultimately he emerges as a victor.

The man's angst of existence is pacified by his love to his son. His son is his hope and life. The man as an optimist chooses to struggle even when the condition is grim and bleak. It seems pointless to struggle in such incinerated wasteland but as an existential hero, he defies the fate and enjoys his freedom of choice. His wife chooses to commit suicide, but he chooses life. He is aware of the fact that he is responsible for whatever he has chosen in his life and he is happy with it. He faces alienation, despair and loneliness as the by-product of apocalypse. But he does not surrender to the fatal environment and keeps on struggling. He is self-motivated to protect his son from the unwanted risks of attackers and cannibals. It is actually a difficult choice to opt to struggle because of the hostile environment but he commits to it.

Out of despair the man questions the existence of God. He even confronts God as null and doubts the omnipresence and omnipotence. He struggles disregarding the morbid circumstances that are in front of him. He also believes in his action rather than waiting for the external forces or divine intervention. Though the chance for survival is slim, he does not give up. There are many instances when his body gives up but his mental resilience does not let him do that. A lonely character dejected by the fate at the end emerges as a hero by his strong urge to save his son.

The man glorifies action. His actions are self-directed. He kills an attacker

who wants to kill his son and he does not feel guilt for it. Although people turn into cannibals, the man's moral obligation does not allow him to kill other for food. He has a pure soul that suffers, but he does not crave for redemption. His only motive is to protect his son. Every autonomous action is directed to save his son. He does not care anything bad or wrong as perceived by the society. He listens to his inner self who is guided by self-moral obligation and the only thing that he cares is his son's survival.

McCarthy has portrayed the theme of alienation of the man who chooses to struggle against the hostile environment. The apocalyptic condition instigates the man to exhibit his real character. His real character is his indomitable courage and resilience. He is stubborn and refuses to surrender to the harsh climatic condition. He exhibits such courage, which can be compared with the Nietzschean superman. He is a true rebel who fights for his morality. He glorifies his action and freedom by taking adversity as an opportunity to display his determination.

The man's world is full of disillusionment. His life is meaningless and struggle is pointless but happily accepts sufferings as a reward. Although the world he is living is futile, he lives an authentic life by dragging himself into the struggle for his own survival. He first believes in the existence and seeks for the essence thereafter. He exists, therefore, he chooses to struggle. His choice to struggle is subjective because he makes self-directed independent choice without the help from the societal conventions, norms or any other external standards. While asserting his choice, he has to deal with anxiety with no meaning of life and thus creates his self-being by creating his son's survival as an existential quest.

The author presents the man's rebellious spirit and perseverance. He is forced to face apocalypse, and creates his existence by struggling against it. Though death is inevitable for him, he fights against the hostility with courage. The author gives

emphasis to the struggle of the man who finally becomes a hero, as his son gets rescued by the good people. Finally, as a hero, he achieves his goal amidst the hardship that he is condemned to face. Having exhibited his heroism, he turns into a redemptive figure.

## Works Cited

- Belliotti, Raymond A. *What is the Meaning of Human Life?* New York: Rodopi, 2001. Print.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Bloom's Modern Critical View: Cormac McCarthy*. New York: Infobase, 2009. Print.
- Camus, Albert. "The Myth of Sisyphus." *Essay on: The Creation of Knowledge*. Ed. Shreedhar P. Lohani, Rameshwar P. Adhikari and Abhi N. Subedi. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak, 1996. 70. Print.
- Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Catalano, Joseph S. *A Commentary on Jean Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness."* Chicago: U Chicago P, 1974. Print.
- Charles, Ron. "Apocalypse Now." *The Washington Post*. 1 Oct. 2006. Web. 11 June 2015.
- Clark, Robert C. *American Literary Minimalism. Alabama: Alabama State UP, 2014.* Print.
- Cooper, Lydia R. "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative." *Studies in the Novel*. Maryland: Johns Hopkins, 43.2 (2011): 221-26. Print.
- Estes, Andrew K. *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces*. New York: Rodopi, 2013. Print.
- Flynn, Thomas. *Existentialism*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.
- Gaarder, Jostein. *Sophies World*. New York: Phoenix, 1998. Print.
- Gardner, Sebastian. *Sartre's Being and Nothingness*. London: Continuum, 2009. Print.
- Gensler, Harry J., Earl W. Spurgin, and James C. Swindal, eds. *Ethics Contemporary*

*Readings*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Gifford, Terry. "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and a Post-Pastoral Theory of Fiction." *A Contested West: New Readings of Place in Western American Literature*. Ed. Martin Simonson, David Rio and Amaia Ibarraran. London: Portal Editions, 2013. 11. Print.

Hage, Erik. *Cormac McCarthy a Literary Companion*. North Carolina: McFarland, 2010. Print.

Kollins, Susan. "Barren, Silent, godless: Ecodisaster and the Post-abundant Landscape in *The Road*." *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horse, No country for Old Men, The Road*. Ed. Spurgeon L. Sara. London: Continuum, 2011. 166. Print.

Lane, Emily. "Hell On Earth: A Modern Day Inferno in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." Diss. U of New Orleans, 2010. Print.

Lewy, Guenter. *If God is Dead Everything is Permitted*. New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 2008. Print.

Lincoln, Kenneth. *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. Print.

Man Lo, Chi. "The Land and the Human Body in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: The Importance of Moral Values in Human Connection and Bonding." *Fabricating the Body: Effects of Obligation and Exchange in Contemporary Discourse*. Ed. Sarah Himsel Burcon. London: Cambridge Scholars, 2014. 73-74. Print.

Maslin, Janet. "The Road Through Hell, Paved With Desperation." *The New York Times*. 25 Sep. 2006. Web. 11 June 2015. 1.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Picador, 2006. Print.

Mullins, Mathew. "Hunger and Apocalypse of Modernity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Symplokē*. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 2011. 80-90. Print.

- Priest, Stephen. ed. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*. London: Routledge, 2001. 204. Print.
- Ryan, John K. "Existentialism." *Encyclopedia Americana*. New York: Macmillan, 1966. 639. Print.
- Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. Trans. Bernard Frenchman and Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Castle, 1969. Print.
- *Existentialism and Humanism*. Trans. Philip Mairet. London: Methuen, 1948. Print.
- *Existentialism is Humanism*. Trans. Carol Macomber. London: Yale University, 2007. Print.
- Schaub, Thomas H. "Secular Scripture and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*. N.p. 61.3. Jan 2009. Web. 11 June. 2015.
- Sheehan, Paul. "Road, Fire, Trees: Cormac McCarthy's post-America." *Styles of Extinction Cormac McCarthy's The Road*. Ed. Julian Murphet and Mark Steven. London: Continuum, 2012. 90. Print.
- Shelley, Rambo L. "Beyond Redemption? Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* after the End of the World." *Studies in the Literary Imagination*. Georgia: Georgia State UP, 41.2. (2008): 99-106. Print.
- Skirbekk Gunnar and Gilje Nils. *A History of Western Thought: From Ancient Greece to the Twentieth Century*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropedia*. "Philosophical Schools and Doctrines." 16<sup>th</sup> ed. 1998. Print.
- Warner, Alan. "The Road to Hell." *The Guardian*. 4 Nov. 2006. Web. 11 June 2015.

Wielenberg, Erik J. "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*. Pennsylvania: Penn State UP, 8.1 (2010): 2. Print.

Willey, Basil. ed. "Jean Paul Sartre." *Twentieth Century Drama*. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963. 152. Print.