

INGL 3300-066--“Post-Apocalyptic Literature and Film” ---Ingl3300-066
UPRM, Fall 2015, Dr. Gregory Stephens (Lecture 9, Oct. 15, 2015)

“On the road with the last god”: Post-Christian faith in *The Road*'s father-son dialogues

In the last class, one of the study guide questions we discussed was:

Why does the father say “curse God and Die” (114)? What led him to this moment? What is his general attitude towards “God”?

There are three questions here. The second and third prepare us to answer the first.

To elaborate my own response to that question, I start by suggesting that the father has three different attitudes toward the deity, godliness, or the *present-absence* of a Creator in a world that is dead or dying.

[Elaborate the idea of a present-absence. The “elephant in the room.” The absent father in Marley’s life, etc. A tension we are aware of, but cannot see...]

- 1). The father argues with the remains of his image of a Judeo-Christian God. Feeling abandoned, he wants to “strangle the neck” of that absent deity (11).
- 2). Conceiving of his son as a *lower-case god*, the father embraces the idea that his mission towards his son is as close as he can get to fulfilling the Word of God. His hint to an old blind man that *perhaps his son is a god* provokes the old “prophet’s” retort: “to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing” (172).
- 3). The father mourns the absence of “godspoke men” (32). I.E., the sense of men through whom the “word of God” is spoken, or enacted. This sense of being the “last man of faith” structures his words and actions, which are re-conceived through listening to his young son.

Together, these struggles inform the father’s “post-Christian” perspective, or his “embodied agnosticism”--a revisioning of the very grounds of faith in a world where humans have acquired apparently fatal god-like powers of destruction.

On the second page of text the father looks out and sees this vision of “the country to the south”: “Barren, silent, *godless*.” (5) Connotations of those words: creation is no longer possible: barren-ness is equated with god-less-ness.

But the lower-case “god” is far from consistent. In fact, the man contemplates God, and in fact speaks to God, with some frequency:

“He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5).

Word of God—care for what we love, and extend the circle of what we love, and consider as kin. This is the subtext of “The Good Samaritan,” the narrative response to the question, “How can I achieve eternal life?”

Caring for the child as the last embodiment of the “Word of God” is similar to learning the “will of God” (as expressed in three religious traditions) through becoming a servant to a Bengal tiger on a lifeboat, in *Life of Pi*. (Stephens 2010)

But the father in *The Road* has arguments with God, and in fact on more than one occasion feels an urge towards **deicide**.

The second night the father and son make camp, it is too wet to make a fire (9). After assuring his son that they are not going to die just “now” (10), the father admits that he would not want to live if his son died.

During a rough, cold night, he listens to “The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void” (11).

Before dawn he departs from his son’s side to cough for “a long time,” the onset of the black lung which will kill him. Kneeling in the ashes, like Job, “He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you **a neck by which to throttle you?** Have you a heart? Damn you eternally, have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. “Oh God” (11-12).

[an echo of, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me”] Spell out Job.

One might say that the father has a “god-shaped hole in his heart.”¹ [DISCUSSION]

I first came to know this concept through Salman Rushdie, the author of *Satanic Verses*. As Rushdie wrote, shortly after the infamous fatwa on his life:

“Dr. Aadam Aziz, the patriarch in my novel *Midnight’s Children*, loses his faith and is left with ‘a hole inside him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber’. I, too, possess the same **God-shaped hole**. Unable to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion, I have tried to fill up the hold with literature” (Rushdie 1990: 62; Sage 1991).

Question of “what has brought him to this”:

“creedless shells” (28) – i.e., how fragile is faith, without material grounding.

[We did not discuss creeds, but you should know what it means to be a “shell of a wo/man” living without a creed.]

Images that reinforce the erosion of the ground beneath his faith:

“ashes of the late world” (11) [READ]

“stood in the rain like farm animals” (20)

“everything dead to the root” (21), etc.

“banished sun” (32)

Then, after contemplating the “frailty of everything,” (later continued in a meditation of the “fragility of things one believed to be true” (89), we find the first instance (the first iteration) of the refrain:

“Can you do it? When the time comes?” Can you?” (29)

This emerges out of a sort of covenant with wife (56).

Tries to teach this to son, you “have to do it” (113-14)

Still, he is far from certain he can do it. He wonders if he could crush that skull if the gun doesn’t fire (114). How can you kill the last god?

“God’s own firedrake” (31) [READ?]



A common definition is simply of a dragon that only breathes fire. But a more likely definition that McCarthy had in mind is probably *“a baby dragon on a dangerous journey, protected from the humans who threaten their existence.”*

Other instances of describing the boy as god-like, or associated with godliness:

“Golden chalice, good to house a god” (75)

Conversation with blind old man about if the boy might be a “god.”

Not being able to properly protect/nourish this “god” leads him to “useless rage,” against God, against himself.

Loss of faith: “the absolute truth of the world” (130) [READ]

How faith in the “borrowed time” of this “crushing black vacuum” becomes all but impossible, in a literal sense.

In the desperation for food, he exposes the boy to the horror of human meat in the basement: (110). It is this that leads to “curse God and die” (114)

The counter-myth, to “keep hope alive”:

Carrying the fire (83; 128-29)

“This is what the good guys do. They keep trying.” (137)

SOURCES

Cooper, Lydia. "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative." *Studies in the Novel*, 43.2 (2011): 218-236.

DeCoste, D. Marcel. "A Thing That Even Death Cannot Undo": The Operation of the Theological Virtues in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Religion & Literature* 44.2 (2012): 67-91.

The article discusses the bedrock of morals in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. The novel revolves around the struggle by father and son for survival as well as the sacrificial love between them. It argues that the actual feeling that is being shown in the novel is love, faith and hope.

Rushdie, Salman. "Choice Between Light and Dark," in *The Rushdie File*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, Syracuse UP, 1990: 61-62.

Sage, Vic. "The 'God-Shaped Hole': Salman Rushdie and the Myth of Origins." *Hungarian Studies in English*, Vol. 22 (1991), pp. 9-21.

Stephens, Gregory. "[Feeding Tiger, Finding God](#): Science, Religion & 'the better story' in *Life of Pi*," *Intertexts: A Journal of Comparative and Theoretical Reflections*, Vol. 14:1 (Spring 2010).

ENDNOTES

1). My most immediate reference on this is Salman Rushdie, whose comments on his "god-shaped hole" were originally published in the Observer, London, Jan. 22, 1989. See also this quote in Salman Rushdie, "The Book Burning," *New York Review of Books* (March 2, 1989). However, the concept has much deeper roots, and a broad dissemination. In Blaise Pascal's book *Pensées*, published in 1670, eight years after his death, he elaborated a defense of the Christian faith. In that book, [he has a quote](#):

"What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that **there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?** This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself."

- Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* VII(425)

Recently, the concept has taken on a life of its own, as in the the '[God-Shaped Hole](#)!.)

"We're all searching for something to fill up what I like to call that big, God-shaped hole in our souls. Some people use alcohol, or sex, or their children, or food, or money, or music, or heroin. A lot of people even use the concept of God itself. I could go on and on. I used to know a girl who used shoes. She had over two-hundred pairs. But it's all the same thing, really. — [Tiffanie DeBartolo](#), *God-Shaped Hole* .