

INGL 3300-066--“Post-Apocalyptic Literature and Film” ---Ingl3300-066
UPRM, Fall 2015, Dr. Gregory Stephens (Lecture 11, Oct. 29, 2015)

Conjuring Community: The son’s “silent treatment” and his critique of the father in *The Road*



I want to examine the repetition of a pattern of “articulate silence” in *The Road* which becomes marked in the last third. The son’s “silent treatment” towards his father is followed by reluctant speech after the father pleads with the boy to talk (52, 77, 261, 267, 270). This pattern of reluctant speech a quasi-punitive silence marks the son’s growing critical distance from his father. Both his silences, and the partial, often self-censored speech which follows, show to readers with gathering force that the son is withdrawing to a reality to which the father does not have access. This constitutes a sort of self-tutoring by which the son prepares for life after his father has passed away.

Some silences are occasioned by the horrors that father and son see; these are characteristic of the silences of the PTSD, a theme McCarthy has employed both in *The Road* and in *No Country for Old Men* (Collado-Rodríguez 2012). But most of the silences are a “moral chastisement,” when his father refuses to help the strays they encounter on the road.

Weilenberg discerns “a Code of the Good Guys” in *The Road*, “a set of principles to which good guys are committed.” He enumerates the following rules

which the father teaches to his son:

1. Don't eat people.
2. Don't steal.
3. Don't lie.
4. Keep your promises.
5. Help others.
6. Never give up. (Weilenberg 2010: 4)



The son tries to “hold his father’s feet to the fire.” Carrying the fire means adhering to those rules. The father has trouble especially with #5, a variant of the “Good Samaritan,” while the boy is an embodiment of the “Good Samaritan Spirit.”

From the beginning, the boy proves himself to be a “higher moral force,” or if one prefers, a more moralistic “good guy” than his father. “I have to watch you all the time,” the boy tells him (34). The occasion was minor—out of paternal love,

the father gave the son all of a packet of cocoa, when he had promised to share everything equally. But the boy is a strict adherent to the letter of the law, who is prone to warn of Kantian “slippery slope” consequences of bending promises.

“If you break little promises you’ll break big ones. That’s what you said,” he tells his father (35). No hint of slippage is to be tolerated.

But the main instigator of the boy’s withdrawal into silence is the limits of the father’s willingness to extend a helping hand. The father thinks his only obligation is to his son. The boy’s sense of kinship is almost boundless: all except the cannibals—the bad guys—deserve their help. The father’s pragmatic concern with survival convinces him that they cannot help everyone, and that most of those that the boy wants to help are, in fact, beyond help. But the boy has internalized a “greater love.” The decisions the father makes to look the other way, and keep moving down the road, inspire silent dissent, and increasingly, a critical distance, on the part of the boy.

I want to focus on how the boy “conjures up” an imagined community (Anderson 1991) beyond the apocalypse. He evokes this out of a tattered map (182, 215), and in response to the horrors he is forced to witness—as a more



attractive alternative to his father’s stunted capacity for outreach.

Let's look at three turning points marking the boy's withdrawal into a space to which his father does not have access, which the boy increasingly refuses to describe.

- 1) "I won't remember it the way you do" (174). This was the boy's response, after a silence following their parting from Ely, to his father's comment: "When we're out of food you'll have more time to think about it."



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVvyogyYxbXQ> [minutes 6-9]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2XhvtXNb48> [continues 1-5:30]

- 2) "I have to...believe you" (185). On one level this is true, but the son's belief is a *form* into which he blows life, as the father blows life into Biblical rituals. The father does not believe in his own fathers (196). The son believes in the living father, but in silence he dissents from the limits of the father's adherence to the "Code of the Good Guys."

3) Barbequed infant (198). This was not caused by a shortcoming of the father, but the father wonders if the boy will “ever speak again” (199). This incident drives the boy to create human community out of his imagination. The dead infant is *transfigured*: he asks “Could there be another one somewhere?” (200)

I want to interpret this “*another one*” in a more metaphorical sense.

As the father’s health declines, increasingly it is the boy who serves as his eyes, and in some cases, as the enabler of their survival. The boy sees “another one” both in real and imagined senses.

It is the boy who spots the smoke which leads them to the horror of the charred infant (196). But it is also the boy who sees, at a distance, a house which saves them from starvation (200). The boy also later sees a bit of sand on the road which enables them to recover the stolen cart, just before the father’s death (254).

The boy has an active fantasy life, as the father noticed: “How things would be in the south. Other children” (54).

After they arrive on the Gulf coast, which was just as “dead to the root” as the trek out of the Tennessee mountains, the boy begins to imagine the human community he had hoped for, but which now seems unreachable. In one scene, he imagined a *doppelgänger*, a “father and his little boy” on a far shore (216, 219). He longs to send a signal to surviving humans with a flare gun (241). He draws a village in the sand (244). He wishes to write a letter to the Good Guys, on the sand,

or some other medium (245). He wonders what life would be like if they had adapted the “little boy,” which the father had earlier forbid him to pursue (281).



During the last third of the novel, as the boy insistently tries to create an imagined community, he increasingly develops a critique of his father: “You’re not going to listen to me” (211).

Silent dissent (242)

“I am the one” [who has to worry about everything] (259)

Re: “Old stories of courage and justice” (41)-- “Those stories are not true” (268)

These criticisms accentuate and intensify more subtle critiques from before:

Father: “I don’t think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road.”

Son: “*We’re* on the road” (151, my emphasis)

He may have picked up something from the old blind man’s similar stance:

Father to Ely: “No they don’t” [give you things to eat]

“You did.”

“No I didn’t. The boy did.”

“There’s other people on the road. You’re not the only ones.” (170)

Father had told son that he was “appointed by God” to protect him.

But the son increasingly gives evidence of having freely translated that. Who does he want to see or hear his message? – the father asks the boy.

“You mean like to the good guys?”...

“Like God?”

“Yeah. Maybe somebody like that.” (246)

Silent treatment: 260, 262, 265, 269, 272.

Questioning the truthfulness of father: telling the truth about dying: 94, 101

Demanding the truth (127), as in, an explanation for why they can't help.

Refusing to talk about his dreams (183, 189, 252)

What goes on in those dreams? They are "more like real life" the boy says (268). They are disturbing. They are incommensurable. His father cannot help him in the word he envisions/dreams/is moving towards.

At the beginning of the novel, we are told that father and son are "each the other's world entire" (6). But it increasingly becomes evident that the father "no longer has the capacity to expand his world beyond the child; the child, by contrast, does have this ability. This difference between the two explains the recurring conflict between them over helping others" (Weilenberg 2010: 8).

"The man's flawed instructions arise from his inability to trust others. This flaw has an important implication for the child—the child is unable to connect with other good guys as long as his father is alive.....He can truly succeed as a parent only by dying." (Weilenberg, 8)

Hence, as I suggested in our discussion of the fire-drake, it is actually only the boy who carries the fire within. The man just tries to blow on that fire, to revive it, to feed it. "The man carries the fire only in a secondary sense: he carries the child" (Weilenberg, 8-9).

CRITICAL ESSAY questions [CHOOSE ONE]

300-350 words. Use quotations cited by page to build your argument.

- 1) Analyze the boy's "silent treatments" in the last third of the novel as an "articulate silence." [IF YOU NEED ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES]:
What are the main reasons for the boy's silence? What message does he convey to his father, through silence? Compare the significance of what the boy chooses to say when he does talk, and what he chooses not to say (after the father's repeated insistence that he must talk).
- 2) Compare the role of the father's dreams, and the boy's dreams.
[MORE GUIDELINES]: What does the father teach the boy about dreams? What does the boy learn about dreams from his father, vs from experience? What do you think are in the boy's dreams that he cannot express?
- 3) The father tells Ely that he doesn't know what his son believe, but that whatever it is, he will never get over it. What do you think the son believes? Support your argument with multiple citations from the novel, *The Road*.
- 4) Describe and compare the boy's *immediate* and *delayed* reactions to two scenes of horror: the human "meat" in the basement, and the human infant roasted over a fire. How might these scenes push him to create an imagined community; or, re-evaluate his father's "Old stories of courage and justice"?
- 5) "The God of *The Road* is the impossible presence..." (Skrimshire 2011: 7). Using quotations from at least three sections of the novel, discuss the possible meanings of this statement. Take into consideration both dystopian (the silent or absent god), or utopian interpretations ("dream the impossible dream"; or, the "impossible" sufferings of Job, which fortify his faith).

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