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The Boy as a Symbol of Humanity in the Novel *The Road*

The famous American novelist Cormac McCarthy wrote the book *The Road*, and it was published in 2006. This book is the Pulitzer Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize winner. With *The Road*, McCarthy provides a story about a boy and his father who try to survive in a destroyed and apathetic world where everything is burned, and there are almost no people and no food left. They are moving to the South, and the warmer climate, where they are hoping to find a better life. The atmosphere in this book is very dark and ominous. The dad and son meet many scary and evil things on their road, such as an uncountable number of burned, dead bodies and acts of cannibalism. However, as a contrast to this bad and dark world with evil people, McCarthy uses a substantial amount of plot to represent the boy as a symbol of humanity because he is unselfish, he is able to love, he is willing to be a good person, and this bad environment does not influence his humanity.

Several critics have established different ideas about what humanity is and how it is shown in *The Road*. Matthew Mullins, in his critique, article examines the idea of hunger in *The Road* and how it is used by McCarthy. Mullins compares hunger and “carrying the fire” in the novel as a way of defining humanity: “In the same way that we cannot be human without hunger, McCarthy seems to suggest that we cannot be human without this fire” (89). The whole section about “carrying the fire” in the Mullins’s article helps to understand the ideas about “carrying the fire” in the book and how it is related to the boy. Aiding the understanding of the importance of

God in *The Road*, another critic, Allen Josephs argues the existence of God and “. . . examines the relationship between good and evil and hope and despair” in *The Road* (704). The author shows to the reader many proofs for and against God’s existence in the novel. The article illustrates the role of God in the book, so the article helps to compare the boy to God. Deanna Reder’s main purpose of writing the article is to answer the questions: does “world humanity” exist, and what does it mean? Reder argues different definitions and meanings for the words “human,” “humanity,” and other words related to humanity. For example, one of the definitions of a person with humanity is “an independent person with good will” (Reder 508). This article enriches understanding of what humanity is and how to recognize it, which helps support the argument that the boy represents humanity by having humanity. Michael Jackson, in his critique article, argues the importance of love in the families, especially a parent’s love to their children: “If you enter the world knowing you are loved and you leave this world knowing the same, then everything that happens in between can be dealt with” (8). As the reader can see, love is one of the most important emotions in the world and this article helps to prove the importance of the father’s love for the boy. This father’s love is the main reason why the boy becomes a very good person. Critics’ ideas are about the book’s aspects of humanity, but this paper examines the boy as a symbol of humanity in the novel.

The boy’s unselfishness represents humanity in this book because the boy always wants to help people, even though he never gets anything back from these people. *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* defines the word *unselfish* as “generous” (G. & C. Merriam Company 2509). The boy shows his generosity by sharing or being willing to share his and his father’s food with the strangers they meet. This unselfishness can even complicate his and his father’s existence. When they share any food with strangers such as Ely, there is less food left in their

cart, so if they do not give these couple of cans of food to Ely, the road ahead might be easier.

There are a couple of situations in which the boy wants to help people, but the father refuses to help them because he knows that there is a risk for their survival. For example, the father refuses to help a thief. Despite the fact that the thief stole all of the boy and father's stuff, the boy still wants to help this thief because he knows that otherwise the man will die. The father leaves this man, in the true sense of this word, naked. These are the boys' words about this situation: "Just help him, Papa. Just help him" (McCarthy 259). The dad answers, "He is going to die anyway" (McCarthy 259). After they leave the thief in the dark and freezing night, hungry and naked, the boy cries for a long time. The boy's reaction shows that he is very worried about this man. The boy worries about everything and everybody. When the father says, "You are not the one who has to worry about everything," the boy answers, "Yes I am. . . . I am the one" (McCarthy 259). Somehow the boy feels that he has to be that special person, and he has to make this world better. A selfish person would never do anything for a stranger if this help could somehow make his or her life more complicated, even if it might save the stranger's life. The fact that the boy is willing to help people no matter what is the proof of his unselfishness. All of the people whom the dad and son meet are foul and selfish because they care only about their own lives. The boy is not like them, so his unselfishness becomes one of the signs of humanity in this book. The word *humanity* in the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* is defined as "the quality or state of being humane; kind of generous behavior or disposition" (G. & C. Merriam Company 1100). In other words, *humanity* means to act good toward people. The words *unselfish* and *humanity* have similar definitions, so reasonably, the unselfish person has humanity. However, humanity is not only about unselfishness and helping some strangers; it is also about love.

The boy's love for his father best represents his humanity because love is an emotion that those who have lost their humanity have forgotten. Throughout all the story, the boy worries about his father. When the dad is going to explore some house that they find, the boy is always afraid because he does not want to lose his father, and the boy is even more scared when his father gets sick. At the end of the book, unfortunately for the boy, the father dies, and this is probably the best scene that demonstrates how the boy loves his dad. When the boy recognizes that his father is dead, his reaction is quite expected: ". . . he knelt beside his father and held his cold hand and said his name over and over again" (McCarthy 281). The boy spends three days next to his father's dead body, before a good man finds him. The boy does not want his father dead body to be found by someone else, so he wants it to be wrapped in blanket. He keeps loving his father even after he has died, so it is even easier for the boy to speak to his dead father, than to God. For the reader, it is not hard to see that the boy loves his father very much. Love helps the boy and his father keep going and to believe that there are still some good people left in this world who have humanity. Love is one of the main emotions that creates humanity, because if a person loves somebody, it means that this person has some light in his/her soul, and this light does not let the person lose his/her humanity. Although that the boy loves his father and takes care of other people, he cannot be a symbol of humanity if he is not a good person.

The boy's willingness to be a good person is represented by his resistance to the corruption of the dark world around him. In the book, there were many acts of cannibalism, but for the boy, it is the most awful thing to even think about it. For the boy, it is a shock when in the basement, they find human bodies that are prepared for food, and it is even more of a shock when they find a charred human infant on the spit. The father, after this situation, was not even sure if the boy will ever speak again. Fortunately, the boy feels better after a couple of days, but

he will never forget what he saw. The boy cannot even imagine eating people. There is a conversation where the reader can clearly see the boy's attitude to the cannibalism:

We would not ever eat anybody, would we?

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving?

We are starving now.

. . .

No matter what?

No. No matter what. (McCarthy 128)

These questions show that for the boy, the possibility that they might resort to eating people is a terrorizing fear. He will not eat anybody no matter what. He even gives an answer why they will never eat people: "Because we are the good guys. . . . And we are carrying the fire" (McCarthy 129). This quote clearly shows that carrying the fire relates to being good. This idea about carrying the fire may seem like a little game that the father uses to help his son deal with all the difficulties that they meet during their journey, yet this sort of game gives a belief to the boy: that it is not the end. Actually, this idea is a symbol of goodness. The author illustrates this idea at the end of the book. When the boy meets a good person, they have a very interesting conversation. The boy is asking the good person, "Are you carrying the fire?" (McCarthy 283). The good person thinks that the boy is "kind of weirded out" (McCarthy 283), but then he admits that he is carrying the fire. After this conversation the boy finally trusts the good man and continues his road with this man and man's family, which consists of the wife and two kids. The symbol of goodness - "carrying the fire" is connected with the boy because the boy repeats this phrase many times during the story, which shows that the boy is a good person. The bad people

cannot represent humanity because they do not carry the fire, and they kill and eat people.

Cannibalism is the total opposite of unselfish humanity, so the statement is that being a good person is an important characteristic of humanity. The boy has all the main signs of humanity, but there must be the reason why everybody lost their humanity, and the boy did not.

The reason why the boy does not lose his humanity is that he has never seen a good world, so this bad environment does not influence him as much as it influences older people. One of the main reasons why people are so rude, vile, and inhuman is the poor environment they are in now. These people are used to living in a good world where there are many good people, an abundance of food, clothes, and everything they need to not only survive, but also enjoy their lives. After the disaster happened, the world changed, and these older people are not used to it. The environment is dark and somber, so it influences these people in a bad way. Inger-Anne Softing, in her critique article, states that environment is “the bad land,” but the father and the son are “the good guys” (705). Softing examines how “the bad land” affects humanity. She comes to the conclusion that “The death of nature has destroyed civilization and it threatens humanity as such” (Softing 709). Softing’s article is proof that the bad environment has killed the humanity in the people who survived in this disaster. However, the boy never saw the previous good world; he does not know how living in a different way is. The scene with a Coke shows that the boy does not even know what Coke is. ““What is it, Papa? / It’s a treat. For you”” (McCarthy 23). Coca-Cola is a well-known brand, so everybody in America knows what Coke is, except babies who are 1-2 years old because they are too small to remember it. Therefore, the boy must have been a baby when the disaster happened, and this fact is the reason why he does not remember anything. As the boy grew up in this bad environment, for him, it is easier to get used to it and not let “the bad land” affect him in a bad way.

Some might argue that the boy is not a human and not of this world, so he cannot be a symbol of humanity. They might say that the boy is too good to be a human. For the people who live in a normal world, the boy being so generous and unselfish in a dying America seems unrealistic. It seems this way even while taking into account that the boy is also just a child. There are a couple of scenes in the book where the dad sees his son as an angelic. The father is injured, so he stops to have a little rest, and this is how the dad sees his son: “standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (McCarthy 273). Later, when the dad is almost dying, he watches his son and sees that “There is a light all about him (McCarthy 277). The boy might even be compared to an angel; the angel in the boys’ body may be perceived as helping the dad go through all of the difficulties. However, if the boy is the father’s angel or imagination, he would disappear after the father’s death. Instead, the boy still exists and continues to be a good person. The boy takes care of his father’s dead body, and he finds good people who will help him to survive in this dark and violent world. The fact that the boy does not disappear after his father’s death is proof that he is not the dad’s angel or imagination. The boy, throughout the story, is eating, drinking, crying, loving, sleeping, swimming, and so on; all of these are signs of being a physical human. The dad cannot teach somebody to swim who is not out of this world. In addition to these proofs, after his father’s death, the boy is talking to his father, and a good woman says that this communication is God’s talking to the boy through his father. If the boy is not of this world, he would not be talking to God through his father; also, the boy does not disappear after the father’s death and has signs of a human, proving that the boy is a human.

In this book, the boy has the basic qualities of humanity. He is unselfish; he is thinking about all of the world and all of the people who surround him. The one who does not have any

humanity cannot be able to love, but the boy loves his father very much. The boys' willingness to be a good person shows that he has this humanity, which almost all of the people in this apathetic world have lost. Unlike these people, the boy has never seen a better world, and this is the reason why the bad environment does not influence his humanity as much as it influences older people. There are even possibilities that the boy might not even be a human. Based on the novel's evidence, and assuming the boy is human and of this world, one can reasonably state that the boy might be a symbol of humanity.

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