

THE GOOD AND BAD IN HUMANITY

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In a bleak world with no hope or morals, mankind loses touch with its humanity. An understanding what it is to be human becomes blurred, and defining humanity to a child who has only known such a world is difficult. Cormac McCarthy explores these ideas in *The Road*, a post-apocalyptic novel that tells the story of a father and son's journey through ruined America, where the boy tries to make sense of what is good and evil in a landscape filled with destruction and chaos. The father imparts knowledge of the former world to the boy, and defines humanity in best way he can by dividing the remnants of it into two groups: the good guys and the bad guys. This worldview allows the boy to challenge his father's perspective of humanity, and transcend its black and white boundaries, ultimately enabling him to survive the harsh world without his father.

In his attempts to define humanity, the father tells his son stories of the world's former goodness in relation to the bad people and devastation in their current surroundings. By creating a clear line between good and bad, he instills a method of survival that holds both of them accountable for their actions as they struggle to stay alive on the road. He hopes that his son will grow up with morals and have survival skills to fend for himself when he can no longer be there for him. He tells the boy "[o]ld stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" so that his son will know that there is still hope, even amongst the miserable landscape through which they trek (McCarthy 41). The boy understands these stories as being good, and the father juxtaposes this concept to the evil people who are also on the road. An example of bad guys is shown when they cross paths with a group of truckers, one of whom threatens to kill the boy if the two of them do not follow him, presumably to be eaten. The father shoots the man to protect his son, and explains to the boy why he did so:

You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. (McCarthy 77)

The confrontation allows the boy to see that bad guys do exist, and also establishes that he and his father are the good guys. Julian Murphet and Mark Steven explain in their book, *Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy's The Road*, that the "belief that they are the good guys is explicitly linked to the existence of God when the father says that his job is to take care of the child" (Murphet and Steven 138). By declaring that God chose the man to look after the boy, the boy can understand past morals where humans followed God, and can therefore associate himself and his father as being the good guys. The father passes on this understanding to give hope for the boy, even though there is none left for himself. This ironic contradiction within the father becomes apparent as they journey alone together down the road, causing the boy to start questioning some of his teachings.

There are times throughout their journey where the boy tries to accept his father's concept of the world being split between good and bad; he learns to understand that the rules for being a good guy depend on the situation. Erik J. Wielenberg discusses the rules the father and son associate with good guys in his analysis, "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." He describes the novel as having a Code of the Good Guys, where "there is a simple rule for distinguishing the good guys from the bad guys. Bad guys eat people; good guys don't" (Wielenberg 5). This code that both father and son commit themselves to includes not stealing, helping others and never giving up (Wielenberg 5-6). As the father and son look for food and supplies and try to stay safe, the boy recognizes situations where they are unable to strictly obey their code of con-

duct. This is seen when they cannot help the naked people who are trapped in a basement, waiting to be eaten. Both father and son flee when they hear the cannibals returning, and the boy states later that “[they] couldn’t help them because then they’d eat [them] too,” demonstrating that he understands that it is not always possible to behave like a good guy (McCarthy 127). The boy also learns that it is fine to take from others if they are no longer alive, and the father insists that this form of taking is not stealing. Although the boy agrees, he does not fully accept that it is right to take from others, and decides to thank them:

Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn’t eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didn’t get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God. (McCarthy 146)

Once again, God is associated with goodness, for the boy hopes that the good guys that left the food and supplies are with him in heaven. By thanking the people before them, the boy transcends his father, showing that there can still be goodness in situations where the line between right and wrong is blurred. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult for the father to abide by the code that he himself created, causing the boy to dispute his ideas.

The boy challenges the dualistic worldview when his father strays too far away from what it means to be a good guy, showing that he is capable of evaluating for himself the right course of action. The boy constantly asks his father to help desperate people they meet on the road, which creates tension between them. Steven Frye, author of *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, states that the conflict that arises between father and son is due to the father being “willing to violate moral principle to ensure their survival” (Frye 170). This goes against the boy’s understanding of good guys, “a status [he believes] they can rightfully claim only if they give food to the hapless outcasts they occasionally meet” (Frye 170). Ely, an old man they come across on the road is one of these outcasts, and the boy has to convince

his father to give him some of their food. Just as the boy had thanked the dead people for the food they left behind, the father tells Ely that he should thank the boy, for he “wouldn’t have given [Ely] anything” (McCarthy 173). This reveals his son’s good nature, which the man seems to have lost during their long journey on the road. A major point of conflict occurs when the father and son catch the thief who stole their shopping cart and campsite supplies while they were walking down the coast. The father punishes the thief for taking what little they had, demanding that the man remove his shoes and clothes or be killed. He remains firm, despite his son’s pleas to “[j]ust help him,” and when he does give in it is too late – the man is gone, and they have to leave his shoes and clothes in a pile under a rock (McCarthy 259). In response to his father explaining that he was not going to kill the thief, the son replies that “[they] did kill him,” implying that if they had let the man keep his clothes and had given him some food, he would not be left alone to surely die (McCarthy 260). The build up of tension as the boy challenges his father culminates in this moment, as he is now certain of the flaws in his father’s theory of good and bad. By attempting to remain one of the good guys, the boy shows that he no longer requires his father to determine right and wrong for him.

The boy fully transcends his father and his limited good guy and bad guy perspective when he is left to survive on his own; he still takes their rules of conduct into account but knows that the world cannot be strictly divided into two boxes. Before the father dies, he tells his son that he has to find the good guys and continue to carry the fire that is inside of him. His son asks about the little boy he thought he had seen earlier in their journey, and the man reassures him by saying that “[g]oodness will find the little boy,” for it has and will again (McCarthy 281). These are the father’s last words, and it is suggested that the little boy he is talking about is actually his son. A few days after his father’s death, the boy encounters a “veteran of old skirmishes, bearded [and] scarred across his cheek,” who invites him to join his family (McCarthy 281-282). From his appearance, the boy should be scared of this man, who fits into his father’s description of bad guys, but instead allows the man to approach him. He is still cautious, pointing the pistol towards

the man and questioning to see if he is “one of the good guys” (McCarthy 282). After being certain that the man does not eat people, the most obvious sign of being a bad guy in their world, the boy agrees to go with the man and his family along the road. His confidence and ability to trust the man shows that the boy is able to do what the father could not—find goodness on the road, even if it does not completely align with their moral code of good guys and bad guys.

Overall, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* presents a unique perspective of humanity, one that is split between good guys and bad guys. The man in the novel conveys this worldview to his son on their rough journey on the road, so that the boy can understand what goodness is, even while in a barren land that does not seem to offer any kind of future. Although the boy accepts the moral code, he is confused by his father’s inability to follow the guidelines of being a good guy, especially when he refrains from helping others. As they journey further and further along the road, their relationship becomes tenser as the boy discovers that his father’s dualistic perspective of humanity is too plain and simple in being comprised of good guys and bad guys. The boy expands the boundaries to extend and accept acts of goodness from people who may not be entirely good, as seen by his efforts to help the thief, and when he chooses to join the stranger’s family after his father dies. The ability to transcend these boundaries gives the boy strength to survive in the post-apocalyptic world without his father, which suggests that there is hope for those who are willing to see and risk their lives for a future.

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