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Complutense Journal of **English Studies**
ISSN: 2386-3935

https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cjes.82261

EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

"You have two bullets and then what?": Fallible Paternity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract. This article seeks to critically examine the representation of the father-child bond in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) in order to elucidate the complex portrayal of fatherhood conjured in the text. In particular, it focuses on the evolution of the ethical stance taken by the father, as opposed to that of his son and his late wife. I contend that *The Road* includes elements that can be read as challenging towards the father-patriarchy conflation, especially the fallible, embodied father. Still, despite its individualization of the paternal function, *The Road* fails to articulate a solid alternative to traditional fatherhood as it concludes with the re-creation of the Symbolic father.
Keywords: fatherhood; ethics; father-child relationship; dominant fiction

[es] "You have two bullets and then what?": Paternidad Falible en *La carretera* de Cormac McCarthy

Resumen. El presente artículo pretende examinar de manera crítica la representación del vínculo paternofilial en *La carretera*, de Cormac McCarthy (2006), para así esclarecer el complejo retrato de la paternidad que surge en el texto. En particular, se centra en la evolución de la postura ética del padre, en oposición a la de su hijo y su mujer. Sostengo que *La carretera* incluye elementos que pueden ser leídos como disruptivos de la ficción dominante, especialmente el padre corporeizado y falible. Aun así, a pesar de la individualización de la función paterna, *La carretera* fracasa a la hora de articular una alternativa sólida a la paternidad tradicional puesto que concluye con la recreación del padre simbólico.
Palabras clave: paternidad; ética; relación paternofilial; ficción dominante

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How to cite this article: Villamarín-Freire, Sara. (2022). "You have two bullets and then what?": Fallible Paternity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 30, 91-100.

1. Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's harrowing narrative about a father and a son journeying through a post-apocalyptic landscape has captured the interest of the general public and scholars alike ever since its publication in 2006. Inadvertently, its sweeping success has contributed to the pervasive perception that father figures are experiencing somewhat of a revival lately. Some critics have seen in it the confirmation of a hypermodern longing for the father. For instance, Massimo Recalcati regards *The Road* as an example of how to articulate and pass on paternal testimony in the wake of the evaporation of the father announced by Jacques Lacan (2011: 105-6). Others highlight its optimistic message and signal that it is the father-son relationship–"one of the most intimate and loving father and son relationships in American literature" (Noble 2011: 93)–which articulates the possibility of a hopeful reading (see Kunsa 2009, Noble 2011, and Wielenberg 2010).

Amidst utter devastation, the man's efforts to persevere stem from his love of the child. This abnegated father tries to provide him with a moral compass with which to navigate the post-apocalyptic world. However, considering Hannah Hamad's claim that postfeminist fatherhood vertebrates a purported shift in hegemonic masculinity ideals (2013: 1), we should interrogate this hands-on model of paternity lest we overlook where this ethics of fatherhood is leading. In other words, we must be cautious with how easily we assume *The Road* is revolutionary to paternal representation because the father repeatedly demonstrates how much he loves his child.

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In the following analysis, I seek to critically examine the representation of the father-child bond in order to elucidate the complex portrayal of fatherhood that emerges from the text. In particular, I am interested in analyzing the evolution of the ethical stance taken by the father, as opposed to that of his son and his late wife. By commenting on character building, but also formal and stylistic choices such as focalization, I aim to assess the potential of the text to narrate the collapse of the dominant fiction. I contend that *The Road* does include elements that can be read as challenging towards the father-patriarchy conflation, especially the fallible, embodied father. Still, despite its individualization of the paternal function, *The Road* fails to articulate a solid alternative to traditional fatherhood as it concludes with the re-creation of the Symbolic father.

2. To Find Someone to Talk to (After the World's End)

Far from being ahistorical and static, father figures have acquired and lost myriad traits over time.[2] Some of these traits have become reified by means of discursive practices, among which the dominant fiction stands out. According to Kaja Silverman, our dominant fiction is "the representational system through which the subject is accommodated to the Name-of-the-Father. Its most central signifier of unity is the (paternal) family, and its primary signifier of privilege the phallus" (1992: 34).[3] Since the dominant fiction "imparts the illusion of reality to whatever comes into close proximity with it" (42), it is far easier to produce narratives that contribute to buttress it rather than the contrary.

Elaborating on Silverman's definition, Debra Shostak argues that this "dominant fiction" is a "compensatory psychosocial model" that is "designed to conceal" the inherent and unavoidable lack that is constituent of human subjectivity (2020: 4). She further adds that "[w]e depend on the dominant fiction for a sense of wholeness and order to fill the lack of completion and coherence we confront once we function within the symbolic order of language that binds us into the social world" (4). In other words, the dominant fiction can be best understood as an unconscious narrative fantasy that presents fathers as metaphors for patriarchal authority and control, and as such is often hidden in plain sight. Consequently, this fiction often surfaces in contexts where it is somehow jeopardized and thereby ceases to fulfill its function of projecting a fantasy of wholeness.

In *The Road* the world lacks any sort of social order. There are no institutions, no sense of family or collectivity. Mutual interconnectedness has been replaced by an acute sense of individual survival. In this extreme context, fatherhood is divested of most of its features: it no longer depends on tradition, custom, or social bonding of any sort, given that human institutions have collapsed. Biological parenthood is not a warrant either, as is shown through the scene in which father and child stumble upon "a charred human infant headless and gutted" abandoned at a fire camp (McCarthy 2006: 167). Against this backdrop, the illusion of the dominant fiction is shattered. McCarthy's unnamed protagonist is a father, but one who struggles to maintain the semblance of control in front of his child.

Here the father figure becomes particularized in the sense proposed by Massimo Recalcati (2014). After the evaporation of the Symbolic father, it is up to individual fathers to assume and embrace their responsibility as such and offer their children an example of ethical engagement. Fathers are not obliged to embody a normative model of perfection, yet they need to assume the consequences of their acts, thereby showing that it is possible to live under the terms of the symbolic Law (Recalcati 2014: 80-1). Both father and child enter an asymmetrical relation of responsibility in which the father passes on his testimony, or story of personal experience, to the child; this story, which ought to be assimilated by the child, represents a reminder of our (inter)dependence with respect to others, as well as to the Other of language (135).

The only possibility for this type of bond to be established thus depends on the individual self's capacity to address the other, to create shared meaning and maintain communication open. In the wake of the unidentified event that obliterates civilization, McCarthy's unnamed protagonist becomes painfully aware of the inexorable disappearance of everything he once knew: "The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night" (2006: 24). The man is radically alone insofar as he cannot share his feelings of uprootedness with anybody. His son, having been born after the event that caused the world's destruction, does not truly grasp the magnitude of his father's loss. Without external referents, language–hence the possibility of communication–comes to an end:

> The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be

[2] In particular, psychoanalytic descriptions of the father as an abstract function have contributed to conflate the Symbolic father with individual paternally-marked figures. For further reading on the paternity-patriarchy conflation, see Kowaleski-Wallace (1989).

[3] The symbolic order is governed by the Law of Language, or the universally applicable principle that any individual must be castrated in order to enter the symbolic order that precedes us all; and the Law of Kinship Structure, or the patriarchal rule that puts women in the position of tokens that men exchange, and "equates the father with the Law, and hence exempts him from it" (Silverman 1992: 42). The fundamental discrepancy between these two laws is solved as follows: the dominant fiction imposes an "imaginary resolution" that consists in the belief in "the commensurability of penis and phallus, actual and symbolic father" (42).

> true […]. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (McCarthy 2006: 75)

For Judith Butler, every account of oneself to another "takes place in the context of an address. I give an account of myself *to you*" (2004: 31; original emphasis). In addition, the context of such an address "means that I am engaging not only in a reflexive activity, thinking about and reconstructing myself, but also in speaking to you and thus instituting a relation in language as I go" (2004: 31). Even though "our exchange is mediated by […] a sedimentation of norms that are social in character" (23), after the erasure of such norms there is still a chance for creating meaningful bonds.

For the characters in *The Road*, addressing the other and hence instituting a relation in language, as Butler claims, is the only way out of complete isolation and despair, but it is also a huge risk to take. After his wife's death prior to the beginning of the novel, the child becomes the man's sole interlocutor. He is the only one that he is willing to trust enough to establish a relation in language–perhaps so because the child is partly other, but also partly same, as Emmanuel Levinas would have it.[4] The man feels that he must cherish his interlocutor. To talk is to preserve hope, however dim it might be. The man treasures communication, but from time to time he needs to make sure that the child remains receptive to their exchanges: "So when are you going to talk to me again?" (McCarthy 2006: 44); "You have to talk to me" (58; 65; 79; 219; 225); "Are you talking? he said" (147).

Usually, the child's reluctance to speak follows some kind of traumatic scene or encounter, suggesting that the harshness of reality forecloses communication and thereby hope. Namely, after seeing the headless, charred baby, the man wonders if the child would "ever speak again" (McCarthy 2006: 167). Likewise, the child is also silenced by the violence his father inflicts upon others, which reinforces the connection between the hopeless scenario they trod and the loss of language and civilization.[5] The forces of violence and trauma are irreconcilable with humanity–and so the Levinasian interpellation to the other goes unanswered.

In order to keep the child speaking and hopeful, the man needs to make sure that the world they inhabit is a place where men can indeed live. Faced with utter devastation, he burdens himself with the task of creating meaning in a meaningless world for the child's sake. Yet, in spite of his good intentions, "[t]he culture that the man creates for the boy is only applicable to a world in which they no longer live" (Zibrak 2012: 108). So even as the man struggles to satisfy his curiosity, there is only so much he can manage to do:

> Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like? But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad. (McCarthy 2006: 46)

For Marie-Reine Pugh, *The Road* stages "an individual's obligations to the larger communal past, as well as the community's artificial pressure on individual motivations"; in this case, the tension between the man's "personal and collective memories" leads him to realize that "his role is to pass on the fire to his son" (2017: 51). Even though he wishes he could forget all the abominable things to which he has borne witness, he "cannot forget because his collective memories are undeniably more meaningful and more powerful than the nothingness he tries to carve out in the present" (53). He uses those (collective) memories, the "[o]ld stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (McCarthy 2006: 35), to give shape to a Manichean mythology that presents them as the good guys that are carrying the fire. Thus, his legacy that he passes on to his son represents the salvage of a civilization already extinct.

3. Good Guys and Bad Guys: The Ethical Code of *The Road*

The stories crafted by the man revolve around the notion of carrying the fire, an image that has been identified with the Promethean impulse of civilization, the possibility of hope, and the idea of Christian redemption. However, I will not deal with its symbolism here, but instead will discuss the implications of this construction in the father's ethical discourse. In particular, I wish to focus on the role of the mother, on one hand, and the father's unreliability, on the other, using the notion of paternal fallibility as my through-line. For Elizabeth H. Pleck, "[t]he most important aspect of the father's role throughout American history has been his role as

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[4] In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas contends that the son is, for the father, partly I and partly Other: "Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other […] *is* me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me" (1979: 277; original emphasis). It is worth noting that for Levinas the son is the promise of futurity to the father, whereas for Recalcati this projection into the future is reversed: it is the child, in the process of becoming, who is projected into the future thanks to the paternal bond.

[5] Although Butler remains open to the possibility of an ethical relation outside of language (or one that precedes language, for that matter), and so does Levinas, the father in *The Road* seems not to be able to dissociate linguistic relations from ethical relations. This would also explain why he is so adamant that his son talks to him whereas he avoids talking to virtually anybody else in the book, unless he is forced by the circumstances (e.g., when the child insists Ely joins them for one night). It is likewise significant that when he does use language, it is to chastise and threaten others.

provider and protector" (2004: 52), and, as such, has occupied a central position within the breadwinning ideal.[6] In *The Road*, as we will see in what follows, the obliteration of human institutions is no impediment to the man's overwhelming sense of inadequacy as he struggles to protect his child from external threats.

After the unnamed catastrophe, the man draws a line between "them," the blood cults, the marauders, and "us," the civilized salvagers emerging from the planetary wreck. The conviction that the world is divided into good guys and bad guys structures the pair's interaction with the rest of characters. In a world where encounters seldom take place and are often extremely dangerous, the man insists that there might be some other good guys out there that are "refugees" just like they are (McCarthy 2006: 67). Whereas the man never provides a description of how the good guys may look like, the bad guys are depicted as the absolute, unfathomable Other, whose aspect is barely humane: "My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word" (64).

Having seen marauders killing and raping and enslaving and cannibalizing others, this sorting system justifies the man's reluctance to establish any sort of interaction with others, for fear it might put him and his son in danger. However, the boundaries that define who is "us" and who is "them" are not rigid, and change with the circumstances. Eric Wielenberg identifies a set of six ruling principles to which good guys must adhere, including the prohibition to eat people, steal or lie, as well as the obligation to keep one's promises, help others, and never give up (2010: 4). It is hinted that any infringement of this code could lead anyone to join the ranks of the bad guys.

By contrast, the man insists on his and the child's intrinsic goodness, manifested through the fact that they are "carrying the fire," the one thing that will keep them from harm: "We're going to be okay, arent we Papa? […] And nothing bad is going to happen to us […] [b]ecause we're carrying the fire" (McCarthy 2006: 70). As father to that child, he has acquired the responsibility to protect him; without the child, he would not be a father, but only a man–and that is not enough to make it through this post-apocalyptic nightmare. It is the existence of a stronger bond between them that motivates him to keep going.

The man's will to be a father to his child stems from his intimate conviction that he is responsible for him. Recalcati identifies the image of carrying the fire with the man's commitment to keeping the boy safe and, in turn, with the Levinasian "*Me voici!*" ('here I am!'), that is, the infinite responsibility we acquire the moment we respond to the ethical invocation of the Other (2011: 105). The man perceives the boy as a grounding force, "all that stood between him and death" (McCarthy 2006: 25). Far from being a stern father, he focuses on the particular acts of love and care he shares with his son. For instance, after he shoots the roadrat so that they can flee, the man gingerly tends to his son: "This is my child. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job" (63). For the man, this summarizes what being a good guy entails: infinite responsibility towards his son above all things. In addition, this idea goes hand in hand with the conviction one must endure in the face of adversity: "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (116). These two traits, responsibility and endurance, define the good-guy rhetoric he believes in.

It is worth pointing out that the commitment displayed by the father towards others is suspended as the child represents the absolute other for him. Following Levinas's idea of asymmetrical and infinite responsibility, Jacques Derrida argues that it is impossible to enter in such a relationship with an other without sacrificing "the other others": "As soon as I enter into a relation with the other […] I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others" (1996: 68):

> I can respond only to the one (or to the One), that is, to the other, by sacrificing the other to that one. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice […] I can never justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other. (70)

Through the biblical story of Isaac's sacrifice, Derrida defines absolute duty in terms of the individual's freedom to refuse:

> In essence God says to Abraham: I can see right away that you have understood what absolute duty towards the unique one means […] responding where there is no reason to be asked for or to be given; I see that not only have you understood that as an idea, but that–and here lies responsibility–you have acted on it […]. Abraham is thus at the same time the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible of men […] because he responds absolutely to absolute duty, disinterestedly and without hoping for a reward […]. He recognizes neither debt nor duty to his fellows because he is in a relationship to God–a relationship without relation because God is absolutely transcendent, hidden, and secret […] not sharing anything in this dissymmetrical alliance. (72–3)

[6] Breadwinning has traditionally been considered "the great unifying element in fathers' lives," shaping their sense of self, manhood, and gender (Griswold 1993: 2). For further reading into the central role of breadwinning in America, see Griswold.

The man also appears to find himself in an asymmetrical relationship without relation–and, incidentally, he even equals the boy's presence to that of God: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 2006: 4). Yet by assuming infinite responsibility towards the boy, the man severs his ties with all the others, including his wife. In a truly Levinasian fashion, the birth of the child signals the end of their mutual preoccupation with the other: "A few nights later she gave birth in *their* bed […]. Her cries meant nothing to him […]. He held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and […] wrapped *his* son in a towel" (50; emphasis added). Meanwhile, the child's birth has a completely opposite effect on the woman, who remains adrift ever since: "My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now" (48-9).

This divergence fuels the ethical debate at the heart of *The Road*, which involves two major stances: the father's, with his Kierkegaardian approach of absurd faith and Levinasian responsibility towards the child, and the mother's, with her pragmatic view on what is the right thing to do in a world that is no longer ruled by the laws of morality.[7] For Phillip Snyder, the woman's suicide showcases that "when one loses the sense of responsibility to the Other, one also loses one's self": "The mother commits suicide, not simply because she rejects her responsibility toward her husband and son, but because the impossibility of fulfilling that responsibility necessarily overwhelms her" (2008: 76). Whereas the man is still capable of looking beyond the horrid reality, driven by his desire to preserve meaning and his son's life, the woman perceives that the right thing to do would be killing the child to spare him from further suffering.

To survive in the post-apocalyptic barren land is to expose oneself to all kinds of atrocities one day after another, a scenario that strongly resembles Derrida's notion of unconditional hospitality.[8] The woman knows this and straightforwardly tells the man: "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" (McCarthy 2006: 48). Her only hope is "for eternal nothingness," and even though he tries to stop her, the man also concedes that "she was right. There was no argument" (49). Noble suggests that the language used by the mother "implies that she is making an ethical judgment" and, as heart-wrenching as their words are, "[h]er logic cannot be argued with" (2008: 99). It is precisely this seamless logic which will later torment the man.

Before committing suicide, she reminds him of his own hopelessness: "You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that?" (McCarthy 2006: 47). In spite of her marginal role, the mother "haunts [the novel's] mood and setting with her absence" (Snyder 2008: 77). The man is indeed haunted by failure–by his failed status as protector. In order not to fail the child, he must fail his wife; in turn, having failed his wife implies that he might fail again. Still, he invests all his efforts in being the child's keeper, and rigidly adheres to his role: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (McCarthy 2006: 65). Crucially, the man is keenly aware that he may need to kill his child at any given point in the event they are captured, but feels incapable of doing so: "Can you do it? When the time comes?" (24).

Maternal dissension jeopardizes the man's quest. Ross Church suggests that the man's "desire to live" is identified by his wife as "part of the wider patriarchal conception of life as a battle […], the product of futile masculine heroics, potentially derived from the 'old stories of courage and justice'" (2017: 25). Here it is worth noting that she declares she "didnt bring [her]self to this. [She] was brought" (McCarthy 2006: 48), thereby hinting at the man's meddling in convincing her to stay alive. Church contends that "in choosing death [by suicide], the mother challenges […] the Christian morality which the man and boy incongruously attempt to maintain" (2017: 25):

> She understands that in the world where there is no reason to live, only the fear of death, the father must use his son to create meaning. He has to use his son like "a passable ghost" to justify his existence. […] By being the meaning of life for the father, the boy is preventing his [*sic*] own reason to live. The son can only be a passive object for the father, something the mother predicts in her speech and counters in her suicide. (26)[9]

If the mother seeks to counter her having become a passive object for the father, then her choice to kill herself can be read as an attempt to regain agency in a male-dominated space (see Church 2017: 24–5). The woman is dangerous, even as a memory, insofar as her life and death are powerful reminders of the father's fallibility and fragility: "The mother's suicide makes the father's task to stay alive and not kill himself and convince his son that they should abide by this value system all the more difficult" (Chavkin and Chavkin

[7] In an article comparing the final version of *The Road* with an earlier draft, entitled *The Grail*, Chavkin and Chavkin call attention to the fact that this previous text brings to the forefront the father's innermost beliefs, as well as his profound disagreement with his late wife. In particular, they discuss the man's notion of "transcendental responsibility that continues even after death," which is still traceable in the definite version (2019: 196).

[8] Unconditional hospitality "means letting others in no matter what, without asking them for papers, without judging them, even when they are uninvited. All are to be treated not as enemies who must be expelled or exterminated, but as friends. Nevertheless, as Derrida constantly stresses, we cannot really identify the friend as such. Unconditional hospitality is dangerous" (Lawlor n.p.).

[9] Church's interpretation of the mother as a figure who chooses death by her own hand before submitting to a fate worse than death (not unlike Antigone) uncovers a potentially subversive reading of the text that is nonetheless muffled by the novel's ending.

2019: 198). After all, the man is unable to find convincing arguments that would make her stay. His tailored narrative of good guys carrying the fire did not succeed in keeping her safe.

It is also in this sense that the mother's (implicit) position among the bad guys must be understood. According to the ethical code, one must never give up because that is "what the good guys do" (McCarthy 2006: 116). When the boy tells him he wished he were with his mom, the man immediately replies: "You mean you wish that you were dead" (47). Here the father appears to make the assumption that the child's voicing of this wish reveals his deteriorating mood–that he, too, will soon give up. The man instantly reprimands him for it, as if by banishing all reference to giving up he could prevent the child from following his mother's footsteps: "Dont say it. It's a bad thing to say" (47). Since her death cannot be explained within the boundaries of the good guys' code, she (or rather, her memory) must be banished in order to keep the father's narrative from collapsing: "He thought […] that he should have tried to keep her in their lives in some ways but he didnt know how" (46).

And yet, in spite of the mother's problematic position, it is her who provides the man with the blueprint for navigating the post-apocalyptic world:

> The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. (49)

The suicidal mother sees through the man's crippling doubt and into his quest for meaning (Church 2017: 26; see also Zibrak 2012)–and so does the child, to some extent. In terms of how this relates to the dominant fiction and its undoing, the mother's disruptive presence threatens the father's simplistic narrative of good guys and bad guys. Likewise, she openly questions his male fantasies of protection linked to paternal performance, thereby undermining his attempts at (re)constructing a narrative akin to the dominant fiction. Albeit brief, her role proves to be crucial in the novel.

4. Fallible Father, Divine Father

The "passable ghost" the man ends up creating is the result of combining a series of elements that were arguably either present in his life prior to the catastrophe or necessary to get on with his life. The pillar of his narrative is the boy, a "blessing" (McCarthy 2006: 26) that gives meaning to his life and, most importantly, provides him with a mission: to take care of him and secure a future for him, however dim the chances are. Paired with the ideas on transcendental responsibility I have discussed before, as well as with his philosophy of endurance despite all odds (which resonates with the biblical story of Job), the narrative secures some sense of duty that gives meaning to the man's actions.

Up until now, my discussion of paternal fallibility has mainly touched upon the fantasy of protection. In this section, I will turn to examine the role of the father as a fallible figure from an ethical viewpoint, as well as the effect this has on the child's own ethical stance. Whereas the debate between the man and his wife revolves around what would be the logical thing to do in their situation, there is another ethical conundrum in *The Road,* which is that of hospitality. Overall, any individual they encounter is automatically catalogued as one of the bad guys by the man unless proven otherwise–and he is tough to convince. His mistrust of strangers, together with his status of "good guy" versus their status as not-quite-human, often leads to situations where violence is used against them. For Wielenberg, this hides a slippery slope: "Under the circumstances, the man's actions may be justified. But there is a danger […] that engaging in justified violations of the code of the good guys can make unjustified violations more likely" (2010: 5).

The slippery slope materializes in all its cruelty in the encounter with the cart thief. Unlike the marauders with their weapons and their threatening aura, the cart thief is "an outcast from one of the communes" whose fingers "had been cut away" (McCarthy 2006: 215). He projects a rather pitiful image: "Scrawny, sullen, bearded, filthy […] old plastic coat held together with tape" (215). Once he is found after stealing the pair's cart with their belongings, the man continues to chastise him regardless, forcing him to take off his clothes even though it is obvious the thief is harmless (216). Despite the boy's pleas, the man announces that he is "going to leave [him] the way you left us" (217), accusing him of having tried to kill them simply because he took their possessions when they were not around. By contrast, when the pair find the underground bunker, the man assures the child that it is okay for them to take the food, since it was left there by some "good guys": "They would want us to. Just like we would want them to" (118).

It may appear that the man adapts the "good guys" code to suit whatever their needs are at any given time. In turn, the part of the code that applies to bad guys must always be rigid. Zibrak argues that:

> The adherence to governing myths so widely divergent from physical reality brings with it real danger, mainly the need to other and punish in order to sustain their fictions. […] The man clings so desperately to his identity

> as a good guy that his actions are responses to his own ideology rather than responses to events. The cart thief is not punished for stealing the cart so much as he is punished for being a bad guy. The man's need to uphold a defunct structure trumps compassion and community building. (2012: 123)

This behavioral pattern reveals that the code is crucial to maintaining the fiction of a functional society, but at the same time shows that the adherence to it does not grant the best possible outcome in real life. Unless the transgression implies cannibalizing others, the code can be bent depending on the circumstances–which may lead to the moral slippery slope that Wielenberg identifies.

For Snyder, this episode constitutes a shifting point for the child insofar as "[h]e understands that he is responsible for the father's responsibility as well as his own and that his responsibility goes beyond being an advocate for ethics […]. [He] also understands that he is responsible as an agent for himself–his father cannot substitute for him" (2008: 82). In this sense, the father's fallible grasp on ethics functions as an example for the boy. Arguably, the father fails so that the child does not need to shoulder that responsibility; nevertheless, it is precisely the man's failure which demonstrates the child that he, too, is infinitely responsible and must embrace his obligation towards the Other.

Unlike the man's, the child's ethical stance is firmly rooted in the belief that he ought to answer the others' calls–that is, all of them. The promise of other "good guys" fuels his dreams of community. In a rare glimpse into the child's psyche, we are told that he had "his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children" (McCarthy 2006: 46). Yet, more importantly, he firmly believes that good guys must perform good deeds. Nevertheless, his father's teachings prove at odds with the grim reality they encounter. This often leads the child to openly question his father's actions. Whereas Chavkin and Chavkin reduce the issue to a question of "tension between the practical father and the idealistic son" (2019: 197), I believe there is more depth to it.[10] He remains convinced that it is his duty to provide assistance to others whenever needed, even in cases where the situation cannot be fixed. For instance, when the pair crosses paths with a man struck by lightning, the child weeps and begs his father to do something, but he explains there is nothing to be done: "I'm sorry for what happened to him but we cant fix it. You know that, dont you?" (McCarthy 2006: 43). Albeit reluctant, the boy concedes. Even though the code features the command to help others, the man convinces the boy that they "have no way to help him" (43).

The man's and the boy's clashing stances illustrate the complex nature of ethics in *The Road.* As Snyder astutely observes, the father does not simply refuse "to take action" since "he still feels the pressure of his responsibility to the man, but most especially to the boy, to do something hospitable" (2008: 78). His asking the child forgiveness "pertains not so much to any particular act, but to everything about the situation in which father and son find themselves, including the impossibility of ameliorating either the general condition of the world or the specific horrors that typify it" (78). In other words, it would be simplistic to reduce the man to an uncooperative hypocrite whilst the child remains the only truly ethical figure. In their own ways, both remain ethically compromised as long as they feel responsible, even if that entails that they will sometimes have to choose inaction. An example of this behavior can be found after they escape from the house where some cannibals are slaughtering and eating people they hold captive in a basement. The child anticipates his father's justifications and offers an explanation himself that is strikingly similar to those of the man:

> They're going to kill those people, arent they?
> Yes. […]
> Are they going to eat them?
> I dont know.
> They're going to eat them, arent they?
> Yes.
> And we couldnt help them because then they'd eat us too.
> Yes.
> And that's why we couldnt help them.
> Yes.
> Okay. (McCarthy 2006: 107)

The man's inability to meet his own (high) standards demonstrates his fallibility. It appears that the boy sometimes mistrusts his father, probably because he sees through his excuses but chooses not to dwell on them–possibly because he himself does not know how to address those contradictions either. The man confronts him about this once, telling him that he does not believe him, to which the child simply replies: "I always believe you […]. Yes I do. *I have to*" (McCarthy 2006: 156; emphasis added). Occasionally, as seen in the long

[10] It might be the case that the boy's desire to help others stems from his own repressed (and unfulfilled) desire to help his mother and thereby save her life. In a similar vein, it is likely that the man sees himself as a failure in his role of protector after that same episode: "He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell" (McCarthy 2006: 27).

quotation above, the boy also participates in these excuses. After all, as Zibrak points out, "[w]hat the boy does not learn by direct observation comes only through his relationship with the man [...]. The man is therefore central to the boy's understanding of each event in his capacity as both a participant and a creator of ideological structure" (2012: 106-7). If he has seen his father break the code to justify their inaction, it is reasonable that he imitates that same reasoning when he feels overwhelmed.

In addition to the ethical contradictions made explicit through the father's actions, the novel's focalization complicates the perception of his moral status. Both Ashley Kunsa and Russell M. Hillier foreground the access readers have to the man's train of thought, which according to Kunsa makes him a more sympathetic character (2009: 62). Hillier also observes that the "frequent coalescence of the novel's narrative voice with the father's mind and subjective experience grants readers insight into the father's desperate struggle to locate or rely upon anything meaningful" (2015: 672). Besides fostering greater sympathy towards the man, his position as the almost exclusive focalizer throughout the novel can make us readers fall prey to his contradictions. This is especially significant in their encounter with another kid while the father is still alive.

While passing a desert town, the boy sees another child about his age when his father is not around. Upon leaving town, he cannot stop thinking about the other child and his well-being: "What if the little boy doesnt have anybody to take care of him? What if he doesnt have a papa? [...] We should go get him, Papa. We could get him and take him with us [...]. And I'd give that little boy half of my food" (McCarthy 2006: 72-3). Nonetheless, the man categorically denies the other boy's existence (72; 74). This episode triggers the memory of their encountering a dog during a time when his wife was alive and they still kept "three cartridges in the pistol. None to spare" (74). Unlike most of the novel, this particular fragment is one of the few that feature first person narration. The man declares he promised the boy not to hurt the dog, but then "[t]he next day it was gone" (74), and concludes: "That is the dog he remembers. He doesnt remember any little boys" (74).

The ambivalent reading of this passage complicates the father's moral stance. Wielenberg convincingly argues that the father shot the dog and used it to feed his family; that would explain why they went from having three cartridges to just two at the beginning of the novel, taking into account that the mother committed suicide with a flake of obsidian (2010: 6–7). If he did kill the dog, it would mean he has broken the good guys' code not just once but several times–promising the boy not to hurt the dog and killing it anyway, lying to him about what really happened, and then trying to deceive readers into believing that the boy is delusional. Additionally, his intrusive remarks on the child's mental state are proven disputable with the appearance of a second boy in the novel's ending. In fact, this episode provides enough hints of the man's unreliability overall, and opens the door to mistrust–the same mistrust the boy and the woman manifest towards him.

In general, the man's ambiguous morale conjures a complex portrait of paternal fallibility in which he appears to be far from heroic, but by no means a villain either. Similar to the role played by the mother figure in exposing the man's contradictions, here it is the boy who lashes out against his father and calls out the dissonance between his teachings and his actions: "Those stories are not true [...]. [I]n the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (McCarthy 2006: 225). Both the child and his mother amplify the man's self-questioning and stage an ethical debate from which there is no easy way out. I would like to insist on the fact that it is not the man's acting fatherly which is being scrutinized here, but rather his projection of the dominant fiction and the very impossibility of maintaining it. The man's inability to live to his own expectations thus conjures a version of the dominant fiction narrating its own collapse. By foregrounding its contradictions, the dominant fiction becomes apparent and thereby can begin to be dismantled.

And yet the ending complicates this reading. Even though the father's decision not to kill the child puts his survival at stake, he takes one last leap of faith in letting the child live: "You dont know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again" (McCarthy 2006: 234). Eventually, his faith is rewarded as a family appears to take the boy in. The encounter with the nuclear family grants the father the moral victory over the mother: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (236). Both are now dead, but the father was right all along and did the right thing sparing the boy's life.

However, what truly undermines the text's overall deconstruction of the father figure is the man's final transfiguration from human to deity-like entity. For Wielenberg, the man's "inability to trust others" implies that "the child is unable to connect with other good guys as long as his father is alive [...]. Because the man is damaged, he is unable to fulfill this function completely. He can truly succeed as a parent only by dying" (2010: 8). In my opinion, this view only reinforces the notion that the father does not become a *true* father until he dies and becomes a bodiless, abstract principle. In a Freudian-esque twist, the death of the real father–that is, his physical absence–transfigures him into the symbolic father.[11] This shift contributes to reinforce the dominant fiction, i.e., the imaginary, compensatory fantasy that equates the father to the phallus, and runs counter to the collapsing fiction that had been so far explored in the novel. As the man comes to embody (paradoxically, upon his death and therefore disembodiment) the Symbolic father, doubt arises as to whether his shortcomings will be remembered by the child. Here the tale is resolved in a way that fits the dominant fiction: the father starts

[11] I am referring to the transformation of the brutal father of the horde into a deity-like figure after his murder, as discussed by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*.

as a fallible and all-too-human individual, but perseveres, and in the end is bestowed with the greatest gift a patriarchal society can offer: to become a god-like figure to men, particularly his son.

5. Concluding Remarks

What makes the man in *The Road* a good father is his will to be a father: he deeply cares for the child, looks after him, and is willing to make sacrifices for him. His enactment of the paternal role is multifaceted insofar as it ranges from the more traditional protector role to the caring, nurturing role–a role that absolutely requires a body. This is a father who hugs his child, shelters him from the cold with his own body, keeps him warm, and keeps him company so that he does not feel alone or scared. The paternal body is very much present and, I would say, essential in the construction of the novel. It is likewise significant that the paternal body collapses due to an unknown illness, hence prompting the eventual parting of father and son. The removal of the paternal body from the equation is what brings the Symbolic father back into the picture.

Once the man is gone, the physical dimension of care is replaced by the silent conversation with a non-responding entity. The ending only reaffirms the transmission of patriarchal values, even if the father's journey as failed protector had hitherto suggested another possible conclusion. The appearance of the nuclear family, together with the transformation of the individual father into the symbolic father, undoes what this disruptive example of paternity had accomplished so far. A bodiless, absent father can never be fallible, because he will be whatever one chooses him to be. The void left by the absent father is filled in with his mythology of good guys carrying the fire.

Nevertheless, it is also true that throughout most of the story the father's role is stripped of its patriarchal halo–especially in comparison to what Church calls "the brutal patriarchy of the marauders" (2017: 28). However, the discourse that undergirds the man's mythical creation of the "good guys carrying the fire," together with the restitution of the nuclear family and the absent, symbolic Father, are elements that cause the narrative to tilt toward consolidating the father-patriarchy conflation rather than challenging it. Regardless, this shift does not nullify other subversive elements. Among these, it is worth noting both the roles of the mother and the child in denouncing the façade of the dominant fiction, as well as the subtle textual clues that point towards the man's limited perspective. In his role of "receptacle of his father's previous teaching" (Snyder 2008: 75), the child comes to understand the dissonance between the semblance of wholeness projected in his father's stories and his actions and avoids passing judgment on him. Far from thwarting his ethical development, the blatant contradictions in which his father incurs teach him to assume his infinite responsibility towards the Other–a category that encompasses the people they encounter, but also his own father. If the man does not give up on the child by keeping him alive, then the child reciprocates by not giving up on his father despite his shortcomings. Nevertheless, this image of mutual engagement is dissolved by the essentialist reduction of the man to a figure akin to God.

The Road opens new possibilities by imagining an embodied father that is fallible, and kind to his child, and humane in spite of everything that has happened–and then effacing those same possibilities with the triumph of the bodiless, absent, symbolic Father.

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