

THE ROAD by Cormac McCarthy

Apocalypse:

1. the complete final destruction of the world, especially as described in the biblical book of Revelation.
2. an event involving destruction, damage or change on an awesome or catastrophic scale.

As long as humanity has walked, there have been only two roads: the road to damnation and the road to salvation. All great voyages spring from the same source: the hope to survive long enough for a better future in some more benevolent or compassionate place. If we cannot make it to this better place, then at least our children and their children will benefit someday. Even when there appears no reason for hope, there is always the road. Should it lead to nowhere, at least we tried.

The continuing contradiction of this quest is that survival demands a degree of single-minded self-preservation, while kindness has as its foundation caring compassion. In this novel, the father is survival and the son is compassion. If they are the last hope for a new post-apocalyptic civil society, the two must find a balance.

Another aspect to consider is that when an apocalypse comes, there is no safety net, no god, and no superman, just a few remaining select individuals reliant entirely on their own physical and intellectual skill for survival. Some slough off their civilized skin on the instant; these are the "bad guys." Others will show themselves to be the "good guys," willing to sacrifice their immediate needs in the name of human decency. Which are you and which values do you imagine you would keep no matter what?

Pre-Reading Questions

1. Give two real life examples of people leaving their homes to find a better place.
2. For each of your examples, why did the people flee and what promises fuelled their hopes?
3. What does the "road to salvation" mean?
4. What would have to happen to get you to set out on the road with only a few possessions that you could carry yourself?
5. In the event of an apocalypse, what would be more important to you: your own safety or the safety of your family and friends?

Pages 3-17

- 1) What atmosphere is created by the details of the man's dream? Explain.
- 2) "He knew only that the child was his warrant¹. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). What does this mean?
- 3) Quote to show how dangerous things are for the father and son.
- 4) Quote to show how desperate they are.
- 5) About what age do you think is the boy? Explain.
- 6) "If only my heart were stone" (11). Why does the father wish his heart were stone?

¹ Warrant means authorization

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- 7) "[C]auterized² terrain," "and all was burnt before them," "cold autistic dark" (14, 15). What calamity could have befallen the world? Explain your reasoning.
- 8) "He thought the blood cults must have all consumed one another" (16).
 - a) What do you think the "blood cults" are?
 - b) Why would there be such things as blood cults in this environment?
- 9) Why hasn't the father lost complete faith in life and in the future of humanity?

Pages 18 to 37

1. He calls beautiful dreams "siren worlds" (18) and is careful to resist them.
 - a. What does "siren" mean in this context?
 - b. What is he careful to resist beautiful dreams?
2. "Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory" (18). McCarthy uses blindness and sightlessness to describe the novel's setting. Why is that a fitting comparison?
3. Why is the scene with the can of Coca Cola so tender?
4. How does McCarthy begin to increase the suspense and tension of the narrative in this section of the novel?
5. On page 29, the father thinks to himself, "Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?" What is the father asking himself?
6. On page 30, McCarthy gives the reader another reason for the father's desperate need to get his son to safety: "On the gray snow a fine mist of blood." What does this mean?
7. On page 34, the boy says to the father, "I have to watch you all the time." Why does he have to watch his father?

Pages 38 to 52

Pipsissewa (39): any of a kind of evergreen herbs of the wintergreen family with astringent leaves used as a tonic and diuretic (causing increased passing of urine).

Morel (40): any of several edible fungi having a conical cap with a highly pitted surface —called also morel mushroom

Windrow (44): a row heaped up by or as if by the wind

Doghouse sleeper (45): a compartment behind the seats of a truck where a person can sleep

Piedmont (47): a gentle slope leading from the base of mountains to a region of flat land.

Macadam (48): broken stone of even size used in successively compacted layers for surfacing roads and paths, and typically bound with tar or bitumen.

Mastic (48): any of various pasty materials used as protective coatings or cements

1. "This is a good place Papa" (41).
 - a. List reasons why he would think so.
 - b. Why is the waterfall not a good place?

² Cauterized means burnt

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2. Why, in this desperate world, would the father tell his son "Old stories of courage and justice" (41)?
3. What does the father discover in the trailer?
4. Why might the trailer be carrying such an unusual cargo?
5. The boy kept pulling at his coat. Papa? He said.
Stop it.
Cant we help him Papa?
No. We cant help him. There's nothing to be done for him. (50)
 - a. Who do the father and son encounter on the road? List details.
 - b. Give reasons why they cannot help this poor man.
 - c. Why is it important that the boy is so insistent?
6. Explain the significance of the man's decision to at last discard his wallet and everything in it.

Pages 52 to 71

Spindled (53): to impale, thrust, or perforate on the spike of a spindle file

Fescue (53): a small pointer (as a stick) used to point out letters to children learning to read; any of a type of tufted grasses

Providential (54): of, relating to, or determined by Providence (divine guidance or care)

Provenance (54): origin; source

Penitent (54): a person who repents of sin

Obsidian (58): a dark natural glass formed by the cooling of molten lava

Meconium (59): a dark greenish mass that accumulates in the bowel during fetal life and is discharged shortly after birth

Rachitic (63): rickety; in unsound physical condition

Siwash (68): a camp without a tent

1. Why does the man begin to fill the bath in this part of the novel? What does his decision reveal about his character?
2. "All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to ones heart have a common provenance in pain" (54). How is this true?
3. What reasons does the boy's mother give for her choice? (Quote)
4. What reasons does the man's wife give for his choice to be a survivor? (Quote)
5. In what ways is it easier that the boy has no memory of the world before?
6. What do they have to eat on the truck? (Quote)
7. Explain how your assessment of the father's character changed following this scene.
8. "A single round left in the revolver. You will not face the truth. You will not." (68) What truth does he refuse to face? Explain.
9. Quote to show what did the truck people did with their freshly killed companion. Why do they?

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Pages 71-90

Anointing (74): Smear or rub with oil, typically as part of a religious ceremony: *'high priests were anointed with oil'*

Chalice (74): A large cup or goblet

Claggy (75): Tending to form clots; sticky

Quoits (76): A ring of iron, rope, or rubber thrown in a game to encircle or land as near as possible to an upright peg

Cowl (77): A large loose hood, especially one forming part of a monk's habit

Changeling (78): A child believed to have been secretly substituted by fairies for the parents' real child in infancy

Sapper (79): A soldier responsible for tasks such as building and repairing roads and bridges, laying and clearing mines, etc.

Matrix (86): A grid-like arrangement of elements; a lattice

1. "Are we still the good guys?" (77). If the truck cannibals are the bad guys, what specifically, in this near absolute anarchy, makes the boy and his father the good guys?
2. As the boy concentrates on his flute, "The man thought he seemed some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a travelling spectacle in shire and village who does not know that behind him all the players have been carried off by wolves" (78). Explain how this metaphor is appropriate.
3. "Nothing bad is going to happen to us ... Because we're carrying the fire" (83). What is this fire?
4. Regardless, of whether he saw another little boy, how is this boy's empathetic compassion vital for the future of humanity should there be one? (Consider the dog scene on page 87.)
5. "... the names ... more fragile than he would have thought" (89). Why are names so important to our sense of the world, even our concepts of right and wrong?

Pages 90-115

Viscera (90): The internal organs in the main cavities of the body, especially those in the abdomen, e.g. the intestines.

Field-dress (90): To remove the internal organs from (hunted game) soon after the kill, primarily to aid the cooling of the carcass.

Frieze (90): A broad horizontal band of sculpted or painted decoration, especially on a wall near the ceiling.

Woad (90): A blue dye obtained from the woad plant, now replaced by synthetic products.

Phalanx (91): A group of troops or police officers standing or moving in close formation.

Catamite (92): A boy kept for homosexual practice.

Bedlam (97): A scene of uproar and confusion.

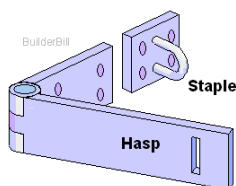
Lope (105): Walk or run with a long bounding stride.

Port cochere (105): A porch where vehicles stop to set down passengers.

Harrow (109): An implement consisting of a heavy frame set with teeth or tines which is dragged over

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ploughed land to break up clods, remove weeds, and cover seed.



Haspstaple (109):

1. What similarities are shared by the bad guys encountered so far in the story?
 2. Give evidence to demonstrate how hungry they are at this point.
 3. "He looked at the boy's face sleeping in the orange light. The sunken cheeks streaked with black. He fought back the rage. Useless." (96). Why would he feel rage?
 4. Before discovering the people in the basement, what signs are there that this is a bad place? "All these things he saw and did not see" (109).
 5. Quote to demonstrate the depth of the father's protective love for his son.
 6. **Response to Reading:** Now approximately halfway through this unusual novel, what strikes you as particularly insightful, interesting or relevant about the experience so far? For further inspiration as to why this book is a worthwhile educational experience, you may wish to scan the critical snippets inside the front cover or take a look at the topics below. Submit your piece of writing after the holidays. It should be approximately 500 words in length (2 pages, double-spaced). Include brainstorming and rough copy.
- Why do you think McCarthy has chosen not to give his characters names? How do the nonspecific labels of "the man" and "the boy" affect the way in which readers relate to them?
 - How is McCarthy able to make the postapocalyptic world of The Road seem so real and utterly terrifying? Which descriptive passages are especially vivid and memorable? What do you find to be the most horrifying features of this world and the survivors who inhabit it?
 - McCarthy doesn't clearly explain what kind of catastrophe has ruined the earth and destroyed human civilization, but what might be suggested by the many descriptions of a scorched landscape covered in ash? Ultimately, why isn't the reason for the catastrophe important to the story?
 - McCarthy envisions a postapocalyptic world in which "murder was everywhere upon the land" and the earth would soon be "largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes". How difficult or easy is it to imagine McCarthy's nightmare vision actually happening? Do you think people would likely behave as they do in the novel, under the same circumstances? Does it now seem that human civilization is headed toward such an end?
 - The man and the boy think of themselves as the "good guys." In what ways are they like and unlike the "bad guys" they encounter? What do you think McCarthy is suggesting in the scenes in which the boy begs his father to be merciful to the strangers they encounter on the road? How is the boy able to retain his compassion—to be "compassion personified"?
 - The Road takes the form of a classic journey story, a form that dates back to Homer's *Odyssey*. To what destination are the man and the boy journeying? In what sense are they "pilgrims"? What, if any, is the symbolic significance of their journey?

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- What makes the relationship between the boy and his father so powerful and emotional? What do they feel for each other? How do they maintain their affection for and faith in each other in such brutal conditions?
- While reading a novel, a reader may put himself into a character's position and think about the choices he would have made differently than the character. Or a reader might realize that a character is much cleverer than he is. Thinking back over the novel so far, what decisions of the father have you either agreed or disagreed with? How would you have chosen differently?

Pages 115-130

1. Why must he take the risk of investigating another house?
2. What is a cistern and of what value is this knowledge in our day and age?
3. Examine a couple of their conversations. How does the father know what the boy is ready to learn and capable of handling?
4. How can it be argued that no matter how hungry these two get, they will never eat a person?
5. "casket black", "blinding cold", "terrible silence", "candle coloured skin" (129). Why not just really black, really cold, really quiet silence and really pale skin?
6. "There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn't about death. He wasn't sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness" (129). Why sob about these things?

Pages 131-156

Gelid (137): extremely cold; icy

Krugerrand (142): a one-ounce gold coin of the Republic of South Africa

Refuge (154): shelter or protection from danger or distress

1. When the father recalls his wife on page 131 he thinks that "each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins." In other words, each time you remember an event, you somehow distort or change what really happened. Do you agree? Do we change our memories as we recall them?
2. What does it mean that the man almost raises the pistol at their reflection and the boy must tell him that it is a reflection of them both (page 132)?
3. If he's so certain that "there's no place else to go. This is it" (137), why does the father not simply ignore his son's terror and open this trap door when he first discovers it?
4. "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up" (137). Explain how this is a true description of "good guys."
5. Explain why they cannot stay there when it is so obvious that they could last for quite a while--at least through the winter. List several reasons.
6. "... he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself and alien. A being from another planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect." (153). Explain this idea in your own words.
7. "Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished

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it to be over." (154) How so?

8. What would you do in the father's situation—stay in the shelter or leave? Explain your reasons.

Pages 156 to 175

Balustrade (159): A railing supported by balusters, especially one forming an ornamental parapet to a balcony, bridge, or terrace.

Pall (159): A dark cloud of smoke, dust, etc. Also, a cloth spread over a coffin, hearse, or tomb.

Scrim (159): (in a theatre) a piece of gauze cloth that appears opaque until lit from behind, used as a screen or backcloth

Bivouac (168): A temporary camp without tents or cover, used especially by soldiers or mountaineers.

Buddha (168): A person who has attained full enlightenment or insight.

1. How does throwing away his flute show that the boy is maturing? What other things does the boy say to show he is growing up?
2. Why do they stop on hills?
3. "He's scared, Papa. The man is scared." (162)
 - a. Describe the man.
 - b. Define "mercy."
 - c. Why does the boy show mercy to the man?
 - d. In what sense is it true that the future of humanity even today depends on mercy?
4. "People were always getting ready for tomorrow.... Tomorrow wasn't getting ready for them. It didn't even know they were there" (168). Evaluate the wisdom of this observation.
5. When I saw that boy I thought that I had died.
You thought that he was an angel?
I didn't know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn't know what would happen.
What if I said he was a god? (172)
In what regard is it reasonable to suggest that the boy is a god/angel of mercy?
6. After they've left Ely behind, the man says, "When we're out of food you'll have more time to think about it. ... After a while [the boy] said: I know. But I won't remember it the way you do" (174). How do you think that the boy remembers their meeting with Ely?

Pages 176 to 198

Midden (177): a refuse heap

Kudzu (177): a fast-growing vine that is used for forage and erosion control and is often a serious weed in the southeastern U.S.

Sullen (177): dismal; gloomy

Cairn (180): a heap of stones piled up as a memorial or as a landmark

Patteran (180): any of several coded signs left along a road or on a non-Roma house by one Rom to another.

Desiccate (184): to dry up

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Bolus (188): a rounded mass

Skein (192): a loosely coiled length of yarn or thread wound on a reel

1. Although not consciously aware of it, what signs are there that the boy senses that his father is dying?
2. "A human head beneath a cake-bell at the end of the counter. Desiccated. Wearing a ball cap" (184). How is this somehow worse than the earlier line up of heads on the wall?
3. What is the father's memory of the snake extermination?
4. Why would the men destroy the snakes? Why are their actions ironic?
5. Why is the boy "so strangely untroubled" (191) by the burnt figures mired in the blacktop?
6. Describe the people that are following the father and son on page 195.
7. Explain why the "black thing skewered over the coals" (198) is possibly the most disturbing image in the book.

Pages 199 to 225

Vocabulary:

Loggia (204): a roofed open gallery especially at an upper story overlooking an open court

Portico (204): a covered place for walking often at the entrance of a building

Palladian (205): of or relating to a revived classical style in architecture based on the works of Andrea Palladio

Disinter (213): to take out of the grave or tomb

Comber (215): a long curling wave of the sea

Vigilant (216): alertly watchful especially to avoid danger

Tokus (216): the buttocks

Seaoats (221): a tall grass, grows chiefly on the coast of the southern U.S.

Isocline (222): a line on a diagram or map connecting points of equal gradient or inclination

Sepulchre (222): a place of burial; tomb

Mae west (225): an inflatable life jacket in the form of a collar extending down the chest that was worn by fliers in World War II

1. "If we had that little baby it could go with us" (200). After his father agrees, the boy seems able to cope once again. Why?
2. What does it mean that "more than once they woke sprawled in the road like traffic victims" (202)?
3. "[The arrowhead] was white quartz, perfect as the day it was made" (203). What is the irony of this find?
4. What does it mean that the boy has no interest in the artifacts?
5. "I think maybe they are watching, he said. They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back" (210). Who is "they" and why would they behave that way?
6. List the lifeless aspects of the ocean. Which is most bothersome? Explain.
7. What is so compelling about the idea that on the other side of the dead ocean is another father and

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son just like them?

8. Why would the boy wish to go swimming and what is so painful about it?

Pages 226 to 250

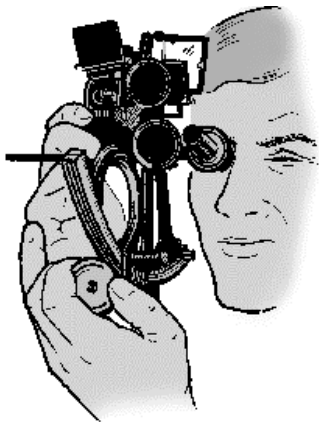
Vocabulary:

Stateroom (226): a private room on a ship or boat; a compartment below deck on a boat used for living accommodations

Galley (227): the kitchen and cooking apparatus especially of a ship or airplane

Excelsior (227): fine curled wood shavings used especially for packing fragile items

Sextant (227): an instrument used especially in navigation to observe altitudes of celestial bodies (as in ascertaining latitude and longitude)



EPIRB (240): emergency position-indicating radio beacon

Pampootie (243): a shoe of untanned cowhide worn in the Aran islands, County Galway, Ireland

1. "It occurred to him that he took this windfall in a fashion dangerously close to matter of fact but still he said what he said before. That good luck might be no such thing. There were few nights that he did not envy the dead" (230). Why would having this good luck be a bad thing?
2. How valuable to them is the first aid kit? Explain.
3. "It would be like a celebration" (241) says the boy about the idea to shoot the flare gun at night. A celebration of what? Why do it at all?
4. With the news that there are no likely any people anywhere else besides earth, the boy quietly says, "I don't know what we're doing" (244). What does he mean?
5. "I will do what I promised, he whispered. No matter what. I will not send you into the darkness alone." (248). Do you think the man knows they are on a journey not to somewhere safe but are simply pretending so, to delay the onset of darkness step by step? Explain.

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Pages 251-287

Vocabulary:

Salitter (261): essence of God

Scarpbolt (271): a long pointed bolt used in shipbuilding

Crozzled (273): blackened or burnt at the edges

Loess (280): an unstratified usually buff to yellowish brown loamy deposit found in North America, Europe, and Asia and believed to be chiefly deposited by the wind

1. Make note of the thief's hand. Why would this have been done to him?
2. Why does looking at the boy make the thief set down his knife?
3. Do you agree with the father's actions towards the thief or do you agree with the son's reaction? Explain.
4. What happens to the father as they are moving through a town?
5. "In the nights sometimes now he'd wake in the black and freezing waste out of softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun" (272). Why are the father's dreams filled with this lovely images?
6. How do we know the man in the yellow ski parka is one of the good guys by his description on pages 281 to 283?
7. What is your reaction to finishing the book? Did you like how it ended? Were you surprised by the ending? Did you feel it was worth reading?