

Reetu Toivanen

**RESPONSES TO THE ABSURD IN CORMAC  
MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD***

The Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences  
Bachelor's Thesis  
April 2022

# ABSTRACT

Reetu Toivanen: Responses to The Absurd In Cormac McCarthy's The Road  
Bachelor's Thesis  
Tampere University  
Bachelor's Programme in Languages  
April 2022

---

This thesis analyses how the characters of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* react to encountering the absurd. The theory section of this thesis includes a brief overview of the history of the philosophical school of nihilism, and further discusses how Friedrich Nietzsche's formulation of the death of God remains highly influential in the development of postmodernist thought. However, the theoretical framework of this thesis will be limited to existential nihilism, of which Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe De Sisyphe*) is a representative of. In his essay Camus formulates three different responses to encountering the absurd: suicide, rebellion, and hope. Camus equates suicide to a repudiation of life. He rejects hope, or the belief in a transcendental quality of life, as in his view it represents an attempt to escape the presence of the absurd. Ultimately for Camus the only acceptable response is that of rebellion, which in his work is portrayed as a scornful struggle against the meaninglessness of life.

In the analysis section of the thesis, Camus' three responses are compared to the responses given by the characters of *The Road*, insofar as those responses can be inferred from their thoughts and actions. In addition to juxtaposing the responses to the absurd, this section includes an examination of the concept of anomie, the unraveling of the bond between the individual and the community, and how this concept affects the possibility of meeting the absurd, and how it affects the response to the absurd. In this thesis I will demonstrate that the responses to the absurd given by the characters of *The Road* are directly comparable to the three responses outlined by Camus. I will, however, note that the barbaric post-apocalyptic world created by McCarthy is a driving force that affects the responses given by the characters in a manner that cannot be underestimated.

Keywords: absurd, absurdism, Cormac McCarthy, nihilism, post-apocalyptic fiction

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Reetu Toivanen: Responses To The Absurd In Cormac McCarthy's The Road  
Kandidaatintutkielma  
Tampereen Yliopisto  
Kielten kandidaattiohjelma  
Huhtikuu 2022

---

Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee Cormac McCarthy'n Tie -teoksessa esiintyvien hahmojen reaktioita absurdin kohtaamiseen. Tutkielman teoriaa käsittelevä osuus sisältää suppean katsauksen nihilismia edustavan filosofisen koulukunnan historiaan ja siihen, miten nihilismi ja eritoten Friedrich Nietzsche'n tuottama idea Jumalan kuolemasta on vaikuttanut postmodernistisen ajattelun kehitykseen. Teoreettinen viitekehys kuitenkin rajataan tutkielman kannalta oleelliseksi nähtävään eksistentiaaliseen nihilismiin, minkä edustajaksi Albert Camus'n esse Sisyfoksen myytti (Le Mythe De Sisyphé) lukeutuu. Esseessään Camus teorii kolme erilaista vastausta absurdin kohtaamiseen, joihin lukeutuvat: itsemurha, kapina ja toivo. Camus rinnastaa itsemurhan elämän kieltämiseen. Toivon, eli elämän ylikuonnolliseen ominaisuuteen uskomisen hän sivuuttaa argumentoimalla tämän uskon olevan yritys paeta absurdin kohtaamisesta. Lopulta ainoaksi hyväksyttäväksi vastaukseksi Camus linjaa kapinan, joka kuvastaa lähestulkoon vihamielistä taistoa elämän merkityksettömyyttä vastaan.

Tutkielman analyysiosiossa Camus'n kolmea vastausta verrataan Tie -teoksessa esiintyvien hahmojen puheista ja teoista pääteltävissä oleviin vastauksiin. Vastauksien samankaltaisuuksien rinnastamisen lisäksi osiossa tutkitaan anomian, eli yhteisön ja yksilön välisten siteiden rappeutumisen vaikutusta absurdin kohtaamisen todennäköisyyteen ja siihen, miten anomia vaikuttaa absurdiin vastaamiseen.

Tutkielmassani osoitan laajamittaisella analyysillä, että hahmojen antamat vastaukset absurdistä kumpuavaan jännitteeseen ovat lähes suoraan verrannollisia Albert Camus'n Sisyfoksen myytti -esseessä mallinnettuihin kolmeen vastaukseen. Huomioin kuitenkin McCarthy'n luoman post-apokalyptisen maailman raakalaismaisuuden ohjailevana voimana, jonka vaikutusta hahmojen tuottamiin vastauksiin ei voida vähätellä.

Keywords: absurdi, absurdismi, Cormac McCarthy, nihilismi, post-apokalyptinen fiktio.

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. The End of Meaning.....	3
3. Filling the Void.....	8
3.1 The Wife.....	8
3.2 The Man.....	12
3.3 The Boy.....	15
4. Conclusion.....	19
Works Cited.....	21

## 1. Introduction

The genre of post-apocalyptic fiction has recently risen to popular culture limelight, and it raises a great many questions as to why. Books, movies, and videogames of the genre are being manufactured by the entertainment industry at a seemingly ever accelerating rate. Why, then, does the idea of the collapse of civilization arouse such curiosity? Arguably it is not awe of the often-depicted physical destruction of environment and life that drives the popularity, but rather the way in which the genre allows for exploration of a human psyche pushed to its limits. After all, how should one react to the loss of the world?

It is this intricate depiction of the human response to the loss of meaning and the resulting battle against nihilism that elevates Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* to its position as one of the most lauded works in its genre. While much of McCarthy's breadth of work revolves around themes of violence, death, acting on instinct, and arguably nihilism, *The Road* remains his only foray into the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. As the world of *The Road* is forcefully stripped of the illusions of safety and common cause that modern humanity often takes for granted, the result is coming face to face with what Albert Camus once called the "one truly serious philosophical problem" (Camus 1), suicide.

The story of *The Road* follows a father and his son on their journey with no destination through a desolate and dead world that has been devastated by an unknown calamity. The pair was once accompanied on this road by the boy's mother, who, having understood the futility of their struggle, chose to end her life. The specter of suicide is an ever-present consideration for the man and the boy, as they, starving and emaciated, scavenge for food and supplies in long abandoned towns and villages while doing their best to avoid roaming tribes of cannibals. Their lives and struggles in this sundered world where nihilism reigns supreme represent an opportunity for analysis of the reasons for their individual decisions to continue living while the threat of violence follows their every step and hope for salvation is a forgone notion.

In “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942), Camus outlined three possible human responses to what is known as “the Absurd”, in other words, this exact notion of being unable to find value or meaning in life despite a continuous search. If one is to entertain the thought of the absurd, one ultimately has to make a choice between these three responses: suicide, faith, or rebellion. Merely living does not, however, necessitate the thought of the absurd, as the majority of human beings are capable of constructing their own meaning within the framework of their lives. It is in the extremes of those lives, in the most difficult and demanding moments that the notion of the absurd manifests. In the world of *The Road*, however, the possibility of constructing meaning has been stolen from the characters, and as such, the absurd is forced on them.

In this thesis I will compare the three responses to the absurd as proposed by Camus with the responses of the three aforementioned characters of McCarthy’s *The Road*. Further, I will attempt to answer the question of whether or not the responses given by the characters of *The Road* can truly be said to be representations of Camus’ framework of responses, and if not, why?

## 2. The End of Meaning

The concept of nihilism, that is, the rejection of meaning, has spawned a great deal of interest and discussion around the subject, and not without cause. This sense of meaning and the importance thereof, after all, is arguably one of the most fundamental driving forces of human existence.

Considering this, the loss of all notions of meaning can then be seen as a destructive force, or even an antithesis to humanity. The breadth of scholarly work on the topic of nihilism spans nearly two centuries, and the subject has splintered into numerous categories of philosophical thought that often restrict these nihilistic positions to a rejection of a specific criteria. This is the case in, for example, Political Nihilism; a philosophical position that renounces political institutions and sets the destabilization, and ultimately the destruction of said institutions as its goal.

Furthermore, much of the work on this topic over the recent decades has shifted to an analysis, or rather an accusation of postmodernity as a vessel for the destruction of meaning. This critique that is rooted in conservatism often concerns itself with arguing against the aspects of social change and progress by evoking fears that these changes will lead humanity down a path of self-destruction if some aspect of tradition is abandoned. This line of argumentation is by no means a new development in scholarly works pertaining to nihilism, as it was already present in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose now famous idea of the death of God was originally argued to have resulted from Europe becoming more secular and moving away from the Judeo-Christian framework of morality:

If you abandon the Christian faith, at the same time you are pulling the right to Christian morality out from under your feet. This morality is very far from self-evident . . . If you break off one of its principal concepts, the belief in God, then you shatter the whole thing: you have nothing necessary left between your fingers. (Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 45)

This ideation that necessitates the loss of meaning once humanity leaps over some imagined forbidden boundary is a persistent theme in more contemporary works on the subject of Nihilism.

One of the most well known critiques of postmodernity of this kind was formulated by Jean François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) where he argued that embracing postmodernism has caused society to distance itself from the grand narratives constructed during the modern period: “These metanarratives or grand narratives are philosophies of history that attempt to organize all events and social projects around a projected goal, and give meaning and legitimation to these events and projects according to that goal.” (Woodward 123) With the loss of these narratives, different societies construct narratives of their own. They have their own alternate histories and ideals and thus the meaning or even the real recollection of events is lost as people are unable grasp which of these various recollections is, in fact, real.

Lyotard’s writing represents only a small part of what could be called a wave of French philosophers whose works largely focused on the analysis of meaning. For example, Jacques Derrida’s concept of deconstruction establishes the argument that the complexity of language prohibits the extraction of the true meaning of a text. Similarly, in his 1967 essay “The Death of The Author”, Roland Barthes argues for abandoning the author of a text as a way for extracting the meaning of said text. As this postmodernist “attack on meaning” progressed, the critique of postmodernism itself began gaining ground.

In his 1994 book, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard went on to argue that as postmodern society continues to further simulate and model reality by artificially reconstructing it anew as simulacra, it is reality itself that becomes lost when humans can no longer distinguish reality from the artificial model of reality. This all-encompassing loss of meaning through the loss of reality, as imagined by Baudrillard, already prevents humanity from even the attempting to re-establish connection to reality: “Of the same order as the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real, is the impossibility of staging an illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.” (Baudrillard 372)



Undoubtedly, however, it is not these discussions of societal scope that first come to mind when one thinks of nihilism, but more so the unraveling of the framework of meaning and value on an individual level. It is discussing the possibility of escape from this personal tragedy that constitutes much of the work on the topic of existential nihilism: “The existential nihilist judges human existence to be pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds up to nothing. It is entirely gratuitous in the sense that there is no justification for life, but also no reason not to live.” (Crosby 30)

In this thesis, the focus will be on this particular subset of nihilism, as the *The Road* provides a perfect avenue to explore these considerations at a point where human life is stripped to its barest, most primal form. The point where the sense of the absurd becomes inescapable and a response to it is warranted. Over the past two centuries, several ways of overcoming nihilism have been suggested but as often happens in the purview of philosophy, no consensus has been found: “Where Stirner advocates egoism, Schopenhauer sees it as source of all suffering. Where Nietzsche celebrates the will to power as the highest value, Schopenhauer rejects it as the essence of evil.” (Crosby 30)

The concept at the heart of existential nihilism, the sense of the absurd, asks anyone coming into contact with it how one should reconcile oneself with the built-in instinct to search for meaning in life and the inability to find any. Alternatively, as more poetically stated by Camus: “The absurd is born of this human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.” (Camus 10) Albert Camus proposes three possible responses to the question in his essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus”. The first and possibly the most fundamental consideration is that of suicide. If one is to completely submit to the notion that life has no inherent meaning or value, suicide becomes a seemingly rational choice. This first response is by no means something that Camus endorses, but rather it is portrayed as a threat, or a defeat that emerges from within. In this manner, suicide is portrayed as succumbing to

the absurd: “It is essential to die unreconciled and not of ones own free will. Suicide is repudiation.”  
(Camus 19)

The second response to the absurd as outlined by Camus is one of hope. Hope that life as it appears to us is not all there is, but that there exists some intangible and transcendental quality to life that cannot be measured or otherwise quantified. This hope can exist in various forms; from the dogmatic faith perpetuated by organized religion to the smallest sects or even the faintest sense of the transcendent in the mind of an individual. This hope for something more, for something that would inevitably reward one for his struggles or otherwise justify ones suffering throughout life is seen by Camus as an attempt to escape the absurd:

Now, to limit myself to existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest escape. Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them.

(Camus 11)

In this manner, Camus argues to avoid hope as a response to the absurd as it is not dissimilar to falling in love with one’s own suffering, albeit via the proxy of attributing some life-transcending meaning to said suffering.

Camus establishes that suicide is not an antidote to life and the absurd but in fact a denial thereof, and that hope on the other hand is fundamentally situated in the realm of the transcendental, and therefore an attempt to escape the absurd. This argumentation then leads Camus to seeking Sisyphus as the prototypical foundation of his third response, the absurd man.

According to Camus, the absurd man is a state of being where all preconceived notions of hope have been cast aside accompanied with all contemplations of suicide. The absurd man accepts the reality of a meaningless life and rebels against it by merely existing: “The absurd is his extreme

tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance.” (Camus 19)

It is in these responses that Camus has outlined that we find the confluence with McCarthy’s *The Road*. Be it by chance or direct reference, when the characters of *The Road* are pitted against the absurd, their differing responses align with the three responses that Camus proposes in “The Myth of Sisyphus”. In the analysis section I will argue in detail how these responses are formed, and whether or not any discernible differences to Camus’ argumentation can be found in these responses.

### 3. Filling the Void

In this section I have limited my analysis to these three previously mentioned characters due to the scarcity of information that is revealed about the other characters that appear in *The Road*.

Furthermore, as the analysis in this thesis focuses on identifying each character's individual response to the absurd, more continuity past the seemingly random encounters that these other characters appear in would be needed in order to establish an argument for any particular response. The ordering of this character analysis follows the chronological order of the characters' deaths in the book, as the emotional impact of these deaths affect the actions and choices of the surviving characters. As an additional point of clarification, the characters of the book remain nameless throughout the story; the father and his son are referred to as only the man and the boy. The woman of the story is established to be the man's wife when the man rummages through his belongings and finds "a picture of his wife" (McCarthy 52-3). However, for the purposes of this thesis, she will be referred to as woman, wife or mother, depending on the context.

#### 3.1 The Wife

While dialogue with the character of the wife only appears on four pages of the book in the form of a flashback, the discussion the wife has with the man in that small section is of utmost importance, as the ideas presented appear as a recurring theme throughout the book, a theme I will further discuss in the analysis of the Man. The Boy is born as the event that burned the world begins and their discussion prior to the wife's suicide is situated years after his birth. The scenario depicted here shows the wife already having decided to end her life, and the man pleading for her to change her mind, unsuccessfully:

We're survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.

Survivors? She said.

Yes.

What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film.

I'm begging you.

I don't care. I don't care if you cry. It doesn't mean anything to me.

Please.

Stop it.

I am begging you. I'll do anything.

Such as what? I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We've been over all of this. I didn't bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I'm done. (McCarthy 57)

While the wife's responses in their dialogue may seem cold and callous, her intentions do not necessarily reflect this, as the scorn she shows toward any plea of compromise from the man is realized as an act of mercy and of preservation. The burden of an emotional confrontation or an expression of doubt over her choice would have only served to undermine the choice of the man to continue his own existence, which the man realizes in his thought after her passing: "She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift." (McCarthy 60)

The above scene clearly emphasizes the importance of the gun, as the bullets can be said to represent the only power they still have over their own lives, which is the choice of their own death, as echoed in the next segment in the dialogue: "You have two bullets and then what? You can't protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that?" (McCarthy 58) Additionally, this thought process is later shared by the man when another bullet is expended; "A single round left in the revolver. You will not face the truth. You will not." (McCarthy 71)

For her, two truths have emerged from their situation. First, there is nothing they can do to better their situation: "You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take." (McCarthy 59)

Secondly, the only escape is death: “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I can’t. I can’t.” (McCarthy 58) Now that there are only two bullets left in the revolver and the power of choice over their own death has been denied to at least one of them, the wife takes on the burden of self-destruction as an act of self-sacrifice. Her death allows the man and the boy to continue forward while still having the option to choose their own death. In these truths that the wife has realized, she ultimately becomes trapped in battle with the absurd, further removing from her even the possibility of willing another end:

There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always a prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them. One has to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future. (Camus 11)

When faced with the absurd, she ultimately chooses suicide, but the choice is not made lightly, or out of weakness. At this point in the narrative they have already been on the road for several years, as evidenced by the boy’s astute realization of the meaning of his mother’s absence the next morning, when the boy asks his father; “She’s gone, isn’t she?” (McCarthy 60) Some critics have argued that the mother’s choice is inherently immoral, or “moral degradation” (Cooper 139), or that her suicide is a post-feminist attempt by McCarthy to perpetuate a supposed cultural trend of “marginalizing mothers in order to privilege fathers” (Åstrom 2018). Which is to say, in Åstrom’s view, the choice of the mother is one of such immorality that writing it as it is must in fact be evidence of McCarthy’s misogyny. As a counter point, I must argue that such a strict views on the nature of morality in the wasteland of *The Road* is at best ethereal, as the judgment necessarily stems from a consciousness that still enjoys the intactness of the social contract, and possibly more thematically, human rights: “He’d seen it all before. Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away.” (McCarthy 94)

Their world can then ultimately be seen as the final and most extreme manifestation of the concept of anomie; the despair felt and characterized by a collapse in morality and in moral guidance by the society one inhabits. In other words: “the world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes.” (McCarthy 192) While anomie, as theorized by Emile Durkheim, is understood to be a factor in some cases of suicide, it does not sufficiently explain the seemingly sudden nature of the wife's decision to end her life, even if she herself argues her reasons in the spirit of it. She realizes the futility of their effort to stay within the confines of Judeo-Christian morality in their actions when the world has mostly abandoned all notions of such. That is to say, she refuses to “carry the fire”, a sentiment echoed throughout the book which I will further analyze in section 3.3.

For her, the notions of morality have died with the world, and she sees the inversion of morality into hegemonic evil as the new ruling way of the world. In this view, the act of suicide becomes an act of disavowing morality, as she holds it a truth that their end will ultimately come at the hands of those who would unleash evil on them. Which is to say that, in her view, being a willing victim of evil by continuing her existence equates to perpetuating the manifestation of evil.

It then follows that the suicide is in fact not sudden nor impulsive. It is that calculation of Zarathustra in Nietzsche's work that guides the act: “My death, praise I unto you, the voluntary death, which cometh unto me because *I* want it.” (Nietzsche ch.21) For Nietzsche, the death of God marked the end of absolute morality ordained by God, and as such, once one forgoes the tenets of Judeo-Christian morality, one is free to choose the time and the manner of their death.

In conclusion, we can see that the wife wills her own death to protect the power of choice granted by the remaining bullets. Her actions are not necessarily immoral in the context of Judeo-Christian morality as some suggest. Rather, she sees the alternative of staying alive as a worse moral choice, as it would entail the conscious perpetuation of evil by quite literally feeding it. While

her choice against the absurd is suicide, it is not repudiation, as Camus would generally suggest, rather it is the free death of Zarathustra as envisioned by Nietzsche:

Freedom towards death as the necessary criteria for willing the overcoming of nihilism is only available to the one who has first travelled the path of negative philosophy, the one who has already destroyed all faith and belief in present human morality. (Biswas Mellamphy 79)

In her view, morality can no longer exist as a consideration in the dead world she occupies. In other words, she “has destroyed all faith and belief in present human morality”. This consideration fundamentally differentiates her response from Camus’ notion of suicide as repudiation of life, as she embraces death as an antidote to evil, rather than an antidote to life.

### 3.2 The Man

If we are to consider the man as a representation of Camus' concept of “The Absurd Man”, we must first do away with the notion of the man's seeming religiosity in the book. As a reader, it is easy to be led to assume that the God whose name the man invokes on several occasions in the book is in fact the Judeo-Christian God of the bible, as we can even see the man venting his frustration into the void in a way that directly alludes to the words of Jesus on the cross:

He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (McCarthy 10)

Around the ninth hour, Jesus shouted in a loud voice, saying “Eli Eli lama sabachthani?”

Which is, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46)

The man is not simply a believer who is angry at God, in fact, it is not clear whether or not he ever had faith in the first place. This claim becomes more valid as we further examine other passages



from the book where the ideas of God are almost casually dismissed, such as when he lets his mind wander in thought; “He looked at the sky out of old habit but there was nothing to see.” (McCarthy 109) Or when he describes their environment; “Barren, silent, godless.” (McCarthy 2) Or even when his response is silent agreement when the old man who the boy chooses to feed with their dwindling supplies, states; “There is no God and we are his prophets.” (McCarthy 181)

If we are then to consider the man as having no faith in God in the literal sense, we must still acknowledge that the moral teaching, or “The Code of the Good Guys” (Wielenberg 4), he bestows upon the boy is still very much derived from the Judeo-Christian moral tenets, which work to separate them from the “Bad Guys”. The form these teachings take are supposedly in the form of stories he recounts or imagines for the child's pleasure. While none of these stories are told in the book, the form of the teaching is clarified late in the book when the boy protests when the man asks if he would like to hear one:

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true.

They don't have to be true. They're stories.

Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people. (McCarthy 286-7)

In this scene, the boy's disapproval is due to the fact that on several occasions throughout the book, the man does not act according to his own teachings: he shoots a man to protect the boy, steals the clothes of another as revenge for robbing their cart, and objects to or refuses to giving food to people they meet because they will “die anyway” (McCarthy 277).

The actions of the man can certainly be seen as further evidence of his rejection of the concept of absolute morality of divine origin, but it does not mean that he has abandoned all notions of morality, as arguably is the case with his wife. His failings in following his stitched together code of ethics, however understandable they are considering their environment, can only be seen as failings by the boy, as the boy is the only follower of his “religion”, which is carrying the fire.

While the fire is alive for the boy, the chant is a performance for the father; “When you've nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.” (McCarthy 78) The man's state of mind is slowly revealed in the book, one solitary thought at a time. He is preoccupied with their survival; “Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food.” (McCarthy 16) Yet simultaneously he would welcome death, most explicitly stated when they have found and retreated into the safety of the bunker, where the man is suddenly awoken from a dream:

He tried to remember the dream but he could not. All that was left was the feeling of it. He thought perhaps they'd come to warn him. Of what? That he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own. Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over. (McCarthy 163)

The man is not concerned over his own life, only the boy's: “He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart. But he knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death.” (McCarthy 29)

As their nomadic life on the road and the constant threat of perils unknown have taken their toll on the man, it can be argued that his humanity has started to wither, he is terrorized by his dreams and lays awake at night “for fear the dream would return” (McCarthy 137), he has lost the sense of beauty and goodness and says that they are “things that he'd no longer any way[sic] to think about at all.” (McCarthy 137)

While the man has not lost his sense of morality, he finds himself unable to act in accordance with the notions he once cherished. He then faces the same question as his wife, but

unlike her, his choice becomes that of defiance, as outlined by Camus. He rebels against the absurd and attempts to rekindle the ashes of morality now cold in his heart, in the heart of the boy. While his own sense of meaning has died in his battle against the absurd, he attempts to subvert it by creating it anew for the boy to carry into the new world. “The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end and deplete himself.” (Camus 19) He then becomes Sisyphus, the man doomed by the Gods to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to see it roll down to start the process anew.

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: It is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (Camus 24)

It could be argued that the life the man still chooses to live, this rebellion against his fate, is fueled by the scorn for the wife’s response to the absurd, but it seems more likely that his scorn is more so directed towards the absurd nature of his existence. The man’s Sisyphean rebellion takes the form of teaching the boy that which was lost to him. After all, if it indeed was the Gods that willed the death of the world and all tangible notions of meaning, what better way to defy them than by rekindling that meaning? As Camus imagined the possibility of Sisyphus being happy, a certain notion of happiness would certainly be shared by the man as he defies rationality and makes the choice to keep rolling the stone.

### 3.3 The Boy

While the majority of the thoughts and ideas discussed in *The Road* are put forward to the reader in the form of vague and silent ponderings grasped from the man’s stream of consciousness, the story of the boy remains one of the more intriguing and discussed topics of *The Road*. The very first words spoken in the book are the words of the man, thinking aloud to himself that if the boy is not the word of God, then God never spoke (McCarthy 4). It is in this moment that a vague transcendental property is attributed to the boy, which to some critics has been a source of

contention over the possibility of the child as a Christ-like figure: “The book of Genesis depicts God as creating through speech (Genesis 1:1-31); a God that does not speak is a God that does not create. Thus, the man’s declaration is that either his son is the word of God, or, for all practical purposes, the universe is a godless one.” (Wielenberg 1)

It is not, however, in the religious ambiguities that McCarthy has trapped the reader with that we can find the necessary evidence for the boy’s response to the absurd. Rather, we find it in stories. From the interactions between the man and the boy, it becomes apparent that the man has been raising the boy with stories of a world the boy will never experience:

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he. (McCarthy 163)

Throughout the earlier segments of the book, we see the boy clinging to every word uttered by the man as gospel, but as time passes, the boy starts to become aware of his father’s own failing in upholding the approximation of a moral code that the man taught the boy. This sudden change is best exemplified by the boy’s reluctance to hear more stories: “But in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people.” (McCarthy 287) It is here that we see the shift in the power dynamic of the duo, as the boy overtakes his father as the new moral arbiter, the one who carries the fire.

The notion of carrying the fire is presented throughout the book in conversations between the man and the boy, but as is the case with many of the vague ideas presented in the book, this too remains unexplained and open to interpretation. The general consensus among critics considers this a form of transferring the values of the old world to the new, with the boy as the vessel. Arguably the most fitting interpretation was presented by Barbara Bennett in her essay on Celtic influences in McCarthy’s bibliography, where she cites a segment of the novel *Saints at the River* by Ron Rash.

A family's hearth fire was never allowed to die down completely [...] When children left to marry and raise their own families, they took fire from their parents' hearth with them. It was both their heirloom and talisman, nurtured and protected because generations recognized for what it was---living memory. (qtd in Bennett)

Carrying the fire is by no means an easy task for the boy, as these ideas he has been inundated with by his father bear no resemblance to- and seem to serve no purpose in the world he inhabits. The doubts and fears of the boy accumulate as the cruel realities of his life force him to consider the absurd nature of his existence, inching him closer to consider suicide:

I wish I was with my mom.

He didn't answer. He sat beside the small figure wrapped in the quilts and blankets. After a while he said:

You mean you wish that you were dead?

Yes

You mustn't say that.

But I do.

Don't say it. It's a bad thing to say. (McCarthy 57)

As the man is the boy's "world entire" (McCarthy 4), and his beliefs are all the teachings of the man, the man's eventual death can be seen as a metaphor for the death of a god, whose words and teachings will be spread by the boy as the new religion of the new world. It is not, however, the belief in any transcendental entity that this religion espouses. The boy's religion is the belief in the continued existence of humanity separate from his father, a belief for which the boy has not witnessed any evidence. In this manner, the makeshift human morality taught by the man replaces the ideation of the existence of a God, as the boy turns to hope as his response to the absurd.

It should be noted that this hope of the boy has faltered before, and even at near the end of the book as his father lay dying on the shore of the sea they strived so long to reach, the boy begs his father to kill him, to allow the boy to follow him to death, but the man refuses:

You have to carry the fire.

I don't know how to.

Yes, you do.

Is the fire real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I don't know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you. It always was there. I can see it." (McCarthy 298)

It is, then, only at the very end of the book where the evidence of the boy's response to the absurd becomes sufficient. After the death of his father, the boy is soon approached by an armed man not unlike in appearance to all the other "bad guys" he has seen while journeying with his father. This stranger, whose intentions ultimately remain unclear to the reader, offers the boy a safe harbor and a new family. What reason does the boy have to believe the man? He has been lied to before, and never has he seen a trustworthy human who was not his father.

The choices are then laid out for him as he still carries the gun which has one more bullet left in it. He could choose suicide, as his father already taught him how to do it to avoid a fate worse than death; being taken by cannibals. He could take on the burden of the absurd as his father did - avoiding any notions of faith or hope by leaving the situation and choosing only to continue existence as a solitary rebellion. However, in a possibly life-ending leap of faith, the boy lowers his weapon and chooses to go with the stranger. It is in this final choice that the boy's response to the absurd is solidified, as against all rational considerations, he attempts to escape the absurd by choosing hope above all.

## 4 Conclusion

The nihilistic world of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presents an interesting avenue for discussing the concept of the absurd, as it is here at the end of the world that a response to the absurd becomes necessarily warranted. As Camus discusses the absurd as a condition of modernity, McCarthy's contribution to the topic can be seen as a continuation of the postmodern trend of questioning the stability of meaning. As the characters of *The Road* face a world severed of established structures of meaning, the absurd challenges them in a far more forceful manner than the tension Camus formulated. The responses of the characters discussed in this thesis were compared to the framework of responses proposed by Albert Camus, and while the characters' responses closely align with Camus' response triad, it should be noted that there exists a fundamental difference in the formulation of said responses.

Camus' argument for suicide as repudiation of life is framed in the context of a living world, where the foundations of morality and society are still in place, and in which the battle against nihilism and the absurd is largely a personal tribulation. In other words, as Donald Crosby noted, while the existential nihilist might find life meaningless, there is also "no reason not to live" (Crosby 30).

In the world of *The Road*, however, the reasons not to live arguably outweigh the reasons *to live*. This differentiation in the premise for consideration of the absurd is most clearly visible in the reasons the boy's mother lists for her decision to commit suicide, as she argues that a violent end to her life is unavoidable, whether it be by the hands of the cannibals or her own. It can be argued, then, that her choice has been stolen from her, or as she words it: "I didn't bring myself to this. I was brought." (McCarthy 57)

Similarly, while the man has chosen to continue his life of Sisyphean struggle, it is evident that if it were not for the boy, he too, would have responded to the absurd with suicide: "the boy was all that stood between him and death" (McCarthy 29). While the man's response to the absurd

could then be argued to be one of hope, as he pushes himself to the brink of death while simultaneously trying to nurture and raise the boy to the best of his ability, it is in the manner he raises the boy where this argument loses ground. His code of morality that he teaches the boy, which includes helping others and not resorting to cannibalism is of no use to the boy, or for himself for that matter, as the world that once upheld these notions is long gone. Furthermore, the man himself does not follow the very code that he has imparted on the boy, which further spells out the argument that teaching these notions to the boy is more so a ritual which serves as a remembrance of the world that was lost, and not a hope for better tomorrow. If anything, following the man's code will quite possibly lead to the boy's death once he is on his own.

It is in the boy's response to the absurd, however, that we can find the purest similarity to the responses outlined by Camus. As the boy was born into an already dead world, he cannot understand the loss of the old one, and the notions of goodness and morality that the man has imparted on the boy take the form of belief in the transcendental; in a quality of humanity and a state of being that cannot be perceived or witnessed in the world he inhabits but can only be considered as a possibility through belief. His leap of faith can then be said to disregard all notions of rationality which allows him to successfully escape the absurd.



## Works Cited

- Bennett, Barbara. "Celtic Influences on Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and the Road". *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 2008.
- Biswas Mellamphy, Nandita. *The Three Stigmata of Friedrich Nietzsche: Political Physiology in the Age of Nihilism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010
- Camus, Albert. "The Myth of Sisyphus". Translated by Justin O'Brien, Hamish Hamilton, 1955.
- Cooper, Lydia. *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2011.
- Crosby, Donald A. *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*. State University of New York Press, 1988.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Picador. 2006.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Modern Library, 1995.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. Translated by Duncan Large, OUP Oxford, 1998.
- The Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 1989. [www.biblestudytools.com/nrs/](http://www.biblestudytools.com/nrs/)
- Wielenberg, Erik J. "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*". *Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Penn State University, 2010
- Åström, Berit. "Post-Feminist Fatherhood and the Marginalization of the Mother in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*". *Women: A Cultural Review*, 2018.