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Light Shining in a World of Darkness

*The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, exemplifies the caring, nurturing and sacrificial relationship that is shared between a father and son struggling to stay alive in a post-apocalyptic world that is demolished to ashes. Throughout the story, the man leads and encourages the boy to keep moving forward, to fight to survive, and to always be searching for the light at the end of the tunnel. Even when times get harder and more desperate, the boy never stops putting others before himself. Despite the boy’s young age and the man’s constant yearn to put the boy’s needs above his own, the boy’s ceaseless selflessness serves as a constant light in the darkness of the situation.

Regardless of the situation, the boy shows selflessness towards everyone he meets, especially his father. The boy realizes that his father is the one who has gotten them this far and kept them alive, and all the boy wants to do is return the favor by looking out for his father, keeping him healthy and making him happy. One of the first instances in the book where the boy’s selflessness is exemplified is when the man finds a Coca Cola in an abandoned supermarket’s soft drink machine (23). The man’s number one concern in life is keeping his son alive and happy, so he chooses to give the soda to the boy (23).

The father says, “Go ahead.”

“You have some, Papa.

I want you to drink it.

You have some.” (23)

The boy insists on sharing even the smallest things with the man, and he is not satisfied until his father accepts the offering. Though the boy is young and has grown up in a world full of suffering and unknown, his heart always goes out to others. He chooses to see the bright side of life, even though everything visible is dark and depressing, and he wants to continually serve others before himself.

Not only is the boy selfless towards his father; he is also selfless towards strangers. When the father and boy find the bunker, it is filled with countless cans of food (138). They decide to eat it because they are starving and the bunker is obviously abandoned (139). The boy is small, dirty, thin and obviously in need of food. The man prepares an enormous meal for them out of the food stored in the bunker (144). The boy is selfless enough to take a moment before eating to thank the people who left the food.

The boy says, “Do you think we should thank the people?”

“The people?

The people who gave us all this.

Well. Yes, I guess we could do that.

…Dear people, thank you for all of this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for

yourself and if you were here we wouldn’t eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re

sorry that you didn’t get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God.” (146)

Even the father does not think to give thanks to those who left the food. This scene shows how mature, selfless and considerate the young boy is. He is starving, and a wonderful meal is sitting right in front of him, waiting to be eaten, yet he chooses to forgo the food for a moment to thank those who provided it. This is not something that a typical child the boy’s age would do. The boy, however, has lived in a world where every bite of food is a treasure, and he does not take it for granted. Despite the boy’s constant desperation to continue on, he never loses his morality and selflessness.

Perhaps the greatest example of the boy’s selflessness is shown towards the end of the book. All of their belongings are stolen by a disheveled, starving man (255). The father’s reaction is extreme anger and hatred, whereas the boy’s reaction is compassion. The man has no sympathy for the thief and wants to punish him for his actions. He is not satisfied with only taking back what was stolen from him, but he also forces the thief to unclothe and walk away with absolutely nothing (256). The boy understands that what the thief did was horribly wrong, and could have cost him and his father their lives, yet the boy still has sympathy towards the thief. He begs his father to be more understanding and considerate (259).

The boy pleads, “Just help him, Papa. He’s going to die.

He’s going to die anyway.

He’s so scared, Papa.” (259)

As a result of the boy’s begging and crying to help the thief, the man decides to return the thief’s clothes (260). The boy knows that he and his father could benefitted from the clothing they took from the thief, but nevertheless, he chooses to be selfless yet again. If the boy had not convinced his father to help the thief, the thief would have definitely died from the bitter cold. The simple acts of the boy gave the poor, helpless thief a chance to live.

The boy’s last act of selflessness exemplified in the book is after the death of his father. The boy meets another man who claims to be a “good guy,” so the boy decides to continue on with him. However, the boy is uncomfortable leaving his dead father out in the open for all to see (285).

The boy says, “What about my papa?”

“…Can I cover him with leaves?

The wind will blow them away.

Could we cover him with one of the blankets?

I’ll do it. Go on now.

Okay.” (285)

The boy realizes that giving up a blanket is risky. Each item of clothing can be the deciding factor of whether he lives or dies. He chooses to sacrifice the blanket for his father, though. Covering his body serves as the boy’s last selfless act towards his father (286).

Connelly, the author of an analysis of *The Road,* agrees that the boy is extremely selfless throughout the book (Connelly). Connelly explains how the boy sees it important to not only look out for himself and his father, but to also help any others whom they might come across on the journey (Connelly). Connelly states, “The Boy also highly values the preservation of the rest of mankind; this becomes clear in The Boy’s persistent desire to help others, The Man included. For this reason, The Boy reciprocates his father’s endless devotion; McCarthy writes that the two are “each the other’s world entire” (6). As a result of the unbreakable bond between himself and The Man, The Boy believes that if one is “carrying the fire,” one should also be willing to share the warmth. The boy, unlike his father, wishes to extend this attitude to those beyond his family” (Connelly). Although the father is not very selfless and often overlooks those they encounter along their journey, the boy’s youth and naivety causes him to reach out to every stranger in need.

Jennifer Egan, the author of *Men at Work*, an analysis of *The Road*, writes about how the boy constantly struggles to hold a moral standard for himself throughout the book (Egan). Egan states, “The boy is constantly seeking to define a moral structure he can live by – one that accounts for the fact that his father doesn’t help stray people on the road, but still ensures their own distinction from the cannibals…The existence of a moral structure – the will to do good – is the soaring discovery hidden in McCarthy’s scourged planet” (Egan). The boy never loses his sense of morality no matter how difficult the situation becomes. He sees it as his mission to not only keep himself alive, but to also help anyone he encounters along his way.

The boy shows countless acts of selflessness throughout the story that impact those around him significantly. The thief is given the chance to live, and the man never loses hope, all because of the boy’s desire to serve others. The boy’s selflessness throughout *The Road* acts as an ongoing light shining in a world of darkness.

Works Cited

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