

The Road – Cormac McCarthy

Summary

The novel begins with the man and boy in the woods, the boy asleep, as the two of them are making their journey along the road. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic world, date and place unnamed, though the reader can assume it's somewhere in what was the United States because the man tells the boy that they're walking the "state roads." Neither the man nor the boy is given a name; this anonymity adds to the novel's tone that this could be happening anywhere, to anyone. Stylistically, the writing is very fragmented and sparse from the beginning, which reflects the barren and bleak landscape through which the man and boy are travelling. McCarthy also chooses to use no quotation marks in dialogue and for some contractions, he leaves out the apostrophes. Because this is a post-apocalyptic story, the exemption of these punctuation elements might serve as a way for McCarthy to indicate that in this new world, remnants of the old world — like electricity, running water, and humanity — no longer exist, or they exist in very limited amounts.

While the boy sleeps, the man reflects upon one of his dreams of a creature with dead eyes. The man's dreams play a large role throughout the novel; the man tells both himself and the boy that good dreams are to be feared because they indicate a form of acceptance, and that death would inevitably be near. Bad dreams, on the other hand, are reassuring because they demonstrate that the man and boy are still persevering in the world they inhabit.

From the start, it's clear that the boy is all the man worries about. He is all the man has, and the man believes that he's been entrusted by God to protect the boy. He keeps a pistol with him at all times, unless he goes inside a house. Then he gives the pistol to the boy. The pistol, though, only has two bullets.

The man, too, is all the boy has. When the boy wakes, they set out on the road yet again, making their way through a "nuclear winter" that follows them from start to finish as they make their way south to the coast, hoping to find a better life there, although the man knows there's no reason for him to hope that things will be different for them there. They have a grocery cart with them, filled with their belongings and supplies for their journey. They are running low on food, and the man is fighting a bad cough, one that sprays blood on the gray snow.

They come upon towns and cities that are mere shells of what they once were. Remnants of the old world often — like houses, billboards, and hotels — clash with the reality of the new world, reminding the man of the life he once lived. The man remembers an evening spent on the lake with his uncle. And he remembers his wife — who left him and the boy, presumably to kill herself and escape this horrible new world.

In one grocery store, the man finds a pop machine that has a single Coca-Cola in it. He retrieves it for the boy and lets him drink it. The man likes to offer whatever he can to his son to make his world a bit more pleasant and to give him glimpses into the world that existed before him.

The man and boy come upon the house where the man grew up. The boy is scared of this house, as he is of many of the houses. The boy worries they'll run into someone, like the road agents or bad guys who eat people in order to survive. The man has decided, too, that should road agents find them, that he will kill the boy so that they cannot torture him, but he often wonders to himself if he would be able to do it if the time should ever come.

They come upon a waterfall and the man and boy swim together, the man teaching the boy how to float. It's a tender moment that suggests lessons that fathers would have taught their sons in the old world. Throughout the novel there are moments like this one at the waterfall, scenes that prove the bond between fathers and sons still exist in this new world. It exists, in many ways, just as it did before. The father cares for his son, and teaches his son, and worries about his son's future under such uncertain circumstances.

The boy is very concerned with making sure they are "carrying the fire," assuring himself that he and his father are the good guys as opposed to the bad guys (who eat dogs and other people). The man tells the boy stories of justice and courage from the old world in the hopes that such stories will keep the fire alive in the boy. The man hopes for a future that might again also harbour courage, justice, and humanity.

As they walk, they keep track of their location on a worn and tattered map that they must piece together like a puzzle each time they use it. While on the road, they come upon a man who's been struck by lightning. They pass the burnt man and the boy wants to help him, but his father says they've got nothing to give him. The boy cries for the man, showing his kind heart and his compassionate nature in a world where very little humanity exists.

The man has flashbacks about leaving his billfold behind earlier in the journey, after his wife left him and the boy. He recalls that he also left behind his only picture of his wife, and ponders whether he could have convinced her to stay alive with them. The man remembers the night that his son was born, after the clocks all stopped, how he'd delivered the baby himself, marking the beginning of their intense father/son bond.

A truck full of road agents comes upon the man and the boy, who hide in the woods. The truck breaks down and one of the bad men finds them in the woods. The bad man grabs the boy, and the boy's father shoots the man in the head and both escape into the woods. Now the pistol has only one bullet left, and the man knows that this bullet is for his son should the time come. The boy wants to know if they are still the good guys, despite his father's committing a murder. His father assures him that they are.

The man views his son as a holy object, something sacred. The boy is a source of light for the man and the man believes that if there is any proof of God, the boy is it.

The man and boy are cold and starving, as they are for most of the novel. As they travel, they are on a constant lookout for food, clothing, shoes, supplies, and road agents. In one town, the boy thinks he sees a dog and a little boy and tries to chase after them. He worries about the other little boy for the rest of the novel.

By the time they come upon a once grand house, the boy and man are starving. There are suspicious about items in the house, such as piles of blankets and clothes and shoes and a bell attached to a string. He finds a door in the floor of a pantry, and breaks the lock. The boy becomes frightened and repeatedly asks if they can leave. In the basement, the man and boy find naked people who are being kept alive for others to eat. The man and boy flee just as the road agents return. They hide in the woods through the freezing night, the man feeling certain that this is the day when he's going to have to kill his son. But they survive the night and go undiscovered.

They continue their journey, exhausted and still starving. The man leaves the boy to sleep while he explores, and he finds an old apple orchard with some dried out apples. He continues to the house that's adjacent to the orchard, where he finds a tank of water. The man fills some jars with water, gathers the dried apples, and takes them back to the boy. The man also found a dried drink mix, grape flavoured, which he gives the boy. The boy enjoys the drink and their spirits are lifted for a moment.

The man and boy move on, but the perceptive boy asks his father about the people they found in the basement. The boy knows that the people are going to be eaten and understands that he and his father couldn't help them because then they may have been eaten, too. The boy asks if they would ever eat anyone, and his father assures him that they wouldn't. They are the good guys.

They press on, enduring more cold, rain, and hunger. Nearing death, the man's dreams turned to happy thoughts of his wife. They come upon another house, and the man feels something strange under his feet as he walks from the house to the shed. He digs and finds a plywood door in the ground. The boy is terrified and begs his father not to open it. After some time, the man tells the boy that the good guys keep trying, so they have to open the door and find out what's down there. What they discover is a bunker, full of supplies and canned food, cots to sleep on, water, and a chemical toilet. It is a brief sanctuary from the world above. The man realizes that he'd been ready to die, but they would live. This is hard for the man to accept. The man and boy stay in the bunker for days, eating and sleeping. The boy wishes he could thank the people who left these things. He's sorry that they're dead, but hopes they're safe in heaven.

The man whittles fake bullets from a tree branch and puts them in the pistol with the one true bullet. He wants the gun to appear loaded should they encounter others on the road. They go into town to find a new cart and return to their bunker to load up with supplies. In the house, the man shaves and cuts both his own hair and the boy's — another moment in the novel that recalls a father/son ritual of the old world. They plan to leave the next day, but the following morning they wake up and see rain, so they eat and sleep some more to restore their strength. Then, they set out on the road again, still heading south.

They come upon another traveller on the road, an old man who tells them his name is Ely, which is not true. Ely is surprised by seeing the boy, having convinced himself that he never thought he'd see a child again. The boy persuades his father to let Ely eat dinner with them that night. The man agrees, but tells his son that Ely can't stay with them for long. Later that night, the man and Ely talk about the old world, about death, God, and the future — particularly, about what it would be like to be the last human on the planet. The next day as they prepare to part ways, the boy gives Ely some food to take with him. His father reluctantly gives away their supplies. As Ely moved on, the boy is upset because he knows that Ely is going to die.

As they continue moving south, the man and boy run into other towns and landscapes that act as skeletons of the old world, both literally and metaphorically. They see bones of creatures and humans alike, as well as empty houses, barns, and vehicles. They find a train in the woods, and the man shows the boy how to play conductor.

The boy asks his father about the sea. He wants to know if it's blue. The man says it used to be. The man has a fever, which causes the two to camp in the woods for over four days. The boy is afraid his father is going to die, and the man's dreams turn to dead relatives and better times in his life. The boy's dreams continue to be bad, and the man encourages him, saying that his bad dreams mean he hasn't given up. The man says he won't let his son give up.

When they set out again, the man is even weaker than before. They come upon numerous burnt bodies and melted roads that have reset in warped shapes. There are people following them: three men and a pregnant woman. The man and boy hide and let the group pass. Later, the man and boy come upon their camp and discover the baby skewered over a fire. The boy doesn't speak for over a day. Then, he asks about the baby; he doesn't understand where it came from.

Their arrival at the coast is anti-climactic. The water looks gray and the boy is disappointed. It looks as if, even at the southern coast, life isn't sustainable. But the boy, with his father's encouragement, runs to the waves and swims in the ocean, which lifts both his and his father's spirits.

From the shore, the man and boy see a boat in the water. The man swam to the boat and explores it, finding supplies, including some food, a first-aid kit, and a flare gun. He and the boy make their camp close to the beach, plundering the ship each day to see what else they can

find. The man's cough worsens and then the boy gets sick, too. The man believes the boy will die and he is terrified and enraged. The boy, though, recovers.

The man and boy decide to leave their camp on the beach, and they pare down their food stores so that the cart is more manageable. They hike up and down the shore, and when they return to their camp they see that all of their belongings have been stolen. They take off after the thief and find him. The man makes the thief take off all of his clothes, leaving him there for dead, which is what the man tells the boy the thief did to them. The boy begs his father not to hurt the man, and when they leave the boy cries and convinces his father to take the man's clothes back to him. They can't find the man, but leave his clothes in the road. The boy tells the man that they're responsible for that other man, that they killed him, and it makes the boy question their role as the good guys. He says they should be helping people.

They walk through another barren town, and the man gets shot in the leg by an arrow. He shoots a flare through the window from which the arrow came and hits the man who shot him. It's unclear whether he kills the man, but when the boy asks, his father tells him that the arrow shooter lived.

The man stitches up his leg and they press on. The man grows weaker, his cough worsening and becoming even bloodier than before. The man's dreams soften and he knows he's going to die. They make camp and the man tells the boy not to cover him because he wants to see the sky. The boy brings his father water, and the man sees a light surrounding the boy. The man tells the boy to go on, to leave him, but the boy refuses. Eventually, the man dies. The boy stays with his father's body for three days, then a man with a shotgun finds him. The man invites the boy to come along with them. The man says that he's one of the good guys and that he's carrying the fire, too. He also says that they've got a little boy with them and a little girl, too. Eventually, the boy decides to go, but not before he says goodbye to his father. The boy leaves his father covered in a blanket.

The novel ends with the boy welcomed into a new family in this new world that he must learn to inhabit. The question of his future, and the future of humanity remains. The boy talks with the woman about God, and he admits to the woman that it's easier for him to talk to his father instead of to God. The woman tells the boy this is okay, because God's breath passes through all men. The final passage of the novel is set up in story form, evoking thoughts not only of the man and boy's story, but also of humanity's story as a whole. The novel ends with a note of mystery — the mystery of the bond that exists between father and son; the mystery of the boy's and humanity's future; and the mystery of this new world and what it will be like now that it has been forever changed.

Characters

The Man

The man goes unnamed throughout the novel. He is the boy's father, his papa, and believes that he has been entrusted by God to keep the boy safe and to protect him from harm and the evils in the world — even if that means killing him before the bad guys can get to him. He wonders if he has it in him to do harm to his own son, the only source of light in the man's world. He must push himself and his son to extreme measures in order to survive. The connection that the man feels with his son is sacred, almost holy, and throughout the novel the man makes great sacrifices to allow his son to live on and have a future in a world that has gone dim. He shows his son how to carry the fire, first with his help, and then, later, without him.

The Boy

The boy goes unnamed throughout the novel. As the man and boy travel on the road, the boy is the only source of light in his father's life. Similarly, the man is all that the boy has, and the boy doesn't want to live unless his father remains with him. The boy is strong and resilient, but also sensitive and compassionate. When the man and boy encounter others on the road, the boy shows more sympathy towards them, while his father is more concerned about keeping the two of them alive. It is the boy who is able to get the man to show kindness to others on the road, however begrudgingly such kindness is given. One of the boy's top priorities is to be a good guy. He wants to make sure that he and his father are helping people and are carrying the fire. While the boy is the source of all of the man's strength, the man doesn't realize how much the boy worries about him, and how much the boy's will to live on depends on his father.

Minor Characters

The woman

The woman is the man's wife and the boy's mother, and she also goes unnamed throughout the novel. She leaves the man and boy when the boy is still very young, and she is presumed to be dead. Through the man's flashbacks, it became clear that the woman had grown weary of the brutal and bleak world in which they lived and wanted to die alone. She wanted to take the boy with her, but the man refused to let her. Many of the man's dreams and memories are of the woman, and he knows that death is near when he starts having comforting, good dreams about her.

Man struck by lightning

The man and boy come upon a burnt man on the road, a man who's been struck by lightning. They follow him for a short time, but the man eventually sits down in the road and they overtake him. The boy wants to help, but the man says they can't help him because they don't have anything to give him. The boy cries for the man struck by lightning, a man who highlights the sadness and helplessness that exists along the road.

The bad man from the truck

He's the first human being, other than the boy, that the father speaks to in over a year. He represents what has become of the human race. When the bad man grabs the boy, the boy's father shoots him in the head.

Road agents, the bad guys

The roadagents and members of communes are the bad guys, and they're the ones who the man and boy fear and must watch out for. They rape, kill, and eat other humans, which the man and boy bear witness to multiple times throughout the novel. The man and boy come upon a group of roadagents that keep a group of humans locked in a basement, each to be killed and used as food, as if they are livestock. Another group of roadagents births, kills, and cooks a baby over a spit. They are the essence of evil in the novel.

Ely

Ely is the old man whom the man and boy come upon in the road. The boy takes pity on him and convinces his father to let Ely eat dinner with them. Ely doesn't thank the boy because he says that he wouldn't have done the same, if the situation was reversed. Ely isn't the man's real name: He doesn't want to reveal who he really is.

Thief

This thief, an outcast from one of the communes, steals all that the man and boy own while they are away walking on the beach. The man and boy catch up to him and the man makes him strip naked and leave his clothes. The man wants to leave the thief with nothing, just as the thief did to them. But the boy cries for the man, saying they've killed him.

The man with the bow and arrow

As the man and boy are walking through town, the man with the bow and arrow shoots the boy's father with an arrow. The boy's father shoots back with a flare gun and either kills or severely wounds the man. It is not made clear which, but the father tells his son that he didn't kill the man.

The woman with the bow and arrow man

After the boy's father shoots the man with the bow and arrow, he enters the house to see who else is inside. He finds this woman, who holds the man with the bow and arrow, cursing the boy's father for what he's done. When the boy's father realizes that other people left her there with the man, she tells him that she chose to stay behind.

The man with a shotgun

He finds the boy after his father dies. He tells the boy that his family has been following them and that there was some debate as to whether they should come for the boy. In the end, they decide to invite the boy to join them on their journey. The man says that he's one of the good guys and that he's carrying the fire. This man adopts a fatherly role for the boy and seems to be a man that the boy can trust as he keeps his promise to cover the boy's father with a blanket.

The little boy

Throughout the novel, there are instances when the boy says he sees another little boy and is deeply concerned for him. At the novel's end, we meet this other travelling family that has both a little boy and a little girl. This could be the same little boy that the boy has seen previously, or he could be a different one. It's never made clear, but the link between the little boy from earlier in the novel and the little boy at the end is clear.

The woman, wife of the man with a shotgun

The woman takes on a motherly role for the boy, welcoming him to their family with a hug and saying that she's glad to see him. The boy talks to the woman about God because the woman still believes in His existence. The boy says that he finds it hard to talk to God, but that he prefers to talk to his father. The woman assures him this is okay, saying that the breath of God passes through all men.

The little girl

Though she's never seen in the novel, she is mentioned by the man with the shotgun. She will be a part of this new post-apocalyptic nuclear family.

Section 1 Summary and Analysis

The man wakes in the woods to the desolate, gray, gloomy world around him. He pushes aside the tarp and stinking blankets and rises, checks on his sleeping son, and reflects upon a dream he had in the night. In the dream he holds the boy's hand, leading him into a cave where there's a lake and, on the far shore of the lake, a pale, translucent, naked creature.

At the first sign of light, the man leaves the boy to study the land around them. He thinks it is October, but hasn't kept a calendar for years, indicating that the world has been in this desolate state for an extended period of time. He and the boy are moving south where the man hopes the winters will be easier to survive.

He returns to the boy and readies the tarp for breakfast, setting the pistol on the cloth in front of him. He reassures the boy that he is there, that he hasn't left him alone.

Then, they return to the road, pushing a cart loaded with their supplies and belongings. Each of them carries a knapsack that holds their essential things should they have to abandon the cart and make a run for it.

At a gas station, the man finds very little. He finds a phone and dials the number of his father's house, just as he'd done in his earlier life, but there's no phone service anymore. He is able to decant a bit of oil for their lamp before they leave and continue their walk south. They crest over a hill and look down upon roadways and a burned house, billboards that now mean nothing. Everything is dead and covered in ash.

The next day, they descend into the city. There are no signs of life here, just burned buildings, cars covered in dust, and a dried corpse in a doorway. The man tells the boy that he should be careful about what he looks at and what he puts in his head, because once those memories are there, they won't go away, especially the bad memories. The man recalls a day from his boyhood, spent with his uncle on a lake in a rowboat. They dragged a stump across the water's surface and didn't speak a word the entire afternoon or evening. The man believes this was the perfect day from his childhood.

Analysis

From the start, McCarthy establishes that the man and boy exist in a future where the world as we know it has been destroyed. The landscape is ravaged, little life survives, little hope remains, and danger is ever present as the man and boy make their way south along the road. This danger is evidenced by the care they take in keeping their cart hidden on the side of the road, and the rear-view mirror they have attached to the handle to see if anyone is approaching them from behind, and their constant states of lookout for signs of smoke or fire.

Throughout the novel there is a strong focus on the bond between father and son. The man sees his son as the only remaining sign of God's existence; without his son, the man has no hope for the future. Their mutual desires to live and die depend solely on one another.

Another theme that emerges at the start of the novel is that of frames, or skeletal shapes. In the city and along the road, all that the father and boy see are the shapes (or remains) of the old world. They see the frames of cars, barns, and houses, and they see the physical remains of dried and decaying human bodies. McCarthy's writing style reflects this sparseness in that he chooses to write in fragments and he keeps the father's and son's dialogue very choppy. The language of the novel reflects the skeletal and barren landscape through which father and son must travel.

Additionally, the theme of dreams emerges in this section. There are dreams that the man has at night, the dreams (or flashbacks) he has during the day. Examples of these flashbacks would be the man's memories of phoning his father's house or spending time on the lake with his uncle.

Section 2

The man and the boy continue south. They walk for weeks through the raw landscape, passing old aluminum houses and burned countryside. They struggle against the cold nights and the man worries about keeping their shoes in good shape and finding their next source of food. They eat sparingly and watch out for the blood cults, road agents, and marauders. They stop in an old barn, where bodies hang from the rafters. The man and boy speak very little and trudge on through the unforgiving landscape.

The man has dreams about his wife, but he mistrusts these dreams, that take him back to the phantom world of what once was. He believes that his survival depends upon his dreams remaining dark and perilous, whereas pleasant dreams mean that he is succumbing to death's beckon. The man wills himself to stay alive because the boy needs him.

At a supermarket, the man finds a soft drink machine with one Coca-Cola inside. He lets the boy, who's never seen a soda before, drink from the can. The boy knows he might never taste this drink again.

They make their way into a city where all that remains are the mummified dead. Farther south they find the man's childhood home, which stirs up memories of his sisters, his mother, his father. The boy is scared of the house, just as he is scared to go inside many of the houses and enclosures that they come upon.

They make their way into the mountains and the man recalls the first years of the world's demise, how the refugees wore masks and goggles and sat along the sides of the road, their spirits destroyed. Now very few survivors remain, and the man worries often about death. As they make their slow ascent, the cold worsens, as does the man's cough, which leaves a mist of blood on the gray snow. They come upon the gap in the mountains, the man unsure of what they will find at the coast, or if they'll even make it there at all.

Analysis

The man continues to draw a link between the boy and God. When he sees the boy catch a gray snowflake in the palm of his hand, the man thinks about taking the host, the body of Christ. And it is the boy whom the man calls "God's own fire-drake." The boy carries the fire and keeps the fire alive within the man.

The theme of fire, and of carrying the fire, is also an important theme in this novel. Fire is an important source of warmth for the man and his son; they have to struggle through many cold, wet nights without it. The flames, though, stir hope in the man.

Dreams and memories continue to play a large role in this section. The man must fight back dreams of his wife and dreams about things that will never happen again, such as walking through the wildflowers and forests, tasting a peach, spending a Christmas in his childhood home or a night by the fire with his sisters. These dreams, he believes, are the call of death, the phantoms that will make him want to give up.

There is a recurring juxtaposition of the old world with the new, the phantoms and shapes that remain of a world that will be no more. In this section, along with the man's dreams and his childhood home, the man and boy also see a lake that has no more fish, a concrete dam that will remain long after people, and newspapers that contain "quaint concerns."

The man's cough is ominous in this chapter, as is his uncertainty about what they will find at the coast. As much as he encourages his son onward to the south and to the coast, he is very aware that all of his plans and promises could be empty, that maybe there is no chance of survival. Still, for his son, he presses on and carries the fire, wondering all the while if he'll be able to do it "when the time comes." While the man doesn't say what he's referring to, it becomes clear that he thinks he may have to one day kill the boy, to spare him.

Section 3

The man and the boy make camp in the mountain pass and then move on the next morning. Before setting out they have a small breakfast of crackers, tinned sausages, and hot chocolate. The boy watches his father, noticing that his father is pouring himself only water. The boy tells his father not to do that, not to go without so that the boy may have more.

The man has to drag the cart through sludge, and their continued descent takes days. Finally, they reach the river. A waterfall streams before them and the boy watches it in awe. The water is freezing, but the man and the boy go swimming in it anyway. They make camp near the waterfall and find some morels, out of which they make a meager dinner. To put the boy to sleep, the man tells him stories of courage and justice from the old world.

The boy wants to stay at the waterfall, or at least follow the river, but the man says the river runs east and that they must continue south. He shows the boy their map, now a tattered piece of parchment they must piece together each time they want to look at it. They continue to follow the state roads of states that no longer exist, states that the boy has never known.

They come upon an overturned tractor-trailer that's been jackknifed there for years. To get to the other side of it, they must slide the cart sideways beneath it. They camp in the truck cab and the next morning the man finds human bodies sprawled in the trailer.

That night in the woods, a storm breaks out, lightning flashing around them and setting fire to the trees. They have to wait for the road to cool so that the macadam doesn't stick to their feet. Ahead of them they see tracks and soon come upon a man, limping and ragged. They follow him, but his pace is slow, and soon the man sits on the road, not even daring to look up at the

man and the boy as they pass. He's been struck by lightning, and they leave him there, the boy crying. He wants to help the man, but his father explains that he's going to do and there's nothing they can do to prevent that.

The man remembers his billfold, how he eventually left that behind in the road, along with his wife's picture. He feels guilty for not keeping her memory alive. He thinks back to the first day, how the clocks stopped at 1:17 and he filled the bathtub with water, all the electricity exhausted.

The boy says he wishes he was with his mom, that he wishes he were dead. The man tells him he mustn't say that. The man remembers the night she left, how she'd wished they'd all gone ahead and killed themselves, but she especially wished she'd killed their son. She's leaving them both so that she can die alone. She can't bear to see her son raped, killed, and eaten, a future she believes is imminent no matter how much the man says he will protect them. She leaves in the dark night, and the next morning, the man and the boy set out. The boy knows she's left them.

Analysis

In this section we see that the boy feels a great deal of responsibility to keep his father alive, to make sure that his father is taking care of himself, too. This is shown in how the boy makes him take some of the hot chocolate.

As much as the world has changed, there still exists a strong, traditional bond between the man and his son. The father is trying to keep the fire alive in his son by telling him stories of courage and justice. They take time to enjoy the waterfall together, the man floating the boy on his stomach and helping to push him around in the water, just as a father might have done before the world expired.

This section highlights the boy's strong sense of right and wrong. He feels guilt at leaving the man who's been struck by lightning behind. This is a recurring theme in the novel, how the boy wants to give what they have to others in order to help them, but how the father must refuse such help so that the two of them can survive. It creates a tension between the father and son, sometimes a silence, as is indicated by the father asking if his son is still talking to him after they've left the man behind.

Dreams and memories play a strong role in this section as the son has a nightmare about an old wind-up penguin toy that he had at the house where they once lived. The man, too, has dreams about figures standing on the far side of a river, calling to him. Perhaps it is the call of death. He thinks more and more about his wife, about the day on which the world ceased to exist as they'd known it, about how she'd left them in the middle of the night, and about how he'd left her, too, when he put his wallet with her picture on the road. The man wants to hold onto his wife, wants to keep her memory alive for himself and for the boy, but he knows that this will only make living harder.

The son says that he wants to be with his mother, that he wishes he were dead, and the man tells him that it's bad to say this, bad to think it, that he mustn't wish to be with his mother. Not only does the ghost of the old world haunt the man and the boy, but the ghost of the boy's mother haunts them as well.

Section 4

The man remembers the birth of his son, how he delivered him by the light of a drycell lamp and cut the cord with kitchen shears, the beginning of their special bond.

The boy asks his father if he used to have friends. The man said he did, that he remembers them, but they're all dead now. When they wake the next morning, they hear men coming, the bad men who carry lengths of pipe and clubs. The man topples the cart, hides it, and takes the boy and runs through the woods. They crouch behind an embankment, and the road gang's truck dies. Upon them comes one of the bad men who is going to the bathroom. The father raises his pistol at the bad man, they exchange words, and the father reveals in his speech that he has knowledge of human anatomy. The bad man asks if he's a doctor because they've got a man hurt. The father says he isn't anything and asks the bad man to go with them, but the man refuses, reaches for his knife, grabs the boy, and the father shoots the bad man in the head, covering the boy with the man's gore.

They run through the woods and hide, listening through the freezing night as the men search for them. The man holds his son close, trying to keep him warm. He thinks of the single round left in the revolver and wonders again if he'll be able to do it, if he'll be able to shoot his son should the time come.

The next morning, all that remains of the road gang are some tracks in the road and the dead man's remains. The dead man's gang boiled the man, ate him, and left behind his innards. Their cart has been ransacked and they leave it behind, continuing south, camping through cold and barren nights around a fire, their food supply running out.

Eventually they come upon a town and enter one of the stores, taking whatever supplies they can find. They move southward to the houses at the edge of town and they see a dog. The boy makes sure that they aren't going to eat the dog, and his father promises him that no, they won't hurt the dog at all.

That night, sleeping in a parked car, the boy asks his father if they're still the good guys. The man tells his son that they are still the good guys, that they are still carrying the fire.

Analysis

The man sees the boy as something that is greater than himself, something holy, as is symbolized by the man referring to his son as the "golden chalice." He also describes the moment in which he washes the bad man's brains from his son's hair as some kind of "ancient anointing," something that indicates the boy's holiness in this new world.

Because the man was chosen as the boy's father, he has been entrusted by God to take care of him. The man reflects often on his role as the father, how he must be the one to wash the bad man's brains from his son's hair, and he questions again in this chapter about whether he'll be able to kill his son if the time should come. With one bullet left, he knows that

Fire continues to be a central theme, as many of the descriptions in this section focus on the building of fires, how the man shapes the fire, and how both he and his son stoke the fire. In many ways, the man is shaping and stoking the fire within his son, too, by sharing stories of the old world and by instilling a sense of right and wrong in the boy.

In this section, the boy still raises questions of morality, asking if they're still the good guys even though they killed the bad man. He wants to make sure that they are doing right even when so many others are doing wrong, as is indicated by the dog and how the boy wants to make sure that he and his father won't hurt the dog, a creature that many others would choose to eat. The fire is alive in the boy.

The bad man and the road gang in this chapter symbolize the deterioration of the human race. They embody the ugliness that has emerged in this new world where almost all things beautiful have been destroyed. For the man, though, he still has his son. And the boy still has his father. What is shared between them is something sacred, and McCarthy alludes to this by including the flashbacks of the boy's birth, how it is the father who delivers his son and how it is the father who is appointed by God to take care of his son no matter what evil and desperate situations befall them.

Section 5

The next morning they begin to search through more houses. The boy sees another little boy, about his age, and chases after him, shouting that he won't hurt him. The man chases after his son and grabs him, asking him what he was doing, but doesn't see the other little boy himself. The man believes that there are people there watching them, but they're hiding.

They move southward, and the snow and cold continue to be relentless. They are almost completely out of food, and the man can feel the old world moving farther and farther out of his reach. He cannot remember certain colors or the names of birds. They come upon more burned houses where all that remains is the shape of each place.

They follow a stone wall past the remains of an orchard, and hanging on another wall they find dried human heads and raw skulls. They move slowly and wake from camp one morning to find the bad guys tramping by them, an army wearing red scarves at their necks. They carry

lengths of pipe and every manner of bludgeon. There are pregnant women and slaves harnessed to wagons. They move past the boy and the man who hide along the roadside.

While they walk, the boy asks if the man will tell them if they are about to die. The man says he doesn't know, but that they're not going to die.

One night they camp in the snowy woods and the trees begin to fall down around them. The man and the boy run to get out of the path of the falling trees and huddle under the tarp until it stops. The next morning, they find the cart, and the father rewraps their feet to keep them warm and dry.

The man asks the boy if he still thinks they're going to die and the boy isn't sure. He doesn't know if his father would lie to him about that. The man admits that he might lie about dying, but that he isn't lying now and that right now they're not dying.

They come upon wheel tracks in the snow. Someone had passed their camp in the night, and the man believes that the bad guys are coming. He and the boy make a maze of tracks in the snow so that they can't be followed, and move to higher ground from where they can watch the road. Two men come through, but they pass by, not seeing the man and his son.

Analysis

In this section we see the constant dangers that the man and the boy must face. They fight starvation, the cold, and must evade the bad guys. While their daily purpose remains the same — to stay alive and to move south — the threats that they encounter vary, and they must learn to deal with these threats in various ways.

We see that the boy is very concerned for the other boy's safety, wondering what will happen to him and asking if they can take the boy with them. In many ways, the boy's fear for the other boy represents the fear and worry that he has for himself. He fears losing his father and being left all alone.

The man's inability to recall the birds and colors and pleasantries of the old world illustrate how the old world is falling away from him, in much the same way that the physical world is being scaled back, too. The trees in the forest collapse, and all that is left of the old world is a shape, the skeletal remains of houses, barns, buildings, and roadways. This theme of sparseness and skeletons continues in this section as is seen through the image of the human skulls on the stone wall, the image of the "trellis of a dog," and even the thinness of the boy as observed by the man. McCarthy continues to reflect the barrenness of this world in the barrenness of the language. The writing style is often in fragmented form, especially when the father and son are exchanging dialogue.

The description of the bad guys as wind-up dolls recalls the nightmare that the boy has earlier in the novel when he dreams of a penguin toy that walks without being wound-up. The bad guys are just as soulless as the penguin wind-up toy. Whatever was once human in them — the fire — has gone. It is up to the man and the boy to carry the fire and be the good guys.

Section 6

The man and the boy come upon a house that was obviously once very nice. They are starving and the man wants to go inside to search for food. The boy, however, finds the house terrifying and doesn't want to go inside. But the man pushes on. Inside they find mattresses and bedding sprawled in front of a fireplace and a pile of clothes, shoes, belts, and coats in a corner of one of the rooms.

In a small room adjoining the kitchen, something like a pantry, there is a door in the floor that's locked with a large padlock. The man finds tools to break the latch, while the boy begs him not to open it. The boy claims that he's no longer hungry anymore and just wants to leave. The man persists; he opens the door in the floor and the two descend into a cellar — the stench almost unbearable. They find naked and starving men and women. They see a man with both of his legs gone to the hip; his torso, where his legs would have started, burned. The people beg the man and boy for help, but the two run back up the stairs and through the hatch. Through the window they see four men and two women walking across the field to the house.

The man and boy run for the woods. The man fears that this may finally be the day when he's going to have to kill his son. He thinks about running in the direction opposite the boy to lead the bad people away. He tries to leave the pistol with the boy and tells him that if the people find him, he has to shoot himself. He directs the boy to stick the pistol's end in his mouth and aim up, but the man sees that the boy is too scared and that he can't leave him there alone. The man wonders what he'll do if the pistol fails, if he'll be able to pummel the boy's skull with a rock. They wait out the night in the cold woods.

Analysis

This section illustrates more of the evil that the man and the boy are up against. The juxtaposition of the house, itself, which was once a grand estate, and the horrible things that are now going on inside the house speaks to the novel's ongoing theme of how a once beautiful world has disintegrated into something so cold, stark, and ugly.

This section provides a glimpse into the atrocities that some people are willing to commit to keep themselves alive. While there are hints throughout the house that something terrible is occurring (such as the pile of clothes and the bell attached to a line), the man doesn't recognize the warnings signs until it's too late. Instead, it is the boy who senses that they need to leave, but his father doesn't listen and they almost end up paying with their lives.

It is implied that the people in the basement are being kept alive only to be eaten, a limb at a time, as illustrated by the man on the bed whose legs have been burnt off. Before opening the door, the man says, "There's a reason this is locked" (108). He believes it's because there is food down there, and, in a morbid sense, this is true. The humans in the basement are being treated like livestock, and there's nothing that the boy or man can do to help them, or they might end up in the same position.

This section also investigates the man's internal struggle about whether he'd be able to kill the one thing that is keeping him alive: his son. The man does everything in his power to protect his son and to make sure the boy doesn't fall into the hands of the bad people. It is a continuous struggle for him to weigh the risks surrounding them while they are on the road. Houses and enclosed spaces may lead to danger, as this house does, but these places also offer the possibility of food, which is detrimental to their survival.

Section 7

The man and boy set out through the woods, often stumbling due to exhaustion and hunger. The man has to carry the boy but can't get very far. He wakes in the woods and sees the shape of a house and a barn in the distance. He knows that desperation led him to carelessness at the last house and understands that he must proceed with more caution from here on.

He leaves the pistol with the boy, who's still sleeping in the woods, and goes through a gnarled apple orchard to get to the barn. Inside, the smell of cows lingers. The man wonders if cows have gone extinct. In the house, he finds a packet of grape powder drink mix and notices a drainpipe running down the corner of the porch and into a tank, where he finds fresh water. He fills mason jars with the water and goes out to the orchard, where there are the shriveled remains of apples. He fills his pockets with the apples and returns to the still-sleeping boy. They spend the afternoon eating apples and drinking water. The boy likes the grape mix. They return to the house to gather more water and apples, then they embark on the road again.

Analysis

After they found no resources at the last house and going into it nearly cost them their lives, this farmhouse proved to be a source of lifesaving sustenance. The boy tells his father that he did good. The man and boy's journey continues to be one of ups and downs. They come close to death and then, at the last moment, they find something to help them continue on the road for a little bit longer.

The theme of skeletons and skeletal remains continues in this section. The father sees that the boy is so starved that he resembles a prisoner at a death camp. The man also sees the shape of a house and a barn from his vantage point in the woods, indicating that those places were once a house and a barn, but now they are simply the empty shells of a time that's past. The apple

orchard, too, is gnarled and skeletal in appearance. All of these images call up a world that is no more. Only skeletons of the old world remain.

The theme of memories reappears, too, with the smell of cows in the barn. The scent makes the man wonder if any more cows exist in the world. He thinks of the past and what he once knew of cows, and then he thinks of the future and wonders why anyone would care to keep a cow now, which hints at his sense of hopelessness for the world.

Section 8

The man and the boy walk the road into the night and through the freezing rain. Of all the bad nights they've had, this is one of the worst and longest nights the man can remember. When the rain stops, the man tries to dry their clothes. The boy asks for a fire and the man apologizes but tells him that he dropped the lighter. The boy asks if the bad are people are going to eat the people in the cellar. The man tells him yes. The boy asks if that's why they couldn't help the people in the cellar, if it's because the bad people would have eaten them too. The man says yes again, that they couldn't help otherwise they may have been eaten, too.

They pass through towns with billboards advertising products that no longer exist, the ads painted over with warnings. Out of apples and starving, they search desperately for food. The boy tells his father that they'd never eat anyone, no matter how hungry they become. He wants to make sure this is true, and the man confirms it. The boy wants to make sure they are still the good guys, that they are still carrying the fire.

Fearing that they're both close to death, the man wonders if they should find a place to hide where they won't be found. He watches the boy sleep and sobs uncontrollably. He has nightmares about the boy on a cooling board, and then he has other dreams about the old, lost world, about his wife in her nightgown.

They move through the remains of charred houses. The man raises the pistol to their reflections in a mirror in one of the houses. The boy tells him, "It's us," and they move on. At the back of the house, the man notices that the ground feels different beneath his feet. He gets a garden spade and begins to dig.

Analysis

The boy is very aware of the horrors happening around him. He knows what is going to happen to the people in the basement without asking his father, but he still asks. The boy wants to make sure that they couldn't have done anything to help the people. He struggles with guilt and morality and wants to make sure that no matter how desperate they become, he and his father continue to carry the fire and the goodness along the dark road.

As the man and boy make their journey, scavenging for supplies, their dialogue continues to mimic the landscape. It's very sparse and exists as more of a frame for a conversation rather than a fully realized discussion.

Just as it is difficult for the man to recognize the world he now inhabits, it is also difficult for him to recognize his own reflection. He worries constantly about their survival, particularly for his son, and the theme of dreams returns as both the present and past worlds come to haunt him at night. His nightmares are of violence to his son and his other dreams, the pleasant ones that call him to death, are of his wife. He cries for his son and for all of the beauty that he will never see or experience, which again begs the question about the future, about why they're trying to survive at all. For what? Yet, as the man digs at the end of this section, there is a continued search for something good and for something to sustain the man and his boy.

Section 9

The man digs and finds a door. The boy, remembering what happened when they opened the cellar door at the large house, doesn't want him to open it. So they sit down together and talk about it. The man says they need to try it, that the good guys keep trying things. The boy decides it's okay to try.

The man lifts the door and beneath he finds stairs that descend into a bunker full of canned goods, blankets, cots to sleep on, water, soap, ammunition (but no gun), and various other supplies. The abundance astonishes both the man and the boy, and the boy wonders about the people who made the bunker. He decides they're dead and wants to know if it's okay for them to use their supplies. The man says they'd want them to use their bunker because they were good guys, too.

Over one of their meals, the boy thanks the people who supplied the bunker. The man knows they can't stay here long, that it will be difficult to keep their door in the ground hidden. They heat water and bathe in the house. The man has to come to terms with living. He'd been prepared to die, and now they've found sustenance to keep them going for a bit longer. The bunker is their small paradise in a very brutal world.

Analysis

This section allows us to see the man and the boy enjoying a brief reprieve from their rigorous journey. The discovery of the bunker itself is very dreamlike, and the man observes that the boy doesn't appear to be able to commit himself to the reality of the bunker and all of its luxuries, wary that he might wake up in the middle of the woods, cold and hungry. The bunker, itself, is yet another reminder of the world that is no more. The boy has never known a world in which he had easy access to such wealth, and the bunker provides them with all of these comforts.

After being so close to death, the man finds it difficult to shift his thoughts back to living, to prepare himself to continue this fight for survival. In many ways, death would be a relief, but — as the man says — the good guys keep trying, and he knows that he must keep himself alive to keep his son alive.

The boy continues to worry about their role as the good guys, making sure that by eating someone else's food and using someone else's bunker that they aren't doing anything wrong. Carrying the fire is of the utmost importance to the boy.

Section 10

The man and the boy head into town and find a cart to fill with the goods from the bunker. They hide it in the shed until they're ready to leave their sanctuary. The man knows it's important not to stay too long, that their paradise will be discovered soon enough.

Later that day, the man cuts the boy's hair, then his own. He shaves. There are a few nights of heavy rain, so they delay their departure from the bunker and spend the days eating and sleeping. When the rain eases up, they leave and continue their journey to the coast. The man thinks they're about 200 miles away, "as the crow flies." The boy asks if there are any more crows or if they're only in books. The man says they only exist in books now, and the boy says that's what he thought.

They stop for the night on a hill. The boy wants to know what their long-term goals are. The man asks where the boy heard that phrase and the boy tells his father he heard it from him, but neither the man nor the boy can remember what those goals were.

Analysis

Again, we see the man thinking about the future, imagining how the boy fits into the future. The man also thinks about what the boy must think of him. To the boy, the father decides, he must be a kind of alien, a person coming from a world that the boy has never known. The man worries that his stories of the old world, and perhaps even the bunker itself with all of its wealth of goods, might be harmful to the boy; they might make his trek on the road more difficult. At the end of this section, the father learns that the boy has thrown away his flute, which indicates that at some point along their journey, the boy determined that music no longer had value. The boy's actions indicate that he, too, might feel as if there's no hope left.

The moment when the man cuts his son's hair is very poignant in that it recalls father and son rituals of the old world. The boy watches the man shave, learning from his father, except this father and son exist in a different world, one in which rituals such as these are almost forgotten. The two of them keep some part of that old world together, but they're pioneering what that relationship means in this world where they are two of the few remaining good guys.

The man has another dream. This time it is about creatures at his bedside; he thinks they have come to warn him — but of what, he's not sure. The dream makes him regret their discovery of the bunker. He admits that there's some part of him that always wishes for their struggling to be over, and perhaps those creatures are connected with that part of him, that link to death of which the man always ponders when he dreams.

This section ends with the boy asking about long-term goals, a question that leads the man to wonder what those goals are, what they have become. They're still heading toward the coast, but what future will they find once they get there?

Section 11

The man and the boy come upon an old man ahead of them on the road. The man is wary of the old man, worrying that he's a decoy for roadagents. The old man is filthy and in poor shape. The boy wants to give the old man something to eat. He wants to comfort him, but his father tells him that the old man can't come with them, that they can't keep him. He and his son make a deal: They give the old man a cup of fruit on the side of the road and invite him to eat dinner with them that night.

At their fireside, the man asks the old man about his time on the road, about how he has survived for so long and who else he's met along the way. The old man offers his perspective on the state of the world, saying that he knew something like this would happen eventually. The old man relates that he thinks it would be awful to be the last person on earth, and suggests that it might have been nice to have died already because while nobody wants to be living under the circumstances they're living in. The old man also confesses that no one wants to die, either. He says that his name is Ely, but also says that's a lie. He doesn't want to give away his real name because he doesn't want people talking about him. He doesn't trust anyone else with his name. Ely goes on to say that he doesn't believe in God, and that it'd be better if everyone did just die, because then all that would be left of the world would be Death, who would have nothing left to do. Ely admits that he thought he had died when he saw the boy, because he didn't think he'd ever see a child again.

The next morning, the man and the boy part ways with Ely. The boy has persuaded his father to leave Ely with some cans of food. Ely, however, doesn't thank the boy, admitting to the man that he wouldn't have given them food if he'd been the one with supplies. The man says that the boy didn't give him the food for the thanks. Ely wonders if the boy believes in God. The man says he's not sure what the boy believes in.

Analysis

This section illustrates more of the moral dilemmas that the man and boy struggle with. The boy wants to help the old man, saying that he's scared and hungry, but the father is wary of the man, wondering if Ely might be a decoy for some roadagents. The father also knows that their survival depends upon them conserving their food, so helping others along the road isn't a

good option. But the boy's sense of goodness and his desire to remain a good guy are enough to make the man give Ely some food.

Their discussion about whether they should feed the man calls up a father and son conversation common to the old world that usually focused on whether a child could keep a dog. They use the same language that would have once been used to negotiate a pet adoption ("Can we keep him"), but in this new world, such language refers to a human life.

This section, too, focuses on this theme of the future and death with Ely serving as the primary philosopher on the topic. Just as the man has wondered about whether it's better to give in to death or to keep going, Ely too has thoughts on this topic, believing that being the last man alive would be a horrible fate.

Ely admits that he no longer believes in God, but he wonders if the boy does. The man mentions that perhaps the boy himself is a god, again placing almost a mythical quality to the boy's role in the future of this new world. When Ely says that he never thought he'd see a child again, it adds to the boy's importance. The boy still represents hope and, perhaps, the presence of innocence and goodness alive in this new and caustic world. The boy's goodness is one that not even his father can understand, something buried deep within. The boy, more so than anyone, carries the fire.

Section 12

Later that afternoon, the man asks if the boy is purposefully not talking to him. He knows that the boy is upset over the man's unwillingness to let Ely stay with them and tells the boy that he'll have more time to think about Ely when they're out of food. The man knows the boy thinks that he was wrong for making Ely leave them. The boy feels sure that Ely is going to die.

The man's cough continues to get worse. He wakes in the cold night and thinks about Ely out on his own. The man knows he is dying and wonders how he can do that with the boy still alive.

The boy forgets to turn off both valves on their stove, so it runs out of gas. The man tries to hide the mistake from the boy, but the boy figures it out. The man insists that the mistake is not the boy's fault but his, because it's his job to check the tank.

They continue to make their way to the coast. The towns and land they pass through are full of death — dead creatures, dead homes, and barren fields — and they have been completely looted. The boy discovers a train in the woods. They explore it and the boy sits in the engineer's seat, but they find nothing of substance. Their stores are all gone long before they reach the coast.

During their journey, they pause to look at the map and figure out their location. The boy wants to know if the sea is blue. The man says it used to be, but he doesn't know if it is anymore.

The man assures his son that there are other good guys on the road, but they're just hiding. They run into three men in the road, who want to know what's in their cart. The man aims his pistol at them, and he and the boy make their way past.

Analysis

In this section, multiple scenes foreshadow the man's death. The man's cough is getting worse and he admits to himself that he is dying and isn't sure how he can do that with his son still alive. He is afraid of leaving his son alone and continues to do all he can to protect the boy, even trying to spare him the guilt of forgetting to turn off the gas valve on the stove. The boy has a dream in which his father won't wake up even though the boy is crying for him.

The landscape is as hopeless as ever, with multiple images of death, such as the bones of dead creatures in the gullies and fields.

The image of the man and the boy on the train again recalls father and son moments from the world that no longer exists. The man places his son in the engineer's seat and makes train noises for the boy, before realizing that those noises mean nothing to him since the boy has never seen (nor heard) a working train. Again the man struggles to reconcile the old world with the new, while trying to decipher what his son must think of the world in which he's being raised. The train, which once represented industry and technology, now sits in the woods — an empty vessel and stands as a stark reminder to the man of a lost world, something that cannot be recovered or recreated for the boy.

When the man and the boy study the map, they work to figure out their location. This serves as a metaphor for their ultimate search for their place in the world. The man and boy don't know who else is out there, and although the man promises that there are other good guys out there, soon after they run into three men who aren't good guys. Still, the boy has already expressed that he believes his father is correct. He continues to believe that there are others out there like him and his father, carrying the fire.

Section 13

The man becomes very sick with a fever, and the boy is scared for him. The man's dreams become more peaceful and in them he's visited by dead kin. They don't move for more than four days and the man recalls a scene from his boyhood when he watched men burn a pile of snakes in a field.

The boy has a bad dream and refuses to tell the man what it's about. The man assures the boy that his bad dreams mean he hasn't given up. When they set out on the road again, the man is very weak. They come upon a stretch of road where everything has been burned and people abandoned their belongings. Farther up, they find dead bodies, mummified in agony, melted into the black asphalt. The man says he doesn't want the boy looking, but the boy tells him that the images are already in his head and that they're not leaving.

The man feels as if someone is following them. They watch the road from a hiding spot atop the bluffs and see three men and a pregnant woman on the road. The man and boy remain where they are for the night and let the people pass.

The next morning, they see smoke coming from the place where the people camped. They go to investigate and find a skewered baby cooking over an open fire.

Analysis

In this section, the father's deteriorating health adds to the novel's tension. All along the man has been worried about his son, wondering what will happen if he has to leave the boy behind. The man believes that it is his purpose to protect the boy. There is a moment in this section when the father briefly muses on fatherhood, wondering if his ancestors are watching and if they are judging him and how he is caring for his son. This reflection is part of the novel's theme of fatherhood and the special bond that exists between father and son.

Dreams continue to play a large role in this section. While the man warns the boy that pleasant dreams are bad, telling his son that bad dreams mean he still wants to live, the man's dreams have taken a turn and become peaceful. The man's dreams focus on his own death; visions of dead relatives while he's ill represent his calling to death.

The image of serpents recurs in this section, as well. The man has had multiple dreams about beasts and creatures that are related to evil, and here he remembers seeing snakes burned when he was a boy. Shortly after the man recalls the burning snakes, the man and boy come upon human carcasses that were burned in the road, and the infant cooking on a spit. Each of these burned/burning images conveys desperation and hopelessness, which resonates with the man and boy's current state. The man continues to grow weaker and closer to death, the boy is beginning to realize that he is losing his father, the days remain bitterly cold, and their food stores are almost completely used up.

Section 14

They camp at the river. The man hopes the sound of the water will cheer up the boy after seeing the cooking baby carcass. The boy asks where the baby came from but his father doesn't answer. They continue to head south and to the coast without any knowledge of what

they'll find when they get there. People's belongings are scattered by the road and the man recalls how the boy used to pick things up and carry them with him. The boy doesn't do that anymore.

They sleep deeper than before, waking up in the middle of the road, and the man knows that they are in desperate need of food. They haven't eaten in two days. The boy spots a house across the field and they make their way to it. Crossing the field, they find arrowheads and a coin with Spanish writing on it.

This house, like many of the other houses, makes the boy nervous. He doesn't want his father to go upstairs. They build a fire in the hearth and the man finds jarred foods. They cook a hot dinner and sleep, then explore the house the next day. They stay for four days, eating and sleeping, and in the yard they find a wheelbarrow. When they set out to retrieve their cart and resume their journey on the road, the boy asks if they did good, and his father confirms that they did.

Analysis

The man is noticing changes in the boy; it has been ages since he'd seen the boy run or pick up objects along the roadside and carry them with him. It's as if the boy has become less of a child. Earlier in the novel, the boy discarded his flute. Now, he's lost a bit of his curious nature.

In this section, the country house offers the man and boy a moment of reprieve. They are able to find food and regain a bit of their strength. While doing so, the man muses on, wondering if "they" are watching. This question recalls the moment in the previous section when the man wonders if his fathers are watching him. The man believes that they are watching, that they are looking for something that not even death can undo. This "thing" is, presumably, the connection and love between father and son. The man believes that if the fathers don't see that this bond is still alive, that they will leave the man and boy there to die alone. But, if the man and boy remain so strongly linked, as they have been throughout their entire journey, then their fathers won't leave them.

The man recognizes that the tragedies the boy has witnessed while on the road have altered the boy in many ways, taking away his childhood, but the father continues to protect his son and keep the fire alive inside him. At the end of the section, the boy is pleased, knowing that they've done good, that they've managed to find a bit of sanctuary during their journey to the coast.

Section 15

The man hopes that the coast will offer hope, but he knows he has no reason to believe this will be true. They eat sparingly and when they do finally reach the coast, they find that life isn't much different there. The sea isn't blue, and the man apologizes to the disappointed boy. Along the shore there are the bones of birds and ribs of fish, a bleak scene up and down the

beach. The boy asks his father what's on the other side of the ocean. The man says that there's nothing, then he says that maybe there's another boy and his father, carrying the fire. The boy goes for a swim after the man telling him he should try it.

The man remembers another night he was at the beach, before the world slipped into this dark state. He recalls the warm sand, the stars, and his wife there beside him; a comforting, nearly perfect night.

The man and the boy comb the shore for tools and supplies they can use. They come upon a sailboat keeled over in the water, and the man undresses and swims out to the hull. He explores the boat and gathers clothing, pulling on foulweather gear and returning to the boat's deck to check on the boy, who's a bit alarmed by the man's new appearance.

The man also finds a brass sextant from London, a navigation tool that stirs something inside him that has been hibernating for a long time. He finds rope, too, and cans of food that are rusting and bulbous. He selects those that look salvageable and returns to the shore, telling his son that he's found lots of stuff.

Analysis

While the coast doesn't offer the relief or salvation for which the man and boy have hoped, it does restore a bit of the fire within them. The man thinks about a father and son on the other side of the sea, the boy hoping that they, too, are carrying the fire and remaining vigilant under these harsh circumstances. The man also encourages the boy to go for a swim, an attempt to keep a bit of the child alive in his son.

The man, too, has a moment on the boat when the sextant stirs old emotions in him, perhaps emotions of curiosity and hope for discovery. The man and boy are, in many ways, navigators of this new world and the sextant, as a navigational tool that is also beautiful in form, offers the man hope and a rekindling of heart.

The theme of shells and skeletons is exceptionally strong in this section. Not only are there bird and fish bones washed up along the shore, but there is also the boat, an empty vessel of the old world. Throughout the novel, the man and boy have walked through abandoned homes, empty shells that hearken back to the old world and reveal all that has been lost. The ship in this section functions as those homes have throughout the novel. While the boat offers the man and boy hope with the supplies it provides, it also stands as a reminder of something from the old world that is lost to them.

Section 16

The man and boy start making their way back to their camp when the man asks the boy where the pistol is. The boy realizes he forgot it on the beach and they have to turn back. The boy

apologizes, but the man says it's his fault; he should be making sure they have the pistol at all times. They return to the beach and the man cleans the sand from the gun. The boy is nervous, asking if the dark is going to catch them.

A storm moves in and they hurry to get to their camp before nightfall. The night does catch them, though, and so they move with the help of the lightning. Then the man hears the rainfall hitting their tarp. They take refuge for the long, cold, wet night.

The next morning they go back to the ship and spend the day offloading whatever supplies they can find. They sleep on the beach that night and the man's bloody cough returns. He admits to himself that he is dying. The following morning, the man makes one more trip to the ship and finds a raft, a first-aid kit, and a flare gun, which excites the boy. The boy asks about the flare gun and what it's used for, and the man says it's for signaling, so that people know where they are.

That night, the man shoots off the flare gun. The boy asks who they might signal to, wondering if there's anyone else out there. The man says he doesn't know, that he's not sure where the other people are. The boy says he doesn't know what they're doing then, and the man changes his mind about people, telling his son that there are others out there and that they'll find them.

Analysis

The man continues to try to protect his son, blaming himself and not the boy when the pistol gets left behind. This is similar to an earlier scene in the novel when the boy forgot to turn the gas off on the stove and the man said it was his fault, that he should have checked to make sure both valves were closed.

The man continues to struggle with his bloody cough, which foreshadows his death as well as his involuntary abandonment of the boy. Because the man fears he'll soon be leaving his son to fend for himself, it is even more important to him to encourage his son and inspire hope in him. When the man shoots off the flare and says he doesn't think many other people are out there, the boy says he isn't sure what they are doing then, that he doesn't know why they continue with their journey on the road if all hope is lost. The man changes his mind, deciding that it's best to tell the boy that there are others out there like them and that they'll eventually find these people. He wants the boy to believe that there is purpose in their time on the road and that there is hope for the future.

The boy continues to maintain a deep focus on the morality of his and his father's actions. He asks his father if he thinks the people from the ship are dead. The man, understanding the motive behind the boy's question, says he thinks the people are dead so that his son doesn't think they are stealing somebody else's belongings. The man knows his son so well that he recognizes the boy would be more upset if the people from the ship were alive and came back to find their belongings plundered.

While the flare gun serves as a source of entertainment for the boy, it also allows the boy to feel as if they are orienting themselves on the earth in some way; as if they are signaling to God, telling God where it is they stand. The boy, like his father, is fascinated by maps and studies theirs frequently. The flare gun represents one more way in which the boy is trying to understand what it is he and his father are trying to do as some of the last remaining good guys on earth.

Section 17

The man walks along the beach while the boy sleeps and when the man returns, the boy is sick. The boy vomits and apologizes, and the man tells him he hasn't done anything wrong. The man holds his feverish son through the nights, terrified that the boy is dying. He works to keep the fire going and examines their food for anything suspect. He gives the boy medicine from the first-aid kit, but nothing seems to be helping. He vows that he won't let his son die alone.

Then, one morning, the boy wakes and he asks for water. He's ready to eat again. The man asks if he remembers being sick. The boy says he remembers and that he had some weird dreams, but doesn't want to say what they were about. The man stares at his son. The boy asks him to stop looking at him, but the man can't.

Analysis

This section, like the rest of the novel, illustrates how much the man loves his son. He comes so close to losing him and is enraged at the thought of having his son taken from him. He keeps his promise, though, making sure that he doesn't leave his son because he refuses to let his son go into the darkness alone.

This section also contains a lot of fire imagery, referring multiple times to how the father tends to and rekindles the fire. This physical fire stands as a metaphor for the fire that he and the boy talk about carrying within them. The father fights to keep both his son and the fire within the boy alive, and McCarthy uses the physical fire to emphasize this recurring theme.

For the first time, the boy reveals that he does keep some of his thoughts private, even from his father. The boy doesn't want to tell his father about the dreams he had while he was sick. While we don't know what the boy dreamed about, the implication is that the boy is keeping his dreams a secret to save his father's feelings. Maybe the boy's dreams would scare or depress his father. Or, instead, maybe the boy is simply shy, or maturing. He gets uncomfortable when his father stares at him. This, too, could represent a part of the boy's growth: he needs his father to care for him but at the same time, he's craving a bit of independence, too.

Section 18

The man and boy spend two more days at the beach. They eat large meals and work to get their stores down to a level that will make travel a bit easier for them on the road. One day they come back to the camp and the man sees boot prints in the sand. They reach their campsite and everything is gone: the cart, their food, the tarp, blankets, and shoes. Everything has been stolen from them.

The man is beside himself, calling himself a stupid ass. He and the boy race up to the road and try to find traces of sand so that they can see in which direction the thief, or thieves, headed. The boy sees some sand and they follow it. By the time they overtake the thief, it is dusk. It's a single man, an outcast from one of the communes. His clothes are ragged, the fingers of his right hand have been cut off, and he's filthy. He holds a butcher knife in his hand, but steps back when the man raises his gun at him. The man tells the thief to step back from the cart and take off all of his clothes, even his shoes. The boy begs his father not to kill the thief, but the man responds by saying that's what the thief was doing to them — killing them by stealing all that they had.

The thief tells the man to listen to the boy, who's begging his father to let the man be. The man forces the thief to pile his clothes and shoes on the cart. Then the man and the boy leave the thief in the road — alone, naked, and starving. The boy cries for the thief, but his father tells him to stop. The man tells his son that he's scared because he's the one who has to worry about everything. The boy refutes his father, claiming his father's statement is not true: It's him, the boy, who's the one that has to worry. They return to the place in the road where they last saw the thief. They call for him, but no one comes. The boy remains sure that the thief is there, hiding because he's scared. The man leaves the thief's clothes and shoes in the road.

That night, the man assures the boy that he wasn't going to kill the thief. The boy, though, claims that they did.

Analysis

This section illustrates more of the boy's compassion for others, even those who might have done harm to the boy and his father. The boy has a strong sense of right and wrong and a commitment to humanity, which again recalls the boy's desire to carry the fire. The boy represents hope for the world's future, proof that humanity still exists. Even the thief recognizes this in the boy, as he is described as seeing something "very sobering" to him in the child.

The man, however, finds it harder to forgive. He believes that the thief left them for dead, so he plans on repaying the thief back in the same manner. When he tells the boy that he's scared because he's the one who has to worry all of the time, he doesn't realize that the boy worries, too; that the boy feels just as much of the burden as he does. It is an epiphany for the man, to see that his son is shouldering his own burden. It is because of the boy that the man decides to return to find the thief and leave his clothes for him.

The man wants the boy to know that he wasn't going to kill the man. The boy, however, states that by taking the man's clothes and leaving him for dead that, for all intents and purposes, they did kill him. The boy's comment could regard the thief's life, literally, or it could refer to a metaphorical killing. The boy's father treated the thief as something less than human, killing something inside of the man that cannot be recovered. The boy so strongly desires to be a good guy that he doesn't even wish harm to his enemies, a righteousness that the man finds difficult to support.

Section 19

They set out the next morning and the man tries to get the boy to talk. The boy, still upset about the thief, says he's trying to make conversation. The man hears the earth rumble and thinks about the past and what's ahead in the future, what's coming for them.

The man goes through their cans of food once more to toss whatever seems like it might be rotten. They make their way into a town and as they're pushing the cart through some back streets, the man is shot in his leg by an arrow. He covers the boy and shoots a flare at a man with a bow, who is standing inside a window of one of the houses. He and the boy hear the man with the bow scream. The man tells the boy to stay put while he runs inside. He finds a woman holding the man who had the bow, who may be alive or he may be dead. The woman curses the man, but the man asks the woman where the bow is. She claims not to have it, and the man realizes there must have been others with the two of them, who have taken the bow and left the injured man and the woman behind. She says that she chose to stay behind.

Outside, the man gets the boy and they go into a building that was once a store. The man's leg bleeds heavily, and he rinses out the wound, cleans it with disinfectant from the first-aid kit, and stitches it up. The boy asks if it hurts and the man says it does, but that it's okay.

The man and the boy spend the next day in the store, where the man asks the boy if he wants to hear a story. The boy does not, because stories aren't true because in them, his father tells him that they're helping people. The boy no longer believes they are helping people. The man asks the boy to tell him a story, then, or to tell him about some of his dreams. But the boy refuses to talk about his dreams because his dreams aren't happy. The boy believes that stories should be happy, but his stories are like real life. The boy says that real life isn't so great.

The boy tells his father that when he goes out to the road and starts coughing, that he can hear him. He says he can also hear him cry sometimes and that if his father won't allow him to cry, then he shouldn't cry, himself. The boy asks his father if he killed the man who shot him with the arrow. His father says no. The boy asks if his father's leg will get better, and he says yes.

Analysis

In this section, the boy is still trying to reconcile the sadness he feels for the thief that they left naked in the street. The boy's father is thinking about stories, musing on the story of himself

and his son. He wonders how old the boy is, what time of the year it is, essentially organizing the setting of the story in his mind. Stories, after all, are what have allowed him to keep the old world alive for his son up until this point. The earth, however, interrupts the man's thoughts, creaking as if to remind him that stories of fiction and stories of reality have changed and will forever be changed in this new world. The man wonders what is coming for him, what is going to "steal" his eyes and "seal" his mouth, perhaps foreshadowing his death and how it will silence him as it has silenced so many others' stories before his.

The theme of stories and of dreams both continue throughout this section. The man asks the boy if he wants to hear a story. The boy does not, because the stories the man tells aren't real. The man tries to tell stories to make the boy happy, which is why he creates stories in which they help others. But the boy, presumably still thinking about the thief, says that they don't really help others. For the boy, being a good guy is one of his primary reasons for continuing on in their journey. He doesn't see much of a point in life if he isn't helping others. When his father asks him to tell him about his dreams, the boy refuses because his dreams are sad. The boy wants stories to be happy. He remembers that bad dreams are a good sign, though, because they mean that he hasn't given up. The man asks the boy about real life, and the boy admits that real life is pretty tough, a comment very reminiscent of others that the boy has made about wanting to be with his mother, wanting to be dead.

The man's ability to stitch up his own wound recalls an earlier section on the novel. Before the man shot the bad guy in the truck, the bad guy asked if the man was a doctor. The man answered by saying that he isn't anything. Obviously, the man has medical skills: he birthed his son, and he can suture wounds.

When the boy wants to know if his father killed the man with the bow and arrow, his father tells him that he didn't. The boy wants to believe his father, just as he wants to believe that they're still the good guys and don't kill people. Whether the man with the bow and arrow is really alive or dead remains unclear; all the boy (as well as the reader) has is the man's word. The boy also wants to believe his father when he says that his leg will get better. Throughout the novel, the boy has second-guessed what his father tells him, especially when it concerns whether or not they are dying.

Section 20

The man and boy struggle onward. They pass the ruins of seaside resorts and the hulls of stripped and empty boats. The man continues to cough up blood. They come to a coastal city, where the tall buildings have melted and bent slightly. The man's dreams turn to pleasant things. The man knows that his son listens for his breathing at night, worried that he'll soon be gone. The days get harder and harder, and the man grows weaker. As they slowly make their

way along the road, the man notes the earth's deconstruction and wonders if the secrets of the earth's creation will be revealed in its deconstruction.

The road is so strewn with wreckage that the man and the boy abandon their cart. They trudge on for two days before setting up camp. The man knows that this is the place where he will die. They have a single can of peaches left and the man refuses to eat any. He tells the boy to save them for him until tomorrow. The boy brings him water and tries to cover him with a tarp, but the man says he doesn't want to be covered. He watches the boy, who is surrounded by light.

Analysis

The theme of skeletons and empty vessels resumes in this section. The man and boy come upon the remains of cities, buildings, cars, houses, boats, and human bodies. Everything has been stripped of life and has been hollowed out, left to rot in the wind and cold and ash. The tone of this section is increasingly desolate, and the language and sentence structure is very barren. The use of sentence fragments and choppy dialogue reflect the bleak landscape, as it has throughout the entire novel.

The man's softer, happier dreams foreshadow his death. The man has said throughout the novel that good dreams are a bad sign because they mean you've given up on the present world. This shift in the man's dreams indicates that his life is coming to an end.

The man knows that he is dying, but the boy comforts him. Again, the man notes godlike or holy qualities in the boy. When the boy turns to look at his father behind him in the road, the man likens him to a glowing tabernacle. Similarly, when the boy brings his father water, the man notes that the light comes with the boy and retreats when the boy moves away. This light symbolizes the goodness in the boy, as well as the fire that he carries. The man can feel himself and the boy growing farther apart. The boy will have to live on in this new world and make for himself a place within it, while his father is getting ready to leave.

Section 21

The boy takes the revolver with him and goes out to find food. But he returns with nothing, and his father tells him that he needs to press on and head south by himself. The man tells the boy to find the good guys and carry the fire. When the boy asks if the fire is real, the man assures him that it is; that it's inside the boy. The man tells his son that he will always be able to hear him and that if he practices talking to him, he'll be able to hear the man's response. The boy goes down the road as far as he can, but then turns around to go back to his father who's asleep.

The boy asks his father if he remembers the little boy that he saw in one of the towns. The man says he does remember the other boy, and that he thinks the boy is all right, that goodness will find him because it always has.

The boy sleeps close to his father that night and when the boy wakes the next morning, his father is dead. The boy stays with his father for three days and then sets out on the road. A bearded man with a shotgun comes toward him. The man with the shotgun asks the boy if the man was his father. The boy confirms it was and that he died. He asks the man with the shotgun if he's one of the good guys, and the man with the shotgun assures the boy that he is. The man with the shotgun tells that boy that his group of companions discussed whether they should come after the boy or not, but they'd decided to ask the boy to join their group and travel with them. The boy asks if the man is carrying the fire, and he says that he is. Then the boy asks if there's a little boy in the man's group, and the man confirms that there's another boy about his age and a little girl too. The boy asks the man with the shotgun if he and his group eats people, and the man tells him that no, they don't eat people.

Before the boy sets out with the man, he wants to say goodbye to his father. His father's body is covered with a blanket, just as the man promised it would be. The boy cries over his father's body, and then sets out on the road once more. The woman in the group welcomes the boy. She and the boy talk about God, but the boy says he prefers to talk to his father, which the woman says is all right, and that God passes through all men through all of time.

Analysis

This section begins with a shift in roles between the boy and the father. It's now the boy who carries the revolver and leaves in search of food. The man knows that it's time for the boy to go ahead of him, to be a part of a future that doesn't involve him. He continues to encourage his son to carry the fire and tells the boy that the lightness (goodness) is a part of him, a quality the reader has witnessed throughout the entire novel. The man calls his son "the best guy." All along the boy has wanted to be a good guy, and here his father calls him the best.

When the boy asks his father about the other little boy, he not only calls to mind this thought that others could be there around them, offering hope, but he might also be voicing concerns about himself. He wants to know what his father thinks happened to that boy, and, indirectly, wants to know what will happen to himself, too. His father seems to sense this, and tells the boy that goodness will find the little boy because it always has.

After the boy's father dies, a new man enters the novel. The boy carries the revolver in the same way his father used to. The boy has to decide whether he can trust this new man or not, and so he asks him about carrying the fire and about eating people, two of the boy's major concerns throughout his journey. The man says that there's a little boy with them, although it's not clear if this is the same boy that has been mentioned throughout the novel.

The boy decides to trust the new man and go with him, and the children and woman with him. When the boy goes back once more to say good-bye to his father, we see that the new man has left the boy's father covered with a blanket, just as he'd promised. This indicates that the man is, presumably, trustworthy and is, in fact, a good guy.

In such a bleak world, questions of God's existence emerge both for the boy and the man. Throughout the novel, the man has often seen glimpses of God in the boy. He sees a light in the boy and has referred to him as a "glowing tabernacle," a "golden chalice," and a god. But at the end of the novel, the boy reveals that he prefers to talk to his father instead of God. The woman tells the boy that the breath of God passes through all men and, in this way, the boy is able to recognize a bit of God in his father. Earlier in the novel, when the man is talking with Ely and Ely asks if the boy believes in God, the man says he doesn't know what the boy believes in. In this final section, the boy reveals that he believes in his father, thus perpetuating the mystical, and seemingly holy, connection that exists between father and son.

The novel's final paragraph begins in storytelling form: "Once there were . . ." The frame for this final paragraph recalls the man's thoughts about storytelling and about the death that was going to put an end to his story. This paragraph shows that while the old world remains a story, there is a future — and the boy is a part of it. The stories of the men from the old world, like the boy's father, will remain so long as the boy is able to carry the story on. The boy continues to carry the fire of his father and a new fire that lives within him and that he will spread over time.

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