Scott C. Dyer

Sis. Papworth

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The Man Without Syzygy

*The Road* by Cormac McCarthy is the story of a man and his son struggling for survival in a ravaged world inhabited by cannibals. In the end, the father dies tragically leaving his son alone to fend for himself. The man is a tragic hero because he is incapable of fulfilling the archetypal role of the father. Through analysis of the man's relationship with his wife, child, and the rest of society, it is clear that the man became a tragic hero because his wife left him; their separation creates a hole in the man that skews his perception of the world and in turn prevents his son from achieving happiness in the world.

In order to give the world a bleak feeling McCarthy applied a distinct use of diction. Only one character in the book actually is named, the rest are referred to as what they are. The author uses very little punctuation, and he almost never adds dialogue tags. The dialogue is almost always between the man and the boy. In order for the reader of this essay to understand the quotes I use I will indicate who is talking so that the quotes are more clear, and when I refer to the man I am talking about the main character unless stated otherwise. In addition I will insert the quotes in the same way that they appear on print.

The archetypal role of the father according to Anthony Stevens is helping their children achieve positive world views that will enable them to succeed. He said, "It is not just that a father's attitudes to work, social achievement, politics and the law condition the developing attitudes of his children, but that he constellates for them the whole of extraverted potential of the world as a place-to-be-known-and-lived-in. Inasmuch as he succeeds in this role, he sets them free from their involvement with mother and fosters the necessary autonomy (ego-self axis)" (Stevens 107). This is precisely where the man failed with his son. The man teaches the boy to distrust everyone. Throughout the novel the man puts no confidence in anyone else alive. When the boy and the man see anyone else on the road the boy always asks if they can give them food and the man always says no. There is one instance when the man concedes and they give food to someone that they find, but the man is reluctant and tells the boy, "Okay means okay. It doesnt mean we negotiate another deal tomorrow" (165). The man instilled a negative view of the world in his son.

The man was not always cynical towards society. The man’s view of the world changed drastically when his wife left him. Before she left he was indifferent towards it and solely focused on surviving. When she left the man his view of the world changed.

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

Survivors? she said.

Yes.

What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film (55).

Before this point the man only thought of their family. After telling the man the gruesome things that people will do to their family if they are caught by the other people that survived the disaster, she says, "...and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen" (56). Before she left she made him see her opinion causing him to distrust everyone he meets.

Even though the man did love the boy he was too robotic and his love could not fill both the mother and father roles for the child. Their mother was the anima or "the female aspect present in the collective unconscious of men" (Boeree) for both of them. On page fifty-five the boy says, "I wish I was with my mom." The boy missed the his mother. This is a very archetypal emotion a young boy to have with a missing mother. Without her there was no longer anyone to care for them emotionally. She had left a hole in both the boy and the man that only she could fill. The anima completes a male. Carl Jung used a specific word to describe it that word is syzygy. Syzygy is "both conjunction and opposition of two heavenly bodies" (OED). Jung used this word to describe the opposition of the male and female and how they are related and necessary to each other. Without the mother there is no syzygy and what was left of the family was emotionally lopsided; as if the earth lacked the moon and only had the sun.

The man's family fell apart without their mother. The man and the boy missed her nurturing. On page fifty-three in the first flashback that the man has of his wife is of the day disaster destroyed civilization. The first image of his wife she is standing in the doorway holding her pregnant belly. This image is an archetype for a nurturing mother. She was what the boy and the man missed, and what they needed in order to function as an archetypal family with an authoritative father, a nurturing mother that would produce a child which represents the future. Without her they were no longer a functioning family.

The man's intentions in the novel are good. His sole purpose of survival is for his son.Very early on in the story the boy asks his father an endearing question.

Can I ask you something?

Yes. Of course you can.

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yea. So I could be with you.

Okay (11).

Throughout the book the man is scavangeing for food so he can feed his boy and trying and help his son survive. After his wife leaves the family, the man becomes purely mechanical in his survival, and his only emotional connection is with his son. The man shows that he does not care for anyone else but the boy. After passing a man on the road south the man and the boy have a small conversation.

Who is it? said the boy.

I dont know. Who is anybody? (49)

McCarthy's excellent use of diction in this short exchange is a clear depiction of what society has become to the man. "Who is anybody?" People have lost names and identities, and they have ceased to be people to the man. Even he is denied a name. It is evident that the man thinks of everyone, but his son, the same way. He has no emotional attachment to anyone in the story, but his son. On page 63 an unnamed cannibal from the road attempts to kill the boy. Until this point the man had been saving his only two bullets to kill the boy and then himself if their problems worsened. In a quick decision the man shot the cannibal to save his son with the same bullet intended to kill the boy. The man's only attachment to the world was the boy, and the boy only had his father in the world.

The boyknows his father is tragically flawed but follows him anyway displaying love for the man.

You dont believe me. (The man)

I believe you.

Okay.

I always believe you.

I dont think so.

Yes I do. I have to (185).

The boy continues to follow the man through the whole book even until the man dies. He may not have realized it but his father held him back from getting happiness. Tragic in itself is the death of the man. When he dies the boy is left alone in the world. The child, an archetype for the future, wants to die with his father.

Just take me with you. Please.

I cant.

Please, Papa.

I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.

You said you wouldnt ever leave me (279).

The boy is then abandoned in a bleak world filled with "the bad guys". The man's tragic flaw was his inability to trust other people. Ironically, after the man's death the boy was found by another man. This other man and his family took the boy in and took care of him. The reason the boy was able to find happiness in the end is because his father was no longer there to tell him not to trust other people. In other words, had the man been more trusting he too would have found happiness and civilization in the end.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* the man is a tragic hero. After his wife leaves him, the man starts down the road to his death. Failing to fulfill his role as the archetypal father, the man dies leaving his boy alone to find happiness when he himself was the one holding his son or the future from attaining it.

**Bibliography**

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Scott:

I think you have potential for a very powerful paper here. You’ve tackled one of the most difficult problems in your first draft (getting a paper to flow easily). The problem I noticed was an occasional claim or explanation that hadn’t wasn’t related back to the thesis. If you decide to make the changes I recommended, you’ll really just be adding some explanation. Please contact me if you have any questions.

John Larsen

208.403.3623