

Mother-Absence, Love-Omnipresence

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ABSTRACT: Following the line of classic apocalyptic novels, *The Road* offers a panoramic view of the wasteland in the aftermath of disaster. The father-son bond appears strong as they live and die together on their voyage to the south, while the absence of mother is perplexing. This article purports to explore her suicidal behavior and further uncover the principal cause for absence. Evidences suggest that mother's absence is the continuation of love rather than a lack of love, thus promoting the boy's growth.

Key words: Absence, Growth, Maternal Love, *The Road*

I. INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy is deemed as a contemporary American literary master whose Frontier Trilogy once sparked a literary phenomenon. As a result, he is lauded as “the only heir to Hemingway and Faulkner” and “one of the greatest American writers of our time”. *The Road*, McCarthy's tenth full-length novel, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Quill Book Award and the Independent Booksellers Association of America Book Sense Book of the Year. And it has also been thrust into the limelight of scholars both at home and abroad. Love not only proves a recurring theme but also serves as the inspiration for McCarthy's *The Road*. McCarthy accepted the initial public interview after winning the award and explained why he composed such a work. At that moment, he was looking out the window of his El Paso hotel room, with his son John sleeping next to him. “I just had these images of these fire up on the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy. And I wrote those pages and that was the end of it” [1]. This is the book he writes as a gift for his son.

McCarthy's preoccupation with the theme of love (particularly paternal love) has caused an obsession with scholars domestic as well as overseas. Hellman contends that a man “has less room in his heart for compassion, but his love for the boy sustains him and keeps his humanity buoyant” [2]. The article by Fang Fan illustrates the end of days to reveal the spiritual crisis of mankind and points out that only “the active, one-way love” can bring a ray of hope to the doomsday world [3]. The father's love is motivated by duty and instinct, while the son's love provides strength and support to his father. The mutual love between them drives them struggle to survive in such a bleak world and construct a new one. Thomas Schaub shows that the novel is unique in that “the basis for meaning in the father's love for his son... even suggesting that this meaning transcends the father's efforts to affirm and protect his son's life” [4]. Despite more paid attention to love, however, scholars have mostly concentrated on the father's love as embodied in the novel. And one aspect that has been under-researched in the field is that of maternal love. Meanwhile, the absent mother is misunderstood

as a lack of maternal love. In the following discussion, my point of departure attempts to dig deeper into the theme of love and elucidates the principal cause for mother's absence, with the intention of reinterpreting the mother's in-depth love for her son.

II. IRRESPONSIBILITY, MEANINGLESSNESS, EVIL

The Road is a laying-foundation work by the American writer McCarthy. The New York Times describes it as "a sweeping book about the end of the civilization, the end of life... Of McCarthy's books, *The Road* is the most readable and profound one." The story follows a father and his son after an apocalyptic calamity as they head for south in search of warm shores. Along the way, they struggle with cold, hunger and horrific cannibalism. Father and son rely on and encourage one another to find hope for survival. Throughout the whole journey only father and son appear. And the image of mother who is absent shows much appeal academics. There exist diverse opinions on the mother's suicide in the academic circle, with two general trends emerging: rationality and irrationality. The reason for the mother's death is an integral criterion by which scholars measure the reasonableness of her action. Lydia Cooper regards mother's suicide as "moral degradation" [5]. Another scholar Wilhelm holds the similar belief: "Although the wife's reasons for committing suicide and merciful murder may seem logical, even rational, given the potential threats of rape, torture and cannibalism, however, as a matter of fact that "such a philosophy is untenable, even immoral" [6]. Meantime, he also argues that the mother's killing herself embodies the "human mentality that succumbs to fear and doubt and deprivation because it cannot think beyond the limited scope of the self, one that too readily relinquishes the duty of life, an obligation to which the father so desperately clings" [6]. And submission and renunciation mould her into a woman "callous and heartless" [7]. Before committing suicide, she behaved decisively, and completely unmoved by the man's plea. She did not even bid farewell to her son, leaving "the coldness of her suicide was her final gift" [8]. Conversely, some critics suggest that the woman commits suicide since she confronts with the "hopelessness of their situation" [7]. and has no hope for life. The post-apocalyptic world resembles the Biblical apocalyptic scene: ashes fall from the sky, flora burns, ships are wrecked, marine organisms are extinct, the sun and moon are completely obscured, pestilence and earthquakes abound, and cities are overrun with corpses. It is not that the mother never appears in the novel, but she ends her life after the boy is born. The young couples were arguing about whether she should have killed herself that night the woman committed suicide. The man said they were "survivors" while the woman thought they were "the walking dead in an honor film" [8]. The man pleaded with woman to live, however, she said: "They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it" [8]. When the disaster struck, the woman hoped for a brighter future as well. And she believed that they would weather the existential crisis and returned to a peaceful and happy life. Nevertheless, the situation deteriorated rather than getting better. As the dark side of humanity occurred, the woman lost faith in the entire world. In fact, her act of suicide lies in "fear of falling prey to such atrocities" [9], and therefore "the boy's mother commits suicide as a solution to such despair" [10]. There exists no way for her to live in such an alienated world or to face the inhuman mankind. Wielenberg argues that the last straw that breaks the camel's back is that she "has lost her connection with the man and the child" [11]. While giving birth, "her cries meant nothing to him" and the man simply "wrapped his son in a towel" [8]. When the child was born, the man was so preoccupied with the child that he ignored his wife's feeling, which caused her great disappointment. The child's birth separated him from mother, and the mother-child link was destroyed. They used to discuss death and the man said he could die for them. However, now she has lost faith in the man and no longer trusts the man and doubts that he is capable to protect them. Mother's suicide can be interpreted as human atrocities, not only by cannibals, but also by people's indifference

and alienation among people.

The above critics hold three views on the mother's suicide: firstly, that the mother's abandoning her husband and son is an immoral act, a sign of selfishness and irresponsibility; secondly, the mother determines to die since the apocalyptic world has no meaning to follow; and thirdly, that the mother's suicide is caused by the evil of human nature in an existential crisis. The three ideas, to some extent, are related to the absence of mother rather than the primary cause. This article happens to hold the same view with Greenwood which he expresses in his book *Reading Cormac McCarthy*: "the mother's decision to kill herself was one made in the name of love, not cowardice. She died to improve her son's and husband's odds of survival" [12]. While mother's death has received much attention from scholars, little has been done to unveil the main reason out of love. The present study tries to articulate the leading cause of absence, having a better understanding of maternal love.

III. IN THE NAME OF LOVE

The fetus is conceived in the mother's womb and the child bears a close bond with the mother before and even after birth. "Mother love by its very nature is unconditional" [13]. A mother loves her child simply due to the child itself, not because "the child has fulfilled any specific condition, or live up to any specific expectation" [13]. The woman in *The Road* adopts the position of a mother, takes on the obligations and expresses maternal love. Mother love is the "unconditional affirmation of the child's life and his needs" [13]. And such a kind of affirmation consists of two aspects: "one is the care and responsibility absolutely necessary for the preservation of the child's life and his growth", another is "the attitude which instills in the child a love for living" [13], which transcends the mere protection of life. Protecting the child's life seems the minimum requirement of maternal love, whereas transferring love, a sort of true love, is a higher requirement. The two-side love in Genesis is as follows: God creates man and the field so that people become self-sufficient through hard work, which corresponds to the care and affirmation of survival. In fact, God says: "it is good", which does much more than satisfying the basic needs. Maternal love should instill a positive outlook on life rather than merely keeping the child alive. A similar idea is implied in another biblical symbol that the land given by the God (the land is usually a symbol of motherhood) is described as "flowing with milk and honey". Milk is an essential nutrient for babies, which represents the surface layer of maternal love: the affirmation and care of life. The sweetness of honey that touches the taste buds of the human being, symbolizing "the sweetness of love, the love for it and the happiness in being alive" [13]. Most mothers can only give "milk" but not "honey" so that they fail to love their children properly.

"My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born" [8]. The umbilical cord that connects mother and child together is severed while delivering a baby and the physical bond is severed. Before birth, the mother delivers nutrients to her child through the umbilical cord to meet its survival needs. The world is a barren, uninhabited place in the aftermath of the apocalypse, where food scarcity forces people into an existential crisis. After the birth of the child, such a connection is cut and the mother can no longer meet the basic needs of the child's life, let alone bring him hope for survival. "The very essence of motherly love is to care for the child's growth. And that means to want the child's separation from herself. The mother must not only tolerate, she must wish and support the child's separation" [13]. The woman chose to commit herself after giving birth to her child rather than leaving it in the womb or dying with him. She once wanted to kill her child, "I'd take him with me if it weren't for you" [8], she said to her husband. Such a maternal filicide occurred for two reasons: on the one side, she has not yet adjusted to the reality of the child being separated from the mother, and another side was that she had no hope for life and believed that surviving would only be crueler than dying. In this regard, driven by love, she succeeds in achieving this separation. Seth, the mother in Morrison's *Beloved*,

was afraid that her daughter would become a slave and killed her own daughter. And the spirit of “better death than dishonor” pushed maternal love to a certain level [14]. The mother’s situation in the novel is not identical with Seth’s. Had they chosen to survive, they might not have ended up being killed, eaten or raped, as demonstrated by the father and son’s quest for survival.

A mother fails to secure their lives, let alone imparts optimism to her children. The couple reacted to the collapsing world in very different ways in the aftermath of the apocalyptic crisis. The man chose to live, while the woman chose to die. The man’s decision to survive even though there is no reasonable possibility of things improving, which shows his positivity and optimism. The woman, having suffered from the horrible catastrophe looked exhausted and even faith collapsed. She began to doubt God and even distrusted her husband. The woman had no way of dealing with the chaos in life and her psychic world was gradually crumbling as it was overshadowed by the dark side. In the book *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung states that the pathogenic and traumatic effects produced by motherhood are twofold: “(1) those corresponding to traits of character or attitudes actually present in the mother, and (2) those referring to traits which the mother only seems to possess, the reality being composed of more or less fantastic (i.e., archetypal) projections on the part of the child” [15]. Even at such a young age, the harsh conditions of existence and the degradation of civilization instilled a sense of misanthropy in the boy, who thought “I wish I was with my mom” [8], implying that surviving in such a state was not preferable to death. The negative attitude of mother was projected onto the child, and the man tried to stem this negativity with long journey with hope.

IV. A CONTINUATION OF LOVE

Unable to protect her child’s life nor to project hope for life, the woman chooses to commit herself. Maternal love does not end with the mother’s death, but rather continues in a different form. “Things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness” and “any woman” can be regarded as the archetypes of mother [15]. The life-giving entities such as mountains, rivers and lakes are symbols of mother love. Father and son’s journey to south in is a search for water, soil, fresh air, and other substances that nurture living things, as well as a quest of maternal love. Following the death of his father, the boy determined to join a completely new family including a man, a woman and children. The woman of this new family fills the void of the absent mother and entrusts the responsibility of maternal love to the man.

The woman has entrusted the responsibility of maternal love to the man, in addition to the ubiquitous symbols of mother. In many ways the man fulfills the missions of a traditional woman. He takes the role of mother by making the boy’s bed, cooking and doing some laundry. When possible, the man also puts towels on the table to serve as tablecloths, lays out plates, cups, and plastic cutlery, and even prepares a balance diet with a variety of food, all of which denotes feminine meticulousness and thoughtfulness. Apart from keeping physical cleanliness, the man always keeps the boy’s soul clean. “This is my child, he says. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job” [8]. The blood on the boy’s head was left by the man who shot and killed the bearded man who threatened the boy’s life. And the man regards it as a father’s duty to assist his child in removing the blood. It is the blood of the “cannibals” and he does not want this bad thing to remain in his child’s memory. He always tries to protect the boy’s innocence and purity.

Aside from meet necessities of life, the man behaved like a tender-gentle mother who cared for and comforted his child. “Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each other one than what had gone before” [7]. The first thing the man does when he wakes up in the “darkness” and “coldness” is to make sure that the child is with him, and “the boy was all that stood between him and death” [8]. On the Road, the man sometimes tells the boy stories - “stories of courage and justice” [8]. Human beings confronted with a serious

existential crisis following the apocalypse tragedy, not only on a material but also a spiritual level. The situation was harsh, with no food or clothing to protect them from the cold; the disaster separated people, rustling in a lack of communication and faith. People gradually lost hope in life as a result of the double crisis. Faced with the increasingly precarious situation and suffering from hunger, cold and cannibalistic persecution, the boy frequently asks if they will perish. The man's answer is always firm and certain: "We are not going to die" for we are "good guys" and we are "carrying the fire" [8]. The father assured the boy that they would not die. And if did, he would be by his side. Life full of uncertainties, the boy considers father's words a reassurance. In times of hunger and coldness, father and son always seem to have good fortune, finding unexpected food and shelter. They found a bunker full of canned food, supplies and cots, like the "richness of a vanished world" [8]. The basic supplies for them are unfathomable riches, demonstrating how far the world has fallen. The boy worried about that the owners are still alive, as he doesn't want to steal. The man ensured that the owners demised and that they would like them to take the food and supplies as they were "good guys" too. The boy attempts to stick to his ideals as a "good guy". There is no doubt that the father and son are good guys, so they receive a great windfall, a momentary reprieve from their constant danger and starvation, which makes them have a hopeful attitude to life.

The man coughs incessantly, and his physical state exacerbates. He fears death and even more so of leaving his child to face this terrible world alone. He tells the boy, "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up" [8]. The man sets a long-term goal, however, he is acutely aware that he has no reason to hope for better. His ambition and optimism are largely useless, yet there is a power within him that compels him to keep going and aspire for a brighter future. The man creates a cheerful and optimistic attitude towards life and he wants his children to know that no matter what happens to them, they should not give up lightly. The man associates good people with tenacity and risk-taking, which is linked to the larger symbol of the road that reflects men's underlying urge to keep traveling and hope for something better. The boy felt bored and even lost faith faced with a monotonous and unpromising voyage. And the man kept setting accessible goals, not just heading south or towards the coast, but taking one step at a time, as if drinking some water and following the path. Their long-term goal is to continue to survive and follow the road. Although the mother's role is absent throughout the journey, maternal love exists omnipresent. Not only symbols denoting mother but also the father who assumes the role of mother spare no effort to express maternal love.

V. CONCLUSION

The study indicates that mother's absence demonstrates love for her child. Unable to sustain her child's life nor to transfer positive attitude, the woman leaves her hope for survival to her husband and son. Not only does the man have a keen sense of approaching danger, but he also possesses great survival intelligence and superior survival skills, and his chances of surviving with his child are higher. On the road, the boy gradually gained some experience and mastered basic survival skills. Most importantly, he always kept the code of good guys in his mind: do not to eat people, do not to give up and keep going. He possesses goodness in heart and shows sympathy to everything that was alive. Whether it is a puppy or a hobbling old man walking alone, he wants to help them all. His extreme compassion and empathy are affected by his mother because women are endowed with goodness and strong interpersonal skills. Women focus on "connections and situations to construct benevolent relationship among people" [16]. Both paternal love and maternal love are supposed to be indispensable emotions for children's growth. Without a doubt, it is the powerful love of parents that enables the boy grow into a complete man. The boy combines the rationality of father with the sensuality of father due to the perfect love, retaining goodness and carrying the fire of civilization.

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