

Trauma and Resilience in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: An In-Depth Psychological Analysis of Survival in a Post-Apocalyptic Setting

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Abstract: *Cormac McCarthy's literary work, 'The Road,' serves as a poignant monument to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of the desolation that characterizes a post-apocalyptic society. This paper undertakes a riveting psychological examination of the immense pain endured by the protagonists and their undying perseverance as they navigate across a lonely landscape. Through an in-depth examination of the psychological aspects shown in the literary work, this study aims to explore the profound impact of traumatic experiences on the cognitive processes, emotional states, and behavioral patterns of the main characters. By integrating trauma theories and psychological insights, this study aims to explore the many levels of psychological distress and resilience that influence individuals' reactions to a harsh and unforgiving reality. This study explores the complex coping strategies utilized by both fathers and sons, shedding light on their capacity to discover resilience in the face of adversity and optimism in times of tragedy. Through an analysis of the progression of their interpersonal bond, this study aims to underscore the significant influence of human relationships as a means of fortitude in the midst of complete devastation. Moreover, this research examines the profound impact of resilience, highlighting the characters' ability to withstand and adjust as a means of ensuring their survival in an environment devoid of any recognizable reference points. This interdisciplinary investigation offers profound insights into the capacity of the human psyche to endure trauma and discover resilience even in the most challenging circumstances. Through an examination of the psychological intricacies present in 'The Road,' this analysis emphasises the unwavering essence of the human spirit, providing a deep comprehension of the interplay between trauma and resilience in the quest for survival amidst a desolate environment.*

Keywords: Surviving, Wasteland, Psychological exploration, Trauma, Resilience, Parent-child relationship, coping mechanisms

A traumatizing encounter can be a very stressful situation that tests our capacity for adjustment and leaves us feeling terrified, horrified, or powerless. Disasters from the environment, accidents, life-threatening diseases, fires, and acts of cruelty during wars are just a few examples of the wide range of situations that people may deem to be traumatic. Traumatizing events can also include violent crime, bullying, domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse or neglect. At any stage of a person's life experience traumatic incidents could be caused by a single occurrence or by years of repetitious exposures.

In the 1994 novel *In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O'Brien, a Vietnam veteran named John Wade's Senate campaign collapses after it becomes public knowledge that he had been present at the massacre at My Lai. Wade and his wife Kathy relocate to a distant lake cottage as a form of escape following a terrible political failure. But soon after they arrive, Kathy disappears and is never seen again. Because Wade's culpability in both tragedy—the Vietnam massacre and his wife's disappearance—remains ambiguous, the novel's drama is intensified. When *In the Lake of the Woods* was published, the idea was crucial to experts' understanding of trauma. Psychologists refer to this failure to recall an extremely terrible incident as a traumatic memory. (Four times in the book, O'Brien expressly references Judith Herman, one of the leading proponents of traumatic amnesia.) But for the first generation of literary trauma theorists, especially Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and most significantly, Cathy Caruth, the idea that one may forget—or fail to adequately describe—trauma also represents a fundamental understanding.

According to Caruth, trauma is a painful experience that is too intense for the mind to bear ordinarily. The victim may forget all that happened immediately afterward, but the trauma memories do resurface, they are frequently nonverbal in nature, for the sufferer very big challenge to express to them verbally. However, Caruth argues that creative literature, or figurative language as opposed to literal language, may "speak" trauma when conventional, discursive language cannot, and fiction aids in giving a voice to traumatized individual and the population, in "Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma" Joshua Pederson explains,

When people feel threatened, they experience a significant narrowing of consciousness, and remain focused on only the central perceptual details. As people are being traumatized, this narrowing of consciousness sometimes seems to evolve into a complete amnesia for the experience. More than 85 years ago, Janet (1909) claimed: "Forgetting the event which precipitated the emotion ... has frequently been found to accompany intense emotional experiences in the form of continuous and retrograde amnesia. (335)

Caruth depicts the complex relationship that exists between trauma and memory, trauma is unspeakable, Caruth believes that he work of Moses and Monotheism secretly attests to the tragedy of the writer's retreat from Vienna prior to the Nazi takeover. According to Caruth's interpretation of Freud's ambiguous references to his hurried departure in that book, he can only "implicitly" communicate about his flight; she goes on to say that "Freud's writing preserves history precisely within this gap in his text; and within the words of his leaving, words that do not simply refer, but [...] convey

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the impact of historical events specifically as what could not be understood for leaving." Caruth claims that Freud is not able to comprehend or accurately describe the specifics of his traumatic narrowing escape. Caruth's diagnosis seems to be one that vanderKolk would concur with.

Freud describes how recollections of normal and traumatic events are different, in the book *Trauma (The New Critical Idiom)* (2019) Lucy Bond and Stef Craps says what is trauma, 'trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation.' (4) Memories of trauma are hidden as they develop, rendering them incapable of conscious memory; as a result, they reoccur in many misplaced ways, such as hallucinations, memories, or nightmares. Unexpected connections that upset or confound are made when the traumatic experience unexpectedly returns to consciousness, abruptly opening previously separate passages across systems.

Trauma is transparent because it blurs the lines between speech and silence, memory and forgetting, and the mind and body. It transcends the boundaries between the inside and the outside, the personal and public, and the singular and the communal. Trauma is dynamic; its boundaries are always changing as it crosses disciplinary and institution boundaries, as well as age and cultural boundaries.

'[t]he history of trauma itself is marked by an alternation between episodes of remembering and forgetting, as the experiences of one generation of psychiatrists have been neglected only to be revived at a later time' (6)

The emergence of trauma theory has given writers new methods for conceptualizing trauma and shifted focus from the issue of what is remembered of the past to the issue of why and how it is remembered. Some historical thoughts has taken by writers in fictional works such as Toni Morrison's fictions *The Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), where she has taken trauma of slavery. *Trauma Fiction* (2004) by Anne Whitehead says,

'fiction itself has been marked or changed by its encounter with trauma. Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection.' (3)

Trauma is rarely expected from the past, although the fact that the limits of trauma fiction have been questioned and a larger range of texts are currently being researched than at the beginning of literary trauma theory. Literature has long depicted human suffering, whether actual or imagined, but trauma is particularly related to a psychological state associated with and recognized with the advent of Western modernity. Additionally, the formalization of the "unspeakability" of trauma and its thematization appear to be recent developments. Earlier clinical studies on neurological illnesses increasingly moved away from physiological models of hysteria and towards a more psychodynamic approach to trauma, concentrating on the fundamental contributions of Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, and Sigmund Freud. The First World War had a

profound psychological impact, and many national contexts responded to it in different ways, showing the ways that political and military concerns influenced the codification and reception of mental illness. The twentieth century saw more evidence of the connection between trauma and conflict, most notably in the wake of the Vietnam War. By emphasizing its value as a critical tool for examining the connection between referentiality and historical violence, trauma theory as it was developed by Caruth, Felman, Hartman, and their colleague Dori Laub in the early 1990s can be seen as an effort to reclaim an ethical space for deconstruction.

Surviving

The concept of surviving in novel "The Road" goes beyond mere physical survival. The novel delves into the psychological impact of trauma and the resilience required to endure in such a grim and hopeless environment. Resilience, in the context of psychological exploration, refers to the ability of individuals to bounce back, adapt, and recover from adversity, trauma, or challenging life circumstances, capacity to withstand and endure difficult experiences, maintaining mental and emotional well-being despite facing significant stressors or hardships.

"People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didn't believe in that.

Tomorrow wasn't getting ready for them. It didn't even know they were there."

Quote reflects the characters' focus on immediate survival, as they have been deeply affected by traumatic loss of a stable future. The characters in the novel must adapt to the new reality of the wasteland, which is vastly different from the world they once knew. They learn to make the best of limited resources, navigate through dangerous situations, and cope with uncertainty such as profound loss, fear, and despair throughout their journey. Resilience allows them to confront and process their emotions, finding ways to keep moving forward despite their grief and trauma.

"He remembered waking once on such a night to the clatter of crabs in the pan where he'd left the day's catch and to the sound of the boy's voice crying out for him in sleep. He sat up and held the boy. Shh, he said. Shh. It's okay."

The mutual experience of pain between the father and son prompts them to seek solace and affirmation from one another within their challenging circumstances. The maintenance of hope and resilience is facilitated by the strong link and mutual support between the father and son. The individuals' profound emotional bond and affection for one another serve as a reservoir of resilience and drive among the challenges encountered throughout their arduous voyage. Resilience is frequently bolstered by a prevailing feeling of optimism and unwavering resolve. The characters' determination to endure and discover purpose in their existence functions as a motivating factor, propelling them onward despite the desolation of their situation. The theme of resilience is prominently explored in "The Road", whereby the novel delves into the capacity of the human spirit to withstand and persist through profound tragedy and misfortune. The work underscores the potency of the human

spirit and its ability to discover optimism under the dreadful circumstances, as seen by the protagonists' unwavering determination.

Wasteland

The name "wasteland" denotes the dystopian environment in which the narrative unfolds. The environment is characterised by its desolation, bleakness, and barrenness, resulting from an inexplicable cataclysmic catastrophe that has caused widespread devastation. The barren landscape is characterised by the conspicuous absence of living organisms, enveloped in a layer of ash and scattered remnants, and devoid of any discernible traces of human habitation. The wasteland has a significant symbolic role throughout the narrative, serving as a representation of the tangible and psychological consequences following a catastrophic event on a worldwide scale. The aforementioned scenario depicts the profound devastation and extensive destruction resulting from an undefined calamity, resulting in a global condition of complete ruin. The ground exhibits an incapacity to support biological organisms, while the environment is characterised by unfriendly conditions, including few resources and severe circumstances that pose significant obstacles to living. The wasteland serves as a symbolic representation of the internal conflicts and psychological distress experienced by the protagonists. The narrative is imbued with a pervasive atmosphere of loss, misery, and hopelessness. The surroundings reflect the emotional condition of the father and kid as they confront the actuality of their situation and contend with the gravity of their distressing encounters. Moreover, the depiction of the wasteland serves to emphasise the vulnerability of societal structures and the impermanent character of human accomplishments. This raises concerns over the repercussions of human acts and the capacity for self-inflicted harm. As the protagonists navigate through the desolate terrain, they come across the vestiges of bygone eras, thereby accentuating the irrevocable consequences of the catastrophic incident. Within the desolate landscape, the paramount objective shifts towards the preservation of life, compelling the protagonists to negotiate an inhospitable environment in search of sustenance, habitation, and security. The presence of limited resources and the persistent presence of peril compel individuals to confront their most profound anxieties and evaluate their capacity for endurance. The situation presents itself as a crucible, so testing individuals' humanity, moral values, and capacity for adaptation. The wasteland depicted in the text also serves to underscore the profound disparity between the pre-apocalyptic society, characterised by its abundance of comforts and conveniences, and the present bleak condition. The recollections of previous experiences function as a distressing prompt of the things that have been forfeited, so augmenting the sorrow and need for an improved existence experienced by the characters.

The investigation of psychological phenomena

Within the framework of Cormac McCarthy's literary work "The Road," the term "psychological exploration" pertains to the comprehensive analysis of the characters' internal cognitions, affective states, and psychological conditions as they navigate the distressing and perilous circumstances encountered within the dystopian aftermath. The literary

work explores the psychological dimensions of the characters' odyssey, providing valuable understanding of the effects of trauma and the strategies they employ to navigate their situations. The following elucidation presents an analysis of the fundamental components pertaining to the psychological investigation within the literary work titled "The Road." The individuals portrayed in the literary work have had significant psychological distress as a result of the catastrophic incident that caused widespread devastation to the global landscape. Individuals in this context have experienced the unfortunate loss of close family members, been exposed to distressing events, and persistently face the imminent risk of physical harm and mortality. The examination of trauma entails comprehending the emotional injuries and psychological marks individuals bear, which afterwards shape their behaviours and engagements with others. The literary work explores the capacity of the characters to demonstrate resilience when confronted with tremendous challenges. Notwithstanding the adversity they have encountered, they persist and discover the fortitude to persist in their endeavours. The psychological investigation centres on the origins of their resilience, encompassing their interpersonal connection, their drive for survival, and their commitment to cultivating a feeling of optimism. The characters within the wasteland are confronted with the stark truths of their environment, prompting them to adopt various coping methods in order to manage their emotions and worries. The coping techniques encompass a spectrum of responses, including emotional detachment, dissociation, and seeking solace in memories or rituals. The story explores the impact of various coping methods on their psychological well-being and ability to endure. The examination of the characters' emotional distress holds considerable importance within the context of the psychological investigation. The trajectory of their expedition is characterised by profound sorrow, apprehension, hopelessness, and an enduring perception of imminent danger. The tale explores the characters' emotional challenges and their efforts to traverse the intricate network of emotions inside a desolate and merciless environment. The wasteland presents a formidable obstacle to the characters' conception of their own humanity, so prompting a profound examination of the psychological dimensions inherent in the lack of established societal conventions and civilised structures. The literary work prompts inquiries regarding the maintenance of empathy, compassion, and ethical conduct in the presence of extraordinary situations. The examination of the psychological aspects in the story mostly revolves around the core issue of the father-son bond. The relationship between the individuals in question functions as a means of providing emotional assistance, solace, and encouragement. Gaining insight into the profound nature of their bond illuminates their strategies for managing their pain and discovering motivations to persevere. The work delves into the psychological realm by placing much emphasis on the importance of dreams and nightmares. The dreams experienced by the characters provide insights into their subconscious psyches, so unveiling their anxieties, aspirations, and lingering emotional conflicts.

Trauma and Resilience

A "trauma novel" is a fictional work that portrays great grief or extreme terror on a personal or community level. The alteration of the self-brought on by an external in nature frequently horrifying experience is one of the characteristics that distinguishes the trauma novel and sheds light on the process of accepting the dynamics of memory that shape the new perceptions of the self and the world. "literary and imaginative approaches [to trauma] provide a necessary supplement to historical and psychological studies" (29)

Literary works and their fictitious settings enable sophisticated interactions with the theme of trauma, which is frequently personified and contextualised, fictionalised and historicized, and also psychologized and metaphorized simultaneously. Therefore, literary responses to trauma have the ability to pique readers' sympathy and emotional identification as well as their capacity for critical thought. In the book *Wounds and Words* by Christa Schönfelder in the first chapter "Theorizing Trauma Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds" how trauma effects in fiction explains well,

[Twentieth-century trauma narratives] remain connected, at least in principle, to a long tradition of literary representations of 'other people's pain', whose ethical implications are tied to their fictional status and to the fact that the other people and their fates whose pain the reader is witnessing or sharing are the fates of imaginary people in a deprivatized and metadiscursive space of textuality, which however may paradoxically enhance its communicational intensity and its signifying power towards a collectively experienced historical reality. (30)

In summary, the psychological exploration in "The Road" goes beyond the external challenges of survival and delves into the characters' inner struggles, coping mechanisms, and emotional journeys in the face of trauma and desolation. This exploration adds depth and complexity to the narrative, making the novel a profound examination of the human psyche and the resilience of the human spirit.

"He knew that such a chronicle had no power to chronicle and that the true account of the world was kept in a granary where it was gathered into grain over time and it was also gathered into story, indestructible and without end."

This quotation delves into the notion that the act of storytelling and the use of narrative can serve as a means to navigate and manage traumatic experiences, thereby safeguarding the fundamental nature of human existence in the midst of profound adversity. Within the realm of psychological investigation, trauma is defined as an intensely upsetting or disconcerting encounter that surpasses an individual's capacity to effectively manage and assimilate the accompanying emotions. Cormac McCarthy's work 'The Road' explores the concept of trauma as it depicts the journey of a father and son in a post-apocalyptic setting, characterised by a barren and perilous environment, as they face numerous challenges in their quest for survival.

"He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not."

In the novel, trauma is experienced on multiple levels. The catastrophic event that led to the apocalyptic wasteland itself is a traumatic event, causing immense destruction and loss of life. The characters in the story have likely witnessed the horrors of this event firsthand, and the constant struggle for survival in such a harsh environment can lead to ongoing traumatic experiences.

Moreover, trauma is also seen through the memories and flashbacks of the characters. The father, in particular, carries the weight of his traumatic past, memories of a world that once was, and the loss of his loved ones. The psychological burden of these memories influences his actions and relationships in the present, affecting his ability to connect with others, including his son.

"The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors."

This paragraph demonstrates the protagonists' trauma-induced disconnection from reality and the slow loss of the meaning of the world. In 'The Road,' resilience is an essential component that follows trauma. A person's resilience is their ability to bounce back from hardship or traumatic events and reconstruct their lives. The father and son show incredible fortitude by persevering on their trek in spite of the many obstacles they face, such as hunger, the cold, and the continual fear of being attacked by other survivors. Resilience in the face of suffering is exemplified by their love for one another and their will to live and find hope in an otherwise desolate world. 'The Road's' examination of pain and resilience goes deeply into the psychological ramifications of living in a dystopian society and how people deal with grief, terror, and hopelessness. Through his representation of these topics, McCarthy sheds light on the human condition and the resilience of the human spirit under extreme adversity.

Resilience

Resilience is a major subject in the book, which centres on a father and his young boy as they make their way across a treacherous wasteland where supplies are few and daily existence is a challenge. The characters' tenacity is demonstrated in a number of ways: The climate is hard and brutal, and both the father and the youngster must adjust. They acquire the skills necessary to scrounge for food and resources, make tough choices, and modify their behaviour in order to deal with obstacles. The protagonists have experienced the loss of loved ones and the collapse of civilization, which has left them with severe emotional anguish. In spite of these traumas, they manage their feelings, work through their losses, and keep a feeling of optimism and purpose in life. Characters that exhibit resilience are those that have an unyielding will to live and look out for one another. Driven by their love for one another and their determination to live, they continue their adventure in spite of the many challenges and risks they

encounter. They demonstrate resilience by using their creativity to solve issues and get over challenges. They find food and safety by navigating through hazardous situations using their knowledge and talents. Algerian women today talk about trauma, memory, and the nature of sociocultural settings using the destruction wrought by "natural" disasters as an image. Similar to how the earthquake affected the populace, MaissaBey's *Surtout ne teretourne pas* (2005) protagonist uses the devastation left by the earthquake as a crucial chance to reestablish her identity and her community. In Nina Bouraoui's 1999 novel *Le Jour d'uséisme*, the earthquake represents the longing gap between memories of a childhood spent in Algeria and maturity in France. By drawing a comparison between the séisme and cultural, psychological, and geopolitical boundaries, the authors aim to challenge the hierarchy of postcolonial pain. It is clear from their attempts to maintain their humanity that the characters are resilient in a world where survival frequently necessitates making difficult decisions. They make an effort to preserve moral principles and resist giving in to the violence and desperation that are common in the wasteland. Resilience becomes a crucial component of the protagonists' survival throughout "The Road" novel. It emphasises how resilient and adaptable the human spirit can be, even under the worst of situations. The study of resilience throws light on the resilience of the father-son relationship as well as the will to find purpose and hope in a harsh environment. Resilience is ultimately a key component of the characters' survival, demonstrating the strength of human tenacity and the capacity to endure and recover in the face of tragedy and destruction.

Relationship between parents and children

The novel 'The Road' depicts the parent-child dynamic by following the expedition of a paternal figure and his juvenile offspring as they traverse a desolate and ravaged world subsequent to a catastrophic event. The paternal figure has a strong dedication to safeguarding and nurturing his offspring, who represents a scarce reservoir of optimism and affection within their barren societal context. The narrative readily exhibits the existence of a unique bond between the son and his father. In a subsequent section of the literary work, the protagonist's son inquires about his father's hypothetical response to his own demise. The father articulates his want to also pass away, so expressing a desire to be reunited with his son in the afterlife. This man's lone remaining memory of his potential former life and surroundings is the child. The words about son by his father reveals

“He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said:
If he is not the word of
God God never spoke.” (5)

The father has a deep seated thought as protection and sacrifice, very emotionally connected, Resilience and Adaptability: The parent-child relationship showcases the resilience of both characters. Despite the trauma and hardships they encounter, their love for each other fuels their determination to survive and persevere. The parent-child relationship raises ethical dilemmas for the father. He must make difficult decisions to protect his son, often leading to moral ambiguity and internal conflict. Throughout 'The

Road,' the parent-child relationship becomes a symbol of hope and humanity in the face of devastation. It exemplifies the capacity of love and familial bonds to sustain individuals through trauma and despair. The exploration of this relationship adds depth and emotional resonance to the novel, highlighting the profound impact of such connections on human resilience and the will to survive.

Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are the tactics and actions people do to control and adjust to stressful events, traumatic events, or difficult circumstances. Within the literary framework of Cormac McCarthy's novel 'The Road,' the utilisation of coping techniques assumes a critical role in facilitating the psychological examination of trauma and resilience exhibited by the protagonists as they traverse the desolate landscape following an apocalyptic event. The utilisation of coping mechanisms in the novel 'The Road' is of paramount importance in facilitating the survival and emotional well-being of the protagonists. The work exhibits several notable coping methods. The characters may employ denial as a coping mechanism in order to protect themselves from the overwhelming impact of the tragedy and misery they encounter. In addition, individuals may opt to refrain from engaging in conversations or addressing challenging feelings and experiences, opting instead to prioritise their immediate survival requirements. The phenomenon of emotional suppression When confronted with a significant amount of trauma, individuals may employ emotional suppression as a coping mechanism in order to maintain a state of heightened attention and concentration. This strategy enables individuals to temporarily disengage from emotional distress, hence facilitating their ability to engage in survival-focused behaviours. The Concept of Bonding and Connection: The parent-child bond functions as a tool for coping. The establishment of an emotional bond and provision of support between the paternal figure and his offspring serve as a significant means of solace and impetus to persevere through the challenges encountered inside the desolate and inhospitable environment. Coping mechanisms encompass the characters' capacity to employ resourcefulness and engage in problem-solving strategies in order to effectively traverse perilous circumstances and surmount the various problems they confront. The characters may employ hope as a psychological strategy, utilising it as a means of managing their emotions and seeing a more favourable future, even in the face of their present circumstances characterised by desolation. Hope can instill individuals with a sense of purpose and fortitude, motivating them to persist in their endeavours. The implementation of rituals or routines, such as the nightly search for refuge or the division of chores throughout the day, might provide individuals with a perception of organisation and constancy within a tumultuous and capricious environment. The protagonists in the narrative may employ several coping mechanisms to navigate and manage their experiences of trauma, one of which involves deriving resilience and fortitude from recollections of their previous existence or significant relationships. The recollection of these memories has the potential to provide individuals with emotional assistance and enhance their ability to adapt and recover from challenging circumstances. It is imperative to

acknowledge that coping techniques has the potential to exhibit both adaptive and maladaptive qualities. While certain coping mechanisms can facilitate individuals in effectively navigating challenging circumstances, others may have detrimental effects in the long run, resulting in bad results or the avoidance of crucial emotional processing. The novel 'The Road' explores the psychological resilience of its protagonists and the ways they employ to confront the horrific experiences within the wasteland, as seen by their coping mechanisms. The investigation of coping methods enhances our comprehension of individuals' psychological progression and underscores the intricacies of adaptation in a profoundly distressing and barren environment.

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