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Reading *The Road* with Paul Ricoeur
and Julia Kristeva: The Human Body
as a Sacred Connection

ABSTRACT

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* confronts readers with a question: what is there to live towards after apocalypse? McCarthy locates his protagonists in the aftermath of the world's fiery destruction, dramatizing a relationship between a father and a son, who are, as McCarthy puts it, "carrying the fire." This essay asserts that the body carrying the fire is a sacred, incandescent body that connects to and with the world and the other, unifying the human and the divine. This essay will consider the body as a sacred connection in *The Road*. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach will help to explore what is sacred. In addition, their works elucidate the body as a present site of human connection and sacredness while calling attention to what is glaringly absent yet hauntingly present in McCarthy's text: the mother. In the aftermath of destruction, primitive, sacred connections become available through the sensual body, highlighting what is at stake in the novel: the connection of body and spirit. The essay will attempt to show that McCarthy's rejection of a redemptive framework, or hope in an otherworldly reality, shrouds spirit in physicality symbolized by the fire carried by the body. This spirit offers another kind of hope, one based on the body's potential to feel and connect to the other. The thought and works of Ricoeur and Kristeva will broaden a reading of McCarthy's novel, especially as a statement about the unification of body and spirit, contributing a multi-dimensional view of a contemporary problem regarding what sustains life after a cataclysmic event.

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

The chillingly desolate, post-apocalyptic world of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* confronts readers with a question: what is there to live towards in a barren, forsaken world? McCarthy locates his protagonists, and his readers with them, in a grim setting, breathing air tinged with ash. The main characters, an unnamed father and his son, journey south seeking food, water, and a warmer climate. Possessing little, they confront death and destruction upon the road, coming upon a newborn infant roasted on a spit and male and female captives being gradually harvested as food. Annihilation is certain: the father moves closer to death throughout the text, and readers never come to know the mother, already dead from having committed suicide. Even in the wake of cataclysm, the tender relationship between the father and the son remains, and they proceed on a mission, as McCarthy puts it, "carrying the fire" (24–25). Feeble and dilapidated, their bodies hold this fire, which marks them as "good," or as not susceptible to alleviating their hunger by eating other human bodies.

This essay will consider *The Road* in terms of its treatment of the body as a sacred connection. In the analysis, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach will help to explore what is sacred.¹ In addition, their works elucidate the body as a present site of human connection and sacredness while calling attention to what is glaringly absent yet hauntingly present in McCarthy's text: the mother. The essay will then illustrate how, in the aftermath of destruction, primitive, sacred connections become available through the sensual body, through sight, smell, sound, touch, and through breath. What is at stake in the novel, the connection of body and spirit, emerges through corporeal sensations and connections. Primary paternal and maternal relationships will serve to illustrate this connection. For instance, the tender compassion in the father and son pair illustrates what occurs when sacred bodies meet. Lastly, the essay will attempt to show how McCarthy rejects a redemptive framework, or hope in an otherworldly reality. Instead, he shrouds spirit in physicality symbolized by the fire carried by the body. This spirit offers another kind of hope, one based on the body's potential to feel and connect to the other.

¹ Julia Kristeva and Paul Ricoeur both have impressive *oeuvres*. This paper treats their works in light of McCarthy's novel and, therefore, will not go deeply into the philosophies or theories of either writer, an unfortunate limitation of this piece. Rather, the essay seeks to draw the reader to an important point in all three writers' works: that the body is sacred and that "hope" lies in the body and in the "other" of continued existence.

The body carrying fire is a sacred, incandescent body that connects to and with the world and the other, unifying human and divine. The thought and works of Ricoeur and Kristeva will broaden a reading of McCarthy's novel, especially as a statement about the unification of body and spirit, contributing to a multi-dimensional view of a contemporary problem: what sustains humanity with no past and no future?

The dire predicament posed by *The Road* forces the characters to face the idea of ultimate destruction, questioning the method and teleology of living after apocalypse. The question turns back on the reader: what are you living for and how are you living? The book does not give an unequivocal answer; it only shows the body containing a fire, serving as a connection, and seeking a mother. McCarthy concentrates on the body, keeping readers in the present. His protagonists are two human bodies, bodies among bodies, fighting, moment by moment, to stay alive in a world where cannibalism represents an option for living.

THE SACRED

In *The Road*, the sensual is sacred. Simple moments like eating canned peaches and bathing disrupt and unite distinctions between divine and human: finding peaches is so rare that eating them is venerated, and immersion in clean water is a form of rebirth. In the novel, mundane experiences grounded in the body become sacred. Further, McCarthy hallows and makes indispensable the body even when it is threatened, injured, or dying. He transposes the traditional view of holy, meaning whole and perfect, to associate holy and sacred with those "carrying the fire." The fire carriers regard all bodies, even injured ones, as sacred and view cannibalism as blasphemous. In contrast, the cannibals see the body as a physical thing to possess and consume; to them, the body is a determinant object without a sacred aspect.

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade's conception of the sacred merges the divine and the creaturely establishing the sacred as "preeminently real," the source of life and fecundity (28). The sensory experiences of the body in this novel are "preeminently real" or radically present. Destruction and death are real. Eliade states that, "religious man's desire to live *in the sacred* is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality . . . to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion" (28). Paying special homage to Mircea Eliade's contributions to his formulation, Ricoeur develops a phenomenology of the sacred in *Figuring the Sacred*. He organizes the sacred around four traits: its experience as "awesome" and "overwhelming," whose power has the capacity to escape

articulation in speech; its ontological foundation and emergence in the world, or hierophany; its nonlinguistic quality and connection to ritual; and its emergence in nature, which participates in hierophanies (49–55). All of these points are founded on the sacred’s manifestation in capacity of the cosmos “to signify something other than itself” (*Figuring* 54).

For Kristeva, what is sacred is a perpetual fixation visible in our preoccupations and lying at the edge of the unconscious and personal relationships. Sacred is “not religion or its opposite, atheistic negation, but the experience that beliefs both shelter and exploit, at the crossroads of sexuality and thought, body and meaning” (Clément and Kristeva 1). Corresponding with Catherine Clément, Kristeva posits that the sacred is “rooted in a certainty about life” and asks “what if what we call the ‘sacred’ were the celebration of a mystery, the mystery of the emergence of meaning?” (13). Kristeva envisions a dimension to mystery that is particularly fruitful in a reading of *The Road*, that women’s bodies function as a site where biology and narrative meet, disrupting patriarchal categories that classify the masculine as producing meaning. She also calls readers to be attentive to what is present and absent in the role of the mother. The mother’s body serves as an intersection where rootedness and obscurity meet. Her body, especially related to birth, represents a link between the human and the divine.

Disrupting the connection between the body and the meaning and between the human and the divine, in *The Road* the body *sans* fire indicates evil. Ricoeur states precisely that evil is “the threat of the dissolution of the bond between man and the sacred” which “makes us most intensely aware of man’s dependence on the powers of the sacred” (*Symbolism* 6). In the novel, sacred space is body guarded as “carrying the fire”; this life is held in tension with other life precisely because not having the fire means that one is more than willing to damage another body. The man and the boy see the burning bodies; they confront three bodies hanging from the rafters and look upon the horror of an infant roasted on a spit. These ghastly images illustrate mortality, but they also indicate a lack of respect for the body’s holiness and the soullessness of the transgressors: those who do not “carry the fire.” Fire is the classic symbol for the soul and characterizes the incandescent body (Heraclitus 96–99 and Boehme 26). Further, the body is distinguished from the destruction in the setting, but not completely set apart from its bareness and primordial nature. What is at stake in this novel is the connection between body and spirit; the body physically presents what is most crucial, the holding of the fire, marking sacred space.

“Carrying the fire” can be read as carrying the soul, but not the soul in the prophetic sense that lifts the characters up to an other-worldly existence; this soul is divine as it is rooted in apotheosis. Entirely being in the body

and respecting that body is the only way to have the fire. Many times the father tells the boy that they will not succumb to starvation by destroying the body because they carry the fire, the fire that signifies that they are the “good guys,” those who seek to preserve human life and sanctify the body. In spite of the post-apocalyptic scene of destruction, their bodies, set apart from cannibalism, are powerful sites of the sacred; their bodies’ sensual experiences validate this sacredness. The father tells this to the son:

“You have to carry the fire.”

“I don’t know how to.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Is the fire real? The fire?”

“Yes it is.”

“Where is it? I don’t know where it is.”

“Yes you do. It’s inside you. It always was there. I can see it.” (278–79)

The fire inside, perceived through the eyes and emblematic of the sacred connection, distinguishes the protagonists and their allies from the cannibals. This manner of identification is not far from the adage that someone’s soul is visible through the eyes. The cannibal, without the fire inside, fails to operate as holy or divine because it assumes imperfection. The flesh, as it is, does not suffice. The cannibal relegates flesh to the realm of the larder. The fire carriers are capable of connection because they see the body as holy, whereas the cannibals are incapable of connection because they fail to see the sacredness of the body. The protagonist’s sense of the holy in the novel then illustrates that the body in any state is not denigrated; instead, the body is complete and whole regardless of its condition. According to the religiously holy, the body’s containing the fire makes it more holy, not because it transcends the body or will remain after the body, but because it marks the body as holy, as carrying the spirit, as incandescent.

THE BODY AND THE SENSES

McCarthy’s text has fragmented dialogue and little plot. Without evolving action, *The Road* carries readers forward through sets of repeated events, all associated with and grounded in sensual, bodily experience. Bodily senses, particularly those of the protagonists, drive the plot and establish, in lieu of speech, a connection between the characters. McCarthy’s novel cannot do without the body or the connections between the bodies. Driven by the needs of the body, action is also driven by the need for the mother and water; without the mother the novel has no frame, the man has

no memory, there is no child; without water, the characters seek nothing but the south and certain death.

Propelled to go forward on the road without the mother, the man and his son endure as two threatened bodies. An event of recognition, or revelation, marks the post-apocalyptic scene in the apprehension by a body, the father's, of a body that is something more, such as a fire carrier. The man repeatedly reassures the boy that they are "the good guys" who are "carrying the fire." Their threatened bodies at once also become illuminated bodies when the fire they contain signifies the soul and the sacred.

Sensory data helps not only to compose the body, to render it present, but also to distinguish between what is dead and alive. McCarthy's novel echoes phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who writes, "by sensation I grasp, on the fringe of my own personal life and my own acts, a life of given consciousness from which these latter emerge, the life of my eyes, my hands, my ears, which are so many natural selves" (50).

For Ricoeur the senses, and the experience of sensation, transpose what is literal into what is figurative. In so far as McCarthy's text is poetic, fictional, aesthetic, the language moves readers from the literal to the figurative quite rapidly. McCarthy writes through the voice of the father,

This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire. . . . All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them. (74)

For Ricoeur, the movement from the literal to the figurative is also a movement from the sensory to what the sensory represents. For instance, hearing and seeing are never simple receptions but are complicated and attached to the indeterminate. The transfer, both determinative and through language, takes place in some metaphysics. Said another way, the twofold movement illustrates first the adoption or assertion of meaning; the second posits it within a spiritual order, an order Ricoeur asserts exists *a priori* the sensory experience (*Rule* 280–95).

A critical component of Kristeva's theory and practice are the senses, which support carnality. For Kristeva, the analytic technique has two possible solutions, reliant on human connection and related to the return to affect or the manifestation of emotion (*New Maladies* 99). The mobilization of affect permits the signifying process of which the analyst is an explicit part. Verbalizing sensation and perception liberates this signifying process; intellectualization is subsumed, and memory is released. Kristeva writes, "the taste of Proust's madeleine depends on the possibility of remembering

it" (*New Maladies* 100). Furthermore, Kristeva reports, "the discourse of sensations directed toward the other, and the discourse of the self as other, is by nature an uninhibited discourse" (*New Maladies* 100). Applied to McCarthy's text, Kristeva's psychoanalytic technique replicates Ricoeur's recognition of the move from the figurative to the literal; in Kristeva's terms, the move is from affect to sign to sensation and perception, the latter being the element that links one to another, intimately, viscerally.

This is not a war of the reason versus the senses. McCarthy's writing and use of metaphors leave readers vacillating between what is sensual and literal and what is metaphysical, while he simultaneously calls that metaphysical world into question. For instance, in McCarthy's novel, holy as traditionally complete and as perfect emerges in the sensory relationship between people, when two bodies connect. Some of the most touching moments include the man swaddling the boy in blankets, in tarps, and holding him after a dream. McCarthy teases readers with the messianic vision of the boy, but that hope falls short because these moments are interrupted by the reality of the barren, desolate, dangerous landscape. When they come upon an abandoned home with a shed that has yet to be pillaged, the father tells the boy to hold his hand in front of the lamp so the father can see if behind the shed's door there are more horrid sights, because, he says, "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up" (137). Once the door is opened and the reader is in suspense, the father reaches to hold the lamp. "He started to descend the stairs but then he turned and leaned and kissed the child on the forehead" (137). A sacred connection, in the firelight of a lamp, marks the transition from the known to the unknown depths, here into the shed.

Apprehension by the body of the body is conducted through the senses. These sensual experiences establish the point of origin for all experiences. Eliade discusses religious experiences as primordial experiences, the most central points for orientation in the world, and for both Eliade and Ricoeur, senses orient the sacred. Merleau-Ponty also accepts originations of experience in the sensations, "the most rudimentary perceptions," which connect us to each other (281). This sensual connection to the other is the most crucial aspect of the novel. Not only is the body, as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology establishes, active, as "our general medium for having a world," it also, through its sensual experiences and bodily sensations, "gives us access to some form or other of being" (252).

Considering McCarthy's use of the senses more particularly reveals how the stark simplicity of situations highlights the extraordinariness of touching, seeing, smelling, tasting, and hearing. Touch in the novel, as for the ancient Christian saints, renders the body preminent, present,

and holy.² Touch is pivotal not only because it confirms life, signified by McCarthy's continual use of and reference to warmth to be found in the south or in the sand on the beach, but also because it furthers a sacred act: the holy connection between one and the other. The father touches the child to see if he is warm, awake, present, and has a heartbeat. Similarly, when the boy touches the old man they have stumbled upon on the road or touches water, he has an experience of the sacred; a body touching another body is a sacred moment. The father ruminates: "Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly" (114). The embrace signifies tenderness tinged with a sense of urgency and immediacy that such a moment is really all there is left in the world replicating Ricoeur's notion of the non-linguistic aspect of the sacred.

While touch emblemizes a physical connection, seeing represents a sacred connection of another sort, especially when seeing is related to insight. In *The Road*, seeing is employed in its usual narrative sense, but sight also signifies presence, life, and intuition. To see something substantiates its presence; it is a method of locating or identifying things, especially living, moving things. When the boy recognizes himself in a mirror, a device he has never seen before, readers are moved. Most importantly, sight helps, as the father tells his son, to distinguish who carries the fire; in this sense, sight operates in unison with intuition helping the boy to see who has an inner fire and who does not. "Seeing is not of the same order of penetration as insight" (Ricoeur, *Rule* 332). Insight is what is needed to identify an incandescent body; insight also assists the identification of dreams, regardless of their being disturbing, as a source of life. Seeing also happens in dreams. The father tells an awakening, shaken son, that apparitions in dreams let the dreamer know he/she is still alive and fighting to stay alive. In addition, the father sees the mother in his dreams; through dreams readers realize that she marks the beginning of the novel's story, walking out as the apocalypse began. Her absence is haunting, where her presence in dreams marks what she symbolizes: life and fecundity.

Furthermore, the absence of the sensual, in this case sight, marks the termination of the sacred connection. The mother's refusal to see is striking as she walks out from the family's home into the darkness. The father implores her to stay, "you can't even see." She responds, "I don't have to" (48). What does she refuse to see: apocalypse? False hope after apocalypse? Death and destruction? The father and son's struggle towards death? Or

² On how, in late ancient Christianity, hagiographic texts employed sensory realism in terms of sight and touch to articulate the presence of the holy in the world in a non-idolatrous way see Patricia Cox Miller 404–05.

is she meant to draw readers to grapple with what life is without a mother? The mother's not seeing signifies a loss, a loss of the body, and death. To be sightless, to be blind, is to fall victim to the impenetrable darkness. Walking and feeling his way through the dark, the man "could see no worse with his eyes shut" (57).

Sight also has another function. The dangerous enterprise of living is intensified by the possibility of being seen by those without the fire. If the bad see the good, if they recognize the fire (this is a literal reference McCarthy makes, which alludes to the figurative notion of the fire inside as good), the bad will attempt to eradicate the good. Danger in the novel emphasizes the body as a threatened, even if illuminated, body. The peril illustrates the body's vulnerability, emphasizing that what the protagonists possess after apocalypse is only their bodies and each other; accrual of something more is dim. As Kristeva indicates, well-being (for her in the analytic encounter) relies on human connection and the return to affect (*New Maladies* 99). McCarthy communicates a similar concern in his cataclysmic world. Readers faced with his fictitious reality are stimulated to ask what is dangerous now, today, that interferes with bodily connection and well-being.

Smell, too, links the boy and man to what is radically present and fecund; smell intensifies the moment's reality and its sacredness. Within the novel, water, a life-giving source, is also indicated by smell. McCarthy describes, "water so sweet he could smell it" (103), and the boy recognizes water by the scent of the rocks within it. Further, smell and taste emphasize what is lost in apocalypse, signifying absence and presence. The man describes the taste of life, which he associates with pleasure. This pleasure transcends taste as a hedonistic experience and moves toward the sacred in the simple experience of tasting water, pears, and a peach.

The sensation of hearing also facilitates a sacred connection. This manifests in the hearing of the breath as life's remnants. In addition, the father continually tells the son that they will always be able to hear one another, dead or alive. The sense of hearing bridges a gap between presence and absence, between life and death. Hearing, like sight and touch, marks what is sacred—the connection between people—and also has a power to protect. "I'll hear you if you call" (158), the father tells the son. And to his dead father the son whispers, "I'll talk to you every day. And I won't forget. No matter what" (241).

FATHER AND SON

The pairing of a father and a son in *The Road* inevitably leads to a consideration (at least for a theologian) of the parallel between the protagonists

as the Father (God) and as the son (Jesus Christ) in Christianity. The allusion to the child as a messianic figure, both in general and through the father, has resonance throughout the novel, and in the novel this is a word made flesh. The father says at the beginning of the novel: “if he is not the word of God, then God never spoke” (5).

In *Conflict of Interpretations*, Ricoeur considers fatherhood from several points of view: psychoanalysis and the Oedipus complex, the phenomenology of the spirit, and the representation of fatherhood in religion. Ricoeur makes an argument that leads readers to consider the relationship between desire, spirit, and God. This argument is also the move from the non-specific “a” father to the particular “the” father. Desire is one impulse, or starting point, that leads from consciousness to self-consciousness, the drama of which is wrapped up in Freud’s version of the Oedipus complex. The economy of desire comes to fruition, according to Ricoeur’s analysis, in Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*; through a psychoanalytic lens, killing the father, or killing Moses, represents the repetition within which religion (Christianity) situates itself.

Further, for Ricoeur, spirit represents a Hegelian self-consciousness synonymous with self-awareness, where divine nature and the human are united (“Fatherhood” 489). When the father is dead, he transpires into a symbol in two senses, as a signification of an ethical substance and as a tie, which binds the members. Literally, the father is the tie that binds the son to him and the mother, but he is also the tie that binds the son to God in the end of the novel, or perhaps, in McCarthy’s terms, to mystery. This sense of connectedness is consistent with Ricoeur’s move from Freud to Hegel, from phantasm to symbol, “from non-recognized fatherhood, mortal and mortifying for desire, to recognized fatherhood, which has become the tie between love and life” (“Fatherhood” 481).

However, the death of the father in Christianity, noted by Freud and Ricoeur, leads to a religion of the son. This is for Freud the neurotic outcome of the Oedipus complex. However, Ricoeur notes the possibility of another outcome, significant in this analysis, because McCarthy does not provide, according to my argument, a redemptive narrative bound up in the notion of a salvific son. The alternate outcome is the death of the father, which “belongs to the conversion of the phantasm into the symbol” (Ricoeur, “Fatherhood” 492). Ricoeur states that then,

We could speak truly of the death of God as the death of the father. That death would be at the same time a murder on the level of fantasy and of the return of the repressed, and a supreme abandonment, a supreme dispossession of self, on the level of the most advanced symbol. (“Fatherhood” 493)

For Ricoeur, this symbol culminates in the “spirit among *us*” (my emphasis), specifically, “the spirit of community” (“Fatherhood” 495). The death of the father leaves the boy to seek the spirit among us, the spirit of community with those fire carriers who remain, just as the death of the mother did for the father and son at the beginning of the novel.

Ricoeur discusses the lack of the use of father as a label for Yahweh in the Old Testament, noting the evolution of God as Father in the New Testament. In this analysis, Ricoeur states, “The name is a proper name. Father is an epithet. The name is a connotation. Father is a description” (“Fatherhood” 485). Father is a metaphor dependent on context. In his essay, Ricoeur recognizes the significant repetition of the father figure as a designation of sense, as “a declaration *of* the father” and finally as an “invocation *to* the father” which culminates in the Lord’s Prayer (“Fatherhood” 487). McCarthy seems to use the father in Ricoeur’s terms, emphasizing the connection rather than the individual. Thus, “the Father” becomes a metaphor contingent on the apocalyptic context, stripped of individuality to heighten the importance of the connection.

Viewed through a Christian lens, the father and son’s setting out on a journey in search for water alludes to their attempt to complete a trinity with the Holy Spirit. Further, in the Old Testament, water symbolizes life and is used as a means of purification. In Genesis, water is present prior to the beginning of God’s created act (*The Jewish Study Bible*, Genesis 1:2, 6–8). The spirit of God hovers over the waters (Genesis 1:2). The earth is founded upon the waters (Genesis 1:6–7, 9–10), and God commands the water to bring out myriad living souls (Genesis 1:20–21). The water mystery in Christianity accomplishes rebirth as in Baptism (John 3:5–6; Acts 8:39; cf. Acts 1–2). The imagery and symbolism regarding the water, especially aligned with baptism that implies the birth source of the mother, is another lack the trinity has to negotiate. It cannot be skipped over in McCarthy’s novel, not the least because he sets up an allusion to this kind of reading by calling the son the word of God.

In addition, McCarthy complicates the narrative with the suicide of the mother. Dead, her presence haunts the characters in memory and in the search for water, a symbol for the feminine. When the mother is the source of generation and aligned with water, drinking and eating become her way of being radically present. Furthermore, Ricoeur acknowledges that:

To recognize the father is to recognize him with the mother [there is a father because there is a family, not the reverse]. It is to accept the father’s being with the mother and the mother’s being with the father. Thus, sexuality is recognized—the sexuality of the couple that has begotten me; but it is recognized as the carnal dimension of the institution.

This reaffirmed unity of desire and spirit is what makes the recognition of the father possible. ("Fatherhood" 480)

Therefore, according to Ricoeur, reading the father demands a reading of the mother, and interestingly, his view of the connection is extremely physical and not psychic.

Kristeva offers another reading of the father: "the father dies so that the son might live; the son dies so that the father might be embodied in his work and transformed into his own son" (*New Maladies* 183). Within this Christian construction, Kristeva writes, "we must search for the woman" (*New Maladies* 183). Kristeva's recognition of the son concurs with Ricoeur's: "the father's body carries the memory of the mother's body," as does the son's in a more concrete way (*New Maladies* 183). Ricoeur's trajectory from desire to symbol in the hermeneutics of "father" can also be applied to "mother." Reading McCarthy in terms of the father and the mother leads to an understanding of the distinct difference between the non-particular and the particular underlined by the base experiences of the senses. At the end of *The Road*, there is "a mother" but this is not the mother that binds relationships. The final mother serves as bodily substitute. "The mother" lost at the beginning of the novel, sought for in mystery to which the father also succumbs, is the foundation for the sacred, wholly bodily connection; from her womb the son is born. Desire for the mother transposes into spirit; in the text, she is recalled through memory. She ultimately evolves into a symbol represented by water and, ultimately, another mother.

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THE MOTHER

Julia Kristeva recognizes the role of the mother in much of her writing, a recognition that must be made when considering *The Road*, not only because the search for food and water is so profound, but also because the novel is framed by "the mother" and "a mother" respectively. The novel starts with a catastrophe while the mother is pregnant with the son. Although McCarthy does not recount the story chronologically, the journey on the road begins just after the mother walks into the darkness to kill herself. In the end, the father dies to leave the son with a mother near the sea for which they have been searching incessantly. This mother is not the birth mother, but a mother nonetheless. McCarthy creates a strong image of the mother whose photograph left beside the road by the man reverberates in his dreams. And yet, her physical presence is absent and figuratively desired.

Kristeva discusses this mother on margins as an absent presence. In *New Maladies of the Soul* and “Stabat Mater” in *Tales of Love*, Kristeva points to Christ made flesh through the mother, a mother who stands on the periphery. Kristeva also reflects on mother’s absence from the trinity in Christianity, and then extends that to a psychoanalytic consideration (Freud’s Oedipal conflict) of the internalization of the absence of the mother. This internalization of a lack of the mother, so apparent in McCarthy’s novel, leads to a representation of the mother through water. Kristeva labels this kind of representation in the mother’s physical absence: *représentance* (*Hatred* 181). Affect, language, and idea, or an emotional response grounded by a sensation, combined with language, manifest into a representation of the mother. Perhaps for Kristeva, this interplay is not only evident in the Oedipal cycle, but also expresses itself in the Christian notion of the virgin mother: “deployed around this archaic link of the child [son] and the mother is the entire continent that extends just this side of and beyond language: a profusion of sensorial and drive-related races that connect Word to flesh” (*Hatred* 69). Language and body merge in McCarthy’s literary expressions, his story of an absent mother, a son, a dying father, and the perpetual search for nourishment, the symbolic site of the breast.

“Stabat Mater” facilitates further consideration of the mother’s body. The maternal body is, for Kristeva, “immeasurable, unconfined” (*Tales* 253). The maternal body is the womb, the ultimate connection, and upon birth signifies the ultimate disconnection. The son’s birth in *The Road* is marked by apocalypse: the catastrophe having occurred during his mother’s pregnancy facilitates the reading of the novel as the ultimate disconnection followed by the dread of death and the mother’s absence. Kristeva’s reflection in “Stabat Mater” responds to this dread:

Man overcomes the unthinkable of death by postulating maternal love in its place—in the place and stead of death and thought. This love, of which divine love is merely not always a convincing derivation, psychologically is perhaps a recall . . . of the primal shelter that insured the survival of the newborn. Such a love is in fact, logically speaking, a surge of anguish at the very moment when the identity of thought and living body collapse. The possibilities of communication having been swept away, only the subtle gamut of sound, touch, and visual trances, older than language and newly worked out, are preserved as an ultimate shield against death. (253)

Considering the novel through a psychoanalytic lens fosters an understanding of the symbolic relationship between water (and food) and the mother. The mother is the most absent figure in the novel; water is the

most absent element. The elusiveness of water and food symbolically parallels the absence of the mother. The journey on the road is propelled forward by the search for the ocean, where ultimately *a mother* is found. Just as fire is a symbol for the soul in the classical Greek system, the sea signifies the maternal. According to Carl Jung, “the maternal significance of water is one of the clearest interpretations of symbols in the whole field of mythology, that even the ancient Greeks could say that ‘the sea is the symbol of generation’” (218). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud connects bodies of water to fantasies about birth and escape into the mother’s womb (243). Likewise the search for food is significant: “love and hunger meet at the mother’s breast” (Freud 218). The breast becomes a site of sacred connection, through the body, symbolized in the story by the perpetual search for the sea, for food, or nourishment, and water, or sustenance.

At the moment in the novel when the man and boy discover a body of water, the body becomes most alive:

The man turned and swam out to the falls and let the water beat upon him. The boy was standing in the pool to his waist, holding his shoulders and hopping up and down. The man went back and got him. He held him and floated him about, the boy gasping and chopping at the water. You’re doing good, the man said. You’re doing good. (33)

In the midst of post-apocalypse, water delineates a sacred space, a preeminently real moment enjoyed and experienced wholly by the body. This particular venture *into* water is nothing less than baptismal. The image McCarthy presents creates a feeling of the holy, of completeness, and the family structure seems substantiated in the water. Ricoeur’s notion that the son implies the mother’s presence comes to fruition in the actual immersion into water, which represents a symbolic return to the womb. Jung says, “the projection of the mother-imago upon water endows the latter with a number of numinous or magical qualities peculiar to the mother . . . water symbolizes the mother” (219). For Jung, water achieves numinosity, for instance in the act of baptizing, as a result of the mother-imago. Furthermore, for Kristeva the womb is a kind of beyond that is not above our heads but radically present in the corporeal.

Reading McCarthy’s use of the senses with Kristeva locates their power glaringly apparent in the text, to elucidate the body as a site of memory, healing, hope, connection, even as a potential connection to what is absent in the maternal body. In the novel, it is precisely sound, touch, and vision that act as barriers to death, literally and figuratively. At the end, near the sea and with a mother, the boy still hears his father. McCarthy never

completely disabuses the reader of sacred connection from the father or the mother.

CONCLUSION

The body represents the apocalyptic moment in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, when apocalypse is defined not only as a moment of the end of the world, but also as a revelation or prophecy. Although dilapidated, the body remains after apocalypse, whether it does so full of life or in death. Much like in Revelations, as St. John is exiled to Patmos, removed from all he knows, the protagonists of this novel are removed from what they know. Or, rather, all that they know has been removed from them. Their commonly held earth has been eradicated. In the moment of erasure, though, there is something elevated; that something is the sensual body, which comes from the mother and is sanctified through water. Further, all that is sensual plays a critical role in the novel's sequence of repeated events. The senses highlight the tensions between life and death while they emphasize the sacred and profane, holy and sacrilegious. The text reveals the holy (as in sacred) and whole (as in complete) body, yet it still leaves readers with a lack associated with aporia.

At the end of the novel, whether or not McCarthy's work generates a sense of hope, is a question that occupies many critics of his text. Instead of a promise facilitated by the metanarrative of apocalypse promoted by a Biblical reading, McCarthy leaves readers suspended between fear and hope, death and life. The characters and readers alike are challenged to face the end times forthrightly—unable to deny death and destruction posed with the perpetual question of what to live towards. The road's ending in aporia disabuses the reader of the ability to hold on to a biblical, apocalyptic metanarrative offering redemption.

McCarthy's novel leads readers to a questionable place and to a life that has no future; however, the boy lives on. The uncertainty of his future existence is grounded in an acceptance at the end of the novel of what is impossible to achieve: clean water, "the mother," and continued existence of the father. The question for the son is further pressed: how and for what does he move forward? And again, the question is left unanswered, but a mother, water, and fire persist. The book ends in two paragraphs. One about a woman who serves as a mother reassuring the boy that his father's breath was "the breath of God," which would pass "from man to man through all of time" (287). This is the key to the sacred connection; the breath of God passes from one body to another through all of time. The second entails a memory about trout in streams and glens full

of mystery. In the end, this is all that is left of hope: mother, father, son, water, mystery, and sacred connection.

Ricoeur locates two words that compose what he considers a contrasting language of hope: “meaning” and “mystery” (“Christianity” 243). For Ricoeur, meaning is the basis of courage to live in history. However, this meaning is hidden; it is mysterious; “no one can define it, rely on it, draw assurance from it against the perils of history” (“Christianity” 250). Applied to *The Road*, such meaning in hope derives from the fire inside, the incandescent body, a mysterious source that marks the appreciation of the body. Hope, for Ricoeur, should never really be tied to an answer, as in the Christian narrative of redemption; it should not subvert the ambiguous or deny the rational. McCarthy’s text does neither. Instead, hope is submerged in absurdity and provokes a search for meaning; a meaning, as Ricoeur says, that is ultimately hidden.

For Kristeva, hope appears within an ethics of care (“Joyful Revolt” 65); it is like love, where neither hope nor love is ideological. Kristeva asserts that hope has religious connotations. She states that she is not a religious person and that she does not put faith into ideological structures:

As a psychoanalyst, a woman and a writer I have for some time now been aware of what I call the destruction of the psychic space, or at the very least the threat which hangs over that space. . . . If in the face of this [destruction] there is to be any hope for us, to use your term, it resides in what I would call *care*. I am convinced of our ability to restore that psychic space to well-being. (“Joyful Revolt” 65)

In this world, the boy is able, through connection with the father, to come to know himself as a bearer of fire. Ricoeur and Kristeva might both concur that self-knowledge comes through our relation to the world and our life with and among others in that world. The realm to which McCarthy inserts readers is the realm of the body, where touching, feeling, seeing, and tasting become so crucial, because there is so little left to see and touch. What remains after apocalypse is the body, both as a sacred connection in its sensual, corporeal experiences, and as a facilitator of that connection. McCarthy answers the question of what to live toward in the contemporary world where destruction is often an everyday affair. His answer is the sensual body and its capacity to connect us to one another.

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