

A Psychological Perspective On The Young Survivor In Post-Apocalyptic World Of Cormac Mccarthy's The Road

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Abstract

This study explores the psychological development of a young survivor born after an Apocalypse in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road* (2006) to help understand children's psychology, and improve their mental health. Since majority of works have focused on the father's resilience for continuing this odyssey, this study, however, focuses on the boy's thinking patterns, the influence of his dead mother, dying father, and the blasted apocalyptic setting in shaping his behaviour. Investigating the boy's innermost disturbances, grievances and apprehensions, the study steadily records the protagonist's moment and response with his father in the post-apocalyptic world. Keeping in view his changing behaviour and mental process, the study explores the negotiating space between his undertaken challenging journey, and growing morality. Melanie Klein's findings in the field of psychoanalysis help in locating defence mechanisms of object-relation theory, paranoid-schizoid position, depressive position, projective identification and superego. The study concludes: as the boy's character develops, he credits his hereditary positive qualities and, in the crises, he emerges stronger than his parents. Besides impacting the concerned research society, education sector, mental health centres, children psychology, and child protection institutions, the study corresponds to Good health and well-being (UN's SDG No.3), and Climate Action (UN's SDG No.13).

Keywords: Post-Apocalypse, psychological development, *The Road*, Melanie Klein, defence mechanisms.

I. Introduction

World literature abounds the idea of apocalypse—which is a Biblical description of annihilation, fear, loss, Armageddon, or the end of the world (Merriam Webster). Daniel Wojcik (1997) notes in his book, *The End of the World As We Know it*, the word apocalypse means 'revelation or unveiling' (p. 4). Being one of the most

prevalent thoughts in American literature, apocalypse attests the end of the world by a disaster (such as Tsunami), viruses (such as Ebola or Covid-19), over population, nuclear warfare, starvation, flesh eating viruses or some other unimaginable and unknown afflictions. The event is also supposed to mark the end of human existence (Wojcik p. 2).

Contrarily some of these literary pieces uphold the ideas of resurrection: a new beginning of the same world, world order and judicial system. Such ideas are commonly found in folklore (Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse) and contemporary films (2012), cartoons (Zombible, Apocalypse), music (Apocalypse by Dax), drama, (You, Me, and the Apocalypse), theatre (How to Survive an Apocalypse), and comics (Apocalypse (En Sabah Nur). The highest rated apocalypse TV series include: The Walking Dead (2010-2022), We're Alive (2009), The League of S.T.E.A.M (2008), Survivors (2008-2010) and The Last Ship (2014-2018). Moreover, there are many movies on the apocalypse narrative—Threads (1984), Zombieland (2009), Noah (2014) and 2012 (2009)—which portray nature as a cruel agent. The characters' survival is dependent on their mental and moral potential.

Building on Jean Baudrillard's thread, Cooper claims that the West has created the concept of apocalypse (The Road, 2006, p. 222). The concept has roots in their socio-religious history. McCarthy does not identify different in his interview, "he had no idea where it was going" while he wrote The Road, although he knew perfectly "where it was coming from" (Cormac Oprah Winfrey Interview, n.p.). Baudrillard correctly posits Lydia Cooper's quotation (2011), countless movies of terror, destruction and violence came out after 9/11 that exhibit the unconscious fear of the horrifying backlash (p. 222). However, the psychological patterns of thinking, in relation to an imminent debacle, have been changing through ages.

Contextualizes the result of a cruel event, The Road details the gruelling journey of a father and his young son over a period of several months across a landscape blasted by an

unspecified cataclysm that has destroyed industrial civilization and almost entire life. Maybe caused by man himself or some other force, the event showcases the world's end game. The event is regarded the 'apocalypse' (McCarthy, 2006).

Destroying every man-made symbol, the backdrop of The Road is completely dystopian as it depicts, "the endgame of earth's ecology" (Wilhelm, 2008, p. 129). In this context, owing to his ever-changing mental and emotional self, McCarthy's young protagonist gains crucial importance. Melanie Klein's knowledge of children's psychology helps us to understand the deeper recesses of the boy's mind who stands the test of the time in the apocalyptic ashen grey milieu with his sick father.

1.1 Statement of Problem

First, the study explores how the boy survives across different apocalyptic situations through various defence mechanisms. Second the study investigates the child's cognitive inquisition of innate goodness in the absence of self, family, culture, customs, society and environment. Third, investigating the potential and instrumentation of innate properties, ancestral legacy, environment and society; the study explores shaping entities behind the child's evolved behaviour.

1.2 Scope

The Road is characterised as a post-modern and contemporary piece of literature. The novel's topic, namelessness of characters, setting, speech, characterisation, etc. depict annihilation of the world. The 'boy' in the novel symbolizes those who survive the situation without knowing about the

lost world. Besides the primary data—the text, the secondary data comprise of the relevant books, journals, research papers, articles, movies, TV shows, interviews, seasons, and critical assumptions.

1.3 Broader Impact

The study offers a great deal to the concerned research community, educational institutes, law-making institutions, etc. The study directly addresses the issues of psycho-social perspective, Good health and well-being (UN's SDG No.3), and Climate Action (UN's SDG No.13). Benefiting the concerned research society, education sector, mental health centres and child protection institutions, the study highlights the importance of children psychology and its weight on the well-being of their future. The study attests the impact of close family members in particular, and society and environment in general on children's behaviour. In sum, all these impactful markers categorically validate the study's profound and considerable weight which clearly highlights the issues of children's mental health and climate change.

1.4 Methodology

With a well-perceived research design (practical issues related to data collection, analysis, and interpretation), the study has an ingeniously devised research methodology which turns to be qualitative and interpretive in nature. With the tools of close reading/textual analysis, the study relies on nominal scale measurement for codification of data. The study is careful to envision practical issues related to data availability, collection, analysis, and interpretation, and is apprehensive enough how to deal with them with the course of the investigation.

1.4.1 Theoretical Framework

Since Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) introduced psychoanalysis as a new scientific way to explain human behaviour. It has become a widely employed theory in many disciplines in particular: literature, sociology, theology, anthropology and mythology. Freud's discoveries were groundbreaking, who pioneered the theorisation of Oedipus complex, psychosexual development of an infant and interpretations of dreams. The ideas, though startling, threw light on intricate workings of the human mind and its unexplored terrains. In this regard, the study employs Melanie Klein's theory of psychoanalysis which explains children's behaviour and thought processes in their early years. Indeed, Klein's work is a considerable extension on Freudian concepts of psychoanalysis.

Many psychologists like Sandor Ferenczi, Ernest Jones, and Karl Abraham followed Freud's psychoanalytical techniques. However, elaborating the older ones, Klein goes beyond Freud in postulating new ideas. She attests the earlier emotional development of a child's life is a "dark period" (Developments, 15) since little is known about the child and its psyche the earlier stages. Similarly, Freud also regards it a "dim and shadowy era" (Developments, 15). This stage precedes object-relation period in which the child starts generating its ideas about the external objects. Early few months are highly significant in an infant's life where the child battles to understand its surroundings and for that it develops distinct defence mechanisms (Klein p. 15).

Klein divides the defence mechanisms between neurotic and psychotic defences that further generate

the ideas of projective identification, depressive and paranoid-schizoid positions, anxiety annihilation and unconscious phantasies that help the child to cope with pleasant/unpleasant, stable/unstable situations. Unresolved, unsatisfied issues may hamper the infant to grow normally. Klein's observation of splitting of ego led her to distinguish between a depressive and a paranoid-schizoid structure that are eventually divided into two distinct positions in her theory—paranoid-schizoid position and depressive positions. The paper hence attempts to explain such defence mechanisms through Klein's theory of psychoanalysis that the young boy employs to manage, cope, and grow.

2. Literature Review

Literary research these days receive ample attention. American Literature, which appears to be on rise these days, receive more of it. Like the apocalyptic themes of American Literature mirror the major themes of literature in particular. This study explores the apocalyptic themes in *The Road*. The review will assess whether the novel has received any direct or indirect research through apocalyptic aspects. If received, the study will gauge the volume and degree of this reception.

McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is an acclaimed novel that erupts a great deal of literary debate. The debate incorporates variant perspectives in terms of apocalyptic phenomenon. Claire P. Curtis observes that McCarthy in *The Road* does not provide any hope of starting over rather he provides "an end that is absolute" (p.12). Consequently, in a post-apocalyptic scenario, the thought patterns, the way the family members interact and communicate with one another seem to be changing. The need for survival and the effort they make to

save themselves from the upcoming dangers hint at their fear (2012, p. 13). Curtis' work does not provide any clue of psychological aftermath on those characters despite referring to their fear.

On the contrary, Joe Chellino's (2011) *The Day Everything Became Nothing* predicts a future possibility. He observes *The Road* contains in itself a fictional realism that depicts unknown human trepidation that lies in their sub consciousness for an imminent arrival of a catastrophic event (p. 22). Chellino's study concludes that McCarthy approaches systems of meaning-making and understanding in post-apocalyptic settings and texts (p. 23). However, leaves room to understand psychological collision after the apocalypse.

Andrew Keller Estes in *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Space* (2013) develops a discussion to examine the later works of McCarthy through the lens of a formative debate in American culture. American writings demonstrate an overwhelming attraction with the settings, space and environment, denoting nature as good or bad, positive or negative and perhaps wilderness turning into places of sin and death (p. 18). Estes work shows a more technical approach related to environmental issues unlike the present work that closely relates to the psyche of the characters themselves.

Erik J. Wielenberg (2010) in his article, "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" observes that *The Road* deals with moral and ethical values of the two survivors. It is an attempt to examine the existence of God which is somewhat ambiguous and its connection with life. It further highlights that morality is an individual based phenomenon rather that societal based.

Alan Noble (2011) in the article 'Absurdity of Hope in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*' and Inger-Anne Softing (2013) in his paper 'Between Dystopia and Utopia: The Post-Apocalyptic Discourse of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*' discusses both hope and hopelessness that is woven throughout the text. Both researchers talk about the complexity between nature and man, the struggles and the miracles. Contextualizing the boy, the current study also hints at the hopeful side of the story, the rehabilitation of civilization, reconstruction of the society and redemption for humanity. Unlike Noble's research, this study looks for recesses of mental growth and development. The study appears incredibly sound and astonishingly remarkable.

In another work, *The Road at the End of the World*, Linus Strand (2012), regards *The Road* as a post-apocalyptic fiction that suggests no past and no future (p. 14). In opposition to Strand, Cecilia Lidberg (2010) constructs her argument in favour of optimism. In her work, *What is Left at the End of the World*, Lidberg advance: where there is a will, there is a way. She predicts "a light in the tunnel" (p. 10). In a nutshell, the above-mentioned works discuss the novel distinctly, however, leave room to explore the psychological impact of the disaster.

Paul D. Knox (2012) in his article, 'Okay Means Okay': Ideology and Survival in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, raises the question of what sort of ideology survives and why so. The study concludes—the survivals create their own codes of morality derived from the father's past moral values. In other words, the morality is 'constructed and maintained' rather than 'received and accepted' (p. 96). This idea distinguishes

the current paper from Knox's research by extending its scope not to just construction of moral codes but also to its implementation. It further adds how the boy was different from his father even when the boy knew no code of morality to predict a future with him.

Kevin Kearney (2012) in his article, 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the frontier of Human', highlights the absence of any referents. The novel's setting depicts a lack of 'sense of specificity in terms of time and place' (p. 160). This triggers the nature's ambiguity of the event to follow the moral and ethical codes, and adopt language, and culture. While highlighting the unnamed traces, Kearney finds no hope for the future unlike the current paper which not only offers hope but also sees the boy emerging as a Messianic figure who restores the world eventually.

The reviewed literature goes through the existing literature on *The Road* with its relation to the apocalyptic threads but comes across no such comprehensive study. So the defined research gap licentiates the study for further advancement. At the same time, the review also invites other researchers to conduct their explorations in the outlined and clarified directions which are not the part of this study.

3. Analysis

Klein explains defence mechanisms that children employ in the early stages of their psychological development. Addressing defence mechanisms through object-relation theory, paranoid-schizoid position, depressive position, projective identification and superego, the study surveys the text for the target elements. In early infancy, the child experiences a threat by external malevolent forces that may destroy [the child] physically

(Klein, 1989, p. 153). Whatever the boy goes through in the barren and desolate world is a mixture of both positives and negatives.

This early stage of ignorance is marked as paranoid-schizoid position where the infant tries to make sense of his chaotic feelings brought by anxiety (Klein, 1989, p. 153). Ehlers (2004) explains Klein's view that in this stage the ego splits into fragments of good and bad where the good parts are idealized whereas the bad ones are annihilated (p. 360). In the same way, the boy perceives the figure of the "bad guys" as a negative one whereas he and his father are the positive of groups because they are "carrying the fire" (p. 70).

The boy, after all, embodies the purity of thought and goodness that the father always wishes to instil. The fire-carrying symbol is not just a metaphorical one, as Cooper (2011) identifies that the grail-bearer in the chivalric stories does possess a "blood inheritance" of piety and humanity (p. 227). In this regard, the boy is indebted to his father because along with other factors, ancestral legacy plays a significant role. While identifying positive and negative, the boy is reluctant to step in the father's old 'house' (p. 23) because the boy, perhaps, is afraid to lose his closest companion in a place that only the father relates himself to and where there is no "shared history" of the son (Edenfield, 2012, p. 591).

Upon entering the house, "[t]he boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see. We should go, Papa, he said (McCarthy, p. 22). In this regard, Luchins argues that "when people don't know or trust 'what's going on, there occurs "paranoia" (2015, p. 5). In consequence, the boy is afraid of the unknown. He is

disinclined to give it a chance because his uncertain circumstances do not allow it. The fear of "somebody" (McCarthy, p. 21) engulfs him completely, however, feels at home as soon as he comes out of the house.

Following paranoid-schizoid position is the depressive position. It is a mental constellation in the infant's development and is understood to begin in the second six months of life (Klein, 1989, p. 84). The baby, gaining physical and emotional maturity, begins to integrate fragmented and incoherent perceptions of its parent and has a more integrated sense of self (Klein, 1989, p. 84). The boy, in this case, remains a fragment by not completing the whole with his lost mother like Harry Potter as explained by Mur (2014, p. 9). Resultantly, through the process of introjections, projection and splitting, the ego learns to organize its universe while distinguishing between good and bad objects.

Klein argues that paranoid-schizoid position is preceded by depressive position in which the infant seeks to idealize the good objects while rejecting the bad ones (Klein 1989, p. 143). According to Klein (1975), "[t]he synthesis between the loved and hated aspects of the complete object gives rise to feelings of mourning and guilt which imply vital advances in the infant's emotional and intellectual life" (Envy and Gratitude, p. 3). For instance, after a period of starvation, finally when they happen to find a bunk of food, the boy does not accept it readily rather he feels guilty and asks his father, "Is it okay for us to take it?" (McCarthy, p. 118). This shows that the boy's awareness of the given object is still in the process of development. In this regard, the father is careful in his conduct and makes sure that he produces only a filtered version in

front of his son because whatever the boy gets to learn, will be imprinted on his mind forever. Afterwards, the boy does not forget to thank the people who have stored the food.

Another defence mechanism explained by Klein is object-relation. Klein (1975), posits that “object-relations exist from the beginning of life, the first object being the mother’s body which to the child becomes split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) body; this splitting results in a severance of love and hate” (Envy and Gratitude, p. 3). In view of this statement, the boy’s mother appears as an object of discomfort and anxiety, leaving the boy ungratified and frustrated. The mother commits suicide, preferring to embrace death as “a new lover” (McCarthy, p. 48) than to become a prey of cannibalism and inhumanity.

The present mother fails to serve as an object of comfort rather she intensifies early anxieties with which the child is born. Eventually, the father becomes the sole caretaker of the boy – the good and reliable object. In object-relation, the child “loves and tries to acquire, keep and identify” with his/her ideal object (Segal, 2003, p. 67). Accordingly, the boy extends sympathy for the helpless man, idealizing him as a good object that needs love, affection and help, most of all. The ego of the infant likewise gains power to defend his ideal object, lessening his “paranoid fears” (2003, p. 67) while increasing tendency towards integration of ego and the object.

Projective identification is another important defence mechanism that the boy employs while coping with his mental and emotional chaos. The kind of belongingness the boy shows to helpless people can be regarded as the

defence of projective identification. Spillius defines Klein’s idea of projective identification as an unconscious phantasy in which “aspects of the self or an internal object are split off and attribute to an external object” (2011, p. 126). The boy’s phantasies possess unconscious dreams, wishes and hallucinations because of which he identifies the little boy as his own self who is helpless and clueless. By extending compassion and support to helpless, the boy experiences a sense of gratification and belongingness. However, the child is rebuked for possessing feelings of compassion and kindness for the bereft little boy (McCarthy, p. 236). Klein views such feelings as the broken link between mother and child as the compassion shown for the young boy reflects his own need for love, especially from his mother, “I wish the little boy was with us” (McCarthy, p. 111). The boy sublimates his pathological operations to an external figure that depicts his anxiety and depression.

A key aspect in the boy’s early development is superego. According to Klein, it starts to form at the beginning of life, rather than with the resolution of the Oedipus complex, as Freud theorises. The early superego is very severe and in the process of development becomes less severe and more realistic (Spillius, 2011, p. 147). Klein considers: superego is “ethical responsibility” towards people, whom one owns in particular communities (Zaretsky, 1998, p. 37). The boy’s sense of morality is as severe as Klein has observed in her experiments with young patients. It weakens and becomes more realistic as the child grows further (Fettner, 2004, p. 4).

The boy appears making his own decisions that seem appropriate to him regardless of what his father wants him

to think and do. In one such incident, the boy's superego corroborates in taking apparently little, but significant decision of his life: "[i]f you don't want to hold the lamp you'll have to take the pistol./ I'll hold the lamp (McCarthy, p. 115). The boy's decision of "holding the lamp" is the affirmation of the fact that he wants to be amongst the people who are useful to society. The boy insists on listening to the story from his father and feels mesmerized by the "courage and justice" (McCarthy, p. 35) depicted in the story. It acts like a device for instilling the values of audacity, integrity and honesty that stands him out. The father often fails to follow the righteous path in the apocalyptic selfishness, but the boy never fails in exhibiting true nature of humanity. This makes him exceptional and better than both his parents.

4. Conclusions and Future Study

Highlighting the psychological perspective of an apocalypse, the study concludes: the parental legacy affects the young protagonist's morality largely. The way he manages to be exceptionally good goes back to show his father's values that he instills in his son, while being too empathetic indicates that he is holding onto his superego instinct undauntedly. The parents influence the son as much as his innate spirit does. This way, the son is "better" (McCarthy, interview) than his father is. The boy clearly lives in the realm of better expectations. It might be recommended to the future researchers to bring in light more apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic texts with psychoanalytic techniques to gain insight into the characters' unique thought patterns.

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