

Traumatic narratives in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy

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Abstract

Trauma narratives in *The Road* explore the psychological effects of trauma on personal and cultural identities. Cormac McCarthy's language effectively captures the characters' mindset and desolate surroundings, examining the consequences of environmental degradation and the potential for global conflict. Applying trauma theory reveals the characters' psychological trauma and its lasting impact on their well-being. Healing is difficult due to fear, killers, and a harsh environment. The novel also highlights the resilience of parent-child relationships and the power of love in traumatic experiences. *The Road* emphasizes the profound influence of trauma and the importance of human connection and resilience.

Keywords

Parent and child relationship, past memories and traumatized

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Traumatic narratives examine psychological trauma, its portrayal in language, and its effects on personal and cultural identities. It draws on various critical perspectives, including psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, sociocultural, and postcolonial theories. The field aims to understand the psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance of trauma, particularly how language shapes an individual's understanding of traumatic experiences.

The study of trauma began in the 1870s with the exploration of hysteria, a psychological response to trauma. Jean-Martin Charcot focused on physical symptoms exhibited by patients, while Sigmund Freud proposed that hysteria was a psychological reaction to trauma. Freud suggested that discussing traumatic memories and expressing associated emotions could provide relief, laying the foundation for talk therapy.

Trauma referred only to physical harm, but it later expanded to include mental damage. Freud introduced the concept of traumatic neurosis, and Carl Jung explored trauma through emotional events. Cathy Caruth further developed Freud's ideas, defining trauma theory as the sudden, catastrophic experiences that lead to delayed, uncontrollable reactions. Caruth emphasized that trauma is not just a pathology but a process of uncovering reality and truth through storytelling.

McCarthy's *The Road* explores post-apocalyptic life and the struggle to survive amidst trauma. The novel delves into the concept of trauma narratives defined by the APA as an emotional response to horrifying events. The book highlights the vulnerability of humanity and the bond between a father and son in a world dominated by trauma.

The characters face sleep disturbances and dangerous individuals in their fight for survival. The novel emphasizes

the consequences of environmental pollution and the need for prevention. McCarthy's language mirrors the characters' psychology and the desolate world they inhabit. The darkness in *The Road* is physically agonizing, with everything consumed by ash.

McCarthy's novel focuses on the mental and psychological transformation of the characters rather than offering solutions for the devastated world. It explores the disorientation of time and lack of structure in the future. The gray and suffocating sky adds to the characters' sense of timelessness. The novel explores the daily experiences, reactions, and traumas of the father and son, including the scarcity of food and fear of cannibals.

The significance of the novel lies in its exploration of the potential for a third World War and the need for precautionary measures to minimize harm. Dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature arises from fears and anxieties about past calamities, the present state of affairs, and an uncertain future. These crises can lead to feelings of hopelessness, aggression, depression, fear, and sleeplessness, symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The father's protectiveness towards his son is driven by his fear of losing him, disrupting his ability to sleep. He expresses his love in an oppressive yet selfless manner, preserving his son's innocence through storytelling. The constant darkness and fear of the unknown threaten their well-being. Due to this uncertainty, the father prevents his son from forming bonds.

McCarthy argues that physical objects can be destroyed, but qualities like kindness and love are resilient. The boy symbolizes hope for the father, reminding him of his humanity. However, the recollection of these memories is also bound to diminish. The newspaper and magazine connect the father to the past, highlighting the loss of time and psychological

distress. McCarthy suggests that values and attitudes endure, unlike industrial and technological items.

The novel explores human morality and the relationship between culture and nature, serving as a cautionary tale and reminder of past calamities. It emphasizes the preservation of human values in a violent world and portrays parental love in a paralyzed society. Applying trauma narratives to *The Road* helps understand the psychological and emotional trauma endured by the characters. The novel depicts a desolate and dangerous world, shattering the characters' sense of safety and stability. The man and the boy constantly face danger, scavenging for survival and evading cannibalistic gangs. This pervasive trauma permeates the story.

The novel explores the lasting impact of trauma on its characters' mental well-being. The protagonist, a father haunted by his wife's tragic suicide, experiences vivid memories of her death and overwhelming guilt and despair. He also suffers from distressing nightmares and intrusive thoughts, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. McCarthy's portrayal of these psychological manifestations highlights the profound influence of trauma on mental health.

The novel is filled with distressing moments that deeply affect the characters. The father and son come across a barn with three lifeless bodies, leaving a lasting mark on the father. However, it is the death of his wife that truly traumatizes him. Returning to his childhood home, the father is confronted with empty rooms that trigger memories of past Christmases and cherished moments. His dreams are plagued by visions of his wife's illness, and he relieves the pain of caring for her.

Flashbacks to his wife's pregnancy, marked by a power outage and a haunting glow, further haunt him. The absence of birdsong serves as a stark reminder of the desolation of the world. The narrative then shifts to a conversation between the man and his wife, where he pleads with her not to consider suicide. She desires death as an escape from the horrors of rape and the impending murder of their family.

In the morning, the man and boy prepare their belongings, and the boy expresses the absence of someone dear to them. Another memory takes us back to the joyous occasion of the boy's birth, which brought immense happiness to the father and his wife. The man recalls a specific incident from the past when his wife was still alive, involving a dog and a difficult decision. He also remembers a distressing scene from his own childhood, witnessing a group of men setting fire to serpents. These memories are prominently depicted in the novel.

Throughout the story, fear is a constant presence for the characters due to murderers and the harsh environment they face. Death and brutality are always looming. The father even teaches his son how to end his own life as a last resort if captured by cannibals. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the father and son are the only survivors, eliminating the need for them to distinguish themselves. If the son were not alive, the father would choose to end his own life. Despite witnessing horrifying acts, the father's determination to persevere is remarkable.

The unidentified source of trauma makes healing and finding a remedy challenging, resulting in only temporary recoveries. Despite effective recovery processes and well-organized treatment, returning to a pre-apocalyptic state is unattainable. Physical repairs are often beyond human control, making storytelling a temporary means of healing. In the final pages, the son encounters a family while his father passes away, symbolizing a small glimmer of hope for recovery. However, the Earth remains desolate and inhospitable, devoid of any signs of prosperity or sustainable life.

The story portrays the unique bond between the father and son. The son questions his father about their roles being reversed, and the father expresses his desire to accompany his son in life. Their connection is profound, with the son being seen as a divine blessing. The father's commitment to safeguarding and nurturing his son is unwavering.

The novel highlights the resilience of the parent-child relationship. Their love propels them forward, enabling them to endure and survive. The father grapples with moral dilemmas as he ensures his son's safety, challenging his understanding of right and wrong.

The parent-child relationship serves as a symbol of hope and humanity amidst devastation. It emphasizes the power of love and familial bonds in sustaining individuals during times of trauma. This exploration adds emotional resonance to the story, highlighting the impact these connections have on human resilience and determination.

The Road depicts the man and the boy forming a strong bond and relying on each other for emotional support. They establish routines and rituals to maintain a sense of normalcy, showing their desperate desire for meaning and connection in a bleak world. The concept of narrative reconstruction is also evident, as the man shares stories of the past to escape their current suffering. Overall, trauma theory helps us understand the characters' coping mechanisms and the profound impact of trauma on their lives.

While trauma theory highlights the ways in which individuals attempt to cope with their traumatic experiences, in *The Road*, the man and the boy develop a strong bond with each other, relying on their relationship as a source of emotional support. They create rituals and routines to maintain a sense of normalcy in their lives, such as their daily search for food and their nightly conversations about their dreams. These coping mechanisms demonstrate the characters' desperate need to find meaning and connection in a world that seems devoid of both.

The father's love for his son is unwavering and serves as a driving force behind his actions. He is willing to endure unimaginable hardships and make sacrifices to ensure his son's safety and well-being. This portrayal of parental love highlights the strength and resilience of familial bonds, even in the most dire of circumstances. It also emphasizes the importance of human connection and the role it plays in providing comfort and support in times of adversity.

In the end, trauma theory provides a valuable framework

for analyzing and understanding the psychological and emotional trauma depicted in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. The novel delves into the effects of trauma on the characters, their coping mechanisms, and the ways in which they attempt to make sense of their experiences. By applying trauma theory, we gain a deeper insight into the profound impact of trauma on individuals and the resilience they demonstrate in the face of unimaginable adversity.

References

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