

**West Bloomfield High School English Department**  
**Honors American Literature Summer Reading 2015**

All three of the summer reading texts for Honors American Literature have been chosen because they connect to the notion of “the road” that pervades American literature. From the journey of the Pilgrims across the icy Atlantic to the new country, to Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” and Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” to the great Mississippi river that functions as a “road” for Huck and Jim in *Huck Finn*, to Jack Kerouac’s meditations “On the Road,” to Holden Caulfield making a beeline for the streets of New York after escaping the confines of prep school, to Cormac McCarthy’s post apocalyptic journey along *The Road*, this idea spans *four hundred years* of American literature and is worthy of our study this year. As you approach the three selections, use the following questions to help guide your reading.

- ⊙ What are characters searching for when they set out on the road in these novels? Identity? People? Opportunities for work? Are they heading away from home or towards home? Safety? Adventure?
- ⊙ How does the road function as a character of its own in each of these novels? What characteristics does it bring to each novel? (e.g., Is it smooth and winding, dusty and well-trod?)
- ⊙ How do characters in each of the novels decide which road to take? As Robert Frost famously noted:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth; (“The Road Not Taken” 1-5).

Which road does each character take, both metaphorically and physically? What obstacles are presented as a result of that choice?

- ⊙ For each of the characters in these novels, does the road symbolize freedom and independence, duty and obligation, a fresh start, survival, or something else entirely?
- ⊙ In 2015, what does “the road” mean in our American lexicon? Is it merely a means to an end, or is it a journey to be savored along the way?

**Directions:**

1. Here’s the short version of the directions:
  - a. You will read three books this summer:
    - i. *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck),
    - ii. *The Road* (McCarthy), and
    - iii. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston).
  - b. You will take a TEST on *Of Mice and Men* in September.
  - c. You will answer QUESTIONS for EITHER *The Road* (McCarthy) OR *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston) (not both).
  - d. You will write an IMPROMPTU ESSAY for EITHER *The Road* (McCarthy) OR *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston) (not both) UPON YOUR RETURN IN THE FALL.
  - e. Got it? One test, one set of questions, and one essay.

2. Read *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. There will be a **test** on *Of Mice and Men* in September in your Honors American literature class.
3. You will also read BOTH *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. For one of those choices, you will answer questions. For the other, you will write an essay. See the instructions that follow.
  - a. Read and **answer questions** on either *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston **OR** *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (not both). Your **typed questions** will be **collected** on the SECOND day of class and must be submitted to turnitin.com by the same day. Please see the documents and links below to help you better understand these novels.
  - b. Questions must be answered using MLA 7<sup>th</sup> edition format. Each question must be at least one paragraph (8-10 sentences) with textual evidence (quotes) and YOUR OWN analysis. This is INDIVIDUAL work.
  - c. Write an **impromptu essay in the fall** on either *The Road* OR *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:
4. If you have questions over the summer, please contact me at [jennifer.mcquillan@wbsd.org](mailto:jennifer.mcquillan@wbsd.org)
5. Questions for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: go to <http://www.neabigread.org/books/theireyes/readers-guide/discussion-questions/> (answer all 12 questions)
6. Questions for *The Road*: go to <http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Reading-Questions-Your-Guide-to-The-Road-by-Cormac-McCarthy/1> (answer all 12 questions, you will have to click on a second page to get to all of them)

### **Tips for Annotating from Mrs. McQuillan**

YOU ARE ENCOURAGED but not required TO ANNOTATE ALL THREE OF THESE NOVELS IN PREPARATION FOR THE FALL. This is a skill we will continue to work on throughout the year, especially during the first semester. PLUS – ANNOTATIONS MIGHT COME IN HANDY FOR THAT IMPROMPTU!

**an·no·ta·tion** – *noun* **a critical or explanatory note or body of notes added to a text.**

1. NEVER simply write a literary element (ex. “symbolism” next to a paragraph or line) without explanation. What, exactly, is the symbol? What does it represent? Why is this important or worthy of note? Note: Themes cannot simply be listed in the margins. They MUST be explained in terms of significance.

2. If you highlight or write down a quote, EXPLAIN IT. Why is it significant? What makes it worth writing down? YOU MUST IDENTIFY AND EXPLAIN QUOTES IN ALL OF YOUR ANNOTATIONS.

3. Can you identify any patterns (often seen in REPETITION of words, phrases, or ideas) or absences? (For example, if you are reading a story about a family and there's NO MOTHER, wouldn't that be significant and important to analyze?)

4. What philosophies or values are espoused by the text? Family? Marriage? Love? Religion? Ideas about nature, death, life, etc? Does the text seem to endorse a way of life or a way of thinking about the world?

5. READ about the background of the work, READ the background of the author, READ the introduction or afterword of a novel, READ any extra materials that are supplied to better educate yourself about the piece! This will help tremendously in annotating!

6. Underlining and/or highlighting is NOT annotating. The process of annotating is taking critical or explanatory notes on a text. There must be NOTES present in the margins of the work. Plot summary may, at times, be necessary to demonstrate understanding, but at an honors or AP level is not enough to earn you full credit on an annotations assignment. We are looking for depth and breadth in your thought process, not a 4th grade book report.

7. When details are presented about the setting in an act or chapter, please provide an analysis of how the setting contributes to the action and atmosphere of that act or chapter.

8. Stop asking questions in your annotations UNLESS you take the time to go back and answer them. It's fine to wonder what will happen, but asking the questions and leaving them unanswered tells me that you didn't follow through with your thought.

9. After each chapter, you should offer END NOTES on the chapter/act as a whole. No annotations for a chapter or act should be turned in without these thoughts! Don't simply SUMMARIZE. Think about how the events of the chapter / act show growth in a character. Explain why the ideas presented are significant. What implications do they have for the novel as a whole?

**END NOTES SHOULD LOOK LIKE THIS:**

End notes should consist of 1-2 themes that are key to the work. Your end notes should be structured as follows:

- A. **THEME (UNDERLINED)**
- B. **EXAMPLE (WITH A \* NEXT TO IT)**
- C. **SIGNIFICANCE – NEEDS TO ANSWER THE QUESTION “BUT WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?”**

**END NOTES MUST APPEAR AT THE END OF EACH CHAPTER!**

For more ideas on annotating, see also:

[http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers\\_corner/197454.html](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/197454.html)

## Literary Criticism for *The Road*:

New York Times Review: [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/25/books/25masl.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/25/books/25masl.html?_r=0)

Title: Trauma and storytelling in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* (a selection from the full article)

Author(s): Francisco Collado-Rodriguez

Source: *Papers on Language & Literature*. 48.1 (Winter 2012): p45.

Document Type: Critical essay

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<http://www.siu.edu/pll/>

### COPING WITH UNIVERSAL TRAUMA: THE ROAD

A new warning about the human propensity for mythmaking leading to more violence and the manipulation of another literary genre combine in *The Road* in a terrifying story where structural trauma has spread everywhere. The protagonists, the man and his son, share a big personal loss represented in the woman who was respectively their wife and mother. Such loss combined with the post-apocalyptic context of ruins and collective anxieties that saturate the story of *The Road* do not seem to allow for much hope in recovering from what clearly qualifies as an inescapable traumatized milieu. Unlike what happens in *No Country for Old Men*, here all survivors share the trauma of the mysterious event that led to the post-holocaust world in which the story unfolds. The few characters in the book sharply fit into one of two groups: the roadrats, who eat any living matter they can find, including other people, and the non-cannibals, such as this new version of the man and his son, literally carriers of the fire in the episode that Bell already dreamt at the end of McCarthy's previous novel. Accordingly, the surrounding darkness announced by the sheriff in his dream also marks the beginning of *The Road*. Fighting against the dark, father and son need to be the fire carriers and keep the power of light going on. The fire is a symbol that philosophers and artists have frequently interpreted as a source of life. (6) Despite its divine character in so many old mythologies, however, when actual fire appears in *The Road* it does so as the lightning and thunder that endlessly punish the survivors. After the presentation of the father and his son, the next character who appears in the book is a man who has been struck by lightning through one of his eyes (51). The event becomes a first warning that the longed-for luminosity can also kill. Too much light can make you blind.

McCarthy chooses again a popular literary genre, this time the post-apocalyptic sci-fi story, to undermine our confidence in human actions and myth creation. Since the end of the nineteenth century, science fiction has frequently expressed in symbolic manner the different anxieties of Western societies. The anxiety that this popular narrative genre may produce about our future is increased by the book's stylistic structure that, as already happened at the end of *No Country for Old Men*, is not formed by sequential chapters but by short passages, a style that reflects the man's traumatized memories. The strategy of textual fragmentation combines with a presentation of the events that is not strictly chronological, with frequent flashbacks, dreams, and nightmares that the narrator scatters here and there to increase the impression of PTSD in the protagonists.

The narrative voice is also used to augment the novel's distressed milieu. This time McCarthy's typical minimalist approach gives way to a different type of omniscient narration. In *The Road*, the man's anxieties and traumatized condition are frequently exported to the narrator's position by means of an abundant use of narrated monologue. (7) In this mode, the protagonist's perspective mixes (till his death) with the narrator's in a strategy that stylistically functions to bring the character's emotions--and therefore his symptomatic condition--closer to the readers, forcing us to

take up the role of witnesses of the violent and traumatizing events the protagonists endure. (8) In the following example, the boy plays the flute his father has given him: "After a while he fell back and after a while the man could hear him playing. A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin" (81). Who is the mind behind the thoughts about the age to come? The blurring of perspectives between narrator and protagonist is further sustained by the absence of inverted commas that has systematically characterized McCarthy's use of direct speech. The combination of these experimental strategies reflects the chaotic condition of a traumatized mind that cannot express itself with sufficient coherence. (9) In addition, the book's structure relies strongly on the quest, a mythic theme frequently present in McCarthy's earlier fiction and a metaphor of the spirit of liberty so characteristic of the American ethos. In *The Road*, however, the writer reduces the quest to its basic aim, survival, and links it to the need to go down to the sea looking for more benign weather conditions. Here, a man and his son ironically replace the figure of the rude brave pioneer, vanguard of the expansion to the Western territories. Escaping from the dark and cold North, they initiate a long way south along which they also become the readers' eyewitnesses of the new Waste Land that originated following the mysterious apocalyptic event.

In many cultural manifestations, the sea is understood as the symbol of the maternal waters and as the main source of life. From James Frazer and Carl Jung to T. S. Eliot, John Steinbeck or Joseph Campbell, the association of women and waters is a recurrent one. The quest, as journey to the symbolic sea representing the absent wife and mother, becomes in *The Road* a search for overcoming trauma and is soon linked to the alleged therapeutic activity of storytelling. If Bell's personal condition required from him the necessity to tell his lamenting confession as a therapeutic way out of his melancholia, in *The Road* the spread of traumatic conditions to all the existing survivors demands the creation of a full mythology that may soothe the collective present situation by interpreting the terrifying past. Accordingly, early in the narrative readers are informed that the boy's birth took place only a few days after the event that put an end to American civilization, a (miraculous) circumstance that will propitiate the man's creation of the new mythology (61). In his mythmaking stories the man sees himself and his son as the good characters, the heroic carriers of the fire that will bring the light of civilization to defeat the post-apocalyptic darkness: "Are we still the good guys?" the son asks the man. "Yes, we're still the good guys," his father replies (81). The man insistently announces that his son is the redeemer who has come to save what is left of the world. Since the beginning of the narrative, for his father the boy is none other than mythos, "the word of God" (3). (10) By the time we know about the circumstances of the boy's birth, however, we also know that the mother has committed suicide (58). Like Sheriff Bell, she is a quitter. From this perspective, in *The Road* the man becomes the character with enough will to save his son. When they finally reach the sea, it does not fulfill their expectations--the sun is still very weak and it is cold even by the shore--but the appearance of a woman ready to take on the role of the mother seems to bring new hopes for the child and mark the end of the quest.

Nevertheless, by then it might be too late for the boy to recover from his traumatized condition. Together with the loss of his mother and the disappointment when reaching the sea, he lives under continuous distressing conditions, increased by his fears of the cannibals. The hard living conditions make of structural trauma a pandemic for all characters in the novel but more so for the innocent younger protagonist. The boy only knows running and hiding as the basic activities in his life. His living conditions place him as a clear victim of PTSD. His teaching guide and mythmaker is not the biblical God or Logos but a mere mortal being who plays the role of an astute survivalist with the necessary skills to go on. The man's method to push his son forward along their quest for the sea is simple: courage, resistance, speed, and storytelling.

If for trauma theorists narratives may soothe the pain of trauma and give meaning to our lives, for McCarthy storytelling can also trap us by imposing an understanding of life where the frontiers between good and evil are misleadingly clear-cut. *The Road* gradually discloses both the father's and the son's suspicion of mythmaking. Incessantly suffering from the symptoms of his traumatic condition (123-124), the boy's skills are becoming more basic and primitive whereas his father's confidence in survival is jeopardized by dreams where useless books appear recurrently--"Soggy volumes in a bookcase" (138). In one of those dreams the "vanished world returned [...]. He'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row" (199). One of the mysterious paragraphs written in biblical tones announces from an indeterminate perspective--the father's, the narrator's, or both--the useless nature of mythmaking and books in a context in which there may be no future left for anybody: "Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground?" (209). Later on, the books the man finds in the boat--ironically named *Pajaro de la Esperanza* (Bird of Hope)--are of no use whatsoever. (11)

Eventually, neither books nor storytelling seem to be valid instruments for the protagonists to work through their traumatized condition. The boy melancholically declares that he cannot believe any longer in the stories his father has been telling him because those stories "are not true"; in them they are always helping people whereas in their real journey along the road they have never helped people (286). Asked then by his father to recount his own stories, the boy also refuses to do so because his stories about real life are not happy ones (287).

The boy's rejection of the basic therapeutic method to work through their trauma seems to confirm the vision of the end of times proclaimed by Ely, the near blind man who is also the only character with a proper name in the book. Ely's biblical undertones and his parodic relation to the prophet Elijah are rather explicit. In the Books of Kings, God sends Elijah as prophet to warn the Israeli that He will not tolerate the cult to Baal. Elijah gives food to the poor, raises the dead, brings fire down from the sky, and finally ascends into heaven in a chariot of fire. His name means "My God is Yahweh." In the novel Ely is almost blind even if his tone is prophetic; he is starving and needs food, and his message is not about the omnipotence of God as creator of life but about the end of everything, including hope. In his conversation with the man and his son, he proclaims that there is "no God and we are his prophets" (181), a paradoxical statement that openly contradicts the meaning of the prophet's name. When the man suggests that the boy might be a god, Ely shakes his head and affirms that where "men cant live gods fare no better" (183). His prophecy is for total extinction; old religious myths have no room in his understanding of the situation, and he openly scorns the boy's role as mythos.

The boy's innocent perception of his father's stories as lies brings him to refuse, then, the possibility of participating in a new mythology. By so doing he also refuses the therapeutic effects of working through his memories by giving testimony of his traumatic experiences. From the perspective provided by trauma studies, the boy's refusal to remember his past experiences and give coherence to his memories points to his eventual incapacity to advance from the stage of acting out his traumatic symptoms. What is left for the son if he refuses to narrate what has happened? In addition, if there is no new mythology to make sense of the collective past, what hope is left for the survivors? Once the man dies, hope for his son's survival seems to disappear. Yet, at the end of the book, the mysterious narrative voice tries to trap the reader in more mythmaking when undefined memories about a pre-apocalyptic past take over the story. The image of trout in a river stream--one of the man's former remembrances (42)--reappears in the last passage of the book to be symbolically extended to the consideration of the puzzle of existence:

"Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. [...] Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes" (306-307). This concluding image also offers a final reflection about the previous optimistic scene in which the son meets his new mother and family. After the encounter, readers may think that the ultimate end of the young protagonist's quest has been accomplished, but the trout image brings us back to the anguished situation in which all survivors stand. There is no coming back to the past; memories, fading out in the father's mind, seem to have now come to their end in the boy's melancholic refusal to recount any stories. The trout lived in a past that cannot be recovered, the maps on their backs have also disappeared, and any possible bearings are lost.

Nevertheless, McCarthy's fiction is not characterized by providing readers with clear, simple endings, and once the man dies the narrator assumes the boy's perspective to carry on the story, a stylistic shift that might suggest the son has inherited his father's will to survive. In the penultimate passage of the book, the woman talks to the boy about God. But the boy does not talk to God; "the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget" (306). The boy's refusal to forget the memories he has of his father suggest that storytelling still has a chance at the end of the book and that the boy may eventually start to mythologize about his father and, by doing so, work through his own trauma and set the bases for collective recovery. As Kenneth Lincoln perceptively observes, at the end of the novel the boy still has one bullet left in his revolver in case he decides to kill himself (173), but he may also decide not to use it. Once again, McCarthy does not provide his readers with any definite or clarifying answer for the story he writes, but in *The Road* he offers a skilled narrative ending that raises too many questions to leave its readers ethically unscarred.

### **Source Citation** (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Collado-Rodriguez, Francisco. "Trauma and storytelling in Cormac McCarthy's no country for old men and the road." *Papers on Language & Literature* 48.1 (2012): 45+. *General OneFile*. Web. 13 May 2014

### **Literary Criticism Links for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:**

DIALOGUE TIP! It may help you to read the novel out loud so you can get a feel for the dialect and what the characters are saying.

<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/old-WILLA/fall99/berridge.html>

"Janie Crawford, the main character in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, introduced herself to the girls in my high school Women in Literature class three years ago as we began with chapter one, and each year students have heard about her before the reading begins. As Janie and her best friend Phoebe sit on the porch in Eatonville sharing a heaping platter of mulatto rice, Janie talks about her soul mate and husband Tea Cake. Zora Neale Hurston draws us into her story with the soft drawl of the South Florida dialect in the velvet dusk. In this Harlem Renaissance novel, my students and I follow Janie through three marriages, seeing her strength and sense of self evolve. Since our first expedition into Eatonville, the character Janie has become a mainstay of our discussions in successive Women in Literature classes and the reference point from which the girls evaluate other female characters in the stories we include in this course."

**Contains:** Character Analysis

**Author:** Judi Berridge

**From:** *Women in Literature and Life Assembly* Vol. 8 Fall 1999

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2838/is\\_n2\\_32/ai\\_21059951/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_n2_32/ai_21059951/)

"Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a text at once (ac)claimed for its ability to speak to contemporary gender and sexual politics and blamed for its inability to speak to the local, particularized politics of its time. *Their Eyes* has been used to situate strong, culture-based women at the center of an African American women's literary tradition, on the one hand, and has been read as reinforcing primitivism or as idealizing the 'folk,' on the other. As important as Hurston's critical reception has been, it has mediated against considering her work as politicized in her own historical moment. Just as Claudia Tate notes the invisibility of the politics of early black domestic fiction, I am suggesting that much of the political embeddedness of Hurston's text has been lost."

**Contains:** Content Analysis

**Author:** Carol Batker

**From:** *African American Review* Summer, 1998

Cormac McCarthy: Author. One of our greatest living American novelists. Wrote and lived between Tennessee and Texas. 2005 brought the publication of *No Country for Old Men*, which was adapted into an award-winning film by Joel and Ethan Coen. - PowerPoint PPT Presentation. Transcript. Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* Cormac McCarthy: Author One of our greatest living American novelists. Wrote and lived between Tennessee and Texas. 2005 brought the publication of *No Country for Old Men*, which was adapted into an award-winning film by Joel and Et In *The Road* Cormac McCarthy's coalescence of the narrative voice with the man's consciousness grants readers insight into the man's desperate struggle to locate or rely upon anything meaningful, an ordeal that often has him draw upon his inner reserves. Through textual remembrance, the man invokes works from his and our old, vanishing world and, engaging with them, he interrogates the possibility of sustaining significance and value in a new, broken world seemingly denuded of meaning. The novel's

