"Hold Him in Your Arms": Deconstruction of Gender Roles in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel *The Road*

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2015

By *Izze Lofquist*

_____
Thesis Director
Dr. Kirk Boyle

_____
Thesis Advisor
Dr. Anne Jansen

Over the last few decades, the post-apocalyptic genre has been the star of the science fiction scene, and even stands out among our vast output of fiction works in general. Series like *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and most recently *Divergent* have been flying off shelves and into the hands of teens and young adults everywhere, and older classics like *Earth Abides* and *Alas, Babylon* continue to receive praise and acclaim over 50 years after their publishing. This genre is known both for its heart-pounding thriller stories and its often chilling examinations of human behavior in extreme circumstances; however, the claim that a proper analysis of humanity is the central purpose of the genre is only true in part, as a large portion of post-apocalyptic works do not consciously touch on the topics of gender or gender-specific behavior at all. Cormac McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road*, is remarkable not only for being a heartfelt and stylistically intriguing example of the post-apocalyptic genre, but for depicting the necessary evolution of our concept of gender in the wake of a world-changing disaster. This breakdown in traditional gender occurs primarily in the case of the main characters: a father referred to only as "the man," his son "the boy," and the boy's dead mother as she exists in their memories and dreams of her. The deconstruction of gender roles is present in several side characters as well, especially in the initial, even visceral emotional reactions the reader is led to have about them; however, the three characters of the novel's core cast are the ones to eventually present the most radical shift from both their own past selves—in the case of the mother and father—and what the science fiction genre would otherwise demand they be like. McCarthy's treatment of gender and its redefinition in the text is admittedly somewhat lopsided, favoring the topic of masculinity and male character archetypes because the novel is meant to focus on the relationship between father and son. Still, its surprisingly radical depictions of both femininity

and masculinity in a post-apocalyptic world provide a parallel to the physical, literal disintegration of the world around them, as well as delving into the exploration of human nature and behavior that so often accompanies post-apocalyptic story settings.

   The Road is a novel set in the aftermath of a devastating war, some unspecified event or widespread bombing that reduced America as we know it to a barren and inhospitable wasteland. Traveling among the roads and ruins are a man and his young son, neither of whom are given names beyond "the man" and "the boy." The boy's mother has been dead for many years, having committed suicide after she lost hope that the three of them could go on in this world without meeting a horrible end. The man and boy must stay on the move in order to find supplies and stay safe from the marauding groups of bandits and cannibals, and they spend the length of the book traveling to the coast to escape the oncoming winter. Like many post-apocalyptic and science fiction stories, this book raises several difficult questions about the integrity of human compassion in the face of extreme circumstances, the nature of the bond between parent and child, and the idea of whether humanity as a whole is still worth anything in light of the cruel things people do to keep themselves alive.

   In order to set the scene for the exploration of gender that occurs in so many of *The Road*'s characters, it is crucial to consider the society that the older characters spent the first part of their lives in, the society that still affects so much of human social development in the world as we know it. The concept of "traditional gender roles" as referenced in this essay refers to the common cultural conceptions of our society that define what is viewed as proper behavior for men and women. Men are considered the stronger and tougher sex, praised for successes earned through individual effort. As Mark Kirby discusses in reference to the work of sociologist Victor

Seidler, the way men's identities are socialized leads them to "have less of a chance than women to develop emotional skills that would allow them to address the needs of others. At the same time men are discouraged from expressing their emotional needs by a socially constructed dominant masculinity which emphasizes aggression and competition" (Kirby 718). Women, in contrast, are seen as weaker or softer, and expected to care for the needs of those around them, often at the cost of their own freedom or even their health. The man, his wife, and the other adult characters in the novel were born and raised in pre-apocalyptic America, with popular culture and the attitudes and beliefs of the people around them conditioning them or at least pressuring them to behave according to these gender roles, or face becoming social outcasts. However, as post-apocalyptic fiction often does, this novel includes as part of its premise a radical change in the structure of our society—a sudden and stark absence of structure, in the case of *The Road*— and suggesting purposefully or otherwise that since the nature of our culture and social interactions have changed so drastically, there may now be room for alternate performances of gender. Judith Butler has heavily examined the concept of "performing gender," and states "in the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self" (Butler 188). Butler is here referring to the constructed presentation of gender that occurs in drag performance, but I believe the idea of gender as socially constructed from current cultural norms is deeply connected to performative gender within *The Road*. Faced with an entirely different physical and social environment, these characters have cast aside preconceived notions about the proper way to perform gender, and

adopted habits that better benefit their health and well-being. Put simply, gender is a fluid and malleable concept that can be altered both consciously and unconsciously as necessary for those performing it. These radical new ideas about gender and gendered behavior not only provide realistic character development in light of radically changing circumstances, but also an indirect commentary on the way gender affects our own society, as well as how it may affect it in the future. As Brian Attebery puts it in the introductory chapter of his book on gender in science fiction, "Science fiction is a useful tool for investigating habits of thought, including conceptions of gender. Gender, in turn, offers an interesting glimpse into some of the unacknowledged messages that permeate science fiction" (Attebery 1). The setting of *The Road* is barely recognizable as the country we know, and with the utter destruction of American society as we know it, typical notions of gender have necessarily been broken down in many of *The Road*'s characters as well, leaving space for natural evolution in the characteristics we have defined as masculinity and femininity.

Women are often defined by their relationships to the people around them—mother, wife, daughter, etc.—and so femininity is defined in *The Road* by the way female characters act towards others. Forced to scrape out her survival alongside husband and son in a merciless and incredibly dangerous landscape, the woman who was the man's wife and the boy's mother is also relegated to an intensely traditional feminine role simply by necessity. To be more specific, she is forced to be the boy's mother before any other role since he is so young when the family sets out on the road, and likely feels social pressure to be a good wife and support her husband since he is working so hard to find food and shelter for them. However, these responsibilities seem to have built up inside her, causing significant pressure on her psyche and eventually pushing her to

a psychological and emotional breaking point. In a past conversation between the man and his wife, she made reference to a saying about the difference between the ways men and women dream: "They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I don't dream at all" (McCarthy 57). As someone raised in contemporary American society, she would have constantly experienced the cultural pressure to center her life around caring for the needs of others—specifically, men—and sacrifice herself for the needs of her children. Indeed, her first introduction to the story is as a wife in her husband's bed, heavily pregnant with his child, and she is given virtually no identity or defining characteristics outside of her relationship to her husband and son. The fact that she is depicted like this while also being the only significant female character in the book speaks volumes about McCarthy's conceptualization of women, as well as the more general role of women in science fiction, which seems to be existing only as love interests and supporting roles to the apparently-more-important stories of men. However, she is still able to find an escape from her role, even if that escape is so radical in nature that it haunts the man and boy to various degrees for the entirety of the novel.

In a surprisingly typical construction of an imprisonment narrative, the degree of situational and emotional oppression that the mother is subject to is matched only by the extreme and dramatic circumstances of her eventual escape. As she and the man sit around a campfire talking one night, the boy's mother reveals not only that her will for self-preservation is gone, but that she has lost some subconscious part of the protective instinct she claims women are supposed to have. In her own words, "[her] heart was ripped out of [her] the night [her son] was born" (McCarthy 57), and she states that the man should not expect "sorrow" or weakness from her now. She reveals that her suicidal feelings have finally taken the dominant position in her

mind, and goes off into the night to slit her own throat immediately after this conversation. In giving up on her own life, she is also giving up her maternal role and a large part of how she defines her own femininity, and in a way she is ascending past the cultural and social pressures that had bound her so heavily in the past. Her suicide is her ultimate declaration that even if she cannot live for herself, she will at least die for herself, giving herself one last bit of mercy in that she will no longer have to live in fear of what may eventually happen to her family. The world has become too radically different for a woman like her to have any hope of finding her place within it, and so her choice becomes simultaneously one of empathetic weakness and of decisive, self-focused strength.

In attempting to pin down the mother's rather nebulous role in her husband and son's lives, looking at various critics' analyses on the presence of women in science fiction and post-apocalyptic literature helps to provide context within these genres. In David Kuhne's piece "Gender Roles After the Collapse," he identifies and examines various models of the female character in post-apocalyptic fiction, laying out four separate roles that are mostly defined by the amount and nature of social influence and power they possess. According to Kuhne, female characters tend to fulfill one of the following four roles: a victimized or subordinate position, a position equal to the male characters, a leader or warrior role, or a "healer, shaman, and spiritual leader" (Kuhne 22). It also seems sensible that a woman's position could shift within a story, or that she could hold a varying degree of control depending on her circumstances, and thus fit into multiple roles as outlined by Kuhne. Kuhne even mentions *The Road* by name, mentioning McCarthy's choice to "[eliminate] any major women characters because the theme of the novel concerns not only the will to survive but also the nature of the father-son relationship" (Kuhne

24). In what memory of her we are given access to, the mother seems to be in a position of equal standing with her husband; the family of three does not travel with anyone else, and the husband does not appear to see her as either subordinate or superior to himself. Her literary role within the book suggests that she be placed into the category of healer and spiritual leader since as a mother she is expected to be a paragon of selflessness and hope for the future of the new world. However, her suicide and consequent portrayal as a sort of martyr drives her outside of either of these roles, into a position somewhat similar to the spiritual-leader archetype but most accurately defined outside of Kuhne's four-role system entirely.

The cause behind the woman's relationship to motherhood, including her eventual denial of her role as a mother, is more complex than just the stress of her individual circumstances. In her article on a socio-cultural concept she calls the "reproductive imperative," Jordan Schildcrout states that identities of nontraditional gender and sexuality are inextricably linked to post-apocalyptic fiction's enamor of children as a symbol of hope for the future. "In plays, films, and novels about the apocalypse, the narrative's optimism or pessimism about overcoming such problems often depends on whether a child, as symbol of the future, survives" (Schildcrout). Thus, there is enormous pressure on any potential parent figure, and mother figures to a much greater degree—since the bond between mother and child is often seen as more emotionally and socially significant than that between a father and child—to provide protection and sacrifice themselves for any child in a post-apocalyptic work, or be treated as inhumane monsters for not caring enough about the future of the world. In discussing the link between queer-identified people and the so-called reproductive imperative, and the subsequent absence or even "vilification" of queer people in post-apocalyptic fiction, Schildcrout cites both "the non-

reproductive nature of same-sex relations" and "the powerful rhetoric that situates queer people as antithetical to the future of families, the nation, and humanity itself" (Schildcrout). The mother's choice to commit suicide—a rather understandable one given the stress, suffering, and emotional duress that living in such circumstances might cause for any post-apocalyptic survivor—is undeniably tainted by the feeling that she is betraying reader's thoughts of what a proper mother or even a proper human being should do, and her decision to give up rather than continue sacrificing herself for her child gives new insight into the role women are so often forced into in post-apocalyptic settings simply because of their gender. The woman's escape from this position through suicide, although extreme and rather untraditional as a way of breaking free from the restraints of gender norms, is significant both to the plot of the book and to the history of female characters in post-apocalyptic fiction. However, to get a true idea of what it means to be a mother in science fiction works, it is just as important to consider the topic of fatherhood.

The role of a father in our society has made some progress away from the embodiment of masculinity and stoic strength that it used to be, but many people unfortunately still see nothing wrong with a father who performs his duty as breadwinner and expects his family to care for all of his other needs. Men who share their feelings with other people are ridiculed for being weak or even stereotyped as homosexual, and the detached and self-sufficient model of masculinity is still seen as the ideal in all too many places despite the harm it can cause in those who try to hold themselves to such standards. Thus, male characters in fiction who show their emotions, are empathetic, or center their lives around caring for others are a rare commodity. Unsurprisingly for a fiction genre many men claim as their favorite, male characters in science fiction tend to be

hyper-masculine reinventions of the Wild West protagonist, showing off bravery and physical prowess in the face of an unknown frontier—the dauntless action heroes Luke and Han Solo of the Star Wars movie series one example, and the caricature of tough, confident, and socially fearless men in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* another, self-aware and satirical though the latter may be. However, the man in this novel is notably distinguishable for taking on several traditionally feminine responsibilities and characteristics, and they round out his character rather than detracting from the confidence or strength that might ordinarily be supported by his masculinity.

The man is his son's only living parent, and so he must be complete caretaker for the child who relies completely on him for survival. This caretaker role is not only in regard to the boy's physical health and safety, but also in regard to his emotional and mental health—otherwise the boy would end up stunted and miserable, and likely lack the will to keep living. The man is a remarkable character in that he is perfectly willing to take care of his son in both the physical and social respects, and his most important concern seems to be the welfare of his child—prioritized over even his own life. The man checks in with the boy verbally many times throughout the novel, asking him if he is "ok" and trying to resolve any issues that are troubling him before they cause the boy any more undue stress, and going against the stereotypical idea that men don't need to or shouldn't discuss their emotions. Sometimes there is little the man can do to placate the boy or soothe his worries, especially if a disagreement between the two of them is the cause behind the boy's lingering unhappiness, but the act of asking the boy what's wrong and picking apart his insecurities seems to be a ritual act and reaffirmation of love that keeps their emotional bond strong. This tendency contrasts rather sharply with the common assumption

that being overly talkative, especially about one's feelings, is a feminine characteristic to be avoided by any man who wants to taken seriously. The man also stated earlier in the novel that a time he once spent rowing on the lake with his uncle, neither exchanging a word the entire time, was his idea of a "perfect day" (McCarthy 13), but his habits seemed to have changed by now so that he can ensure his son's mental well-being.

One clearly maternal behavior that the man participates in with the boy is bathing him: after the encounter wherein the man kills an outsider trying to attack the boy, the man bathes his son in water from a stream to wash the blood off of him, and he also bathes the boy later in the book while they are staying at the house with the hidden bunker. Bathing and cleaning up after children are stereotypically motherly actions, as a wife is often the one to take care of the minutia of caring for the children as well as attending to their emotional needs, but now that the boy's mother is gone the man must do this work. Cleaning his son almost seems to be a reverent or sacred action for him, a way to purify his child from the crimes of the post-apocalyptic world, and a fitting emotional backdrop given that he refers to his protection of the boy as a noble and God-given duty multiple times throughout the novel. The scenes that take place in the bunker, such as the father eating warm meals and playing games with his son—likely the calmest and most serene of the entire novel—are notably reminiscent of the kind of domesticity common to a modern family. Terri Witek states in her article on McCarthy's domestic spaces that his books show a certain "insistence on the impermanence of domestic spaces" and contain a common pattern of familial and marital relations breaking down when in a traditionally domestic environment. This habit is an interesting contrast to the peaceful and content feel of the bunker scenes in *The Road*, but can even be interpreted as quiet support for the viability of single

parenthood or peripatetic[1] lifestyles in the modern age.

Remarkably, the man isn't hesitant to kiss the boy to show affection, although this is mostly limited to times of high stress or as a method of calming the boy. He kisses his son before going to scout after they escape from the cannibals' mansion, and again before they go into the hidden bunker for the first time. While they are on the run from the mansion-dwellers, the text delves into the man's internal monologue for a time while he wonders if, should the situation require it, he could bring himself to kill the boy to spare him from even worse suffering. It is a question that becomes relevant any time the boy and man face threats from outsiders, and one that plagues the man's mind throughout the entire book. The man's thoughts play out here as follows: "Can you do it? When the time comes? … 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," (McCarthy 114). The boy is obviously dear to him, and even though the man was raised in American society as we know it—wherein males are discouraged from showing strong emotion or compassion for others—the extreme circumstances of the post-apocalyptic world have made these cultural rules insignificant to him in the face of his sheer love for his son.

Inexplicably tied to the theme of children is the action of crying, something inherently related to immaturity and emotion, and thus something thoroughly rejected by militant masculinity. To cry is to reveal to others that one is feeling weak, scared, or otherwise disempowered, and it has an interesting role in *The Road*, where the struggle to gather resources and remain in control of one's situation is as constant as breathing. The boy is still young, and

1   Roving or nomadic, living and/or working in many places for short time periods.

almost completely dependent on his father as he has no ability to defend himself; thus the situations where he cries out of fear or emotional upset, such as when they are running from the cannibals or after having a nightmare about his father dying, are not in themselves notable. However, there is also occasionally a mention of the man crying, as well:

> He was beginning to think that death was finally upon them and that they should find some place to hide where they would not be found. There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn't about death. He wasnt sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. (McCarthy 129)

As mentioned previously, the man grew up in a society where the common belief was that crying was something for males to avoid or even be ashamed of, but his ideas about what is proper or fitting behavior always seem to fall away when it comes to his love for the boy. His son is the only thing still precious to him in this world, so he has no false affectations of toughness or detachment in this respect. Interpersonal bonds are seemingly the only things that keep people going in this barren wasteland, and so it becomes clear that any ideas about emotional independence being the only source of strength are painfully inaccurate after all.

There are some authors who, in examining the relationship between the father and son, have noted the lack of a strong female presence in the novel and the ensuing implication that this relationship is a reinforcement of traditional masculine relationships. Behavior such as repeatedly telling the boy not to cry, encouraging him to become stronger and more capable, and instructing him that their survival is related to a sort of heroic mission referred to here as "carrying the fire," are indeed typical for a father or mentor figure in such stories. Naomi

Morgenstern suggests that "all that might be experienced as negative and aggressive and internal to a (father-son) relationship is projected … onto an apocalyptic outside that, in turn, produces an idealized space of goodness in which the father and son can reside together," (Morgenstern 37). However, I counter that such behaviors may be necessary for survival in the harsh conditions of a post-apocalyptic environment, and that acknowledgement of traditional or even harmful facets of a father-son relationship can act as references to or even criticisms of the nature of such relationships in our current culture.

Children fill an interesting gap between masculinity and femininity; they have not yet developed the secondary sex characteristics that many would use to define their gender and therefore their social role, and so they are often left to imitate their role models in the previous generation as they mature. However, the boy in *The Road* was born into and raised entirely in the post-apocalyptic world, and thus his role is very different from those of his parents. He never experienced the masculinity-stressing pre-war environment that may have pressured him to behave a certain way in order to prove his masculinity, and thus he has a pivotal role in any analysis of gender and gender roles as a neutral or androgynous being, both in his physical appearance and in his behavior. Any masculine role he may have in the text is often negated by his other characteristics or can be interpreted as gender-neutral. On the subject of the boy's physical masculinity or lack thereof, his exact age is never stated in the book, but he is still fairly young, and the text often stresses how small, thin, and scrawny malnutrition has made him, such as the reference to his "thin ribs" (McCarthy 116) that can clearly be seen when he is shirtless. He lacks the traditional bulky physical presence that many males would begin to develop even in their preteen years. Boys in our modern society are often allowed or encouraged to be loud,

active, and take up as much space as they need without shame, while the boy in *The Road* usually acts skittish and passive—or even passive-aggressive, in the few arguments he has with his father—when confronted with a threat. Free from any influence that would enforce traditional meanings of gender on him, he is an embodiment of the way the inhabitants of this new world have discarded traditional concepts of gender, and crafted their new identities in whatever way will best help them come to terms with themselves and their surroundings.

Children generally fulfill similar roles in post-apocalyptic fiction: as younger, newer beings, with the potential to grow and shape themselves as they age, they represent hope for the future in a currently desolate landscape. However, in her book *The Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema*, Debbie Olson further analyzes the various purposes child characters can play in film, and even speaks on the specific topic of the boy's role in the 2009 film version of *The Road*. Olson initially remarks on the peculiar intensity of the boy's empathy for others, noting his "compassion … and moral ideals that seem to be in contradiction to those virtues needed to survive" (Olson 67). She asks readers where the boy learned such compassion if his only real role model was his father, who argues against him in situations where the boy wants to offer a stranger food or mercy. An answer to this question, if present at all, is not easily found, other than attributing this behavior to his youth and inexperience as compared to his father's jaded attitude toward other humans. Olson also takes note of the boy's particularly fragile status, given that he is a child and thus vulnerable to physical harm and exploitation in those instances where his father cannot protect him. He is a figure of hope, to be "protected, led to safety, fed, and nurtured so as to preserve the glimmering flame" of life, but is also "tasty fresh meat there for the taking in a world of ravenous, self-serving individuals" (Olson 35). Thus, his role is

simultaneously one of significant promise for the future and one of extreme vulnerability to those whose shortsighted will to devour and survive would lead them to attack and eat the boy. The boy's mother is aware of this status as well, telling the father that if the family is caught by raiders they would rape the boy as well as herself given the opportunity. This comparison of the boy to an object ready to be consumed both literally and sexually is one that in the vast majority of cases is limited to female characters, highlighting the boy's femininity even as it is reduced to a weakness or vulnerability.

In transitioning to examine the various side characters in *The Road*—those outside the nuclear family[2] the book sets up with the three characters previously discussed—I would also like to propose that nontraditional performances of gender are not only allowed for in *The Road*'s new social setting, but required in order to survive with one's compassion and integrity intact. There are almost no living examples of motherhood or selfless female characters in the novel, and while there are no doubt the kinds of predatory, cruel men who here embody the dangers of violent and self-centered masculinity, they are all either killed, humiliated, or barely portrayed as human at all.

As the mother is the only female character of any significance within the novel, she seems to acts as an example for the general circumstances of women in this post-apocalyptic world. As in many post-apocalyptic and science fiction works, women are barely given the chance to live for themselves, and the common implication or even outright position so much of these genres take is that women are somehow too weak and unsuited to surviving on their own in such harsh landscapes. There already seems to be so little room for women in this setting—

2   . A traditionally-structured family consisting of a husband, wife, and their child or children.

although the degree of consciousness in that choice by the author is debatable, since McCarthy's works focus enormously on male characters in general—but the woman's admissions about losing her motherly characteristics can be read as an indicator that there is no room in this new world for motherhood, or rather selfless femininity, at all. This absence of selfless femininity can be felt in the other female characters in the book, despite the fact that they have no dialogue and the man and boy don't even get close to them. The group of cannibals living at the mansion house is made up of four men and two women, and from the cursory glance the man had of this group, the women were not mentioned to be in chains or in otherwise disempowered positions. The man and boy's witnessing of this is the first instance in the book that implies that not all of this world's women have been raped and killed, consumed by harmful masculinity. However, as stated above, it would appear their femininity, or their willingness to act primarily to keep others from harm, has still been stripped away, and these women have grown pas the social imperative to care for others to fulfill their new predatory roles. By making the choice to live as cannibals, they have become literal consumers of humanity, and fulfill a science fiction role that is typically left to male characters: the violent and ferocious outside dangers that threaten the main characters on both a physical and moral level.

Later on in the novel, the man and boy encounter a small group of travelers who follow them on the road for a short time, one of whom is a pregnant woman; soon after, the pair find the remains of an infant roasting over a campfire. The text is not exactly clear on whether or not this baby was born from the aforementioned pregnant woman, but even if this is not the case, the fact that the two events occurred within a few pages of each other unmistakably ties them together in any interpretation of the text. This image of a helpless child left unprotected by its mother and

made into food follows the continuing pattern of the broken mother-child bond, introduced initially with the boy's mother and her fragmented relationship with him and compounded in each segment of the book where these sorts of women are present. The world of *The Road* has become an environment where women are either stripped of their ability to care for others, or have willingly given it up in order to survive.

At the conclusion of the book, the man has died from illness and injury and the boy is left to get by on his own; yet, he is not completely alone, as another man soon approaches the boy and offers to let him travel with him and his makeshift family. As a paternal role model and figure of authority for the boy, this new man fills the now-empty position of the boy's father, and is rather similar to the previous father in his practical and logical nature as well as his capacity for empathy and selflessness. The new man is willing to reach out to the boy in the first place instead of killing him outright or letting him starve, offers to let the boy join his group, and acquiesces to a few of the boy's requests even when they are impractical, such as leaving a blanket behind to cover the boy's father's corpse. Thus, he acts as a message to readers that the compassion displayed by the boy's original father was not a fluke, and that a nontraditional and more empathetic notion of fatherhood and masculinity can still exist in this new world.

In addition to this new father figure for the boy, there is also a new mother figure, and her first action as mentioned by the text is to "put her arms around him and [hold] him" and say that she is "so glad to see [him]" (McCarthy 286). As the boy's new companions represent a new hope for his and humanity's future, she represents the idea that selfless femininity and maternal care can still exist here, a complement for the rough but dedicated care the boy has received from masculine figures in his life. The boy's new father figure is not a strict paragon of unforgiving,

logic-based masculinity, but instead tempers his firm attitude with mercy and compassion; likewise, the new mother figure shows the boy the love and unbridled affection he never received from his real mother, but also gives him freedom to make his own decisions, such as whether he chooses to pray to God or just talk to his father while forming his own spirituality. In addition, it's possible that she could be a role model of positive femininity for the boy, a sign that developing characteristics of selflessness or care for others would not necessarily be a weakness or flaw. He shows a strong tendency toward selflessness frequently in the book, such as insisting that rare treats be shared between himself and his father, and expressing a desire to share resources or travel with other people they meet on the road, and this woman would be likely to encourage those parts of him that are both kindhearted and traditionally feminine. Given that the new mother is only mentioned in a single paragraph at the end of the book, compared to the several pages of dialogue the boy has with the new father, it's possible that she could embody a more masculine form of motherhood as well, complementing the slightly feminine nature of the new father; however, this much must be left up to personal interpretation. In a way, this pair demonstrate not only a new hope for the boy and chance for him to survive on his own in the wilderness, but additional examples of the sort of well-rounded, less severely-gendered figures who can help the boy grow into his own.

In closing, I would like to return to the idea that post-apocalyptic fiction, and science fiction in general, has not given adequate attention to the topic of gender and the ways it can be explored in a genre so groundbreaking in many other ways. Settings on other planets or in distant futures are ripe with potential for alternative performances of gender, since in Attebery's words, "the pull toward strangeness invites the [science fiction] writer to investigate aspects of society,

self, perception, and the physical universe that are difficult or impossible to represent through conventional realism" (Attebery 5). However, a surprisingly large number of science fiction works fail to take advantage of this potential, as the number of fictional alien species molded into the human gender binary only continues to grow. Attebery mentions some of science fiction's reasons for showing this characteristic:

> [Science fiction]'s role as a commercial product has always tended to push it toward safe predictability and a reinforcement of existing social roles … moreover, [science fiction] texts aimed at the broadest possible audience—novels that break out of category to become best sellers, for instance, or nearly all [science fiction] movies—tend to reinforce the sexual status quo. (Attebery 5)

Attebery also mentions that because of the frequently conservative nature of publishing companies as well as the general public's social characteristics, science fiction that ventured outside of traditional gender norms was very rare before the 1960s (Attebery 5). However, the increase in numbers over the years of writers and publishers who are willing to take these brave new steps is encouraging in the face of this frequently wasted potential in exploratory fiction.

Many authors' depictions of post-apocalyptic society betray their cynical view that only the self-centered, fearless, and extremely masculine person can survive in such barren settings, and that women are too weak-willed and vulnerable to live long or avoid being taken advantage of. However, McCarthy's story of this small, broken family and the people they encounter breaks many of those assumptions: women are shown to have grown out of their constricting roles of forced selflessness, while the only men who survive with their humanity intact are the ones who can coexist with and care for others. In considering the politics of society and identity in a world

where the structures we've grown used to are gone, it becomes obvious that new ways of

determining the things that make us who we are and how we plan to go about our lives are

necessary. The boy is his father's source of strength, meaning, and inspiration in an otherwise

hopeless world, and McCarthy seems to be reminding readers that even in such shattered and

bleak times, humanity is at its best in cooperation, acceptance, and love.

Works Cited

Attebery, Brian. *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Kirby, Mark. *Sociology in Perspective*. Oxford: Heinemann, 2000. Print.

Kuhne, Dave. "Gender Roles after the Collapse: Women in American Post-Apocalyptic Fiction."
CCTE Studies 77 (2012): 22-28. Print.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006. Print.

Morgenstern, Naomi. "Postapocalyptic Responsibility: Patriarchy at the End of the World in
Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 25.2
(2014): 33–61. Print.

Olson, Debbie. *The Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema*. Lexington Books, 2015. Print.

Schildcrout, Jordan. "Refusing the Reproductive Imperative: Sex, Death, and the Queer Future in
Peter Sinn Nachtrieb's *Boom*." *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre (JADT)*.
N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Oct. 2015.

Witek, Terri. "Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces." *The Southern Review*
30.1 (1994): 136. Print.