

## **Trauma and Recovery in the Novel The Road by Cormac McCarthy**

**McCarthy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this research is to analyze trauma and the recovery process experienced by the main characters in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. This study aims to: (1) identify traumatic events in the novel, and (2) describe the trauma recovery process. The research applies Judith Herman's theory of trauma and recovery. This study uses a qualitative method with a psychological approach, and data were collected through documentation of narratives, actions, and dialogues. The findings show that: (1) three types of trauma are identified forgotten history, terror, and disconnection, and (2) five stages of trauma recovery are reflected safety, healing relationships, remembering and grieving, reconnection, and commonality. The result indicates that trauma and recovery shape the characters' emotional journey, with human connection, especially between father and son, forming the core of resilience and hope in a devastated world.

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### **Introduction**

Literature is a medium to convey human experiences, values and conditions through aesthetic language. Not only as entertainment, literature also reflects social and psychological issues experienced by humans, such as trauma and inner

suffering (Abrams, 2009). In modern literary studies, the issue of trauma is an important focus because it touches the deepest side of human existence (Çınar et al., 2022). One literary genre that is often used to depict trauma is the novel. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* was chosen for this study because it depicts the emotional relationship between a father and son in a post-apocalyptic world.

The characters experience deep suffering, both physically and psychologically, due to the destruction of the world they face (Bueno, 2019). To analyze the trauma, this study uses Judith Herman's (2015) theory of Trauma and Recovery. This theory emphasizes that trauma recovery involves stages such as safety, healing relationships, and reconnection. Using a psychological approach, this study aims to understand how the main character experiences and recovers from trauma in the novel *The Road*, as well as how family ties can be a source of strength in the midst of crisis.

## **Method**

In this study, researchers used qualitative research with descriptive methods. Qualitative research is a way to understand phenomena in a natural context by emphasizing meaning, understanding, and interpretation of the subject's experience. This type of research looks at human behavior, emotions, and social interactions through observation, interviews, and document analysis. Qualitative research aims to reveal the depth of a phenomenon through descriptive data and detailed narratives. In short, descriptive qualitative research can be explained as a method that works with a simple qualitative approach through inductive flow. This inductive flow means that descriptive qualitative research starts from a process or

event that is described, which ultimately results in a generalization as a conclusion drawn from the process or event (Yuliani, 2018).

## **Finding and Discussion**

### **The Events Cause Trauma in the Novel The Road**

#### **1. Forgotten History**

The world in this novel is depicted as a silent, destroyed, and post-apocalyptic environment without traces of civilized life. This destruction is not given a clear historical background by McCarthy, but rather, this ambiguity strengthens the impression that human history has been forgotten or erased by a catastrophic disaster. This can be seen in the following dialogue:

“Child: What happened to those people?

Father: They died. (*page 37*)”

This brief dialogue carries deep meaning about the loss of civilization and the emptiness of the post-apocalyptic world. The child's question what happened to those people? reflects curiosity and innocence in trying to understand the destroyed world, while the father's response, They died is short and flat, reflecting the tragic reality they face: that most of humanity has vanished. This response also reflects a resigned attitude toward a world that no longer offers moral, historical, or spiritual explanations.

“Child: What is this place, papa?

Father: This is the house where I grew up. (*page, 15*.)”

The boy stands staring at the house. The peeling wooden planks are mostly gone from the lower walls, used for fire wood to leave the boards and insulation

exposed. The frayed wire mesh from the back porch lies on the concrete patio. The conversation above illustrates that when the father mentions that it is the house where he grew up, he is referring to a past that is already gone. The house is no longer a place of life, comfort, or meaning - but a ruin from the past that is now dysfunctional.

## 2. Terror

Terror appears not only as physical violence but also as an atmosphere that pervades the entire story. The world depicted in this novel is filled with fear, uncertainty, and constant threats, especially for the father and son. This can be seen in the following dialogue:

”Child: Will they kill us?

Father: No.

Child: What will they do to us?

Father: They will eat us. (*page 71*)”

This dialogue between the child and father reflects the extreme tension and deep fear that pervades the world in *The Road*. When the child asks whether they will be killed, the father answers no, but then immediately reveals a far more horrifying reality: They will eat us. This dialogue depicts a post-apocalyptic world that has lost not only laws and morality but also humanity. The scarcity of resources has driven some humans to become cannibals, turning other humans into a food source. The father must painfully explain this cruel reality to his son, who is still innocent and seeking a sense of safety. This illustrates how safety, childhood, and basic human values have vanished in a world full of terror and destruction.

### 3. Disconnection

Severed relationships in *The Road* refer to the destruction of social and emotional bonds caused by the brutal and violent post-apocalyptic world. In this shattered world, the characters in the novel, especially the father and son, are forced to face the loss of relationships that were previously the foundation of their lives, such as family bonds and trust between people. This can be seen in the following dialogue:

“Wife: Forgive me. I can't help you.

Man: You're talking crazy.

Wife: No, I'm telling the truth. Sooner or later, they will catch us, and they will kill us. They will rape me. They will rape us and kill us and eat us, and you won't be able to face it. (*page 56*).

In this dialogue, there is an emotional confrontation that reflects the severance of the relationship between the husband and wife due to differing views on hope and survival in a destroyed world. The wife expresses her hopelessness openly: No, I'm telling the truth. Sooner or later, they will catch us, and they will kill us. They will rape me. They will rape us and kill us and eat us, and you won't be able to face it. She states that they won't survive and that the horrors awaiting them rape, murder, and even cannibalism are too terrifying to face. For her, death is better than such suffering, and she chooses to end her own life. Meanwhile, the husband refuses to give up and accuses her of talking crazy, as he still tries to survive for the sake of their child.

“Child : What if we meet someone, and they are okay?

Father: No, they won't. (*page 48*).

This brief exchange between the boy and father highlights the sharp contrast between the boy's innocent hope and the father's pessimistic view of the post-apocalyptic world. When the boy asks with hope, What if we meet someone, and they are okay? he shows that there is still faith in human goodness, despite the surrounding violence and destruction. However, the father's response, No, they won't, reflects a sense of despair and his belief that everyone left has lost morality, becoming a threat and untrustworthy. This statement underscores the profound trauma and fear the father experiences, as well as how he believes that keeping his child alive means extinguishing hope for goodness. This dialogue also reflects the loss of social trust, as well as the tension between hope and reality in a world that has lost its humanity.

### **The trauma recovery processes in the novel The Road**

#### **1. A Healing Relationship**

Healing in this novel is not about physical or social recovery, but rather an emotional connection that mutually supports and strengthens each other in the face of a harsh, threatening, and lost world. Both characters strive to maintain their humanity, even though their world has nearly lost everything that was once considered normal. This can be seen in the following dialogue:

“Child : Do you think it's still possible to love someone?

Father: Yes. I think so.

Child : Like who?

Father: I don't know. Maybe you. (*Page, 150*)”

This dialogue shows how the father's love for his son becomes an emotional healing, reigniting hope in a world that has nearly erased affection. When the child asks, Do you think it's still possible to love someone? he is seeking an understanding of love in a world that has collapsed. The father's response, Yes, I think so, though not directly answering, indicates that, despite the surrounding darkness and despair, there are remnants of human feelings left, namely love. When the boy further asks, Like who? and the father answers, I don't know. Maybe you, it shows that the child is the father's only remaining source of love and hope. In this context, their relationship is not only about survival but also emotional healing, where their affection becomes the only means to endure and maintain their humanity in a fallen world.

The child is awake and whining in the night and the man hugs her. shh, he says. it's okay.

“Child: I had a bad dream Father: Papa knows

Child: Do I have to tell you? father: if you want to. (page, 22). ”

The conversation and narration is a very warm and empathetic moment, where the father gives space for his son to process fear through nightmares. The embrace and tenderness show the father's attempt to heal the emotional wounds of his son, who lives in a world of violence and fear. This dialogue is a form of trauma and the father does not force, but offers a hug and a listening ear, which becomes part of the child's emotional healing process.

“Father: I should have been more careful, he said. The boy didn't answer.

Father: You have to talk to me. Child: Okay.

Father: You wanted to know what the bad guys were like. Now you know. It

might happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed by God to do that. I will kill anyone who touches you. Understand?

She sat there, her head covered by the blanket. After a while he raised his head. Are we still good people? He said.

Dad: Yes. We are still good people. And we always will be. (*page, 48*.) ”

This dialogue shows the emotional process between father and son in dealing with trauma after witnessing violence or threats from bad people. The father tries to calm and restore his son's sense of security by explaining his role as a God-appointed protector, and reassuring him that they are still good people. The son's response of initial silence and then asking Are we still good people? shows the inner wounds and moral doubts experienced, and his father's confident answer is part of the emotional and moral healing effort.

The three dialogs are interconnected because they both describe the dynamics of the relationship between father and son as a form of emotional healing in the midst of a world full of destruction and fear in *The Road*. Although they occur in different contexts, the dialogs of Data 1 love, Data 2 nightmares, and Data 3 threats of violence all show how the father continues to try to protect, calm, and strengthen his son emotionally. The father's love, hugs and moral conviction are not just a response to trauma, but a source of psychological strength for the child to survive. These dialogues show that the relationship between father and son is not just about physicality and protection, but the only form of love and humanity left, which allows them to keep going even when the world around them collapses.

## 2. Safety

In The Road, safety becomes the first stage in the recovery process of the main character, especially the child. In a world that has collapsed, the sense of safety is fragile and difficult to achieve, yet the father continuously strives to create protection for his son, both physically and emotionally. This effort demonstrates that, even in a world full of uncertainty, the presence of a reliable protector is a vital step in building a sense of safety for someone who has experienced trauma. This can be seen in the following dialogues:

“Child : Maybe this is poison.

Father: I think if we cook it properly, it’s fine.

Child : Okay. Why do you think no one else eats it?

Father: I think no one’s found it. The house is hidden from *The Road*. (Page 133). ”

This conversation illustrates how the father works to build a sense of safety for his son amidst uncertainty, especially in terms of survival with limited resources. In the post-apocalyptic world they face, food becomes something rare and risky, so every decision about food must be considered carefully. The father’s reassurance, I think if we cook it properly, it’s fine, shows that he is not only ensuring the safety of the food but also involving the child in the decision-making process, providing a sense of control in a difficult situation.

“Boy: I want to come with you.

Father: You can’t, our clothes will get blown by the wind. Someone has to

guard our stuff. ( *Page 144*). ”

This conversation shows how the father works to build a sense of safety for his son through a sense of responsibility and protection. The boy, who wants to come along during the check-up, demonstrates his dependency on the father, but the father firmly refuses and gives him a task to guard their belongings, not only as a way to protect him from the danger of water but also to give him a role in their difficult situation. You can't, our clothes will get blown by the wind. Someone has to guard our stuff By giving him this task, the father indirectly helps his son feel empowered and involved, even in the midst of limited circumstances. Additionally, the kiss on the forehead and his promise to always look after him provide emotional safety in the midst of a harsh world.

“Child : You don't eat people, do you? Stranger: No. We don't eat people.

Child : Can I come with you? Stranger: Yes, you can.

Child : okay then. (*page, 183*). ”

This dialogue shows how the child seeks reassurance of safety before deciding whether to trust a stranger and join him. The confirmation that he can join signifies that the boy has found new protection after losing his father. His response, Okay then, indicates that, despite still being cautious, the boy begins to feel confident enough to trust the stranger, marking the beginning of his recovery through trust and new social connections.

### **3. Remembering and Mourning**

Remembering and mourning in The Road refers to the process the main characters, especially the father and the son, undergo in dealing with loss and trying to preserve memories of a better past in the midst of a shattered world. This process of remembrance, though painful, serves as a way to maintain their humanity and find meaning in an increasingly dark existence. Mourning, although not always expressed through explicit emotions, appears in the awareness of the lost world and the difficulty in accepting the reality that they must continue living in a world vastly different from what they knew. This can be seen in the following dialogues:

“Stranger: Where’s the man who was with you?

Child : He died.

Stranger: Your father?

Child : Yes.

Stranger: I’m sorry. (*Page 182*). ”

This dialogue shows a simple yet significant moment in the process of remembering and mourning the loss of the father. When the stranger asks about the man who was with the boy, and the boy responds that his father has died, it reflects the boy’s quiet sadness and his calm acceptance of the reality, despite clearly being in mourning. The stranger’s brief response, I’m sorry, is an important acknowledgement, showing empathy and recognition of the loss, even in a world that has drastically changed.

“Father: Are you there? He whispers. Will I meet you in the end? Do you have a neck to choke? Do you have a heart? Damn you forever, do you have a soul? Oh God, he whispers. Oh God. ( *Page 6*). ”

This dialogue represents the father’s deep sorrow and spiritual struggle as he faces loss, fear, and the possibility of death. He seems to speak to God, to death, or to himself, reflecting emotional and spiritual mourning. His cries, Do you have a soul? and Oh God, reveal a crisis of faith and existence, often emerging in the process of mourning and remembering something lost or about to be lost.

“Child : Why is that man like that, Papa? Father: He was struck by lightning.

*Child : Can we help him, Papa?*

Father: No. We can’t help him. There’s nothing we can do for him. (*Page 31*). ”

This dialogue between the boy and the father reflects a simple yet profound way of understanding and responding to death in a shattered world. When the boy sees someone struck by lightning and asks, Can we help him, Papa? It shows his empathy and humanity still alive within him, despite the cruelty and indifference surrounding them. The father’s answer, No. We can’t help him. There’s nothing we can do for him, carries the painful realization that death has become a regular part of their lives, and mourning must be constrained by the

harsh realities they face. However, this moment is also a silent form of respect for the deceased, a recognition that every life still matters, even if it cannot be saved. In this context, remembering and mourning are not conducted through rituals or long words, but through a quiet awareness of the loss that continuously accompanies their journey.

The four dialogs are related because they all describe the process of remembering and mourning death and loss in a world that has been physically and morally destroyed. The son's dialogue promising to continue talking to his father after death Data 1, the stranger's brief but meaningful response to the sad news Data 2, the father's spiritual and emotional struggle with death and loss of meaning in life Data 3, and the son's empathic reaction to the dead who cannot be saved Data 4, all display different forms of grief, reverence, and emotional attachment to life and death. Although these expressions of grief occur in extreme contexts that lack comfort, rituals, or social support, they still show that humanity, empathy, and love do not completely disappear, even when the world has collapsed. Grief here is not just sadness, but a form of resistance to the loss of humanity

#### **4. Reconnection**

Reconnecting in this novel is depicted through the emotional journey of the boy after the death of his father. Throughout the story, he relied solely on his father as his source of protection and love. However, when the father dies, the boy is forced to find new connections with others in order to survive. His decision to join a new family at the end of the novel shows that, although losing

a loved one is a traumatic experience, it is still possible to rebuild relationships with others. This can be seen in the following dialogue:

“Child : I don’t know what to do.

Stranger: I think you should come with me. Child : Are you one of the good guys?

Stranger: Yes, I’m one of the good guys. (*Page 182*). ”

The stranger’s offer, I think you should come with me, is an invitation to help or accompany the boy. While it may seem kind, there is tension in the offer, because in a post-apocalyptic world, such offers could be dangerous or suspicious. The boy’s question, Are you one of the good guys? reflects his cautious nature in a world filled with dangers, where trust is scarce. His inquiry is not just polite; his safety and life might depend on the answer. The stranger’s response, Yes, I’m one of the good guys, aims to reassure the boy that he can trust him, but since it is merely a verbal confirmation, both the boy and the reader might still harbor doubts about the stranger’s true intentions.

“When she saw him she hugged him and held him, 'Oh,' she said, 'I'm so glad to see you.' She sometimes talks to him about God. She tries to talk to God, but it's best to talk to her father, and she talks to him and he doesn't forget. The woman says it's okay. She said God's breath is her breath too, but it goes from person to person all the time. (*page, 185*). ”

In the narrative the child forms a new connection with the woman that shows spiritual love and care. The remark about God's breath moving around can also be interpreted as an attempt to bridge the spiritual connection between people, including with his departed father. It is an emotional and spiritual connection that grows again after a great loss, building new relationships and hope.

“he stands up (stranger), he looks at the boy. why don't you go down the street and wait for me, I'll bring blankets and everything.

Child: What about my father? Stranger: how is he?

Child: We can't leave him here. Stranger: Yes we can.

Child: Can we cover him with one of the blankets? Stranger: I will go now.

Child: Okay. (*page, 184*). ”

The dialogue above reflects the theme of reconnection, particularly between the child and the outside world after losing his father. Although he is in a situation of grief, the child still shows empathy and respect for his father by asking that his father's body not be left unattended. Through this conversation, we see that the child begins to form a new relationship with the stranger who will take care of him. Although initially awkward and uncertain, the child's request to cover his father and the stranger's willingness to do so symbolize the beginning of a growing emotional bond, a form of reconnection with humanity after experiencing loss and isolation.

The three dialogues are related because they both describe the process of reconnection experienced by the child after losing his father in a world full of

destruction and uncertainty. In Data 1, the child cautiously questions whether strangers are good people, reflecting both his caution and his desire to trust others again. Data 2 shows the development of an emotional and spiritual relationship between the child and a woman, reintroducing the concepts of hope, love and spirituality post-loss. In Data 3, the child shows deep empathy for his deceased father and begins to establish cooperation and trust with a new stranger. All three feature the child's emotional journey from alienation to the re-establishment of human connections, which becomes crucial in his psychological recovery process in a world of trauma and loss.

## 5. Commonality

In the context of Judith Herman's theory of trauma recovery, commonality is the stage when the survivor discovers that her suffering is not unique or isolated, but rather shared emotionally or existentially with others. This creates a feeling of solidarity, shared recognition of suffering, and mutual empathy. This can be seen in the following dialog:

“Child: Have a little drink, Papa. Father: Papa wants you to drink.

Child: Drink a little.

The man took the can and sipped the drink and gave it back.

Father: You drink, he said. Let's just sit here.

Child: Because I'm not going to drink this anymore, am I?

Father: It won't be for a long time.

Child: Okay, said the child. (*page, 14*). ”

The dialogue above shows a very intimate and human emotional moment between father and son. They are both in extreme conditions and realize that their lives may not be long. When the son says Because I won't drink this anymore, will I, it is not simply a practical statement, but rather an acknowledgement of their shared condition: they both know that death is imminent, and they share that realization emotionally. While the father continues to protect his son physically, the son also tries to protect his father emotionally, and this shows a deep mutual care. At this point, they are not only connected as father and son, but also as two human beings who share the same suffering.

“all day they walked the long road, stopping in the afternoon for a quick meal from their meager supplies. it was getting warmer and they slept on leaves, padded with their backpacks. (page,37). ”

In the context of trauma recovery according to Judith Herman, this moment shows a stage of commonality that is realized through togetherness in suffering and the struggle to survive. This commonality does not come from the community, but from the closeness of the relationship and the equality of fate they experience, which provides its own psychological strength in the face of a destroyed and threatening world.

“in the long cold twilight and the darkness that fell only once did he hear them. He held the boy close. The cough in his throat never went away. The boy was emaciated and thin inside his coat, shaking like a dog. They lay there for a long time, but they were cold and finally they sat down. He

looked around him, but there was nothing to see. He spoke to the darkness without depth or dimension. (page, 42)."

This quote depicts the fearful and isolated situation between father and son in the midst of a silent and dangerous world. In this moment, the father hugs his son tightly, not only to provide physical warmth, but also as a form of emotional protection. The weak and trembling child shows his vulnerability, and the father tries to be the only source of security. Although they are engulfed in deep, cold darkness, the act of the father embracing his son and their being together in silence reflects a very intimate form of existential similarity.

The three datums are interconnected. They form a complete picture of how deep emotional connection and togetherness in suffering are central to the narrative in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. This also relates to the process of trauma and recovery that does not come from a broad social environment, but from intimacy and loyalty between individuals, particularly fathers and sons.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, the researcher refers to six types of trauma causes and identifies six forms of trauma, namely: forgotten history, terror, disconnection, arrest, child abuse, and new diagnosis. Based on the analysis of the novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, the researcher found three types of trauma that appear in the story, namely: forgotten history, terror, and disconnection, with disconnection being the most dominant. Meanwhile, the other three types of trauma of arrest, child abuse, and new diagnosis were not found in the novel. In this study, the researcher also refers to Judith Herman's book which suggests five

stages of trauma recovery, namely: healing relationships, safety, reminiscing and grieving, reconnection, and commonality. Based on the analysis of the novel, the researcher found four stages of recovery reflected in the story, namely: healing relationship, security, reminiscing and grieving, reconnection, and similarity, with security as the most dominant.

This research closes the gap in previous studies that generally highlight *The Road* from the perspective of symbolism, religiosity, or existentialism, but have not specifically examined aspects of psychological trauma and its recovery process through Judith Herman's trauma theory approach. Although Herman's theory has been widely used in the field of psychology, its comprehensive application in the analysis of literary works, especially in exploring the dynamics of the relationship between father and son in this novel, is still very limited. Thus, this research provides a new contribution to literary studies through the trauma psychology approach and enriches the understanding of the emotional process and recovery in family relationships in the midst of a destroyed world setting.

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