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Readings In World Literature - 3

PLAYING WITH FIRE

Fire, it seems, is as integral to a dying society as it was to the nascent stages of human civilization. In literature, fire is implemented literally and figuratively, and this holds true in *The Road*. In his novel, Cormac McCarthy evokes imagery of fire in many situations. In the brief passage on pages 128 and 129, he uses the imagery of "carrying the fire" to differentiate the man and the boy from those external to them. This serves to establish familial and moral solidarity, and the creation of an *us* (the "good guys") a *them*, an enemy, is necessarily established. This distinction, determined by the carrying of fire, is drawn along lines of morality, the survival ethic, and, literally, who carries the most powerful weapons. It is the goal of this essay to explore these distinctions, their implications, and, if possible, what is meant by "carrying the fire."

Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, deals with many emotionally loaded themes including anthropophagy, the fragility of the human psyche under duress, and the role that traditional moral systems and violence play in a world where previous rules and taboos do not or cannot apply. The protagonists, a man and his son, wander through a stark wasteland, a road on which roving bands of humans of questionable humanity reign under a hegemony of debased violence with a certain vehement tenacity that behooves them to survive by any means necessary. On the road, the man and the boy make a distinction between themselves, the "good" guys, and these powerful militant groups, the "bad" guys, with whom they have had little contact but whose subjectively "evil" nature is clear. When the little boy confirms that "We wouldn't eat anybody… even if we were starving," (128) and asserts that "we are the good guys… and we are carrying the fire" (129) a logical connection is made: because they are carrying the fire and because they do not eat people, it logically follows that they are the good guys. In this formulation, fire is analogous to the outmoded moral code of the pre-disaster world.

There were many opportunities for the man and the boy to violate their moral code. Take for example the episode involving the emaciated dog. The man, it seems, was ready to kill the dog, presumably for food. Because "there were three cartridges in the pistol. None to spare," he "made a noose of wire to catch it." (87) However, the boy put to rest any hope of meat when, comprehending finally what the man was up to, he "began to cry and to beg for the dog's life," so the man "promised he would not hurt the dog." (87) There appears to be an element of pity to this, for the potential meal was subsequently described as "a trellis of a dog with the hid stretched over it" as if, ex post facto, the narrator justified the man's decision not to kill the dog An interesting dynamic exists between the man and the boy; it appears as though the man is intimately aware of the behavioral boundaries placed on him by the boy, which implies that it is not the man but the boy who is carrying the fire, at least in this moralistic sense.

The boy provided moral guidance once again when the man and the boy came upon "an old man. Small and bent…" who, "suffered from a toothache and even by their new world standards he smelled terrible." (161) Instead of wanting to steal from or wanting to kill and eat the man (the former being socially unacceptable and the latter completely untenable), the man seemed hesitant to do as the boy suggested and give the old man "something to eat." (163) Cajoled into selflessness, the man assented and gave the man a tin of fruit cocktail, (163) a valuable source of calories. Later they cooked for the old man, and although the old man confirms that he cannot see well, nor hear too clearly, (which brings to mind the maxim "see no evil, hear no evil…") the old man claims that he has "not seen fire in a long time." (172) Again, a parallel between "fire" and goodness is drawn, and the contrast between the man's pragmatism and the boy's altruism is made again when the man says to the old man, "You should thank [the boy], you know… I wouldn't have given you anything." (173) The old man stated that he would not have reciprocated, and when he asked the man why the boy gave him the tins ("not much") the man said even he is not sure why the boy was generous. (173) Again, in these passages where acts of generosity are described, the driving force is the moral code of the boy, his "fire" that "real" if intangible force carried inside him. (279)

There is another way to look at morality—beyond consciousness of what is *ethical*—to what is expected of a citizen within a social network. With this comes the use of fire imagery to evoke destruction. This distinction is delineated along lines of what is *moral* and what is *immoral*, what is *good* and what is *evil*; a problem arises from this moralization of survival behavior: there is nothing inherently *evil* in the measures undertaken by these ostensibly "savage" beings on the road. In a post-apocalyptic world, the rules survival from the pre-apocalyptic world do not and *should not* apply; thus, the system of morals that reigned in the old world must be overcome and reshaped to fit the new world. Rather than the subjective moral system carried over from the pre-disaster world, one must look at the actions of these "bad guys" through a radically objective lens; if the arbiter of success is the degree to which an individual not only survives but "lives," thrives, the means by which the man and the boy eke out an existence are less than optimal—bad. The methodology behind the militants' means of survival, although subjectively "debased" or "evil" allow them to live beyond the bounds of the old moral system; they have transcended it to form their own, new moral system in which eating people is integral to their survival. Because the actions of these militants appears sadistic, the man and the boy's decision not to eat people ostensibly places them on the moral high ground, but to sustain a collective social body a more sustainable food source must be sought, thus to maintain society the eating of people by people becomes situationally necessary if society is to be maintained on a large scale.

This new paradigm upon which the cannibals operate allows for the eating of people; they have stepped beyond the taboos and societal limitations of the pre-disaster world. Once moral and behavioral boundaries have been laid down, as they were before the disaster, a group cannot retreat from them; rather, dialectically, they break through and above them. That said, there is much tribal imagery related to these cannibals (I use "cannibal" in the traditional, 19th and 20th century senses of the savage cannibal, for this reason). When the man and the boy come upon "shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away," (90) it is clear that the duo came across a

society of hunters, one that has killed off another, evidently less violent group decorated with tattoos, "creeds misspelled," and modified scar patterns. Among the small band of marchers, elements of disparity (their mismatched clothing) and uniformity (red scarves about the neck). Some are in masks (91) and they carried spears or lances "tasseled with ribbons." They carry in their caravan slaves, some women, and "catamites," which means that theirs is a society that transcended the taboos of pedophilia and homosexuality. Although they are "savage," their power is goes unquestioned, and the source of their power stems from the fact that they have broken through all social taboos, which leaves possible an infinite number of possible fates to befall the man and the boy if one or the other is captured.

To survive within a social system, these groups had to develop a culture that allows for the treatment other human beings as prey, roughly equivalent to wild animals, or, as will be examined here, as livestock. When the man and the boy encounter the naked, huddled mass in the root cellar, the imagery evoked is one of squalor: "Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench… Clay floor." (110) The mass, of nondescript size, were naked and huddled against the back wall. The description evokes images of a pigsty, or small-scaled horrors of large factory-farms. The six individuals (111) that come to butcher some portion of the individuals are likely delegated that job as part of a larger social structure. Although no description of these six's appearance is present, one could assume that they are clothed and perhaps of the cadre of red-scarves seen earlier. To exist in civilization post-disaster, a secure source of food must be obtained; because the intermittent caches of canned goods are unreliable and small in scale, and nothing seems to grow, this leaves but one option for those wishing to survive within the framework of civilization: overcome the taboos against eating people, and do so by subjugating them to the point where they are no longer human.

From a strictly literal perspective, "carrying the fire" may mean nothing more than carrying a gun. This also flows logically–we carry the fire, we do not eat people, we are the good guys. Because there are no cannibals that carry guns (they all carry some variation of bludgeons, spears, and knives) and thus carry no "fire[power]," and they eat people, they are not the good guys. Although the men in the diesel truck (60)

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had weaponry, it remains ambiguous whether they ate people. The man whom the boy's father shot, although part of this armed group, attacked with a knife. The notion that carrying a weapon is an indicator of "good" might result from a number of possibilities, but most compelling among them is that to carry a firearm so long after the disaster indicates that the carrier was parsimonious in terms of ammunition expenditure, an indicator, perhaps, of peaceful countenance. This is concomitant to the exchange between the newly orphaned boy and the Christian family that found him; the "fire" in the context of the exchange is a nexus of the three variations of fire-imagery: fire as old-world morality, as the survival instinct, and, literally, in reference to weaponry.

Whereas the man and the boy carry guns with progressively increasing caliber and firepower, but they also carry a lighter (a relatively meek light source); their fires are used for creative, positive ends: cooking, heating, warmth, comfort, and safety—fire here is the embodiment of good. Contrast this with the use of fire by the militant groups: they carry no firearms, but they carry knives and bludgeons, they carry torches—a more efficacious mode of lighting dark spaces—and use their fires for destructive ends such as the cooking of human flesh, cauterizing the man on the mattress's wounds, and represent a certain brutalism and potential danger that the man and boy's fires do not. The environment of the road concords with this latter reading. The drifts of ash, the grayness, "a country where firestorms had passed leaving mile on mile of burn," (190) evoke a post-apocalyptic, perhaps even post-Hell world where Hell's fires have died and literally froze over. In short, although fire imagery is used in multifariously, the "goodness" or the "badness" of the fire is delineated along lines of good and evil, weak and powerful, constructive and destructive.