

THE ROAD STUDY GUIDE

Term 1 2012



"By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp."

Described as the "American master", Cormac McCarthy is one of the world's greatest living novelists. His style is characterised by his philosophical pessimism, thin plots, reductive sentences and restrained vocabulary.

"Cormac McCarthy's tenth novel, *The Road*, is his most harrowing yet deeply personal work. Some unnamed catastrophe has scourged the world to a burnt-out cinder, inhabited by the last remnants of humankind. The sky is perpetually shrouded by dust and toxic particulates; the seasons are merely varied intensities of cold and dampness. Bands of cannibals roam the roads and inhabit what few dwellings remain intact in the woods."

The Road is a frightening, profound tale that drags us into places we don't want to go, forces us to think about questions we don't want to ask.

Ron Charles,
The Washington Post

"A father and his son walk alone through burned America. Nothing moves in the ravaged landscape save the ash on the wind. It is cold enough to crack stones, and when the snow falls it is gray. The sky is dark. Their destination is the coast, although they don't know what, if anything, awaits them there. They have nothing; just a pistol to defend themselves

against the lawless bands that stalk the road, the clothes they are wearing, a cart of scavenged food--and each other."

The Road is the profoundly moving story of a journey. It boldly imagines a future in which no hope remains, but in which the father and his son, "each the other's world entire," are sustained by love. Awesome in the totality of its vision, it is an unflinching meditation on the worst and the best that we are capable of: ultimate destructiveness, desperate tenacity, and the tenderness that keeps two people alive in the face of total devastation. The novel was awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction in 2006. Sources: <http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/works/theroad.htm>, <http://www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/cormacmccarthy/>

Tips

The following questions are intended to help you develop a detailed and critical understanding of this text. You need to consider how McCarthy crafts the setting, characters and how he uses language to take us into the world of the text.

Make sure that your answers are thorough: Each answer must be started with an effective and detailed topic sentence (unless otherwise indicated). This sentence must indicate the main points of the answer you are going to provide.

In addition, it must introduce the answer in such a way as to make the question obvious - without simply restating the question.

- Make specific references to the story for each answer, providing quotations as evidence.

Section 1 Pages 1-7

Vocabulary:

glaucoma, flowstone, pilgrims, flues, translucent, alabaster, decanting, dregs

Questions:

1) This novel is classified as part of the post-apocalyptic genre. Why? Refer to some of the clues in the first section which indicate that a terrible event has occurred. As you read, keep track of those clues - record the descriptions of the original event, or the consequences of the event, each time the man refers

to them in the narrative.

2) Where are the man and the boy going? Why?

3) "He'd pulled away his mask in the night..." (5) What kind of mask is he referring to? Suggest reasons why they may travel with masks on their faces.

4) How is the sense of constant danger communicated to the reader?

5) What does the father do with the phone in the abandoned gas station? Why?

6) Think about the literary style of the book - there are no quotation marks to differentiate speech from the rest of the text, and sometimes punctuation is omitted. How does this style reflect the atmosphere and themes of the book?

7) McCarthy has said in an interview that his four-year-old son John practically co-wrote the book: "I suppose it is a love story to my son." Why do you think he said this? Predict the direction of the plot.

Section 2 Pages 8-17

Vocabulary:

gully, enshroud, mote, temporal, gryke, transom, shoals, cauterized, autistic, vestibular, chronicle, declination, matrix, rotunda

Questions:

1) What does the father mean when he says, "You forget what you want to remember, and you remember what you want to forget?" (12) Suggest memories he is trying to keep, and sights or experiences he wishes he could forget about.

"Cormac McCarthy's The Road, a meditation on death, both of individuals and humanity, is by turns bleak and exhilarating".

Adam Mars-Jones

2) "...[T]he blackened shapes of rock standing up out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash blowing downcountry through the waste." (14) Why do you think McCarthy uses the imagery of the ocean to describe the landscape?

3) There are words being used in this novel which are new to our language - "scabland" (16), "bloodcults" (16) are some examples. What do these terms mean? Why is McCarthy combining words in this way?

4) What are the man's main concerns, other than avoiding other people? Why?

Section 3 Page 18-33

Vocabulary:

pipeclayed, peril, sconces, keel, frescoes, breakfront, effigies, bogfolk, discalced, firedrake, sectarian, deranged

Questions:

1) What is the significance of dreams in this novel?

- 2) Why does the man say that he doesn't trust good dreams?
- 3) What do we learn about the man's past in this section?
- 4) Identify the 'treat' the boy has in the ruins of the supermarket, and why it is significant.
- 5) Why do they go to the father's childhood home?
- 6) What frightens the boy about the house?
- 7) How has the meaning of time changed for the boy and the man, because of the disaster?
- 8) "Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?" (29) To what is the father referring? Why?
- 9) "That the boy was all that stood between him and death?" (29) What does this mean?
- 10) Why doesn't McCarthy directly state the protagonists' location?
- 11) "Not all dying words are true and this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground." (31) To which dying words to you think he is referring? Who or what is the blessing? How do you know?
- 12) Define "godspoke men". (32)

Section 4 Page 34-38

Vocabulary:

basalt, gorge, bluffs, pipsisewa, piedmont, madacam, mastic

Questions

- 1) "You promised not to do that, the boy said." (34) What do you think his father promised not to do? Why? Does it matter? Explain.

- 2) How old do you think the boy is? How do you know? Provide examples from the text to suggest his age.
- 3) What do they do at the waterfall? Do you think this is a wise or foolish act? Why?
- 4) Explain the purpose of the father's flashbacks. Why do they happen so frequently?

Section 5

Page 49-60

Vocabulary:

skeins, coagulate, provenance, penitent, cheroot, obsidian, meconium

Questions:

- 1) What do the boy and the man decide to do when they first see the other man on the road? Why?
- 2) Why did the boy want to help the burned man? Why didn't the father offer help?
- 3) Explain the significance of the wallet, and what the man does with it.
- 4) Why does the man allow his son to hope and have fantasies about life in the south?
- 5) No names are given for any of the characters. Suggest reasons why McCarthy made this choice for the story.
- 6) Describe the argument that the man had had with his wife - explain the differences in their points of view on whether to live or choose to die.
- 7) Why didn't the woman say good-bye to her son?

Can I ask you something?

Yes. Of course you can.

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay.

- 8) How long do you think they survived together after the disaster? Or, how long did the man's wife survive before making her final decision? What are the clues in the text?
- 9) Why is the memory of the boy's birth as important to the man as his wife's suicide?

Section 6 Page 60-79

Vocabulary:

bracken, emaciation, lacquered, stropping, rachitic, lepers, ambush, anointing, evoke, quoits, changeling, commune

Questions:

- 1) Do you think it is realistic that a truck would still be functional, and that fuel would be obtainable for it, as indicated in the book?
- 2) "[H]e had a tattoo of a bird on his neck done by someone with an illformed notion of their appearance." (63) What does this indicate about the survival of animal life since the disaster? Provide at least one other example from the text.

- 3) Is or was the man a doctor? What evidence suggests this possibility?
- 4) Why do you think the night is so completely dark in the environment of the book?
- 5) Explain the significance of the single bullet left in the revolver.
- 6) What happened to the man with the knife, after the father and son got away?
- 7) According to the man, what is his job, as a father?
- 8) How long had it been since the father had spoken with another human being, other than his son?
- 9) List the differences between 'the bad guys,' and 'the good guys.'

Section 7

Page 79-89

Vocabulary:

sappers, viaduct, embankment, parsible, entities, idiom

Questions:

- 1) Why do they agree not to kill the dog?
- 2) Explain the meaning of the phrase, "[W]e're carrying the fire." (83)
- 3) Do you think the son actually saw another boy, or did he imagine it? Why?
- 4) Why doesn't the father go back to search for the other boy?
- 5) "He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More

fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality." (89)
What does this mean?

Section 8

Page 90-105

Vocabulary:

woad, runic, motifs, truncheoned, stile, phalanx, forge, catamites, horde, sedge

Questions:

- 1) When they stop by the orchard, what does the man see that he has seen before? Why is it significant?
- 2) Suggest reasons for the physical appearance of the armed group of men and women. What is the purpose of the red scarves?
- 3) If the bad guys are on the move, why is it not a good sign for the man and the boy?
- 4) Why is it important for the father that his son keep talking? What is wrong with not talking? Explain what it means about the boy's character.
- 5) When the father and son have conversations, the boy frequently ends their talk by saying "Okay." Does that mean that he believes what his father tells him? What else might it mean?
- 6) Does the boy believe that they will live? How do you know?
- 7) Describe the father's strategy after he believes they might be followed.
- 8) Why is this important?

"Mr. McCarthy's final gesture here [is] an embrace of faith in the face of no hope whatsoever. Coming as it does after such intense moments of despondency, this faith is even more of a leap than it might be in a more forgiving story."

New York Times

Section 9

Page 105-113

Vocabulary:

port cochere, privet, chattel

- 1) Explain how McCarthy uses suspense and creates foreboding on page 105-106, with regard to the mansion.
- 2) Do you think the detailed descriptions of physical setting are necessary for this story? Why?
- 3) Why is the boy afraid of empty houses?
- 4) "All these things he saw and did not see." (109) What does this mean?
- 5) Why doesn't the man help the people in the cellar?

Section 10

Page 114-130

Vocabulary:

formica, cistern, hydraulic, mendicant, palimpsest, intestate

Questions:

- 1) "Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing?" (114) Explain the meaning of this quote.
- 2) How do they escape?

- 3) What happens at night in the house?
- 4) How does the man keep them going when the boy cannot walk anymore?
- 5) What was the father's mistake in approaching the house?
- 6) Describe what they do after getting away. Suggest at least one reason for the lack of action. Is this part anti-climactic? Why?
- 7) How is the next house different? Why is there no menace or foreboding with the abandoned farm?
- 8) Why is the man concerned about his coughing?
- 9) Explain the boy's reaction to the truth about the people in the cellar.
- 10) "Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it." (130) What does this mean?

Section 11

pages 131-144

Vocabulary:

begonia, hasp, serrated, corroded, krugerrands

Questions:

- 1) Why does the boy wish that the other little boy was with them?
- 2) How does the father know that the town has been empty for a long time?
- 3) Why does the man take the flower seeds?
- 4) According to the father, what do the good guys do? Why does he say this?
- 5) What do they find buried in the yard?
- 6) Why do you think the original owners did not use it?
- 7) List the supplies that they find. Why do you think there is no gun?

- 8) "He'd been ready to die and now he wasn't (sic) going to and he had to think about that... This was not hiding in the woods. This was the last thing from that." (144) What does the man mean by this?
- 9) How realistic is this section - do you think a find like this would really be possible? Why? For what reason does McCarthy include this solution to their starvation?

Section 12

- pages 145-156

Vocabulary:

footlocker, laved, sumptuous, bonded whiskey

Questions:

- 1) Why does the father have to explain what to do with the butter and the biscuits?
- 2) What does the boy do before eating? Why? To what other, traditional act is this similar?
- 3) Explain the reasons for bathing and cutting one's hair - why does it matter in a post-apocalyptic world?
- 4) When the father reassures his son - "They won't (sic) find us." (148) - why does he say this? Is he telling the truth?
- 5) What kind of global disaster would require the mass removal and burning of bodies?
- 6) Explain the man's reasons for only taking one grocery cart.
- 7) Why does the father tell his son, "...sometimes I might forget to be on the lookout?" (151)
- 8) Explain the meaning of the man's dream, on page 154-155.

"This stands as a radical achievement... A novel of horrific beauty... The relationship between father and son has a sweetness that represents all that's good in a universe where conventional notions of good and evil have been extinguished."

- 9) McCarthy compares the open hatchway to a grave - what might be his reasons for doing this? What might it - the shelter - represent?
- 10) Why don't they stay in the shelter?

Section 13 - pages

156-167

Vocabulary:

balustrade, pall, decoy, rucksack

Questions:

- 1) What has happened to, or where are, the crows? What does their disappearance suggest?
- 2) Why do you think they have not yet seen the sun?
- 3) What does the boy say he threw away? Why do you think he did that?
- 4) When the father cautions his son, "Well, let's not get too smart." (160), what does he mean?
- 5) Why does the boy ask about their long term goals, at this point in the story?
- 6) What are the boy and the man's "new world

standards" (161) for cleanliness?

7) When the old man asks what the man and the boy are, explain the reason why they cannot answer.

8) For what reason do they stop for the night with the old man?

9) What does the father want the old man to tell him? Why?

10) Do you think the old man is as old as he says? Explain your response.

11) What is the significance of the old Man's name?

Section 14 - pages

168-180

Vocabulary:

bivouacked, threadbare, buddha, secular, gullied, middens, kudzu, transit

Questions:

1) "People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didnt (sic) believe in that. Tomorrow wasn't getting ready for them. It didn't even know they were there." (168) What is Ely talking about?

2) Explain what this idiom means: "Beggars cant (sic) be choosers." (169)

3) What does Ely mean when he says, "There is no God and we are his prophets." ? (170)

4) Why doesn't the old man tell them his real name?

5) The father has already made reference to his son being a god. What does he mean by that?

6) Why do you think the boy gives some food to Ely, though Ely admits he would not do the same?

7) What do you think the boy represents?

8) Why does McCarthy continue to avoid specifying where the protagonists are?

9) "If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same." (180) Compare how the man sees the world with how the boy sees it. What might it be like to never know about the world as it is now - to grow up in ruins and ash?

Section 15 - pages

180-195

Vocabulary:

cairn, patterans, sundries, notions, dessicated, culvert, fey, predicated, caustic, quadrants, mattock, bolus

Questions:

1) What do the stone cairns represent? Why do you think they start appearing in the south?

2) Locate two examples of foreshadowing in this section. Predict the next developments in the plot.

3) In the man's flashback, he recalls a time when they had slept in an abandoned pharmacy, and that the expensive electronic equipment had not been touched on the shelves. Why do you think it had not been taken by people? What does that suggest about the catastrophe that ended the world?

4) Why did the three men on the highway leave the man and the boy alone?

5) What do you think the dream of the snakes represents?

6) Suggest reasons for the new distance the father senses between himself and his son.

"Hypnotic and haunting, relentlessly dark, this is a novel to read in late-night solitude. Though the focus never leaves the two travelers, they carry our humanity, and we can't help but feel the world hangs in the balance of their hopeless quest. A masterpiece." —Booklist

7) The father tries to prevent the boy from seeing the dead in the highway, but it appears not to bother him. Do you think this is true? Why?

8) Explain why the man watches the boy eat, and why the boy says for him to stop.

9) How did the father know they were being followed?

Section 16 - pages

195-204

Vocabulary:

corrugate, harrowtrough, ledgerbook, magnolia, spire, provisions, enroute, jerry jug, slough, serpentine, verdigris

Questions:

1) "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." (196) Who says this? What does it mean? Why does he say it?

- 2) What do you think killed the trees?
- 3) What do you think might happen if the man tried to fire the revolver, and a wooden bullet was in the chamber?
- 4) Why did the people leave their food cooking?
- 5) What happens when they realize what the people had been eating?
- 6) What has the father noticed about the boy's emotional growth from the previous year? Explain the boy's behaviour when presented with things left by the road.
- 7) Where do you think the people in the forest got the baby? Why doesn't the father tell his son what he thinks?
- 8) Why does the son apologize for what he had said about the dead in the road?
- 9) How do you think the father feels, watching his son run in oversized shoes toward the creek?
- 10) Predict what they will find in the next house they explore.

Section 17 - pages

205-213

Vocabulary:

palladian, lintel, myraid

Questions:

- 1) "We both have to say." (207) Why does the father include his son in decision making. Does he do it all the time? Explain.
- 2) "I think maybe they are watching, he said. They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us

- and they will not come back." (210) To whom is the man referring? Why do you think that? What could be a thing that death cannot undo?
- 3) Predict what will happen after they leave the house.
 - 4) Predict what they will find if/when they arrive at their destination. Do you think they will make it? Why?

Section 18 - pages

213-223

Vocabulary:

disinterred, cholera, desolation, careened, slag, vigilant, okra, iodine, tidewrack, isocline, sepulchre

Questions:

- 1) Why does the boy stare at the deerhead for a long time?
- 2) What evidence is there that the boy is feeling hopeful about their journey?
- 3) Describe what they find when they arrive at the beach.
- 4) What do they do when they arrive? Why?
- 5) Why does the father let the son play in the surf?
- 6) Why do you think the boy cries afterward?
- 7) Do you think the disaster was truly worldwide, or might it have been confined to just the one continent? Why? What evidence is there that everything has been destroyed?
- 8) Explain why the wind off the water does not smell like the sea.
- 9) Predict what will happen when the father swims out to the boat.

"Trenchant and terrifying...fuelled by a universal nightmare... illuminated by extraordinary tenderness... McCarthy gives voice to the unspeakable... His use of language is as exultant as his imaginings are hellish... This is art that both frightens and inspires."

—Janet Maslin, *New York Times*

Section 19

- pages 223-240

Vocabulary:

sheer-rail, transom, davits, turnbuckles, souwester, humidor, sextant, baize, windfall

Questions:

- 1) What does the father's knowledge of sailboat vocabulary suggest?
- 2) What useful things does he find on the boat?
- 3) How does the sextant affect the man, and why?
- 4) "It occurred to him that he took this windfall in a fashion dangerously close to matter of fact but still he said what he had said before. That good luck might be no such thing." (229-230) Explain what the father means.
- 5) Why do you think the father keeps going, when the easiest thing would be to give up?
- 6) The boy forgets the pistol on the beach, but the father

doesn't get angry. Why is that?

7) Why was going back for the pistol a problem?

8) How does the father get them back to camp?

9) "The slow surf crawled and seethed in the dark and he thought about his life but there was no life to think about and after a while he walked back." (237)

What does this mean? What is the man realizing here?

10) Of what use might the flare pistol be?

Section 20 - pages

240-253

Vocabulary:

tendrils, magnesium, conjuring, travois, pruned,

Questions:

1) Was it a good idea for the man to shoot the flare? Why?

2) What is the father afraid of when the boy is sick?

3) "He walked out on the beach to the edge of the light and stood with his clenched fists on top of his skull and fell to his knees sobbing with rage." (250) Explain the emotions the man is feeling, and the reasons why.

4) Predict what will happen when they catch up to the thief / thieves.

Section 21 - pages

253-270

Vocabulary:

communes, sheaves, cognate, impoderable, dolmen, oracles, moldering, sloe, lampblack, entabled, rickets, congealing, bollards, gantry cane, suture

Questions:

1) How do they find the thief and their supplies?

2) Why do you think the thief was an outcast? Suggest reasons why his fingers had been cut away.

3) Why do you think the thief responds to the boy by surrendering?

4) Explain the man's punishment of the thief. Do you think he did the right thing?

5) How does the boy feel about his father's action?

6) "You're not the one who has to worry about everything...[The boy] looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one." (259) What does he mean by this?

7) Where do you think the thief went?

8) Why do think the man with the bow tried to kill them?

9) Why doesn't the boy want to hear his father's stories anymore?

10) Predict what will happen when they leave the town.

Section 21 - pages

270-end

Vocabulary:

lee, askew, armatures, sloughed, incinerate, crozzled, ensepulchred, tabernacle, hagmoss, counterspectacle, hydroptic, hydrangeas, isthmus, prophet, loess, bandolier, skirmishes, stoven, wimpled, torsional, ermiculture

Questions:

1) What does the father say is the bravest thing he ever did? Why?

2) How has the man's perspective about the boy changed? Why?

"Wrenchingly elegiac... Single plot twists chill the blood."

— The Economist

3) Why does the man say that his son reminds him of an orphan waiting for a bus?

4) "Look around you, he said. There is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honoured here today. Whatever form you spoke of you were right." (277) What is the father talking about?

5) Why can't the father kill his son?

6) What is the 'goodness' to which the father refers?

7) How long does the boy stay with his father? Why?

8) What does the boy do when he sees someone coming? Why?

9) Why does the man in the parka pause before answering the boy's question, about whether he is a good guy?

10) How long do you think he was following or watching the boy and the man?

11) Why does the man in the parka say that the boy needs to keep out of the road?

12) Do you think the man in the parka is a good guy? Why?

13) Why is the woman glad to see the boy?

14) What does the woman represent?

15) What do the brook trout represent?

Source: www.tinyurl.com/vwenglish