



“You Have to Carry the Fire”

The Boy as Christ Figure in *The Road*.

”Du måste bära elden”

Pojken som Jesusfigur i *The Road*

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Abstract:

In this essay the religious implications of the novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy is examined from the narrator's point of view. The main character, the father, uses religion to create meaning and faith. The essay looks into what divine character the boy in the novel holds and how the father manages to create this role. The essay pursues the argument that the boy functions as a signifier that takes on various meanings in the text, and especially he takes on a religious meaning for the father, partly as a means to keep hope alive. Also, I will argue that the father's religious signification of his son ultimately makes the son himself believe that he is divine. The essay demonstrates that the father this way manages to create purpose through his son and the son in return is taught to believe he exists for a higher cause. The religious remarks on the boy's nature are indirectly taught and ultimately the son becomes divine, at least for the father.

Introduction

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, we encounter a post-apocalyptic world where almost all humanity is lost. We follow a father and his son attempting to navigate this moral and physical wasteland. The father decides to embark on a journey to try to protect his son and create some kind of future for him. It is a journey that will hopefully lead to a safer place. Their meetings and experiences on the road are shared with the reader. The apocalyptic event, which has occurred before the novel begins, is importantly not framed in religious terms, and neither is it mentioned as caused by anything else; it remains ambiguous throughout.

When reading *The Road*, the references to religion are impossible to overlook. The protagonist uses religious expressions throughout the novel. The extensive knowledge in religion the father has is projected directly onto the son, to the point where he is implied to be divine. This need for the existence of a greater being is emphasized throughout the journey, primarily in the relationship between the father and son. The view and connection to religion lies in the father's journey. In order not to lose hope, he needs to keep his faith alive.

Religious references appear early on in the book, through a reflection from the father: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke" (McCarthy 5). From there on and up to the very end of the book, the key question seems to be: who or what is the boy? The boy is characterized with many religious references and we follow this view through the father's thoughts and dialogues. The father has his own religious battles within himself and believes that in order for himself and the remaining good people to carry on and have hope, there is a need for a Messiah. The father appears to create this Messiah through his son, where he cannot find, feel or see the real one any longer.

George A. Maloney discusses how symbols are connected to religion and tries to show the connection through the characteristics the symbol bares, which are often religious. But he also speaks about something similar, the concept of a signifier:

"While various objects have been called symbols—including the purely arbitrary signifiers used in mathematical or scientific notation and, in the ancient period, the tokens of identity used in diplomacy and as markers of business agreement—a large subset of these appear in contexts that deal specifically with figuration of the divine. In particular, a symbol, as opposed to other forms of signification, tends to be understood as a representational mechanism that renders transcendent realities into tangible forms". (*Encyclopedia of Religion* 349)

Here the boy functions as a symbol, bearing Christ-like characteristics and is hence seen as a signifier for the father – a body of divine reality. Just as the cross stands for Jesus to a

Christian when seeing it, the boy is now working as his father's signifier, here standing for hope, faith and much more.

Although not numerous, there is some previous research on the religious implications in *The Road*; for the present purposes, most notably Lydia Cooper, who states that "the father's spiritual goal is clear, if potentially untenable: he must preserve human goodness by turning his son into a messianic moral compass" (*No More Heroes*, 135). Cooper has in her research focused on the boy being associated in various ways to the Holy Grail and how the father is creating purpose through storytelling, which is closely related to the directions pursued in this essay, but I will complement this, however by adding the father's perspective in projecting divinity onto his son by using religious references. And that he does it in order for himself not to lose hope.

With the rich religious allusions and themes outlined above as a point of departure, I will here pursue the argument that the boy functions as a signifier that takes on various meanings in the text, and especially he takes on a religious meaning for the father, partly as a means to keep hope alive. Also, I will argue, that the father's religious signification of his son ultimately makes the son himself believe that he is divine.

1. Creating a Second Messiah

Before the analysis of this essay continues, one thing needs to be sorted out. And that is to define the concept of Christ - God. Who do we see Christ to be? This essay is portraying the boy in *The Road* and in what way he is perceived as Christ. Is Christ God himself or is Christ the son of God and thus making them two separate beings? There are two general views here when deciding this: Unitarian and Trinitarian Christianity. A Unitarian Christian "believes that God is not a Trinity" (*Oxford Dictionary* 3942) and thus makes no separate distinction between Jesus - God. A Trinitarian Christian separates them into three characters but still one. God is "composed or consisting of three parts" (*Oxford Dictionary* 3395). I will focus on the latter view here, claiming that the boy is projected into being either Christ or God.

There are several reasons why the boy in *The Road* can be perceived as a Christ-figure. First of all, the father's strong belief that his son has a greater purpose for humanity presents the reader with the idea that the boy should be seen as a Christ-like figure. Also, the fact that the boy tries to work as a savior for those who suffer in the book reinforces this view. Several scholars have discussed the topic and focused on specific sections of the text where it is suggested that the boy is a Messianic figure.

The first passage in the novel that shows indications of such a Messianic understanding of the boy is where the apocalyptic event is described. The apocalypse occurs at 1:17 with “a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (McCarthy 52). This is the only statement of specific time in *The Road* and the only description of what occurs during this event. Steven Frye contends that “-the time is precisely stated with an emblematic intensity, and though the symbolic meaning of the numbers cannot be determined with any certainty, it evokes Revelation 1:17 and the dream vision of John the Divine, in which he witnesses the Second Coming of Christ” (169). The apocalypse here could therefore be perceived as a revelation and a warning of this new, second Christ who is coming and people should be prepared for what is to come. The world has been warned with this apocalyptic event and later the boy is born. Coyle in Cremean also states that the mentioned apocalypse is “based on the New Testament’s final chapter, the book of Revelation, the apocalypse begins violently and darkly but results in a victory for good and peace” (272). Everything known to the previous world is no more and the becoming of a new different world is on its way. Coyle mentions that “*The Road* illustrates that apocalypse does not have to be the end of the world because hope and a new generation survive; the hope is for both the future of man and a living planet (272). This could be regarded as the boy, a child, is the new generation who brings hope with his existence.

Another instance of the boy’s role as a signifier of divine sort is where the father refers to his son as a “Golden chalice, good to house a god” (McCarthy 75), alluding to the Holy Grail mythology. Cooper discusses the passage and explores whether the boy is to be regarded as the grail itself or the grail-bearer. She claims that in order for the boy to be the grail, he has to have many of the attributes the grail possesses and in this passage “the father underscores the connection” (223-24). In describing the various permutations of the grail in mythology, Roger Loomis states that the grail in itself can be described, among other things, as a chalice, a host, or a stone (qtd. in Cooper 224). Cooper finds all these attributes in various descriptions of the boy (224). Here, the father is describing his son as a chalice, underscoring the connection of his son being the grail, further enhancing his son as a signifier. Later, it is the father again who is looking at his son when it snows and then seeing the snow being “the last host of Christendom” (McCarthy 16). And finally, one last description, is in the scene where the father and his son encounter a gang member who wants to kill and eat them. The father kills the cannibal when he threatens the boy with a knife at his throat, and the boy turns mute as stone from this action (60-67), thus making the boy the grail (Cooper 224). Cooper also mentions that the original title of *The Road* was, in fact, supposed to be *The Grail*: “A

title illustrative of the narrative arc in which a dying father embarks on a quest to preserve his son, whom he imagines as a ‘chalice’” (219). In other words, the father sees his son as a “symbolic vessel of divine healing” (219) and must keep him alive somehow since he thinks that his son will be the cure for this world. Cooper also claims that the perception of the boy being a chalice, leads one to see *The Road* as a novel examining our fears of dying, an examination on what we humans are capable of doing when being afraid of extinction (219). This thought is perceived in the father’s struggle to live on by creating his chalice, the boy’s divine character, his signifier. Cooper argues that “the grail, then, becomes a metaphor for that which is capable of healing a world terribly in need of spiritual or moral renewal,” and further remarks that “the boy, like the grail...brings the essence of divinity back to a corrupted world” (220, 224). According to this line of interpretation, the boy’s existence is important for the continuation of the human race, not just for the father himself.

In order for the boy to be the grail bearer, however, he must have other qualities and one of those is the purity the grail bearer must possess. The bearer must be pure, in order to exist and to save the humans (223-24). In order to be the bearer he must be carrying the goodness inside him forward. Cooper adds that the grail bearer is associated with the blood of Christ but “yet while the boy is described as a vessel for divinity many times throughout the novel, those descriptions emphasize the more ephemeral qualities of divinity. In addition to being filled with light, the boy is also the very “word of God” and, elsewhere, the “breath of God” (225). One can perceive the role of the grail bearer in the scene where the boy brings water to his father in a cup and the father sees that “There was light all about him” (McCarthy 296). Again the father represents his son in a religious narrative. Cooper argues that this scene is where “the halo of firelight surrounding the cup-bearer suggests the complicated image of the boy as the grail” (225-26). This implies that the boy might not be the divinity himself, rather that he is carrying the divine, a part of Jesus, but at the same time that he is the grail. Here is an illustration of the father seeing an act in a religious light, of his son bringing him healing with the grail. The father is seeing him as the grail bearer and thus claiming that he is divine and adds to the perception of the boy as the signifier. We can also see here another instance where the boy can be seen in terms of the grail bearer, as argued by Cooper:

“Who will find the little boy?” He is asking about an imaginary “other” boy, and, while from a psychological perspective he is almost certainly using the other boy as a stand-in for himself, the very nature of his question suggests the nature of the antidote that he represents: he is other-focused. The boy thereby demonstrates that he is morally pure enough to be the grail bearer. (233)

Cooper states that the boy must be both the grail and the grail bearer simultaneously, “because the grail cannot appear in substantial form in the human realm without an appropriate bearer, the bearer ineffably becomes part of the grail” (223-24). One cannot exist without the other and this means that the boy is both, another characteristic of the signifier. Steven Frye mentions that the father is troubled in his thoughts after killing the cannibal and explains to his son what his purpose as a father is on this journey. The father believes he is on a mission by God’s order and that he will not let anyone touch his son, hence the killing of the cannibal was simply an act of protection. According to Frye this is “an ambiguous comfort for the boy, who is more than a starving child but a messianic figure in a lost world, in the father’s own words a ‘Golden chalice’” (170). Cooper on the other hand states that the father is obsessed with identifying his son “as the vessel for divine healing” (234). Both authors are attributing the view of the son as the grail and grail bearer to the father, who is creating this illusion of his son as divine, and thereby trying to find a reason to persevere. Cooper adds, if the boy truly is the one, if “he is his father’s and the world’s grail, the symbol of hope for human survival, then that hope is nothing less than a radical commitment to mercy in a world where an act of mercy just may be a death sentence. What is at stake is nothing less than the divine in human nature” (232-33).

In addition to the boy being seen in terms of being the grail, he is also seen in Messianic terms. We can see this when the boy and his father have a discussion of who has to carry the burden of worry on their journey:

Man: You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.
 The boy said something but he couldn’t understand him.
 Man: What? he said.
 He looked up, his wet and grimy face.
 Boy: Yes I am, he said. I am the one. (McCarthy 259)

This could be read as if the boy expresses his feelings that he is the one who has to worry about the suffering of the people that they meet on the road and about his father. The fact that he gives food to those who are starving and will not let the father kill everyone they meet, indicates that he is God’s chosen one, the suffering servant who will save the world and its inhabitants. One could also see this as the father’s accomplishment in forming his son to be a good person with Messianic ideals. According to Ashley Kunsza, the quoted section resembles a passage from John 14:16 where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (66). Kunsza states that the boy, by saying that he is the one, is “the one for whom the world is waiting” (66). According to Kunsza, true nature has come to clarity here; having previously

questioned his father regarding this, the boy now knows who he is. By letting his father know that he is the one, Kunsu says that it contributes “to the statement’s decidedly messianic ring” (66). Here it is no longer through the father’s view we perceive the boy’s divinity, he himself seems to state that he is the Messiah. On the other hand, since the boy has asked his father regarding that question, the view of himself being the Messiah must have been colored by the father’s answers. He is the Messiah since his father has presented him to be so. He understands his role as the signifier now. But Cooper sees no future for the boy, since being one of the good guys puts one at risk of getting killed in this cruel new world (232-233). Martha Himmelfarb mentions that Jesus “is also called the ‘chosen one’”, the name indicating that he is the suffering servant “whom God calls ‘my chosen one’” and that the one who is suffering and has the name of the chosen one is righteous (64). Since the boy bears these features the idea is introduced that there might be some hope for mankind after all.

We can understand the boy’s chosen role in another way and that depends on who we take as being the guide on the road. Carl James Grindley argues that “the son is the father’s personal savior, but, in many ways, the father also serves as his Christ’s protector” (13). The reader of *The Road* might solely see the father leading the boy through this journey but small glimpses in the book suggest that the opposite may be true as well: “the child led him [the father] by the hand” (McCarthy 1). Even though this passage refers to a dream, the child can be seen to be leading his father through this journey and not the other way around. As mentioned earlier, we can see that since the child can be seen as the chosen one, he is also the one who has to worry and therefore he is consequently the one to see to it that his father keeps his hope and faith. He now embodies his role as the signifier. And that way he succeeds in making his father continue his walk on the road.

Another indication that the boy can be seen as Christ is in his way of feeling empathy. The boy is suffering personally on the road, either from hunger, ill health or various other causes; however, he also sees other people suffering and wants to ease their pain too. He feels that he has the world’s fate and problems resting on his shoulders and carries the world’s burdens as Jesus did. He cannot bear the thought of anyone being mistreated. This can be seen in the instance where the boy puts his hand on the old man Ely’s shoulder and says, “He’s scared, Papa” (McCarthy 162). Here, the boy mantles the role as Christ, as he is other-focused again and acts in line with traits expected by the grail bearer, and becomes the voice of the poor, hungry and scared. He feels for the ones who suffer. The boy has been taught about compassion by his father, a trait that is not visible in this cruel new world. We can see this trait of compassion again in the instance with the thief who steals their means, and whom the

father later takes his revenge on by stripping him of all his clothes. The thief only surrenders to the father after he “looked at the child and what he saw was very sobering to him” (McCarthy 256). Looking at the child and seeing this goodness, sympathy and compassion makes the thief give back the items he stole. One could see this as the thief making amends for his sins. Seeing the boy is perhaps giving faith back to an ancient believer who realizes that he has stolen from this good human being, this divine creature. The thief must have seen the boy as a signifier of divine sort. Here the boy sees the suffering in the thief and begs his father to ease it (259). The boy is acting out his divine trait. Kunsu like Lincoln claims that the father practices an eye-for-an-eye method regarding the situation where the thief is treated poorly by the father. The method derives from the Old Testament in the Bible saying that you treat someone the way they treat you (Exodus 21:22-25, Leviticus 24:19-22, Deuteronomy 19:21). One could regard this as the father going by the old biblical rules from the old world he knows of. Here, on the other hand, the boy is not willing to treat the thief as his father does and instead wants “his father to show the man mercy” (Kunsu 66). By not sharing his father’s view of an eye-for-an-eye treatment, and instead showing forgiveness, he rather adheres to the New Testament. Here, “the child faces death with Christ-like pity” and he utters that he is “the one” who has to care “for his father and strangers” when his father claims the opposite and treats the thief poorly (Lincoln 172). The child is showing features of the same sympathetic view Christ had regarding how to treat one another (Matthew 5:38-9).

Another instance where one can see the boy being portrayed as a Messiah is when the boy is referred to as being “the word of God” (McCarthy 5). The father is looking at the destroyed landscape and realizes that without the boy, nothing matters. The boy is pictured as hope and without him the father would have no reason to live. Grindley mentions this scene, where the father utters the words above, is a form of a “father’s need for his son as a religious need after an apocalyptic stricken world” (13). This shows that the father needs to believe that his son has come for a greater purpose than just being his son. Here, the father’s psychological need is displayed. They cannot just be two normal people alive. One of them has to be divine in order for the other to continue living. The phrase “the word of God” connects to the passage in John 1:1 in the Bible: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the word was God” (John 1:1). The concept of the *Word* derives from the original Greek word *Logos*:

In the New Testament, the phrase "Word (Logos) of God," found in John 1:1 and elsewhere, shows God's desire and ability to "speak" to the human. The Christian expression of this communication is evidenced in the Christ, who is the "Word become flesh." In these three biblical words, Christianity points to the possibility of union

between the human and the divine, or the personal and the absolute. God's logos, which the Christ represents, acts as a bridge between the human's inner spiritual needs and the answer proclaimed by the Christian message. (*Glossary Definition: Logos*)

Logos is God acting through Christ, God spreading his word through Christ and here the boy is God's vessel, to bring faith and remind people of God's existence. Here, the Logos is serving as an important role of the boy's character, of being the word and Christ. This is suggested when the father remarks on the boy's silence: "So when are you going to talk to me again?" (McCarthy 52). This questioning could be a reminder for the boy, reminding him of being *The Logos*, of not forgetting his role. To Frye, this shows that in the father's mind, the boy's divine role has been decided from the very start, when asking him this later. Frye further elaborates the view the father has of his son, as being the Logos and hence divine:

The man sees the boy not only as his son but also as a figure of divine import, and though the boy will display extraordinary qualities of kindness, the man's belief in the boy as the incarnate Word of God could be taken as an expression of mere sentiment, were it not for the many references to divinity, in the context of description and allusions to God. (172-73)

The boy cannot only be a kind son, he also has to be divine. The image of the boy as the *Word* is clear for the father, as we can see from his own words. He adds more features to the boy's role as a signifier.

Another example of perceived divinity is found in the moment where the father and son speak of being the good guys who carry the fire within them:

Boy: We would never eat anybody, would we?
 Man: No. Of course not.
 Boy: Even if we were starving?
 Man: We're starving now.
 Boy: You said we weren't.
 Man: I said we weren't dying. I didn't say we weren't starving.
 Boy: But we wouldn't.
 Man: No. We wouldn't.
 Boy: No matter what.
 Man: No. No matter what.
 Boy: Because we're the good guys.
 Man: Yes.
 Boy: And we're carrying the fire.
 Man: And we're carrying the fire. Yes
 Boy: Okay. (McCarthy 136)

Willard P. Greenwood says, "he is one of the good guys, a powerful final statement about the persistence of good in a world filled with evil. The boy survives, and with him, hope persists" (80). The boy and his father do not eat human flesh and this along with carrying a fire differentiates them from the evil humans who eat other people. Carrying a fire is an image of hope, of not giving up and again this is adding to the boy functioning as the signifier. With

hope comes belief, belief in something better to come. They now live in a world where this is gone, and they have to have something within that sets them apart from the bad guys. Something worth fighting for and something to give them reason to keep on moving along on the road. Fire is light and is the opposite of darkness, darkness being connected with evil. They are now carrying a fire, an invisible light within them to make sure that they are not carrying this darkness. The fire will protect them and the father reinforces this view when asked the first time about it by the boy: “And nothing bad is going to happen to us. That’s right. Because we’re carrying the fire. Yes. Because we are carrying the fire” (McCarthy 83). They are thus convincing themselves that they are shielded from evil and harm as long as the fire is lit. The boy also repeatedly questions the father of their status as the good guys. This questioning shows that the boy is unsure of his role, of being good, probably wondering who he is, in terms of being good. Questioning his role as a signifier. At the same time the questioning reminds them of their role, of being the good guys. They will continue to be the good guys and carry the fire within them until the end. When the time comes for the boy and father to part, when the father is dying, they have a final conversation about this fire:

Boy: I want to be with you.
 Man: You cant.
 Boy: Please.
 Man: You cant. You have to carry the fire.
 Boy: I dont know how to.
 Man: Yes you do.
 Boy: Is it real? The fire?
 Man: Yes it is.
 Boy: Where is it? I dont know where it is.
 Man: Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (278-9)

According to John Cant, “The fire signifies that vitality that burns within the ardent heart, the mystery that is the spark of life itself and that needs no reason to exist” (271). He also mentions that the fire “signifies civilization being passed from father to son” (270). The boy in *The Road* is taught that good guys do not eat people and they carry a fire – a belief that goodness still exists. The father is teaching his son the value of this view and telling him how he will figure out a good guy’s existence when he meets one in the future, if his father is not there to guide him. The father struggles to keep his son alive thinking his son is possibly the last hope for man and therefore he forces his son to carry on. When the boy later encounters a man after his father’s death he asks him: “Are you one of the good guys” (McCarthy 282). The man looks up at the sky and then he replies: “Yeah, he said. I’m one of the good guys” (282). Later the boy questions the man of really being a good guy.

Boy: How do I know you're one of the good guys?
 Veteran: You dont. You'll have to take a shot.
 Boy: Are you carrying the fire?
 Veteran: Am I what?
 Boy: Carrying the fire?
 Veteran: You're kind of weirded out, arent you?
 Boy: No.
 Veteran: Just a little.
 Boy: Yeah.
 Veteran: That's okay.
 Boy: So are you?
 Veteran: What, carrying the fire?
 Boy: Yes.
 Veteran: Yeah, we are. (283-4)

This ensures the boy that there are still people like him out there. Not eating humans and carrying the fire means you are a sincere and good human. Another possible signifier here bearing similar characteristics. The boy has now encountered an individual who might share his view of goodness, who has found and will possibly follow the boy until he might be of age and until the boy can continue on his own with carrying the fire and spreading the message of his goodness. At least, this is what the boy believes since the man replies yes to his question of carrying the fire. The man finds the boy weird but shows the boy a trait he will recognize, human compassion. Since there is no one left to look after the boy, he has no choice but to follow the man and meets his family.

The situation is ambiguous, the family could be viewed as new guardians to help realize the boy's destiny for the human race, or they could be evil. The ending does not reveal what the future holds for the boy by following these people. But one thing is definite: the boy carries forth hope. Coyle in *Cremean* states that "the human race can be equated to the seeds; the boy represents hope for a future generation" (274) and that "their hope is based on the goodness they believe they carry, as well as on the goodness they hope to find in others someday" (286). An ounce of hope is lit in the boy now that he has found this new family who says they are the good guys carrying the fire. There is a view on life not being over and that humanity will persist since the child still exists and with him comes hope for a future, the question remaining is for whom?

Frye mentions reviews of *The Road* that are unanimous in their conviction that there is a clear message in the novel that the boy holds messianic features "which implies not only the moral purity and self-sacrifice of Christ, but also the political and religious strife that led to his execution" (168). This is shown every time the boy wants to help someone in need and share his food with the people he meets, even though it may mean that he will starve himself, thereby disregarding his own future. The difference in *The Road* is that no one knows how it will end for the boy. The boy lives on but with the lack of closure at the end, there is

only the reader's imagination left to decide on the boy's future. The father in *The Road* is doing well, teaching his son to be a good guy, a Messiah for the new world, just forcing him to keep going by holding on to the invisible fire within and letting him believe that things will be better as long as you have hope.

2. Re-creating God

Besides being portrayed as Christ-like, the boy is also being projected as being God. McCarthy, himself, writes the word God in both small and capital letters throughout the novel. Whenever the father claims that his son is God, it is always written with a capital letter. One could perceive it as if the father himself believes in God and is therefore stating his name with a capital letter. Since I am analyzing the father's actions in this essay, I will follow his usage of spelling God's name with a capital letter. However, on one instance the father actually uses a small letter, when claiming his son being "a god", and that is in the meeting with the man calling himself Ely (McCarthy 172). In understanding the father's creation of the boy's divine role, one has to look at the father's statement of his son being God. The father speaks to an old man they meet on the road and claims his son to be more than what this old man expects the boy to be:

Old Man: When I saw that boy I thought that I had died.

Man: You thought he was an angel?

Old Man: I didnt know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didnt know that would happen.

Man: What if I said that he's a god? (172)

The encounter with this old man raises many questions and interesting points. There is a discussion about God's existence and this discussion is ambiguous in several ways. The father claims his son to be god but on the other hand, he is afraid of Ely himself being god and thus is scared of mistreating the man: "Perhaps he'd turn into a god and they to trees" (163). What is confusing at this point is why the father, who has brought forth the idea of his son being divine, briefly abandons this belief and suddenly is afraid of Ely's nature? Could it be because of his name: Ely and the father's knowledge of the meaning of this name? Possibly, we can see this fear when the father suddenly refers to his son's divine nature with a small letter, as seen in the quote above about. But there is also the feeling of uncertainty and not fully believing that Ely is God since the father refers to Ely being "god" with small letters too and is thus not entirely abandoning his belief that his son could be god. Steve Gherke mentions in his article that it is the father who brings forth the religious view of the son being a deity. In

this particular scene with the old man who is claiming his name to be Ely, which, Gherke argues, is “a reference to the prophet Elijah” (151). The sudden fear the father experiences could also be caused by his knowledge that the name Ely is also the name for God. This is shown in the gospels when Christ is on the cross and cries out “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” (Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34), which means, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’) But, Ely himself denies his name being Ely (McCarthy 171) and thus it is difficult to know who he truly is. Another point of view on understanding who Ely could be, Erik J. Wielenberg mentions, is: “Elijah wanders in the wilderness and is given food by God, who delivers the food by way of ravens (1 Kings 17:5-7); Ely is fed by the boy and possibly mistakes him for an angel” (2). Ely, when found, is given food by the boy and read in the light of the mentioned passage in the Bible, we would thus understand this gesture of being provided with food, an act which is virtually unthinkable in this apocalyptic wasteland, as showing Ely’s view of the boy as angelic.

Another reason why this encounter is strange is why the old man says “Sir?” (McCarthy 162), when laying his eyes upon the boy. Why is he giving a respectful title to a child, if he truly does not believe that the boy is more than just a child? Ely then says: “when I saw that boy I thought that I had died” (172). Is Ely imagining himself in heaven and seeing God when laying his eye upon the boy? Here, a small child is laying his hand on him like a savior would. He might be afraid of who the boy could be in terms of divinity and denies the boy’s existence by saying that he hopes the boy not being God, since this new world is a dangerous place for God to be in (172). Ely just wishes this to be true, he is not sure of the boy’s nature. He too might be sensing the boy’s role as a signifier. Children do not exist in this world according to him, and yet seeing a child again, he does not know what to believe. Is the boy more than just human for Ely, since humans now are like beasts? The boy is different than others because of his actions of kindness and being good. With the father’s reference to the boy being a god, Ely turns and lets the father know that being the last god is not good because god himself will be the last survivor and even his days are counted. What and whom is one to be a god for if there are no living creatures left? (172-3). So if the boy is “the last god”, no goodness will come since all creatures are to die and the boy’s good nature will do nobody any good when all are gone. But if one looks carefully at Ely’s utterances about God, it makes one think that he does believe that a God exists even though he denies it. He says “there is no God” (170) using a capital letter in the word God, just like the father did earlier. This is a revealing passage where he does not want to share his belief of God’s existence. And

when referring to the boy as “the last god”, he uses a small letter when saying “to be on the road with the last god” (172), which suggests that he just does not believe that the boy is God.

But how does this affect the father and son’s journey and cause? Here, Frye implies that Ely, the old man, can be “thought to be a figure who is actually Satan, tempting Christ since he says ‘there is no God and we are his prophets’” (170). The situation seems like a close parallel to Christ’s being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, where Satan is testing his belief by denying God’s power (Matt 4:1-11). This reinforces the image of the boy being portrayed as some form of Messiah going through the same influences and struggles as Christ did. The father has to make a decision here. Does he pursue his journey or will he believe Ely and give up? In the end, the old man is left behind and they continue on their journey. With this turn of events, we can construe this as if goodness wins over evil, and God’s power will be maintained since the boy continues his mission on the road.

There is another point which needs consideration: who the boy is God to. Who sees him as divine and gives the boy the status of being a God? Cooper says the boy could be God since “human beings create God” and where one finds people being alive, there will also be the belief that God exists:

Facing his child, who has come (again) close to death, he holds the boy and thinks, ‘Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them’ (63). His decision here is to behave as if the child is indeed ‘God’ - the embodiment of all value and morality. While the child exists, so too does meaning. So too does humanity. (229)

As long as the father lives on, he will live to believe that his son is God. And as long as the boy will live, he will bring hope for mankind in his role as a signifier according to the father. The quote about “ceremonies out of the air” above suggests the religious notion that when you have nothing – create a God in your mind and keep giving fire to that belief. There is a thought here, of the father creating the divine character of his son, since he himself needs something to believe in, in order to pursue this journey. He creates it by describing his son in various ways and ultimately creates the boy as a signifier. Cooper suggests that the sentence “glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (McCarthy 230), about the boy in *The Road*, suggests that the boy is the body of God since a tabernacle is a “tent that housed the presence of God in ancient Israel” (Cooper 224). She also argues that since the boy “is consistently associated with light” he is “pictured as a vessel made translucent by the glory of the essence of divinity within him” (224). Again, it is the father who dresses his son with these descriptions and such associations also enlighten the reader to the father’s depth of knowledge

of religion. Wielenberg provides psychological and religious reasons to the father's belief in the divinity of the boy and why he continues the journey in *The Road*:

It is when we suffer that we most need belief in a loving God to keep ourselves going. The more reason we have to doubt God's reality, the more we need to believe. The world of *The Road* is described as "[b]arren, silent, godless" (McCarthy 4) and the man recognizes that "[s]ome part of him always wished it to be over" (154). It is precisely because of this that he needs to believe that he is on a divine mission. (3)

Hence, the father needs his son in order to pursue this journey and if the father would not have had this thought of his son being of a divine character, he would have killed his son himself and committed suicide a long time ago. But here, Greenwood states, "Ultimately, the man believes that the very existence of his child is proof of a living God" (79). God continues to live in the boy according to the father. The father teaches his son being God for his own sake. The boy is taught from the very beginning by his father, the vision of him being on a mission greater than life and where he does not have the choice of giving up since he is meant for a higher cause. The father has all throughout thought of his son as being a divine creature who will bring goodness to the remaining world. Cooper claims that the goodness in the boy comes from the father, a quality that is passed on from a former generation who tells the stories of the old world and teaches his son the view of the world through these stories. The father needs to teach his son this definition of goodness so he can pass it on, since as Cooper claims, "in *The Road*, human survival depends on knowing symbols and being able to interpret them in a meaningful way" (*No More Heroes* 142). The father is using his knowledge of religion, to create a meaning for life. By creating his ultimate symbol, his signifier. Without his father's storytelling the boy would not know what is good or not, and perhaps not survive. The father feels he has to teach his son the old way of life, however he is skeptical himself and is unsure of his own beliefs, still wanting to believe that goodness will live on in the boy. Where a father is "placing hopes where he'd no reason to hope" (McCarthy 213) and again Cooper is claiming that it is the father who pictures his son divine by describing him as such: "The boy, then, is imagined in terms of religious 'forms' that bring God's presence and healing to humankind" (*No More Heroes* 153). The form the boy now has taken is in the role of the signifier. He will be the symbol of hope, faith, love, compassion etc. and by carrying everything inside that his father has taught him, he can bring forth hope to the remaining people. The boy bears goodness inside of him and he bears it thanks to his fathers' actions. The father has tried to create a divine person and leaves him for the world.

Conclusions:

When reading *The Road* from the perspective that has been applied here, it is clear that McCarthy has seriously studied Christianity. With so many words and phrases from the Bible being used, the author's knowledge in this matter is clear. McCarthy has put a sense of glorification on his young protagonist and as he describes this young boy's journey, he also gives the boy the status of divinity while the father functions as a protector.

In the novel, though one perceives the young boy in *The Road* as a loved and cherished being, one cannot see past the effect he has on people who meet him. The boy in *The Road* is most certainly seen as a different being by many who are near him – as well as by readers of the novel. The boy is also a child and children are not the norm any longer since many died after the apocalyptic event or in the near future thereafter. One can perceive this, especially from the scene where the boy and his father meet the old man Ely, who is startled to see a child.

The boy is though most certainly seen as a divine person by his father. Of course all parents see their children as perfect but here, one gets the feeling that the father is on a type of mission where the father sees himself as having been chosen to bring forth goodness, meaning to keep his divine son alive for the future to come, in order to save humans and humanity. The father strongly emphasizes his son's good nature and continuously remarks on his son's divine nature. The father puts the boy in the character of Jesus, the suffering servant – the boy suffering on the road and wanting to ease others' sufferings. The father also puts the boy in the character of God, the almighty. We see this when the father puts the word of his son being God in the old man Ely's mouth. With the father's remarks on his son's nature, there is no doubt that the boy is being taught indirectly through his father the importance of his role. We see this in the quote "I am the one" (McCarthy 277). The boy is indirectly using the holy Bible as a reference, letting the reader know that he is the one to carry the load and burden of being a chosen one but also that he has been taught this role. The boy shoulders the role and believes that he will bring forth "the fire". Here, the boy is the picture of hope for his father and other characters who have lost theirs. If hope would entirely be gone, reason would not exist and life would be no more. Human survival is now resting on hope and the boy is perceived to carry this forward. He brings hope in the shape of a "fire". But in the end, the question to what he will achieve with "the fire inside" and his goodness, remains. McCarthy leaves the reader of *The Road* with an ambiguous ending without closure. At the end of the novel you are left to interpret what the conclusion will be.

McCarthy has written a novel based on belief, love, fatherhood, and many other areas. But above all, one gets the impression of “everything will be alright as long as you keep on believing”, as in *The Road*, where a father rests his belief on his boy having a purpose of the divine kind and has to save him for the rest of the world. And, as mentioned earlier in Cooper’s quote, if “human beings create God” (229), then the father has created his own God resting in his son and ultimately, his son is divine because he serves the purpose of divinity – to provide hope and structure.

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