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**Cover Art***Garrowby Hill* (1998)

David Hockney

# Poetry is a Chemical Reaction

Brandon L. Cochran

I love poetry. Not many men can say that-but I can. I love how emotions, which are chemicals, can be translated into words, which are marks with meaning. Then those marks with meaning can be taken and given to another person and read. To their eye the markings that have meaning travel by light, where their meaning is translated into chemicals by the brain, the chemicals then processed into emotion, and finally into a physical manifestation of what we call understanding, which can be represented by a smile, laugh, tear, or even just the rise of an eyebrow. This is how we feel. Everyone feels differently- I feel through poetry. But most feel nothing when they read a poem. Why? Because they haven't found the meaning, which is where the feelings are; if you don't find the meaning you won't feel. You won't understand.

This article is about how I find meaning in a poem, and maybe by following the steps I use, you might find more meaning in the poems you read too. I'm going to use a short poem by Ted Kooser called "A Happy Birthday."

When I first read a poem I don't think about anything. I leave my mind clear so the words play fully on emotion-that chemical reaction between words, meaning, and memory. If I feel nothing after the first time I ask myself three questions: What clue does the title give me of the meaning of the poem? What words or phrases hold deeper meaning? And what does the poem teach me? Honestly, after reading the poem "A Happy Birthday" for the first time I felt nothing. So, I asked myself my three questions. One, "What clue does the title give me of the meaning of the poem?" Well it's about a birthday- a happy birthday. This means that the words he uses are going to tie into having a good birthday. This is an important discovery because I now know the mood of the poem. It is positive, it is reflective, and up lifting. He had a good birthday. I begin to remember how I felt after a good birthday. I felt loved, needed, and important. I also can't believe another year is gone. I think about what I did and accomplished during that year, and more importantly I imagine what lies ahead for the year to come.

Second, what words and phrases hold a deeper meaning? How is he going to put the feelings of a happy birthday into words? What words might be metaphors for this meaning? These questions will help find meaning. As I reread the poem

## A Happy Birthday

by Ted Kooser

This evening, I sat by an open window  
and read till the light was gone and the book  
was no more than a part of the darkness.  
I could easily have switched on a lamp,  
but I wanted to ride this day down into night,  
to sit alone and smooth the unreadable page

I noticed words like: evening, open window, and book. I also notice phrases like: "...read till the light was gone and the book was no more than part of the darkness", and "...to sit alone and smooth the unreadable page..." As I explore these words and phrases I begin to see how they connect to the title and to me. Birthdays are like evenings, spent looking out the window. When you're about to have another birthday it feels like evening time. The day is done. You look back and wonder where the time went, and where it is going. What you accomplished and where you failed. It's beautiful and reflective. Birthdays are like books. It's a close to another chapter and the chapter to come is just, "...part of the darkness." It's a mystery. It's yet to be. It's exciting. It's an, "unreadable page..."

And finally, what did this poem teach me? It taught me that each birthday we have is a new chapter added in our book of life. A book we will keep forever; a book we authored. We are responsible for its content, and its consequence in the world. It taught me that our first draft is our only draft and it's going to be ruff; we can't choose how our book begins, or when it ends. But we can choose what's in the middle. On my next birthday, when I look over the pages of my past I will plan how the next chapter will end; and I will make sure it ends with another, happy birthday.



## Gut Wrenching Lack of Emotion: Schultz's "The Silence"

Brittany Baxter

**Philip Schultz** is an experienced writer and poet. He has contributed several novels and works of poetry to the American culture. His latest book, *Failure* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2008. He also founded/directed The Writers Studio. Based in New York City, this private school focuses on fiction and poetry. Prior to founding this school he spent four years as the founder and director of New York University's graduate creative writing program.

His poem, *The Silence* demonstrates his ability to communicate strong experiences with dry expression and almost an unbiased tone. Schultz begins his poem with an introduction of its subject. He uses the words "drunk and "pain" to describe this person he was once so close to. He foreshadows the contents of the poem when he tells us he was "listening as if to a ghost." Schultz describes their relationship at its height and at its depth. He substitutes his emotion with concrete detail. This passage, "Tonight a friend called to say your body was found in your apartment, where it had lain for days" surprises the reader. "I was expecting to hear how that experience affected him, but instead he took us back and forth between then and now. Its more of a tribute to his friend, than a memoir on himself" says Victoria Burnham, a Political Science major here at BYU-Idaho.

He tells his reader of this phone call he received without polluting the experience with his own feelings. He then goes back and tells the reader how they met and about their bond was held together by the love of poetry that they shared. Although some readers may not be able to identify with this kind of bond within a friendship, most readers have had a friend who shares a common interest. Schultz then proceeds to tell the reader of how the friend came to him in the middle of the night with a problem. Schultz dryly relays the experience. His friend was dealing with a relationship falling apart, and Schultz offered no consolation but only the empty promise to call back later.

Through all of these telling, Schultz does not provide his reader with his own feelings on the matter. Schultz' readers are forced to draw their own conclusion of how the Schultz must have felt and thus forcing the reader to take draw their own conclusions of how they feel about these types of situation and dealing with these types of friends. Each reader finds himself on a slightly different ground than the reader before him. Each takes a certain response to his unique style.

His readers find this writing style to be very moving. Mary Stephenson, a freshman at BYU-Idaho says, "His tone is harsh because it need to be in order for him to emphasize his point of wasting your life."

Although the theme of suicide and loss are apparent to every reader, each reader has his own lesson that he has taken from the poem. Matthew Hall, a senior majoring in English at BYU-Idaho responded to the poem this way. "Schultz' poem seems to capture the bitter and sharp regret that almost every man has endured because of pursuing romance over the needs of a friend."

Schultz' poetry is so influential not only because the readers can vicariously experience what Schultz has but they also learn more about themselves and their own views from reading *The Silence*.



## Moses' Mother

Sarah Jane Haws

Kathleen Jamie's poem "The Tay Moses" captures the awful feelings some women sometimes feel about their children. The author herself, confesses an anxiety she felt when expecting her son. "And I thought, this person's going to come and live with us for, maybe, twenty years and what if we just don't like each other" (Jamie)? Jamie felt a fear many expectant mothers experience. Luckily for her and her son, these feelings never progressed very far, and so never lead to the scene of "The Tay Moses." Though she never went through the actual act of abandoning a child, or giving it up, her poem vividly captures the emotions felt by women who do.

A common reason for infant abandonment is poverty. Though it is not confirmed directly in the poem, it can be safely assumed that the narrator cannot provide for her child. "What can I fashion/ For you but a woven/ Creel of river-/ Rashes, a golden/ Oriole's nest, my gift/ Wrought from the Firth" (Jamie). The frustration of the mother is her inability to provide anything more for her child than a basket to float away in. Poverty is not, however, the only reason behind infant abandonment.

Many disabled and mentally handicapped children are abandoned because of the parents inability to cope with the stress of raising them. "The Tay Moses" gives no clue about the child's state, but the actions of the mother would suggest parental mental health problems. Most people wouldn't think that putting your child in a basket and setting it afloat down river would provide it a better life. Her associations of the dead salmon and spawn floating in the eddies with the birth of her son further hint that she may be suffering from some type of postpartum depression (Jamie).

Whatever her reasons for abandoning her child might be, they don't last. Not long after she sends her child floating, her sanity seems

to return. She jumps in her car and speeds off to reclaim her son. Then in the last lines of the poem she cries "LEAVE HIM! Please,/ It's okay, he's mine" (Jamie). In the end, she realizes what she has done and races to save the situation before it's too late to save. She realizes her wrong and makes the right decision to be her infant's mother. If we, however, look at this poem from a slightly different point of view, we can see her decision to go after her child as a sign of a selfish weakness.

What makes Jamie's poem so interesting is that the narrator can be seen in two separate lights: the first one, a mother who attempts to abandon her child, and the second, a mother who sets her child up for adoption. The second one may not be immediately apparent, but if we look more closely at the situation of the poem it becomes a likely explanation.

After floating through a few dirty eddies, the infant is discovered by a boatman. Eventually the child is carried ashore to where a farmer and his wife take him in (Jamie). The journey from where the baby started to the rescue could not have been very far. Even if water proofed, I doubt a homemade basket would be able to float very far. On top of that, the mother seemed to know exactly where to go when she changes her mind, meaning she either saw where her child went or had a pretty good idea where he would end up. With this in mind, we can probably assume she expects her child to be taken in by the family.

The difference most people see between abandonment and setting a child up for adoption is the interest in the result. A woman who abandons usually just leaves her child and just hopes for the best. The other knows it will be going to a home that will be able to provide for it and care for it far better than she. An adoption mother knows then, that what she is doing is in the best interest of the child. So our

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narrator's last minuet decision to take her child back can be seen as a sign of extreme selfishness. Rather than placing the needs of her child first, she selfishly puts her wants first. Her need for the child is more important to her than the child's well being.

Those mothers who do manage to make the sacrifice, and give their child to someone who can provide a better life for them give their child the chance to be great. In the case of the original Moses, the mother was unable to protect her child. Seeing that he would die if kept longer, she gives him a chance at life. Because of her unselfish decision, an entire nation of people was freed from bondage.

Not every child that is set up for adoption will save a

nation, but they will be given the chance live a life with opportunities that might have been denied them. Most importantly, they will be given to a family that wants them, and will love them without regret. The narrator of Jamie's poem obviously loves her child. She would not have gone after it if she didn't. However, the regret and guilt that lead her to abandon the child in the first place will not just go away. She chooses to take them in and hopefully come to accept them. Kathleen Jamie's poem shows us a glimpse of a complex world, giving us insight into the emotions and thoughts of a "Moses' mother."

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## Check Your Odometer: Carver's "Are These Actual Miles?"

Suzanne Hochstrasser

The odometer on American poet and short story author Raymond Carver's work will most likely turn over enough times to make a car salesman balk, but to a devotee of literature those miles will read more like a classic showroom model and not last year's knock off. I say this because when you read his short story titled "Are These Actual Miles?" Carver's post modern style gets great mileage and plenty of it. A story about the struggles of contemporary times, "Are These Actual Miles?" takes the reader on an emotional route back in cultural history, a transcendent one that hits close to home in these times of economic crisis.

"Are These Actual Miles?" enters the junction in the life of Leo and Toni as it comes to a screeching halt. Their rash and impulsive spending has plunged them into an abyss of debt. Yet, even on the eve of their bankruptcy trial Toni keeps buying. She "puts on a new white blouse, wide lacey cuffs, the new two-piece suit, new heels. She transfers the stuff from her straw purse into the new patent-leather handbag" (Carver 148). Toni wants everything she never had as a kid, yet doesn't realize that succumbing to a culture which promotes consumerism as a path to happiness leaves her empty. In essence, she comes full circle and is left depleted both materially and emotionally. Toni began her life with nothing and at middle age she has nothing again.

The vehicle in Carver's story lies in their only remaining asset - Toni's convertible. A symbol of social status and self worth, the car is their last possession that represents any amount of dignity. When it is gone, so is their dignity. The couple has reached so low they must sell it for cash. In flashbacks, Leo describes how they got from point A to point B, how they rationalize their excessive spending, and the difference between dreams and reality. It is through Leo's inner conflicts that Carver gives the reader a glimpse into the head games a failing relationship plays on them, especially for Leo. And as sorry of a character as he is, Leo's ability to show emotion is what makes him almost likeable. He spends the agonizing hours waiting for Toni to call drinking, worrying for her safety, questioning her faithfulness, and kicking himself for getting them into this predicament.



selling of the car, that symbol of her worth and identity, reduces her to a pathetic and broken being. Lost and misguided by an unrealistic lifestyle, they are left with nothing but each other and the memory of the many miles they've traveled together. As she lies passed out on the bed, Leo traces the stretch marks on Toni's hip. "They are like roads, and he traces them in her flesh," amazed by them, how many there are; permanent, visible, and real like evidence of the miles and miles of experiences between them (Carver 151).

Carver's 1988 story is a candid look at the materialistic temptations of a generation and their struggles to make sense out of the reoccurring patterns they find so hard to break. Commenting on his writing, Carver expressed, "the best art has its reference points in real life" (qtd. in Pope). Real life is where the author gleans ideas for his poetry and fiction. Growing up with an alcoholic father, becoming a father of two by the age of twenty, years of lousy jobs, and personal battles with alcoholism and cancer resonate throughout Carver's works.

"Are These Actual Miles?" communicates the interactions of human behavior, culture, and society. It prompts us to ask tough questions about ourselves. It shows the ugly side of contemporary ideals, the weaknesses many are challenged by, and how people react to their environment. Literature like Raymond Carver's reveals what we don't always see or refuse to see in ourselves. Carver lays them out in front of our noses in easy language that doesn't skirt around the issues. Those numbers on the odometer stand for more than measurements of distance, they represent all the experiences that shape or misshape us into who are. It's as if Carver is warning us to drive carefully, check the oil, and what ever miles you put on, make sure you can handle them.

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# The Raven Evermore

Emily Treasure

*No Morning Dawns  
No Night Returns  
But What We Think of Thee*  
(Barnes 74)

Such a perfect description of the word “evermore,” a word Miss Moss has a “quarrel with the Dictionary about” (Barnes 78). At least it fits very well with definition number two: “always, at all times, constantly, continually” (Barnes 78). Miss Moss of Julian Barnes’ *Evermore* wishes to retain in remembrance her brother’s death in battle during World War I forevermore, and though she struggles and strains to keep this memory alive “for all future time” (Barnes 78), the archaic first definition that she prefers, she only succeeds in succumbing to a depression and entropy that greatly resembles the shadow of derangement and despair that entraps the narrator of Poe’s “The Raven,” a shadow cast by none other than that bird called Nevermore.

The title *Evermore* could be an allusion to Poe’s famous poem. Of course the romantic connotations of the word “evermore” are as attractive to the music industry as to literature; it is the title of a New Zealand band and is part of the name of the Led Zeppelin song “The Battle of Evermore,” a song often associated with the epic drama of Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings and its foundational myths. All over the world there is a taste for the romance of the permanence of a word like “evermore.” Poe’s “The Raven,” however, shares one of its themes with Barnes’ short story. It is the theme of grief, the ultimate example of fragile mortality’s requirement to change. The narrator of “The Raven” has lost Lenore, the woman he will see in this life “nevermore.” Miss Moss has lost her brother Sam. Both



Both Poe’s narrator and Miss Moss are having a very difficult time coping with their grief—enough that their very sanity is in question.

Miss Moss lives the description of evermore “always, at all times, constantly, continually” in her remembrance and dedication to the death of her brother (his *death*, not his *life*). She takes yearly pilgrimages to her brother’s grave and all of the other nearby war memorials, married a seriously handicapped war veteran (before returning him to his sisters’ care in order to fully consecrate her time to immortalizing her brother), and has constant squabbles with the War Graves Commission over the particulars of the memorials from the kind of grass and flowers planted near the graves and the wording of inscriptions to her many-times-denied plea to have her own civilian



## The Raven Evermore

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ashes scattered in a military cemetery. Miss Moss's attempt to live the word "evermore" leads her to resist change. She even refuses to accept the reality and significance of the second World War, and keeps away from "those parts of France where the second war happened, or at least where it was remembered" (Barnes 81). The gently rolling hills of the plot of this short story mirror Miss Moss's inaction. She has really almost become a part of death herself.

Though Miss Moss and Poe's narrator take their grief to an unhealthy extreme, their common question about immortality, eternity, the meaning of death, and the possibility of life to come is a question all readers share. The mindless raven replies to Poe's narrator's cries of "Is there balm in Gilead?" and "Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant

Aidenn, / It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore" only the sad, sad phrase: "Nevermore" (Poe 36). Miss Moss thinks of her own life and death as a soon to be corrected "clerical error" (Barnes 84). Instead of focusing on physical life, her question about immortality centers on the length of community memory, historical memory, and whether any of it is meaningful memory. Perhaps her Jewish background has laid her cares about physical immortality to rest in a more hopeful way than Poe's quenched balm of Gilead. She does have a horror of Thiepval's memorial to the missing. She wants "*Their Name Liveth For Evermore*" (Barnes 75) to be true, to mean "for all future time." We ask with Miss Moss's psychological raven the question of how long a name can be remembered, even a name that stands for an overwhelming public sacrifice.

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## Selling Out: Arenas' "The Glass Tower"

Miranda González

There are those who argue that fame cheapens beauty. Take the example of a favorite indie rock band. They represent their own label, and by doing so, are free to make artistic decisions without the constraints of a record producer. They arrange all their own gigs, they play at local venues, and their music is really, really good. However, they also don't make any money. Very few people even know that they exist, and they can't make a living off their music, no matter how original it is. One day, they sign with a major record label, and their albums go platinum. Suddenly, they make tons of money and their art can reach a wider fan base. Unfortunately, they also have to compromise some of their ideas. Does that mean they are sell-outs? Does their music now have less artistic value? In Reinaldo Arenas' short story, "The Glass Tower," the narrator addresses these very questions. A critically-acclaimed author battles between spending time developing his novels or using his time to attend parties and network to get a backer for his new book. Arenas uses the character of Alfredo Fuentes to show that true art and monetary success are mutually exclusive.

In the story, when Alfredo becomes recognized as an author, he is immediately in demand of society, much like the new indie band now has photo shoots and press conferences to attend. Alfredo then has a choice: to cater to the whims of his admiring literary circle, or to abandon his fans to devote his time to finally putting his characters on paper. Both sides have a strong and persuasive voice, but he may only choose one. At the beginning of the story, Alfredo has chosen society with its small talk and dinner parties, but the characters of his still unwritten book, Berta, Nicolás, Delfín, Daniel, and Olga, begin to take on a life of their own and are just as real to Alfredo as those in the literary circle. They pester him and vie for his attention. Of course Alfredo "would have much preferred to be alone in his small apartment" (Arenas 33), but he has to sacrifice his passion in the name of saving face, and ultimately, money.

He tells himself that the social gatherings, painful though they might be, are the only way that he can keep his writing alive. However, as he approaches the mansion of publishing guru Gladys Pérez Campo, he also admits to himself that "the solid publishing project..would perhaps one day allow him to own a mansion like this one" (Arenas 34). Thus, his motives are not purely artistic. As the story progresses, his characters become more and more aggressive and less like the reasonable people that he imagined them to be. They scream and cry, they pound on the windows, they even gasp for air as if they are dying. They start out pleading pathetically, progress to violent hissing, and then give up and join the members of the literary circle.

Alfredo's characters betray him, and Delfín tells the crowd, "For all his pretensions and ridiculous posturing as a brilliant author, he has no talent whatsoever and can't even write without making spelling mistakes. He often misspells my first family name and writes it without the *l*" (Arenas 39). The crowd laughs, and various members of the party become more vocal in their dislike for Alfredo; everyone has turned against him. Then suddenly, the guests and his characters all depart, or rather, fade away. Even the great mansion folds up and out of sight. Alfredo is left alone with the dog. He realizes that he could not play both sides; he had to choose either his writing or his financial stability. Thus, by trying to hold on to them both, he caused them to disappear, leaving himself with nothing. So too, is the inevitable path of the newly-discovered rock group. They will likely give up pursuit of their passion in favor of creating music that sells. In this and most cases, Reinaldo Arenas would contend, fame does indeed cheapen beauty.

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## No Stage Five

Shanelle Baxter

"It is a play about love and knowledge," (Edson). This is the response that Pulitzer Prize winner Margaret Edson gave when asked to describe her play in an interview shortly after receiving the Pulitzer. Anyone who has read *W;t* knows that this statement truly encompasses what the play is about. Edson began writing *W;t* in 1991 and it was rejected by every theatre she sent it to except one in Costa Mesa, California in 1995 (Edson). Since those humble beginnings *Wit* has been performed in theatres around the world. The drama was even adapted into a movie starring Emma Thompson in 2001 ("Wit"). I took part in a production of *W;t* when I was in high school and since then I've been committed to sharing my love for it with others.

This first time I heard of it was in January 2006 when my high school drama club debated what our drama should be that year. Chalise Ludlow, my theatre teacher, brought up *W;t* and presented us with copies of an excerpt from the script. As I read the part of Susie, and then Vivian, I fell into this world of poetry, hospitals, and cancer. After a few pages Ms. Ludlow stopped us and presented us with the challenges of such a production: it was hard and very emotional, we only had one month of rehearsal time, the words were difficult, and finally, whoever took the part of Vivian would have to cut their hair. I wanted to play Vivian and it took no time at all to put my waist-long hair on the chopping block, so to speak. Auditions commenced and whether it was my willingness to cut my hair or my acting prowess; I was given the part of Vivian and a trip to the salon to cut off 24 inches, and four long years, of hair.

I was given a script and one week to memorize nearly eighty pages of lines. That first day I read through the script time and time again, continually gaining more knowledge. As I read the character of Vivian was formed in my head. . The character that walks on stage and immediately begins mocking the medical staff that surrounds her daily also has moments of vulnerability. My first response to Vivian was one of surprise and fear. This woman who was facing almost certain death still held strong to her pride; the flashbacks that illustrated her career made me worried that my professors would be the same. Despite these first impressions, I found a woman who was an example of strength and courage. Referring back to the author's description of the play, Vivian certainly exemplifies knowledge throughout the drama. She is a

a scholar of John Donne and applies his poetry to all aspects of her life, even, or maybe especially, her death.

John Donne's poetry plays a large part in this play because it is what Vivian bases her life on. As I was reading, and memorizing, the play I tended to skim over the poetry the first few times around. I did this because I had never heard of John Donne before and his language was difficult to understand. One week after being cast we were in a rehearsal. I was fully memorized and happily spouting off sonnets with no real idea of what they meant. When Ms. Ludlow stopped me mid-sonnet and asked me what it meant I just stared blankly back. After this I went home and really studied what Donne was saying and how it applied to Vivian. I couldn't wait to return to school and tell Ms. Ludlow that Donne must have believed in resurrection because that was what the sonnet was about. The experience I had upon understanding Holy Sonnet X is still one of my best and most memorable literary experiences.

Aside from learning what it really means to understand a text, *W;t* has taught me the importance of love. Vivian was the way she was because she did not show love for others and no one shared their love for her. As I portrayed this woman I learned how important it is to share love with those around you so that in the end someone will visit, or offer you a popsicle.

Being cast as Vivian was the highlight of my acting experience and affects how I respond to many situations in life. There is no doubt that it was the most difficult part I have ever had to play, but there is also no doubt that I could have learned so much from any other role. Reading and rereading *W;t* reminds me every time that just like Vivian's cancer, there is no stage five. We are all at the last stage in our life, there is no re-do. This knowledge makes me reevaluate my actions and makes me a better person daily.

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Humor and *W;t*

Beth Buchmiller

If someone stopped you on the street and asked you to name a playwright- any playwright- who uses wit, humor, and long words against a tragic backdrop of a story, the first name that pops into your head may be Shakespeare. However, another name that comes to my mind is Margaret Edson, and her play *W;t*, which certainly is no misspelling.

Our tale begins with the heroine- or not- Vivian Bearing, who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer, following her through the experimental treatment process suggested by her doctors, and not-so-lovingly details Vivian's struggle to come to terms with her own mortality- and its failings.

The lovely leading lady, Ms. Vivian Bearing, is certainly a character. An English professor specializing in the poetry of John Donne, she has a reputation for being hard and unforgiving- to the extent of being one of the hardest teachers in the school.

Throughout the course of the play, we see Vivian soften and learn to accept her own death through one of Donne's poems in particular. With commentary by one of her old professors, E.M. Ashford, Vivian comes to think of death as "[n]othing but a breath- a comma...death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It's a comma, a pause" (Edson 14-15).

So what of the unusual spelling choice in the play's title? As in most things, "*W;t*," of course, has two meanings. The comma-and-semicolon references to death take a great meaning in the play as Vivian learns to deal with her own impending demise, and she uses her own intelligence and dry sense of humor- and her wit- to carry her through some of the more difficult times. Right off the bat we are treated to a humorous moment, starkly contrasting the dark monologue being delivered by Vivian:

"Of course, it is not very often that I do feel fine. I have been asked 'How are you feeling today?' while I was throwing up into a plastic washbasin. I have been asked as I was emerging from a four-hour operation with a tube in every orifice, 'How are you feeling today?'"

"I am waiting for the moment when someone asks me this question and I am dead.

"I'm a little sorry I'll miss that" (Edson 5).

So how is one to enjoy a play that they already know the ending to? In Vivian's own words before the play even begins, "It is not my intention to give away the plot; but I think I die at the end.

"They've given me less than two hours...Then: curtain" (Edson 6-7). When a reader or viewer is handed the ending at the beginning, what can they possibly hope to get out of the play? In this sort of situation, a different kind of view is required.

As the play progresses, one realizes that it is less about Vivian's death as it is about her struggle with learning to cope with her situation, learning to let go, and learning to stop "hid[ing] behind...wit" (Edson 60).

The greatest step in the course of Vivian's treatment is when the reader- or viewer, as the case may be- seems to have come to terms with her death, and we see this culmination of her realizations, her thoughts, and her resignations when she signs a "Do Not Resuscitate" order. This moment was a real turning point- in Vivian's life, as well as the play. We realize as we watch her decision that she has finally accepted her fate, that her "*w;t*" no longer hides her, and that she is if not ready, then willing to move on, past her "comma" of death and into a new "life."

"Nothing but a breath- a comma- separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple, really... death is no longer something to be acted out on a stage, with exclamation points. It's a comma, a pause.

"This way...one learns something...wouldn't you say? Life, death. Soul, God. Past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma" (Edson 14-15).

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**W;t**

## *Digging to America*

Maggie Franz

Anne Tyler is an American contemporary author who has been gaining popularity within the past decade. Her style of fragmented stories, pieced together by switching the perspective is typical of a post-modern style, but excellently executed by Tyler.

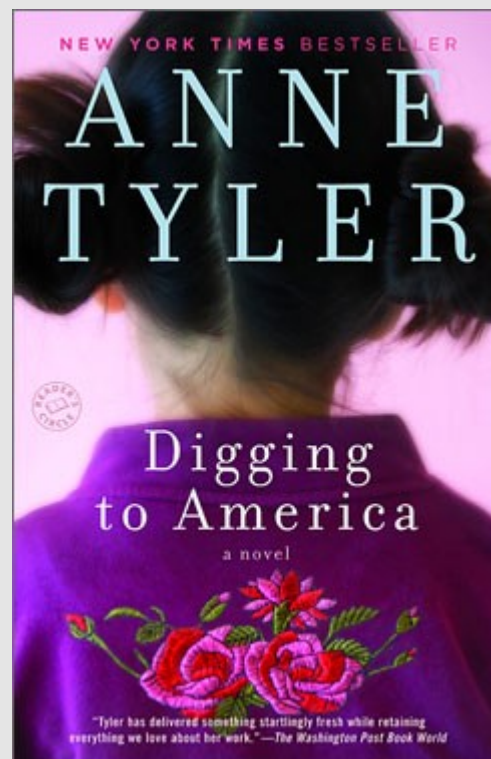
Anne Tyler's latest novel, *Digging to America* is set in modern day Maryland and follows two unlike families over the course of about eight years. Both families are united by an experience they share, each picking up a child adopted from Korea on the same day from the Baltimore-Washington airport.

We begin the story in third-person omniscient. And opens to the BWI airport. Airports are a place with which most Americans are familiar. Most are acquainted with the emotions there: tearful good-byes, boisterous welcomes home, appreciation from a weary traveler that a friend took time out of his day to come pick her up. Most are also accustomed to the over-production that can occur in our culture at times of celebration: too many guests are invited, too many decorations are bought, and everything is photographed and sometimes filmed. In the opening scene of *Digging to America*, these two experiences are lumped together for one very American cocktail of culture and nostalgia. The first family introduced to us is the Donaldsons. "The entire waiting area for the flight from San Francisco was packed with people bearing pink and blue wrapped gifts, or hanging on to flotillas of silvery balloons printed with IT'S A GIRL! And trailing spirals of pink ribbon...at least half a dozen people held video cameras, and many more had regular cameras slung around their necks" (Tyler 4-5). I am immediately engaged because of the easy relation: calling on memories of my own regarding both of these events.

The pan then moves to another group. There is a family that seems to be in the corner and, though it is not written this way, in my mind they are in the

shadows. There are only three of them: a young Iranian couple and an older, also Iranian, woman. They are quiet, also excited but more of a reserved, placid kind of excitement. "The crowd parted... and three people no one had noticed before approached in single file: a youngish couple, foreign-looking, olive-skinned and attractive, followed by a slim older woman with a chignon of sleek black hair knotted low on the nape of her neck" (7). Seeing the two groups in such stark comparison naturally makes me associate myself with one or the other. Of course, being an American who has actually participated in an over-the-top welcome home at an international airport, I have to associate myself with the former group. However, I think I have more respect for the quiet Iranian group. For me, this set the tone for the rest of the book.

We soon find that both families are acting very differently to the exact same situation: they both



## *Digging to America*

Maggie Franz

had adopted a daughter from Korea and were welcoming the girls for the first time at the airport. By request of the American family, the Donaldsons, the two families meet again on the girls' first birthday. From this, an unlikely friendship develops and we are let in to each character's lives by a perpetually changing perspective from each of the characters.

The book's characters are so multi-dimensional that the reader is I became convinced that I have, at some point, met one or all of them in real life. The eccentric Bitsy from America tries so desperately to accept other cultures and shed her "American" image, that she becomes more the stereotype than ever. She can be over-bearing and bossy at times and even pushes so hard in one instance that the normally quiet and respectful Sami exclaims after Bitsy chastises his wife for letting their daughter drink soda, "Oh give her a break, Bitsy...Don't you ever quit? You and your little digs about soft drinks, refined sugar, working mothers, pre-schools...you owe my wife an apology" (101). This was all said when Bitsy had no idea she had even been rude. The way Anne Tyler writes her characters is very ambivalent. The reader sympathizes with the character, even when it is a character that can annoy, belittle, and offend without realizing it.

I constantly found myself in the American culture while seeing its folly. Towards the middle of the book, I almost became frustrated because I didn't want to be associated with such ignorance anymore, but I think this may have been Tyler's intention, because soon enough we find fault in both cultures and realize it is not the culture in which we are born that defines us, but rather our own individual personalities and our ability to love a person from any culture.

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## Questioning Morality in the Face of Mortality

Emily Chapparo

Modern author Kazuo Ishiguro has written a novel entitled *Never Let Me Go* that addresses the profound ethical issue of cloning. Ishiguro writes his novel with insightful sympathy and understanding that allows the readers to join in his views through such strong emotional ties with his characters. He has created a novel that has the right amount of pathos and understanding for its characters and is paced well, so nothing is revealed too early or too late, allowing him to present his analysis of the issue to his readers in the most effective way possible.

*Never Let Me Go* is set in the early 1990's and is narrated by the main character Kathy. She goes through her life as a clone living in a world where she can only associate and interact with other clones. Kathy tells her story through a series of flashbacks that center around three different periods in her life: her days as a child and teen at a boarding school for clones called Hailsham, her early adulthood at the "Cottages" where Kathy begins to explore her humanity and sexuality, and after school, where Kathy begins her work as a caregiver for her fellow clones. Though we do not live in a world with clones we do live in this period of time. Ishiguro does not write in the unknown future, but in our time. This is one way Ishiguro hits so close to home with his writing.

As Kathy grows up she develops into a very observant person and often a peacemaker in her group of acquaintances. This makes her a good narrator because she can understand other characters and their concerns through her consideration and her understanding nature. Because the main purpose of all clones is to donate vital organs for ordinary human beings, Kathy will someday begin to donate her organs too. Up until now she has been a caretaker for other clones who are currently donating. In her work Kathy has watched many of her patients go through surgery after surgery until they finally succumb to their inevitable "completion" (a euphemism for death). This presents her character with the grim reality that she too will ultimately "complete", wondering at the universal question of the meaning of life; specifically, her life.

In the beginning of the novel the fact that all of these children in Hailsham are clones is not revealed but merely hinted at. And then slowly Kathy will bring it up in a story or in a conversation with another character, just to confirm what the reader could almost feel about the situation, but couldn't put

their finger on. Then another character will reveal that clones can't reproduce, and then another that they all have a "possible" (that is, the person from which they were cloned). Ishiguro never reveals a fact or opinion too early, knowing that the reader might judge a situation or an attitude of one of the characters too quickly, and thus wrongly. All of these facts are woven into the story with perfect timing giving the reader an opportunity to ride the waves of Kathy's life with her.

Because this story is told through the eyes and emotional perspective of Kathy, the author, Ishiguro, can help us understand the life and purpose of a being that is so alien and extraordinary. This way the reader can go with Kathy, through her life and experiences, step by step, weaving a detailed tapestry that tells a story not so much about cloning, but of the humanity inside of cloning. And then the reader gets it; they get what Ishiguro is trying to say to the reader and the world. Maybe Ishiguro is not just talking about a hypothetical oppression of human beings conceived in test tubes, but of all oppression of all human beings. Maybe Ishiguro's purpose was to take such an extreme example of alien beings and humanize them so deeply that the reader has no choice but to apply this outlook in his/her own life, with everyday human beings, who may seem alien. To question how much the ends justify the means in this and other issues in our world. Thus we begin to first, question our mortality, and then our own morality.



## Why Give Kids Plastic Guns When They Can Have the Real Thing?

Phillip Sorenson

*Ender's Game* feels like book that I have known about since I was a kid, although now that I have actually read it, I realize I hadn't really known anything about it. I probably stayed away from it thinking it was just one of those books, like a McDonald's cheeseburger, that everyone reads because it's available and convenient. Whatever the reason, it took almost 10 years before I finally sat down with the book.

*Ender's Game* doesn't seem to me like it written for a teenage audience only. In many ways, it reads like a "young adult" title. It's a quick read, not the kind of book in which you need to spend time savoring the language or pondering character motivations; But that is almost the beauty of the book in that it lets you easily picture the story in your head clearly whatever is going on at that time. In that way it really makes the story more accessible. There are some very real issues that present themselves, but even if they don't interest you the story moves forward in a compelling way.

It has a typical sci-fi setting where aliens have attacked Earth, and though we won the round, it was a hollow victory. The military machinery is hard at work, trying to figure out how to make the victory permanent, how to protect the planet from the inevitable second round. To do this, they turn to children. This I think is very interesting twist to a typical "go save the world" type story. Ender, the main character, is chosen to go to the battle-training school for kids. Unlike his siblings, who were too empathetic and too sadistic, Ender turns out to be the most promising candidate seen by the top brass. The book follows him in his journey through battle school and eventually to the pinnacle of success within it.

Ender, and all the other kids, are very young. When I say young, I mean elementary school young, when they start out at the Battle School; it is kind of surreal throughout the book to be reminded of this. Sometimes having kids this young

doing the things they do in the book is hard to accept, but generally it works out, simply because there were so many affirmations that Ender was so extraordinary; the constant reaffirmation that Ender was virtually uniquely gifted made the flashes of insight and wisdom seem plausible in spite of his youth. Still, I don't think I ever pictured the children in these books as young as they are described. I kept having to remind myself that these are seven to fourteen year-olds.

One of the interesting ethical questions that the book raised for me was about what we, as a society, are really asking our soldiers to become so that they can defend us. Several times in the course of the books, Ender expresses his discomfort with the traits that his teachers and mentors seem to be trying to draw out, yet even when he rebels, it's generally by being what they wanted but more so. After all, children are wired to try to please the people who care for them. As hard as it is to picture six-year-olds put in this position, the people that we, today, put in the equivalent position are themselves still very young, still malleable, and cannot see all the consequences of their actions.

I do have to say that I was surprised by the ending — and, yes, this is the time when those of you who don't want to be spoiled should probably move along. It is possible that this is the original "virtual reality is reality" surprise endings in the genre, but I did guess fairly early on that the old war hero, Mazer Rackham, was going to make an appearance as Ender's teacher, but I definitely wasn't guessing that the battle would be fought without Ender even knowing he was doing it.

All in all I thought this was a great book that many people would enjoy for it's pacing, the ideas and issues brought up in the book that are interesting to think about, and for they way you can almost picture it like a classic action/sci-fi movie. Ender's game just has something to offer for just about anyone.



## Road Unknown

Patty Cady

In a tense political environment shouts of “Power to the people!” and “Give me liberty or give me death!” have been heard by those in political control. Such demands and claims, while often relevant in a country with an obvious government, are silent within Cormac McCarthy’s Pulitzer Prize winning book The Road. Set in an apocalyptic aftermath of an unknown catastrophe --McCarthy never clearly states if it is manmade or nature made--The Road makes us wonder what classes, distinctions, or government would appear in an environment with no set rules.

Introduced to a father and son traveling south on a road, the son advises as to the only class distinction among those still living: the “good guys” and the “bad guys”. Those citizens of McCarthy’s book that outnumber all others are described as “bad guys” because the source of food they have found to sustain life is taking the life of others. They have become cannibals. In contrast, the “good guys” are those who refrain from eating others and find other ways to forage for food in the barren, grey, “glaucoma dimming” (3) wasteland.

As self-professed “good guys”, the father and son often refer to keeping the “fire” alive within both of them. This fire constitutes human morals, goodness, and decency. It is that fire which separates the animalistic “bad guys” from the compassionate “good guys”. While we may initially side with the “good guys”, the lines become blurred when we stop to examine the distinctions and ask ourselves the question: What would we do to survive?

While we would like to believe it would not be difficult to maintain a sense of humanity in the face of such overwhelming odds, in his actions and struggle within himself, the father shows that the difference between the animalistic “bad guys” and humanistic “good guys” is actually a fine line.

At one point the father and son come across an old man, Ely, traveling on the road and also struggling to survive. The father and son argue about inviting Ely to their campfire and sharing their meager food with the unknown stranger. The boy insists on sharing, whereas the father contends that if they share their food with Ely they will die faster. Eventually the boy wins the argument and the food is shared. While this may seem an inconsequential argument, the battle between the animal and human side is seen. The boy (human) wants to help and save Ely; whereas the father (animal) focus primarily on his son and ensuring his son lives, not necessarily worried about the life of a stranger.



This struggle is further seen when the father and son come across a farmhouse where they find a group of people locked in a room in various stages of being kept alive so their body parts can be eaten. The captives, realize that the father and son represent salvation plead for help from them. The father, recognizing that helping the captives may mean putting themselves at risk, drags the boy out of the house and runs away from danger. Later, the boy is silent as he works through the actions of his father verses what the boy knows to be moral and right. In questioning the human vs. animal actions his father has taken the boy asks his father:

They’re going to kill those people, arent they?

Yes.

Why do they have to do that?

I dont know.

Are they going to eat them?

I dont know.

They’re going to eat them, arent they?

Yes.

And we couldnt help them because then they’d eat us too?

Yes.

And that’s why we couldnt help them.

Yes.

Okay. (127)

## Road Unknown

Patty Caddy

While the father and son attempt to avoid the “bad guys”/cannibals, for fear of being eaten themselves, the father and son are able to maintain the “fire”/morals, thus creating a power for themselves. This power enables them to trust one another, help one another, survive and overcome seemingly impossible circumstances, and evade capture by the “bad guys”. This perseverance and inner strength shows it is equal to, if not better than, the physical domination the “bad guys” exert over those who are cowed, slaves, and living food for their captors.

Although the father and son struggle against a bleak and inhabitable world as they travel south, they manage to maintain their humanity through their interactions with each other. As they finally reach their southern goal, the father’s health deteriorates to the point where he dies and leaves his young son alone in the seemingly heartless world. Young, alone, and without direction in his life, the boy is susceptible to the influences of both “bad guys” who abound in the world and “good guys”, of whom the boy seems to be the last remaining one. In his time of sorrow McCarthy asserts the power of the few “good guys” by enabling the young boy to find another group of survivors, a family of four, whose “fire” is also burning. This reinforces the idea that the power of one or two individuals is effective against the attempts of larger groups to enslave and rule them.

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# Surviving the Road

Scott Armitage

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* gives an incredible account of a father and son who live during a time when America's future seems hopeless. They are on their own with only a few necessities. Unlike a survival situation that results in the victims being rescued, the father is not sure how much longer the boy and he can survive on their own. From beginning to end, the events of the story show how survival can be dependent upon living and maintaining moral values.

One of the first encounters the father and son had with other people was when they ran into a man who was taking a restroom break from his journey. The father was quick to draw his pistol and question the man's intentions for stumbling across them. The man tried to persuade the father and his son to join him and his group for a meal, but this gesture is rejected. The man then "grabbed the boy...holding him against his chest with the knife at his throat...the [father] leveled the pistol and fired" (McCarthy 66). This situation shows that the father was only willing to kill someone who would threaten his life or the life of his son; so, the moral value held by the father was the preservation of his son's life when left no other alternative choice except to take the life of the contender.

A similar experience takes place near the end of the story as the father and son enter a small, run-down town in search of supplies. As they continued on through town, the father and son are shot at by an unknown person. The father and son dive to the ground, where the father shelters his son with his own body in order to keep him from being the target of the shooter. A second shot is fired, and the father's leg is hit by an arrow. Just like the first incident, the father defends his life and the life of his son as he "grabbed the flare gun and raised up and cocked it...he fired" (McCarthy 262). Again, the father's will to protect his son and himself remains constant – he chooses to take another person's life as a last resort.

Earlier, the father and son are thrown into another possible life or death situation when they discover that their cart full of food, blankets, and other miscellaneous items was missing. They run out to the road and find a man racing away

the knife and stepping aside from the cart: "The thief looked at the child and what he saw was very sobering to him" (McCarthy 256). As far as the text is concerned, the reason for the thief drawing back his knife and away from the cart full of supplies is not explicitly mentioned. However, it is assumed that it is because of the look or reaction on the son's face to the situation that the thief withdrew from his wrongful actions. In addition to the thief showing a sign of

empathy, the father demonstrates his good morals by preserving the life of another person besides his son's and his own life – the thief. Instead, he chose to just leave him in the road with only his clothes. It appears that the father's righteous conduct was a result of the thief making the morally right decision, too.

Another person's life that the father and son choose to preserve is that of an old man named Ely. This old man is blind and travels alone.

Rather than avoiding him or even approaching him in a defensive manner, the father and son spend an evening with Ely and provide him with some food. This symbolizes the true characters of the father and the son. Despite their circumstances of not knowing who to trust, they still showed compassion towards Ely, even though he does not necessarily have the same feelings towards them.

As mentioned earlier, the father was hit by an arrow towards the end of the story, which slowly leads to his death. After the death of his father, the son comes in contact with a family who offer to let the boy come along with them. Regardless of terrible past experiences with other people, the boy agrees to join the family. It seems like a gloomy ending with the death of the father, but cheerful because the family is, in a way, taking the place of that good man who protected his son, provided him with food, clothing, shelter, and an optimistic attitude towards their life. Along with the boy, the new family now has that same responsibility of looking out for each other and practicing good moral beliefs.

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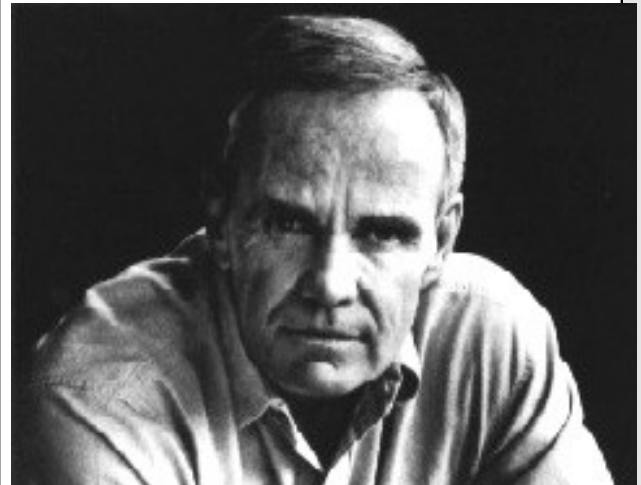
## Cormac McCarthy: Powerful and Real

Matthew Watkins

Possibly America's greatest living author, Cormac McCarthy is the author of several notable books, including the novel behind the academy award winning movie *No Country for Old Men*. He has written ten novels including *Blood Meridian*, *The Border Trilogy*, and *The Road* which won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. He usually writes westerns, though *The Road* is in the post-apocalyptic fiction genre. He is known for his minimalist style and his powerful portrayals of good and evil. His writing is clear and precise, which makes it easily accessible for any reader, even those without a strong literary background.

McCarthy uses several writing techniques to achieve his own unique style. Unlike most authors, he writes with simple punctuation. Readers do not have to worry about decoding a mess of commas or semi-colons. Also, he keeps his writing straightforward instead of abstract. This means that instead of using convoluted phrases and descriptions, he provides simple yet significant details and maintains an easy accessibility. Finally, and perhaps one of his most distinctive traits, is that he omits dialogue phrases like "He said" or "She said." The following is an excerpt from the road illustrating this technique:

What is it, Papa?  
Nothing. We're okay. Go to sleep.  
We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?  
Yes. We are.  
And nothing bad is going to happen to us.  
That's right.  
Because we're carrying the fire.  
Yes. Because we're carrying the fire.  
(McCarthy 83)



Few authors are willing to take this kind of risk in their writing. The techniques of simplifying punctuation and writing straightforwardly are much more common in writing, so I will focus on this last trait, a trait that McCarthy uses to make the dialogue flow more easily, to draw the reader into the conversation, and to make the entire text more cohesive or focused.

The first effect of Cormac McCarthy's dialogue style is that the conversations are much more realistic. In other books, writers often try to put more into dialogue than really needs to be there. The end result is that their characters chortle, cry, or grunt out every other sentence. Moreover, pages of "he said" or "she said" can become weighty, like an elephant stamping out a beat. For example, sometimes these short dialogue sentences of McCarthy's can go on for as much as three pages. That ends up being almost seventy "he said's" or "she said's." Imagine if we talked like this in real life. Try adding "I say" to the end of every sentence. Then try chortling, crying, or grunting them all. Imagine doing this for an entire book.

## Powerful and Real

Matthew Watkins

This is why writers frequently use long sentences in their dialogue. They have to break up all the descriptors. However, McCarthy's dialogue resembles real conversations much more closely. Removing all the descriptors allows McCarthy to use short, rapid fire sentences, just like people use in real life. Each sentence builds off the one previous until it feels like these are real characters having a real conversation.

The second effect of this style is that the reader is drawn closer to the words. Conversations are frequent and important in McCarthy's books. At one point in *No Country for Old Men*, the characters continue talking for ten pages using "he said" or "he answered" only six times (148-157). Sometimes, after going sixty lines without any qualifiers, the reader has to go back and see who is saying what. Surprisingly, this is actually a good thing. This style draws a reader closer into the text, forcing him or her to pay more attention to the words and the meaning behind the words. After reviewing the conversation a second time, the reader will notice things that he or she had not noticed the first time. This creates a natural form of emphasis, without using confusing and cumbersome language, and allows the reader to form a closer intimacy with the dialogue of the characters.

The third effect is the most complicated of the three, but it is also the most important. McCarthy, in using this style, creates more cohesion and focus in the text. What this means is that all the smaller symbols of the text creating a continuously building meaning, much like a snowball rolling down a hill will grow bigger and bigger as it picks up many individual and miniscule snowflakes.

Symbols, in literature, are small details that have a bigger meaning. For example, in *The Road* there are ashes all over the ground and

the trees and even the people as a result of nuclear explosions. However, ashes have a deeper meaning such as death or rebirth.

Words in conversations can also be symbols. When the boy in *The Road* says, "we're carrying the fire," this is a symbol of hope. What Cormac McCarthy's style does is make the dialogue symbols, like "carrying the fire," and the imagery symbols, like ashes on the ground, work together. As they work together, they build off of each other, and eventually create much more meaning than either would have alone.

By not using dialogue descriptors, McCarthy has to use symbols to communicate the emotions behind the words. He first uses small details in his descriptions of things and places, like the ashes on the ground, to reflect the emotions of the characters. Then, when the characters speak, we feel what the characters are feeling even though McCarthy does not write a descriptor like "He said ... angrily." Thirdly, he repeats these symbols over and over throughout the text, reminding us that they are important. Finally, he repeats important conversation words over and over so that we have an ever-changing understanding of what those words mean. The meaning and emotion behind the text build up over the entire book. This way they are not superficial. They are deep and impacting.

It is no wonder, then, why Cormac McCarthy is said to be one of America's greatest authors. His writing style evokes powerful feelings in his readers, and the meanings in his books are deep and well developed. Readers understand them after reading, because of his style. Cormac McCarthy's books are powerful reads that will stay with a reader long after the pages are finally closed.

## No Lies: Truth in McCarthy's *The Road*

Kari Otto

The capacity for human love has no limit in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. McCarthy exemplifies humanity, compassion, and endurance through the relationship of a man and his young son; however, the story neglects all the feel-good pomp of a typical inspiring novel. Through his minimalist writing style, unique mode of dialogue, and candid descriptions, McCarthy cuts straight to the heart of his reader.

McCarthy's writing style is completely void of commas, semicolons, compound sentences, and any other non-basic grammatical form. Most sentences are short and concise; they express the character's thoughts and actions in a direct, blunt manner. Rather than spending pages upon pages describing the setting, McCarthy can illustrate an image in just a few fragments: "The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees" (McCarthy 15). McCarthy ignores integrating grammatical variety into the text; instead, he focuses on just the text.

Not only does McCarthy neglect the traditional rules of grammar, but he also disregards the literary element of character descriptions. Predominantly, the characters do not have names. They are referred to as simply the man and the boy. The formality of names seems superficial in such a grim, barren state of existence. Also, the physical descriptions of the man and the boy are never described. The reader is left to create his own image of what the man and boy would look like; consequently, each reader can have a completely different image of the characters. One reader may imagine the characters as white and another may see them Hispanic. Perhaps each reader will view the characters as he views himself; thus, the reader will be able to connect more to the characters.

Readers can also connect to the characters through the frequent uses of dialogue. Because of McCarthy's minimalist style, the portions of dialogue are void of quotation marks and accounts of who said what. The reader, however, can still follow along with ease; it is not difficult to determine which character is speaking. Furthermore, McCarthy brilliantly captures the tone and diction of the little boy:

Are we going to die?

Sometime. Not now.  
And we're still going south.  
Yes.  
So we'll be warm.  
Yes.  
Okay.  
Okay what?  
Nothing. Just okay.  
Go to sleep.  
Okay.

(McCarthy 10)

The simple questions and responses of the boy emphasize his innocence and goodness. Despite the adversities of his dismal existence, the boy still has hope. His frequent response of "okay" is not a response of tolerance but one of acceptance; he trusts his father and knows that as long as they are together, everything will be okay. The dialogue conceals nothing. Not only does it expose the realism of their frail existence, but more significantly, it reveals the depth of their relationship; it portrays pure love.



## No Lies

Kari Otto

The unspoken thoughts of the boy prove equally intense. The boy has to see things no young boy should ever see—images that trigger such fervent emotion that they leave the boy speechless: “What the boy McCarthy expresses the truth of the situation and the compassion of the relationship through the dialogue, but there are some descriptions that are too harsh to be included in the spoken conversation. Instead, the truth is spoken in silence, in wordless contemplation. After the man has to kill a stranger in front of his son, he feels numb. He washes the boy with freezing water and the boy screams and cries from the pain of the coldness. During this, there is no dialogue between the man and the boy; instead the man thinks to himself, “This is my child...I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job” (McCarthy 74). McCarthy’s word choice is sharp and painful; it cuts. Any other glossed over description, however, would demean the reality—the fierce, vulgar reality.

The unspoken thoughts of the boy prove equally intense. The boy has to see things no young boy should ever see—images that trigger such fervent emotion that they leave the boy speechless: “What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (McCarthy 198). McCarthy’s candid descriptions shock and hurt the reader, but the descriptions are necessary. The grossness of the situation cannot be concealed.

McCarthy’s disregard to typical writing conventions, revealing use of dialogue, and hit-you-where-it-hurts descriptions create a very *raw* piece of work—a rawness of reality. His words are raw because they remain uncooked, unseasoned, and unappetizing. McCarthy presents a lot for the reader to swallow; sometimes the reader even chokes upon the words and wants to spit them out, but the raw reality cannot be purged. The agonizing truth dwells within the reader, but it does not infirm; rather, it enlightens and inspires. The reader must be exposed to the dismay and disgust of the situation so that they can understand the love and compassion of the relationship.

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# Glorify the Ugly with McCarthy's *The Road*

Melanie Nelson and Robert Brown

*The Road* is amazing if for no other reason because it is commercially successful despite being grindingly depressing. *The Road* connects with readers like me, and probably you, who have never had to do live through what we assume to be a nuclear holocaust, or, I hope, have never had to deal with the ugliest of brutalities: cannibalism, murder (at one point committed by a main character), naked men recently struck by lightning, suicide, hangings, etc. This apocalyptic subject matter does not seem to deter *The Road's* readership. I believe the reason this book has caused such a stir is simply because people relate on a very deep level with the themes of love, dependence and travel through a representation of life's journey.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell writes, "Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (97) This description sounds like it was written about *The Road*. However, Campbell is discussing archetypes. Anthropologists have discovered that many stories have a common pattern. If a story is repeated enough, anthropologists and modern psychoanalytic critics refer to the story's pattern as an archetype and *The Road* fits neatly under the archetype, "The Road of Trials" (Campbell 97). Anthropologists and modern psychoanalytic critics would lead you to believe that we connect with *The Road* because, as an effective archetype, it connects at a deep, meaningful level to the human experience. Archetypes are found within stories from every culture and thus represent aspects of the whole human experience, not just the experience of one or two cultures.

As it concerns *The Road*, Campbell writes, "The ordeal is a deepening of the problem of the first threshold and the question is still in balance: Can the ego put itself to death?" (109). In other words, can the hero of the story go against what was before the crossing of the threshold considered his better judgment in order to survive life's trials? The text invokes this question.

Great tension exists between the boy and the man in *The Road* because the man has gone against his better judgment so many times that he has effectively put his ego to death. The father does many inhumane things and the boy wishes the father would be more civil. The child laments, "We don't

help people" (225). The man cares only about protecting the boy and, to a lesser degree, himself. He sees everything in the world as either an asset or a liability to the survival of his boy. He has, in a sense, put his prior judgment to death. The man commits acts of revenge and hostility that we assume he would not have committed in his life prior to his life on the road—he threatens people with guns, he shoots at women—and yet all of these acts seem necessary for his survival.

I love *The Road* because of the father. My own father, if he would ever read this story, would probably call him something like "one savvy son-of-a-gun." The father in *The Road* would do anything for his boy, and he often does. He travels over the archetypal threshold of normality, goes through hell for his son, and in the process does enough despicable things—forcing a man to strip naked in cold enough weather to almost ensure his death, refuses to give a starving old man food, etc.—to be labeled a villain, and yet in the end I still feel a deep connection with this character.

How does *The Road* change one's judgment? All of us compromise our beliefs at some point in order to succeed and overcome challenges. The father in *The Road* has certainly done it, and I have as well. I have, for example, spent more time away from my wife than I would like to in order to succeed at work or at school. I regret that I have to neglect the relationship with my spouse in order to work and hopefully succeed. It is satisfying for me to read about a character whose challenges reflect my own. In many ways, I like the father because he has to compromise his values ("put his ego to death"), and I connect with him because, I regret that I've had to do the same thing. More than just being great literature, *The Road* follows a trusted archetype. I find solace in the difficulties the man overcomes while traveling his road, and it makes me feel better about the challenges I overcome on my own far less challenging metaphorical road.

*The Road* triumphs because it demonstrates how a product of a fallen world can overcome the challenges in life and still love and encourage others to do so, even creatures that are unlovable.



## Relationships: McCarthy's

### *The Road*

Ruth Whipple

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* explores the genre of apocalyptic literature at its best.

He found pieces of flint or chert in a ditch but in the end it was easier to rake the pliers down the side of a rock at the bottom of which he'd made a small pile of tinder soaked in gas. Two more days. Then three. They were starving right enough. The country was looted, ransacked, ravaged, rifled of every crumb. The nights were blinding cold and casket black and the long reach of the morning had a terrible silence to it. Like a dawn before battle. The boy's candlecolored skin was all but translucent. With his great staring eyes, he'd the look of an alien (McCarthy 129).

The journey of father and son begins somewhere distant from the coast. Their journey ends when they finally reach the coast. Along the journey they face starvation over and over again. The boy sees the stark reality of death, the instinct of a father to protect his son. It is true that this is a story that explores the depth of humanity, human nature, but what we do not realize is that it is a telling tale of the darkness of human nature that come in between the bright moments.

The father and son "team" carry the fire. The world is barren and cold. It can be assumed that a nuclear holocaust has taken place and that there are few survivors.

Among the survivors is the boy's mother, who at the time of the disaster is pregnant with the boy. She does not survive the journey to a "safe haven." The mother of the boy commits suicide not too long after the boy was able to remember her. Why, in a time when a child would need the nurture of a mother the most, would that mother leave her son? While reasoning is that it is easier to provide for two rather than three, she leaves them to die.

The relationship between father and son is unique. The man, the sole provider, somehow is endowed with knowledge in survival. Their relationship, and the father's talent, leave the reader questioning whether or not they could do the same given the circumstances. While the father is still a father and the son a son, they share a bond that most children do not share with their parents. They are partners. Partners in survival and in life, they encourage and strengthen each other, giving them the hope that they need to carry on "the fire". At the end of the novel, father leaves son to go to the next life. He leaves his son with little hope, but with experiences he will never forget. He leaves him with the love only a father can give to a son.



Denncha O Caoimh, <http://finphotos.org/>

The man has tried to teach the boy all he can. When the man dies, the boy is still helpless, and then out of nowhere is saved. In the end he experiences what it is like to trust. He trusts a strange man to take him to a place that is better than the one he is in. He meets a woman, the mother of two children, and she shows him what a mother would do for a child.

The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget (McCarthy 286)

She teaches him about things his father would not. In a way she teaches him where the "fire" the boy is carrying comes from. She teaches him about a relationship with God, "She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (McCarthy 286).

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, McCarthy allows the reader to explore their inner core. He makes us question our own nature as humans and helps us to evaluate our relationships with the people that surround us. But in the end, he brings the reader, us, back to God. Something firm and unchanging that man can look to for hope in the dark days to come.

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