

## Original Paper

# The Narrative of Postmodern Ethics in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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### Abstract

*The Road* has been called a “post-apocalyptic novel”, reflecting the ethical elements in the novel. From the perspective of rhetorical narratology, the rhetorical devices Cormac McCarthy used helped convey his postmodern ethics, which was uncertain and full of dilemmas. Firstly, McCarthy reversed the Grail motif and Abraham archetype in *The Road*, questioning the certainty of universal ethics and absolute faith based on the requirements of modernity with the Christian tradition. Besides, McCarthy used impersonal, debating dialogues to reveal ethical dilemmas, making both sides speak, then set neutral plots without favoring either side, which showed the ambiguity and difficulty of the ethical choices and guided the readers to reflect from both sides. Meanwhile, McCarthy portrayed the protagonists with both clarity and ambiguity, making the readers sympathetic but still make independent ethical judgement. He also portrayed clear faces of the passers-by to convey the theme of the Other, so as to make the readers feel the responsibility they had to strangers. By seeing the Other and making choices independently in moral dilemmas, individuals attain postmodern moral subjectivity.

### Keywords

*The Road*, Cormac McCarthy, postmodern ethics, narrative, rhetoric narratology

## 1. Introduction

*The Road* (2006) is the tenth novel of Cormac McCarthy. Through this novel, McCarthy's ethical concerns show themselves clearly: he dedicated the novel to his son John Francis McCarthy, and the original title was “the Grail” (Cooper, 2011, p. 219). Since its publication, *The Road* not only won popularity and praise, such as the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Literature, but was also adopted into a film. It told an uncomplicated story about a father and son, who struggled to survive in the barren landscape

following an unnamed disaster, dependent on each other and living on discarded food. They tried their best to approach the southern coast under the threat of cannibals and psychopaths, a bitterly cold climate, and the father's deteriorating disease. Encounters with other humans almost always brought deadly crises and ethical dilemmas, and the question of to choose self-preservation or saving others was always in front of the father and son.

Since its release, the apocalyptic scenes and ethical dilemmas presented in *The Road* had attracted extensive attention from both Chinese and foreign critics. McCarthy's bloody depictions have always caused controversy among the critics, as stated by Nell Sullivan (1995), "[s]ince Cormac McCarthy arrived on the literary scene almost thirty years ago, the critics have been at a loss about how to view his texts" (p. 115). Vereen D. Bell (1983) even called him a "nihilist" (p. 31) because of his Southern novels. Besides, his former work *No Country for Old Men* (2005) is considered by some as a failure which "lacks moral value and it is a misguidance to society" (Daniel Bell, 1988, p. 35) for its crime writing. Yet critics generally recognized the ethical awareness of *The Road*, and the question is what kind of ethics *The Road* conveyed. On natural ethics, *The Road* warned the world with its cold, cruel, and lifeless depiction of the wilderness and deconstructed anthropocentrism. Therefore, ecological researchers have studied *The Road* from the perspectives of deep ecology and trash writing. On morality and ethics, the ethical concerns embodied in the plots of *The Road* have been emphasized by researchers. A number of ethical researchers regarded the ethical ideas in *The Road* from a kind of either/or dualistic directions, therefore they oversimplified the ethical themes of *The Road* to universal humanity and simple concepts such as "love" and "hope". Some researchers even thought that *The Road* is a work "against moral pluralism" (Feng, 2014, p. 550), and this either/or thinking often divided researchers when they were analyzing the plot of *The Road*. For example, while discussing the father's belief that every passer-by was bad, his unwillingness to put out food to help others, and his killing people from time to time in order to protect his son, some researchers regarded them as "some compelling acts to protect his son" (Chen, 2019, p. 72) which made readers feel sympathetic, while others felt that McCarthy wanted to show that the father's "utilitarianism thinking" (Feng, 2014, p. 546) had no future. Meanwhile, at present, most of the ethical criticisms of *The Road* were carried out from the perspective of plot, and there were few explorations of the ethical thoughts embodied in the writing techniques of *The Road*.

However, the neglect of writing techniques would make it difficult to fully understand McCarthy's ethical ideas embedded in *The Road*, which was the cause of disagreement in the discussion. It was because the writing techniques are equally important in conveying the author's ideas: "... all the artistic techniques and aesthetic ingenuity of the form will incorporate ethical judgments." (Han, 2022, p. 107) From the perspective of rhetorical narratology, literary ethical criticism is not limited to whether the plot and the deeds of the characters are according to the ethical rules. The rhetoric that the author applies is also ethical, as the author is able to subtly guide readers to experience the same work in similar ways through typical narrative. As the representative of rhetorical narratology, James Phelan

(2011) argued that “the author uses the textual phenomena to guide the audience toward one set of judgments, emotions, and ethical responses rather than a host of others.” (p. 321) Another representative of rhetorical narratology, Wayne Booth (1983), also argued that the narrative style of the novel is very important in triggering the moral judgment of the readers, so the author will adopt special rhetorical ways to achieve this goal. Among the various narrative styles, impersonal narration has the potential to provoke moral confusion because “inside views can build sympathy even for the most vicious character” (Booth, 1983, p. 378). *The Road* was written in impersonal narration, and even the cannibals were portrayed in detail as well as the protagonists. Rather than modernity, which glorifies universal humanity and love, *The Road* was deeply influenced by postmodern ethics which emphasizes uncertainty and dilemmas. McCarthy recognized the individualized and unsettled nature of ethics in a post-modern world, and it could be seen from the narrative techniques used in *The Road*. Firstly, the reconstructed Grail motif and the Abraham archetype described the father’s deep skepticism that went hand in hand with paternal love, which constituted an inversion of religious beliefs with full certainty. Using a Christianity-like but self-contradictory belief, McCarthy made the universal settled moral rules in modern condition useless in comforting the father and son’s mind, thus the uncertainties and dilemmas of postmodern ethics were shown. Secondly, McCarthy adopted impersonal narration and use debating dialogues to bring the moral conflicts to the foreground, as well as deliberately designed plots with no preference to either the father or the son, making readers feel sympathy for both sides, thus revealing once again the complexity of ethical dilemmas and ambiguity of ethical judgment. Thirdly, McCarthy portrayed the protagonists with both clarity and ambiguity, in order to fulfil both the mimetic dimension and the thematic dimension of his protagonists, therefore readers from different backgrounds would empathize with the father and son, while making independent ethical judgement without being overly influenced by the sympathy. However, he portrayed the supporting characters with clarity to emphasize the mimetic dimension, in order to make their faces real, and the readers were like looking at the passers-by through the protagonists’ eyes. They became the tool of emphasizing the theme of “the Other”, and facing those faces of “the Other”, the right of making moral choices was given to the protagonists in a state of indecision, and no matter how the choice was made, it might result in tragic consequences or mental anguish. It prompted the readers to think with the protagonists about the ambiguity and difficulty of making moral choices.

British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2002) thought that modernity tended to uniformize moral standards while denying “autonomous moral responsibility” (p. 46), and postmodernity was a situation getting rid of illusion that there was a universal ethical law that fitted everyone, and people found themselves in “strong moral ambiguity” (p. 21). In *The Road*, in a world where there was no longer a state or a social imperative, moral uncertainty took the place of external moral rules. Therefore, morality itself is ambivalent, and people need to make hard choices between often conflicting moral rules. However, in postmodern ethics, such a difficult endeavor is what makes one a moral self.

## 2. Reversal of the Grail Motif and the Abraham Archetype

Judging from the original title of *The Road*, “The Grail”, McCarthy intended to use the Grail motif to convey his ethical thoughts. In the original Grail motif, the “King of Fish” lost the Grail, and only the purest knight could find and bring back the Grail, such as Sir Gawain, who had all the virtues and believed piously in God and salvation. However, in *The Road*, on one hand, the father did not lose the boy who was as sacred as the Grail in his eyes, but he did not believe that they would be saved through his struggles, nor did he believe in human’s nature. It was nothing like the Grail Knight’s belief, which was strong and certain. On the other hand, as a father who loved his son deeply, he committed evil for the boy’s safety, which is different from the traditional image of the Grail Knight. When he chose not to help others, or even hurt others, in order to protect his son, the image of the father constituted a reversal of Abraham’s sacrifice in the Bible. While Abraham sacrificed his son for his belief in God and goodness, the father treated his son as the only meaning of existence and sacrificed others for the sake of his son. While Abraham and his son were both saved by God, the father’s deeds ensured the son’s life but made him grief. Even his faith in his son could not provide him with a two-way solution to his ethical dilemma. The author’s reversal of the Grail motif and the Abraham archetype made the readers more empathetic to the ethical dilemmas, and provoked the readers to reflect on the Western tradition of the settled morality and faith since the Bible.

### 2.1 Weak Belief in the Son and Disbelief in the Other

In *The Road*, the father called his son’s hair “golden chalice, good to house a god” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 28). Born after the disaster, the son became the father’s only faith, and when the father cleaned his hair, he thought of the “ancient anointing” (p. 27). However, unlike the traditional, devout Grail Knight, the father performed the rite of anointing his child with deep skepticism about its meaning. “So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (p. 27), he said to himself. The father analogized his faith in his son “ceremonies [created] out of the air”, instead of what he truly believed in. The father’s faith in his son was made by himself to save himself from losing all hope in a “vanishing world” (Caruth, 2008, p. 121), not out of totally selfless, which implied that the paternal love was, like any love, also imperfect. At the same time, after calling the son “golden chalice”, he followed up with the skeptical statement, “Please don’t tell me how the story ends.” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 28) In the previous chapter, the mother showed their possible tragic ending to the father, that they might be raped, killed and eaten, and their only way out was to commit suicide. She said it was the truth and blamed the father that “you won’t face it” (p. 21). Later, when the father, after killing the robber, realized that he had only one bullet left and could not kill his son before committing suicide, he also said to himself that “you will not face the truth” (p. 25). It is easy to see that the father, though he did not commit suicide, no longer believed that he could save his son or himself through the struggle, and his faith contained skepticism just as it was constructed. Compared to the Grail, the son was more like a “designated but unsubstantiated messiah” (Hage, 2010, p. 145).

Moreover, although the father protected his child as the Grail, he had lost hope in human’s nature,

which was different from the Christian faith that regaining the Grail would bring the earth back to life. Along the way, the father tried to avoid contact with other people and told his son, “I don’t think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 55). However, the father once wounded a man, then he saw a skinny woman hugged the wounded and said “I left myself here” (p. 97), seemingly proving that even in the disaster there was love among people. In the end, the father died of illness, but his son was adopted by another kind family, which showed the father’s mistaken belief and wrong skepticism. The son was not the only hope of humans, and there were other “good guys” in the world, yet he had lost the chance to meet them because of his self-isolation. As a reflection of the Christian faith, which tended to believe absolutely, it showed how much a strong belief would mislead people and make them farther from hope.

## *2.2 Protecting the Faith through Harming the Other*

No more belief in human’s nature brought about extreme subjectivity, as the father saw himself and his believed son as the only subjects, willing to kill indiscriminately in order to protect his son. On the road, the father always refused to save people in need, including the injured and children, while being ready to kill for protecting his son. After catching up with the thief who stole their cart, he forced him to take off all clothes and left him alone in the winter, no matter how much his son grieved over the killing in front of him. In this plot, the father was portrayed in contrast to Abraham in the Bible. In the Bible, Abraham sacrificed his cherished son Isaac for the sake of his faith in God. Abraham’s faith was strong, and God rewarded him with his son’s life and his prosperity. The father in the text, on the other hand, was a reversal of the Abraham archetype. The father regarded his son as his only faith, but was not devout in his belief that his son would be saved. At the same time, he thought that in order to protect his child, killing the others with no mercy was his Manifest Destiny: “I was appointed to do that by God” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 28). If the father’s killing of the hijacker at the beginning of the novel was an act of self-defense, his indirect killing of the thief through forcing him to undress and leave alone was an act of revenge without justice. Thus, after killing the hijacker, the son asked the father, “Are we still the good guys?” (p. 28), and the father immediately gave an affirmative answer. Meanwhile, after taking revenge on the thief, the son no longer asked but pleaded the father to help the thief, and the father’s response was “You’re not the one who has to worry about everything” (p. 95). However, the son wanted to help all and he replied “I am the one” (p. 95). The reversal of Abraham’s belief created a gap between the father and the son, who originally loved each other, and made the readers question the father’s subjectivity, his disbelief to humans, and even his belief to his son, for he did not believe they could be saved, neither did he want to listen to his son.

Along the way, the father had refused to find and save the little boy the son saw on the road. But in the father’s dying moments, he believed that “Goodness will find the little boy” (p. 102). At the end, the father finally believed that goodness existed outside of himself, but he who did not save the boy was not a part of goodness. The father’s belief in the son, constructed out of air in the post-apocalyptic world, led him to believe only in his own fatherly love, and not in the existence of other “good guys”

and love in the world. Because the father determined that his love for his son was the only responsibility, he chose not to follow other moral imperatives, such as protecting the weak and remaining mercy. His choices made not only his son grief, but also made himself skeptical. Zygmunt Bauman (2002) argued that ethical rules of modernity has a character that responsibility “rests with the role” (p. 19), instead of do what he should do while facing the Other. However, just playing the role would not comfort the conscience, which was showed in the father’s last words about the abandoned little boy. Meanwhile, the fact that the father harmed others on the grounds of his own belief coincides with the absolute, consistent tendency of the West since the rise of Christianity. In such faith people believe there is a fixed code to follow, and by doing so one is able to be moral. In the end, the father was not saved but left his son forever with worries, which reflected the author’s reflection on the problems of modern ethics. The father’s ignorance of other moral orders more than protecting the son would not bring inner peace but deeper skepticism, for there was no settled rules which would assure someone that if they were followed, he/she was on the right way. It was a postmodern condition of ethics, in which nobody or external rules would help people out of ethical dilemmas.

### 3. Debating Dialogues and Neutral Plot Design

*The Road* is written mainly in the third person point of view, interspersed with detailed descriptions of the father’s psychological activities from the first person point of view. However, on several occasions when the ethical crisis was depicted, the psychological description gave way to brief descriptions about ethical debates. Whether it was the debate between the father and the mother about whether or not they should commit suicide, or between the father and the son arguing about whether or not they should rescue others, McCarthy did not gave a brief answer which side was right. Each side showed his/her point of view, and the readers were left to make the difficult moral judgment, as if observing a debate or a trial. Booth (1983) thought that “the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects” (p. 150), and the narrator’s impersonal tone could provoke the readers to think like a jury about what was right or wrong on both sides, leading the readers to make difficult moral choices rather than blindly accepting the narrator’s opinion. Besides, in the plot design, McCarthy did not favor either side. Sometimes McCarthy implied that the father’s indifference brought tragedy, while at other times he implied that the son’s kindness would led them to a desperate end. Because of McCarthy’s informative documentation of the various points of view and the absence of his own tendency in plot design, the readers were asked to empathize with each side, and thus gained a deeper grasp of the ethical contradictions and dilemmas.

#### 3.1 Debating Dialogues Evoking Sympathy

In the debate between the father and mother before the mother committed suicide, McCarthy used a brief dialogue in the style of whitewash, making readers reflect on the meaning of survive in the last days and triggering the reader’s postmodern ethical reflection on the paternal love. The mother thought that living on in a depraved world was just like death: “We used to talk about death...We don’t any

more...It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about." (McCarthy, 2006, p. 21) The father could not refute the question, and he even knew it himself that the mother was telling the truth and he was just refusing it, as discussed in 2.1. When McCarthy made the mother speak, her suicide seemed to be understandable to the readers, and she even revealed the truth about the father using his love for his son to dissipate his loneliness. "A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost" (p. 21), the mother said, implying that the father just took the son as an object of love, instead of a human equal with him. It was reasonable that the father's effort to protect his son was also a means of staving off loneliness in the apocalypse. However, the readers would reflect whether the father loved and respected his son as a individual different with him. In the novel, the father refused almost all the son's requests to help others, to connect with other "good guys", and even ignored his son's sadness and forced the cart thief to die, when his son "turned away and put his hands over his ears" (p. 94). It could be seen that the father's love was strong, but not altruistic. It was not the pure and unadulterated morality that modern ethics encouraged, but belonged to the ethics that had personal attributes and particular contemporary factors and that was called by Zygmunt Bauman (2002) "re-personalized" (p. 34). In postmodern state, each one has his/her own morality, and there would not be a universal ethical rule. Just as in the debate between the father and the mother, though they chose very differently, both sides told a part of the truth. The author did not provide a standard answer, and the right to judge was given back to the readers. While bringing freedom, this power to judge likewise led to moral uncertainty. Gaining the sense of this ethical dilemma was encouraged by McCarthy, and this aim could also be seen in his neutral plot design not favor of either the father nor the son.

### *3.2 Neutral Plot Design Leading to Ethical Dilemmas*

In the novel, whenever they encountered strangers on the road, the father tended to see them as potential enemies and hid themselves to defend, while the son always saw them as potential fellows and people in need of help, trying to approach them. However, in his plot design, McCarthy did not explicitly support the son or the father, but showed that any moral choice might have its own reason and bring its own disasters. Depraved cannibals alternated with ordinary strangers, and who the father and son would encounter was completely unpredictable. They both might make wise decisions, making the readers feel it difficult to choose between the two values they represented. In Chapter Two, the father and son firstly encountered the hijacker and then stumbled into a cannibals' shelter, while the old man Ely, whom they encounter in Chapter Three, was a recluse who had given up all hope. He refused to tell the father and son anything about him, even his name, implying that Ely didn't believe the father and son were good guys, or even if they were good guys, their thoughtless words could have victimized him. His deeds was as if to fulfill the prophecy of the father and son's conversation that the "good guys" could not trust each other:

"There are other good guys. You said so.

Yes.

So where are they?

They're hiding.

Who are they hiding from?

From each other.” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 67)

After this conversation, the father and son were being followed, and while the son wanted to travel with them, the father decided to look out for the situation first. Soon after, the father and son realized that they were cannibals. McCarthy didn't let the son, who was always hopeful for humanity, always meet the “good guys” on the road. The seemingly completely random arrangement of passers-by made the readers realize the necessity of the father's self-preservation. Perhaps the son was a more selfless person than the father, but the son's innocence and kindness could only grow in the father's protection. In the end, after the father's death, the son was adopted by a “good guy”. However, the long-haired man also said “You'll have to take a shot” (p. 103), implying that the son might believe in wrong person and die. The ethical dilemma was exemplified by the fact that even if one has good intentions, the others are not always kind and the consequences are unpredictable. Misplaced trust would let the father and son killed, while being wary from the start would isolate them and even leave the son in grief. For the father and son, all ethical choices were difficult to make. Using neutral plot design that didn't favor either side, McCarthy made readers more deeply feel the ethical dilemmas, in which each choice was difficult to make. Zygmunt Bauman (2002) argued that there were no consistent rules to provide guidance in postmodern ethics: “...moral choices are indeed choices, and dilemmas are indeed dilemmas” (p. 32). By using an impersonal tone like courtroom transcript to objectively show the ethical debates, and demonstrating the ethical dilemmas with a plot design that did not favor either side, McCarthy showed the dilemma of ethical choices. The mother's suicide was not unreasonable, and the father's love contained self-interest. Moreover, choosing to isolate oneself or to trust others was essentially a gamble with no certainty of success or failure. “The Other” became completely heterogeneous as Levinas argued, and McCarthy's tendency to confront this unknowable Other was also hidden in the narrative.

#### **4. Ambiguous Subjects and Clear Faces of “the Other”**

James Phelan (1989) thought that characterization plays a strong role in conveying the author's thoughts and feelings: “More succinctly, if a fictional narrative can claim to work upon the world, then it must base that claim upon its ideational significance, much of which will be carried by the characters.” (p. 27) For character's functions, Phelan categorized three dimensions, which are mimetic, thematic and synthetic dimensions. Mimetic dimension required that the characters be close to real people. They do what real people might do and think what they might think, so that the readers would almost forget that it was the author who was manipulating the characters. In this dimension, the readers would develop a sense of closeness and be more sympathetic to the characters. Meantime, thematic dimension is aimed at representing a larger group of people or expressing the author's ideas about some phenomena. If in the mimetic dimension, characters become more individualized and like real people,



then in the thematic dimension, characters become vague and generalized. In *The Road*, McCarthy's protagonists were portrayed with both clarity and ambiguity. On one hand, the psychological activities of the father were depicted in detail, fulfilling the requirement of mimetic dimension, which allowed the readers to treat the father and son as flesh and blood people and to empathize with them. On the other hand, their names and appearances were deliberately blurred, which made the readers to make moral judgement independently, as well as allow the characters to be universal and to "express ideas or as representative of a larger class than the individual character" (Phelan, 1989, p. 12). At the same time, McCarthy's clear portrayal of the strangers' faces made the passers-by seem very real in the mimetic dimension, which developed the thematic function of these characters, allowing them to symbolize "the Other" as a whole, whom individuals would daily encounter. Although the ethical dilemmas hadn't solved and might never be solved, while looking at the faces of the Other and making difficult moral choices, individuals would gain their moral subjectivity, no matter whether the Other was kind or not or where their choices would lead them.

#### *4.1 Protagonists' Images Controlling Sympathy*

In *The Road*, McCarthy described in detail the lifestyle of the father and son. They walked towards the southern seashore, searched for unopened food in the ruins and cherished a tin can of Coca-Cola together. The push and pull between the father and son were touching, as well as the lines describing the thoughts and emotions of the father. For example, when the father asked God in agony, "Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul?" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 5), the strong tone of voice and the series of questions showed that although he had forced himself to be strong in front of his son, his heart had long been drowned in sorrow. The detailed descriptions of the father and son's actions and thoughts achieved the mimetic effect, which allowed the readers to take them as real and empathize with them. Booth (1983) also pointed out that "If an author wants intense sympathy for characters...the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views will help him." (p. 378) However, this sympathy was carefully limited to a certain scale by McCarthy, and that was because of the ambiguity of the protagonists' images.

Throughout the novel, the images of the father and the son were vague, and McCarthy did not even mention their names, appearance or clothes. The deliberate blurring of the protagonists' identity brought a sense of strangeness, which made it difficult for the readers to construct too much identity with the protagonists because of their similarities, for example, name, social class, cultural background, and so on. Booth (1983) argued that the story the author lets the characters tell and the story he does not let them tell are both tools for controlling the reader's sympathy: "If granting to the hero the right to reflect his own story can insure the reader's sympathy, withholding it from him and giving it to another character can prevent too much identification" (p. 282), which means to prevent too much sympathy. Using the blankness of the protagonists' faces to avoid excessive identification between the readers and the protagonists, McCarthy controlled the readers' sympathy to a certain level, so as to allow the readers to stand completely outside the story, observe the protagonists' ethical dilemmas, and make

independent judgments on the ethical conflicts showing in the debating dialogues discussed above. Describing the details of the father and son's time together and the father's ideas made the readers more sympathetic to the protagonists, while the ambiguity of their images made them universal and made the readers more psychologically distant from them. Therefore, the readers were able to make judgments as objectively as possible, rather than being controlled by sympathy for them and believing that everything they do was right.

Besides, the deliberate blurring of the protagonists' faces achieved a certain universalizing effect. Every reader was able to see some parts of himself/herself in the protagonists, and McCarthy tried to avoid making some readers who shared the protagonist's characteristics more empathetic. In this way the images of the protagonists, both clear and ambiguous, had a thematic function that they became the representative of all humans. They were similar to any reader, yet difficult to identify with them completely. Therefore, readers would not be controlled by their empathy triggered by the protagonists' images, and they could make independent and personal ethical judgments. The thematic function of the deliberate clarity and ambiguity of the protagonists was the postmodern situation of ethics: holistic, consistent moral imperatives were replaced by individual moral judgments, and there was no moral guide fitting everyone.

#### *4.2 Clear Faces of "the Other" Calling for Responsibility*

In contrast to the ambiguous protagonists, every passer-by they encountered on the road had a clear face, making him/her just like a real person, which fulfilled the function in the mimetic dimension. During the reading, the readers were unsure of the protagonists' identity, but seemed to enter their sights, seeing everyone they met on the road, thinking about their past and their future, and feeling uncontrollable sympathy for them. From the details of their faces, words and acts, the readers could see their past, their tragic experiences in the disaster that they shared with the father and son, and their humanity that they might still remain.

The hijacker was a desperate young man starving to death: "The holes in it (the belt) marked the progress of his emaciation...had a tattoo of a bird on his neck done by someone with an ill-formed notion of their appearance." (McCarthy, 2006, p. 23) After the catastrophe, there were no more birds in the world, and the poorly executed bird tattoo showed that the person who tattooed him was also a young man who had never seen one bird before. The belt hole marked him as about to die of starvation, so his descent into beasts in despair became understandable. The child the boy met was "wrapped in an out-sized wool coat with the sleeves turned back" (p. 31), and fled at the sight of them, seeming to suggest that he was once in the care of an adult, perhaps one who had not yet left him. The old man, Ely, was weak and blind like "a starved and threadbare buddha" (p. 61), leaving the readers to wonder how he survived unable to run away or harm others. The cannibals on the road couldn't even bear to hurt the old man, and there were people like the boy who were willing to share his food, giving the readers hope for humanity after the horrific scenes in the previous chapters. The thief who took away the cart "was an outcast from one of the communes" (p. 94), and those commune members were all cannibals. He

seemed to be struggling mentally, as he took away the cart that the father and son depended on, but did not want to kill and eat them as the communes did. McCarthy's description of him trying to hide his right hand behind his back, which had all of its fingers cut off, also seemed to show that he still had pride and shame in his heart. Therefore, the father's driving him to death not only made the son grief, but also made the readers thinking whether this level of revenge was justified. In the end, the man who adopted the son was ugly, with broken bones and lips, but the goodness of his heart made a sharp contrast with his horrible face. Their mimetic functions made the readers unable to regard them as blurry-faced, faceted villains, but rather as flesh-and-blood human beings. Thus, as the father and son were confronted with their faces and made hard choices to approach or stay away, to help or discard, to kill or show mercy, the readers were also forced to look at flesh-and-blood individuals, so that they could feel the difficulty the father and son had in making their ethical choices. Because of their mimetic functions, even to support or to oppose the father and son was a hard choice to make for the readers.

McCarthy's intentional detailed portrayal of the passers-by also developed thematic functions. Their faces became, in Levinas's words, the faces of "the Other". Levinas's philosophy of the Other, as a representative doctrine of postmodern ethics, is a counterpoint to Western modernity's emphasis on subjectivity and disdain for the Other. According to Levinas (1981), the face of the Other "signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility" (p. 88). By depicting passers-by, McCarthy put the readers in the presence of the Other, whether as good or evil, and to see their common suffering in the catastrophe. Such encounters with the Other had an essential element of risk, and ethical dilemmas were always present. However, only through going to the Other could individuals gain moral subjectivity, which was not the subjectivity taking the role and ignoring the Other in modern age, but a post-modern subjectivity facing the Other and taking the responsibility. With this subjectivity, people would always face ethical dilemmas and suspect whether he/she did enough, which is "the foundation of morality", for "the moral self is a self always haunted by the suspicion that it is not moral enough." (Bauman, 2002, p. 80) Therefore, when the father and son faced the Other and made difficult moral choices, they gained the subjectivity and became "moral self" (p. 80). Meantime, when the readers were forced to see the Other along with the father and son and to make moral choices in dilemmas, they were forced to recognize the plurality of ethics and their own responsibility, from which the postmodern subject in morality was born.

## 5. Conclusion

Booth (1983) insisted that "an author has an obligation to be as clear about his moral position as he possibly can be" (p. 389). When McCarthy used impersonal techniques to write ethical dilemmas, he didn't mean that there were no moral concerns. However, the ethical condition in *The Road* was not a settled world with universal rules, but a world of moral pluralism with endless dilemmas, showing the postmodern ethics. Although McCarthy's tone remained objective and dispassionate and he did not express his ethical claims in explicit terms, from the perspective of rhetorical narratology, he

established ethical standards through rhetoric devices, showing the readers the personalization and plurality of ethics in postmodern society. First of all, McCarthy reversed the Grail motif and the Abraham archetype to show that the absolute and universal faith advocated by Christian tradition and modernity was at a loss facing ethical crisis. The father took his son as his faith, but he could not escape from the spiritual crisis through playing the role as a father and hurting others, and the uncertainty of ethics was an inevitable condition of postmodernity. McCarthy then allowed his characters to engage in debating dialogues about ethical issues without judgment from the author, allowing the readers to simultaneously empathize with both sides, and to learn that no choice was entirely unreasonable. His neutral plot design also demonstrated that no ethical choice was entirely right in a postmodern situation and that ethical dilemmas would always exist. However, the difficulty in ethics didn't mean an end, but a beginning of new ethics. Postmodern ethics argued that "morality and justice (or, as some would prefer, micro- and macro-ethics)" (Bauman, 1997, p. 69) are real when one takes responsibility for his/her own choices, rather than letting ethical norms take responsibility for him/her. Derrida (1999) called this situation as "Messianism without Messiah" (p. 294), which means to take responsibility for himself in the absence of a savior. Therefore, what *The Road* encouraged was not a retreat into traditional values such as universal religion and humanity. It encouraged readers to gain a deep understanding of the absence of universal ethical rules, the complexity and dilemmas of ethical issues, and the responsibility people had for the Other. Only then could people no longer play the roles blindly, but recognize the ethical dilemmas and "take a shot" while facing the Other. By this assumption of moral responsibility in ethical dilemmas, one can be called a moral subject, no matter what the choice would bring. This responsibility to morality in an uncertain world is what McCarthy tried to convey to the readers through his postmodern ethical narrative.

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