

## Trauma and Existentialism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

Since its publication in 2006, *The Road* has attracted the attention of many academics. The book has been understood by some as a conceited response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center of September 11, 2001. Although the novel undoubtedly shares some of the characteristics which are typical of 9/11 novels, approaching it exclusively from this perspective can lead to a very narrow reading because, as I aim to show in this paper, the message that the novel conveys goes beyond one of non-violence. This paper analyzes the novel from the combined perspectives of trauma studies and Camus' existentialism and shows that the novel's strength lies in both the portrayal of the emotional consequences of a collective trauma and the existentialist message that it conveys in the face of devastation, while also offering reverberations of our (pre-apocalyptic) times.

*Keywords:* trauma studies; existentialism; Albert Camus; Cormac McCarthy; *The Road*; 9/11 fiction

### *The Road: Trauma, 9/11, and Beyond*

Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* tells the story of a father and a son who, after surviving an apocalyptic event that has destroyed almost all signs of life, travel to the south of the United States in search of better living conditions. Although there are hints that a "nuclear holocaust" might have taken place (Cant 2008: 269), the cause of the disaster remains unknown to readers, and the emphasis is laid instead on the protagonists' struggle to survive in a post-apocalyptic world where violence is ubiquitous. Their wish to go on and not to give up strongly contrasts with the attitude adopted by the mother of the boy and wife to

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the man, who commits suicide at an early stage in the story, fearing that they might be raped or attacked by other survivors who have seen in cannibalism the only possibility to survive.

Since its publication in 2006, *The Road* has attracted the attention of many critics, who have analyzed the novel from different perspectives. One popular reading sees it as a response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center of September 11, 2001. This is the case of Richard Crownshaw (2011), Richard Gray (2008), David Holloway (2008), Michael Rothberg (2009), Nell Sullivan (2013), and Arin Keeble (2014), among others. Although the novel does not engage directly with the attacks on the World Trade Center, it was published five years after 9/11 and it seems plausible that McCarthy had been influenced by the shocking events. In fact, the book shares many of the features which are typical of "9/11 fiction." Perhaps the most obvious link between *The Road* and the 9/11 attacks is the description of the landscape. McCarthy describes a country where everything is "covered with ash and dust" and is "as it once had been save faded and weathered" (McCarthy 2006: 11, 6), which may remind readers of the so-often shown footage of the New York landscape after the collapse of the two towers.

Apart from the clear link that we can establish between the landscape described in the novel and the landscape after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, as happens with many other 9/11 novels, *The Road* seems to be inner-oriented, as it tells the personal tragedy of a father and a son who are psychologically traumatized and try to survive in a barren landscape where there is no hope. The failure of some parents to protect their children was, according to David Holloway, a recurrent motif in early 9/11 novels, and evoked the lack of protection of the citizens on the part of the State after the terrorist attacks (108). This is something which can also be perceived in *The Road*. In spite of the father's constant attempts at protecting his son, his lack of sufficient protection eventually becomes evident when he dies at the end of the novel, leaving the boy to survive alone in a devastated world. Finally, as happens in other narratives dealing with the terrorist attacks, fear is a recurrent motif in *The Road*. The main characters are always on the lookout, fearing that something might happen at any moment. For all these reasons, many critics have seen McCarthy's most celebrated book as a 9/11 novel. Arin Keeble, in her book *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity*, even

describes *The Road* as “the most powerful allegorical or symbolic narrative of the attacks” (Keeble 2014: 92).

However, although McCarthy might have indeed been influenced by the 9/11 attacks, there are other reasons to think that his project when writing *The Road* goes beyond writing a novel solely or mostly about the terrorist attacks. The fact that the story does not reveal what has led to its apocalyptic situation and that the protagonists have no names—and thus could be understood as representatives of the human condition—together with McCarthy’s tendency to engage in universal themes in his works,<sup>2</sup> suggest that *The Road* should be read from a more general perspective than that of 9/11. In fact, not all critics who have analyzed the novel have paid so much attention to 9/11. For some reviewers, such as writer Michael Chabon (2007) or Christopher J. Walsh (2008, 2009), 9/11 is just one of the factors that might have influenced McCarthy for devising his book’s post-apocalyptic ethos. Instead, these reviewers direct our attention to the wider sociopolitical context in which the novel was written, and claim that the idea of an apocalypse may well have arisen as a result of the confluence of a number of conflicts in which the USA was involved at the time, such as the war in Iraq or the effects of global warming, among others (Walsh 2008: 48). In any case, whether they see 9/11 as McCarthy’s main influence when writing *The Road* or just as one of the factors that might have influenced him, many of the critics mentioned so far tend to put the emphasis on the causes of the disaster rather than on its implications for the survivors. However, what really seems to concern McCarthy is human behavior in a situation of crisis such as the one described in *The Road*. As he states in an interview, the cause of the disaster “could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do?” (In Jurgensen 2009). It is precisely in moments of crisis when human beings most thoroughly question the meaning of life, and this aspect, as the following pages show, becomes central in the novel’s portrayal of two traumatized protagonists who are left to decide whether life is worth living in a post-apocalyptic world where violence is pervasive.

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<sup>2</sup> As Greenwood puts it, “McCarthy’s stories confront timeless issues that have challenged human beings since the beginning of recorded history, such as the nature of evil in the world” (Greenwood, 2009: 16).

This paper analyzes the novel from the combined perspectives of trauma studies and Albert Camus' existentialist philosophy—more specifically, from the views proposed by the philosopher in his works *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*) and *The Rebel* (*L'Homme Révolté*). Although these two critical frameworks have already been used independently to analyze the novel by some critics—thus, trauma plays a significant role in Collado-Rodríguez (2012), while Michael Keren (2012) explores how *The Road* “updates Camus’ notions of the absurd and revolt in the context of the early twenty-first century” (Keren 2012: 240)—no critique of McCarthy's novel has, to the present moment, approached it combining the two perspectives. While there may be some points of tension between the two, which will be addressed later on, I contend that reading *The Road* from this dual angle provides a more encompassing reading of the book that may enlighten both perspectives by focusing not just on any single event—such as 9/11—but on a situation which seems to affect many people at some point in their lives and undeniably increases in traumatic scenarios: the feeling of the absurd. As I aim to demonstrate, the constant violence exerted on the characters in the story leads them to a traumatic state that does nothing but increase their existential feeling of absurdity, a feeling in which McCarthy seems to be most interested while exploring the different responses that can be adopted in the face of the traumatic situations he portrays in his fiction. In this last respect, this paper regards the protagonists' decision to live with the absurd (instead of committing suicide) and to live authentically, as a form of resilience in the face of their structural traumas, as well as a way of fighting the melancholy of a pre-apocalyptic past. Additionally, this paper goes one step further and suggests that the situation depicted in the novel could also work as a metaphor for the situation of human beings in contemporary society: in a society in which violence is ubiquitous and life seems to be worthless, human beings are more than ever traumatized and confronted with the feeling of the absurd. As happens to the protagonists of the novel, being surrounded by violence human beings are left with two opposite choices: to give up or to nurture their will to live and try to make things change for the better.

*The Road from the Perspective of Trauma Studies*

Over the last decades, trauma studies has become one of the most relevant frameworks for the analysis of works of fiction. According to Stef Craps, although theorizing about trauma started as early as the nineteenth century, it gathered momentum in the twentieth century, “an era saturated with unprecedented violent and wounding events” (Craps 2005: 9). The upsurge of trauma studies coincided with a renewed interest in ethics in the 1980s, a time when the critical perspectives provided by poststructuralism and deconstruction were being accused of not paying sufficient attention to history, politics and ethics (Craps 2005: 5). Craps refers to trauma theory as “an important sub-strand of the ethical turn” and names Cathy Caruth (1995), Shoshana Felman (1992), Geoffrey Hartman (1993), and Dominick LaCapra (1996) as some of the most prominent representatives of this new significant paradigm (Craps 2005: 9). The evolution of the notion of trauma as a field of studies, he claims, culminated in 1980, “in the official acknowledgment of the phenomenon of trauma by the American Psychiatric Association under the title ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (‘PTSD’)” (ibid.).

Although the critical framework provided by trauma studies has been very popular among academics in the last two decades, only a minority of the critics who have analyzed *The Road* so far has made trauma the central focus of their analysis, which is surprising, in view of the important role played by trauma in the novel. When reading the novel, both the style and the themes dealt with point to the fact that an analysis from this perspective seems both appropriate and necessary. As mentioned earlier, McCarthy is most interested in the consequences of the event for the protagonists, and the trauma they suffer as a result of the cataclysm is, in fact, one of the main issues dealt with in the novel. We can find at least two different types of trauma in the novel: on the one hand, the father and the son—and, we could say, every survivor of the catastrophe—suffer from individual or psychological trauma. On the other hand, the catastrophe has given rise to a collective trauma. Although both of these types of traumas arise directly or indirectly as a result of the same event, each of them has its own particularities. In his 1976 work *Everything in Its Path*, Kai Erikson used the following argument to conceptualize the difference between individual and collective trauma:

By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively [...] By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. (Erikson 1976: 153-54)

These definitions are very useful to differentiate between the two different kinds of trauma that we can find in McCarthy's novel. Regarding collective trauma, although Erikson is talking metaphorically, we could say that in *The Road* the metaphor becomes a fact, as all social structures and signs of civilization are literally destroyed by the unknown catastrophe. The few people who remain are left to live in a world where surviving seems to be the end that justifies the means and where there are no legal institutions to state what is wrong and what is right. In this way, all survivors are left to wander on their own in a territory in which the sense of community has turned into a fight for survival, a space where there are no values anymore and where nobody can trust anybody else: the legal system has been replaced by the old naturalistic (anti-)law of the fittest.

Apart from (but also as result of) this collective trauma, each of the survivors of the catastrophe suffers from PTSD. Although in the novel we can find many characters who are psychologically traumatized—for instance, Ely, the old man the protagonists find on the road—McCarthy lays the emphasis on the psychological traumas of the father and the son. The father, on his part, has a number of reasons to be traumatized. To begin with, he has been a direct witness to the decay of the world: he has seen how, from one day to the next, both the natural world and civilization have been almost destroyed, with the remaining life entering a progressive process of utter extinction.<sup>3</sup> Besides, he has lost his wife who, in the light of the situation, has chosen to commit suicide. Finally, in this ravaged world where violence is ubiquitous, the father is left to live without knowing if he and his young and only son will be alive the following day. At one point in the novel we can find him guessing when death will arrive: “How many days to death? Ten? Not so many more

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<sup>3</sup> Many critics have suggested that the image of the brook trout in the final passage of *The Road* points to the inevitable destruction of both human life and the natural world (See Greenwood 2009: 80-81; Luttrull 2010: 19-20; Phillips 2011: 186).

than that” (McCarthy 2006: 141). The son, on his part, is also psychologically traumatized. Because he was born just after the unknown disaster took place, he did not get to know the civilized world. Furthermore, his mother committed suicide soon after he was born, leaving him to face the perils of growing up motherless in such a bleak world. On his part, his father, aware of the pointlessness of providing his son with glimpses of those long-gone days, avoids making references to both the previous order of things and his wife’s death, his silence further adding to his son’s troubled psychological condition. In this respect, several critics have engaged in their works with the intergenerational transmission of trauma, many of them providing evidence that unspoken memories and traumatic events of one generation can haunt the next generation (See Laub 1998; Lijtmaer 2017). Additionally, the situation the son is living through is critical. All throughout the story the boy witnesses very violent and traumatizing events derived from the pervasive lack of ethical values. Thus, at one point in the novel, both the man and his son enter a barn where they find “three bodies hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty among the wan slats of light” (16). In short, the protagonists are left to live in a world which has turned into an increasingly hostile place, with gangs of cannibals wandering around in search of survivors to use them as food. Readers have to cope with a world where ethics does not matter anymore, and where people are kept as prisoners and progressively dismembered, children are roasted on spits, and young boys are raped.

In view of this situation, it is not surprising that the protagonists show many of the symptoms that are characteristic of PTSD. In the introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*—which is, according to Stef Craps, “a landmark collection in the formation of what has come to be known as trauma studies” (Craps 2005: 9)—Cathy Caruth argues that:

while the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (Caruth 1995: 4)

Although the trauma of the main characters is not just the result of a shattering initial experience, as Caruth suggests, but also, as hinted at above, of a constant, insidious vulnerability (See Brown 1995: 107; Gibbs 2014: 15-18) in a world in which all social structures and signs of civilization have collapsed, many of the symptoms to which Caruth makes reference can be traced in the story of *The Road*. On the one hand, the father has recurrent dreams of the pre-apocalyptic world. This recollection in dreams of the irretrievable past points to his incapacity to assimilate what has happened and to his traumatized condition. Besides, he has flashbacks to some disturbing moments of his former life, such as the conversation he had with his wife just before she committed suicide, in which she explains her reasons for wanting to do so: “sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I cant” (McCarthy 2006: 58). In addition, the man is conscious that if they were to be found by cannibals, he would probably have to kill his own son to prevent him from suffering, and he is repeatedly visited by the intrusive thought of whether he would be able to do it—another manifestation of his psychological trauma:

Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you? (28)  
Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time.  
Now is the time. Curse God and die. (120)

The boy, on his part, also shows some of the symptoms which are commonly associated to trauma victims. Thus, he keeps having nightmares at night. As he states: “I dont have good dreams anyway. They’re always about something bad happening” (288). Besides, many times we find him crying or refusing to talk, as shown in the following quotations:

He looked at the boy but the boy had turned away and lay staring out at the river.  
(53)  
The boy sat slumped, his face blank. [...] Talk to me, he said, but he would not. (71)  
But when he looked the boy was crying. What is it? he said. Nothing. No, tell me.  
Nothing. It’s nothing. (233)

Trauma narratives tend to show a particular set of stylistic features which mirror the psychological fragmentation of the characters (Vickroy

2002: 178; Whitehead 2004: 84). In her Introduction to *Trauma Fiction*, Whitehead states that “novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (Whitehead 2004: 3). From her point of view, “if trauma fiction is effective, it cannot avoid registering the shocking and unassimilable nature of its subject matter in formal terms” (Whitehead 2004: 83). She suggests the presence of three characteristic features in trauma narratives whose presence in *The Road* is also recognizable: “intertextuality, repetition [at the levels of language, imagery or plot] and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice” (Whitehead 2004: 84). All throughout the novel, as the examples above show, we can find dreams, flashbacks, repetitions, and intrusive memories, which are proof of the fact that McCarthy drew his main characters as suffering victims of a traumatized psychological condition. It is also worth noticing that the novel is not divided into different separate chapters but constituted instead by a succession of short paragraphs which also seem to reflect the psychological distress and traumatized memories of the protagonists, especially the father’s (Collado-Rodríguez 2012: 61). In addition, McCarthy uses in *The Road* a narrative technique which, according to Collado-Rodríguez, “functions to bring the character’s emotions—and therefore his symptomatic condition—closer to the readers, forcing us to take up the role of witnesses of the violent and traumatizing events the protagonists endure.” This technique is the narrated monologue—also known as free indirect style—a mode in which “the protagonist’s perspective mixes (till his death) with the narrator’s” (Collado-Rodríguez 2012: 62). Collado-Rodríguez concludes that “the combination of these experimental strategies reflects the chaotic condition of a traumatized mind that cannot express itself with sufficient coherence” (ibid.), a claim that seems to validate Whitehead’s contention.

The fact that all throughout the novel the protagonists show symptoms of being traumatized reveals that they are still, in Dominick LaCapra’s words, stuck in the process of “acting out,” and that there is no progress towards the “working through” stage (LaCapra 1996: xii). LaCapra was the first critic to take the terms “acting out” and “working through” from Freudian psychoanalytic theory and use them to refer to the different stages in the traumatic experience. According to him,

“acting out” makes reference to the stage in which “the past is compulsively repeated as if it were fully present” (LaCapra 1996: 48), while “working through” refers to the assimilation of the traumatic memories. In order to recover from trauma, victims should evolve from the acting out stage to the working through stage. In the novel, McCarthy points to the fact that the atmosphere of constant violence and desolation that surrounds the protagonists is what impedes them from moving on to the working through stage and, thus, recovering from their psychological traumas.

Living in the post-apocalyptic world of McCarthy's novel is indeed a collective traumatic experience; no survivors can escape from the continuous threatening conditions of daily life in such context. Consequently, the two main characters in the story are often confronted with the feeling that life is not worth living. Thus, at some point the son refuses to tell his father a story because his stories are not happy stories, they are “more like real life” and, therefore, not worth telling:

You always tell happy stories.  
You dont have any happy ones?  
They're more like real life.  
[...] Real life is pretty bad?  
What do you think?  
Well, I think we're still here. A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here.  
Yeah.  
You dont think that's so great.  
It's okay. (287-88)

Furthermore, although most of the time the father shows his will to live, as will be explained later on in more detail, there are moments when he also considers giving up and committing suicide. This can be perceived in the following quotation from the novel, when he concludes that he would have killed himself a long time ago if he had not had his son to look after: “but he knew that if he were a good father still it might well be as she had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death” (29). The previous quotations evidence that, as a result of the extremely traumatic conditions to which the protagonists are subjected on a daily basis, they suffer from an increased awareness of the futility of life, something which takes us to LaCapra's notion of *structural trauma*. In his 1999 article “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” LaCapra makes a distinction, on the one hand, between “absence” and “loss” (LaCapra

1999: 697) and, on the other, between “structural” and “historical” trauma (LaCapra 1999: 699-700). For him, “losses are specific and involve particular events”—and are, therefore, related to historical trauma—while absence “applies to ultimate foundations in general, notably to metaphysical grounds (including the human being as origin of meaning and value)” (LaCapra 1999: 700-01). For LaCapra, structural trauma is associated with absence in the sense that it is related to “a gap in existence” and it may not be simply “reduced to a dated historical event or derived from one” (LaCapra 1999: 727). Nevertheless, LaCapra then argues that the distinction between these two categories (absence and loss) “cannot be construed as a simple binary because the two do interact in complex ways in any concrete situation, and the temptation is great to conflate one with the other, particularly in post-traumatic situations or periods experienced in terms of crisis” (LaCapra 2001: 48). Thus, the constant violence to which the protagonists of *The Road* are subjected leads them to live in a continuous state of anxiety and melancholia, ultimately increasing their awareness of the meaninglessness of life and, consequently, their structural traumas. The close connection between structural trauma and existentialist philosophy points to the fact that an analysis of the novel from this perspective could complement well the analysis from the perspective of trauma studies. As I aim to show in the following section, analyzing the way characters behave when faced with devastation and with an increased awareness of the existential absurd is also one of McCarthy’s main concerns in *The Road*.

#### *The Road from the Perspective of Camus’ Existentialism*

According to Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall, the label of “existentialism” was self-consciously adopted after the terrible events leading to the two World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Dreyfus and Wrathall 2006: 3). However, the origins of this philosophical movement date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, when Blaise Pascal (1623–62) rejected Cartesian rationalism. Instead of seeing the human being as a rational being, Pascal stressed the “contradiction between mind and body” inherent in the human subject. This view was shared by other philosophers and writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, especially Søren Kierkegaard, often considered to be “the founder of modern existentialism” (ibid.), as well as Friedrich

Nietzsche (1844–1900), and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81), who “form the historical background to twentieth-century existentialism” (Dreyfus and Wrathall 2006: 4). In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, French thinkers Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), and Albert Camus (1913–60) played a key role in making existentialism well-known. These philosophers, influenced by the “existential” philosophers of the previous centuries and also by Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) phenomenological philosophy, helped to popularize existentialism by including existentialist themes also in their works of fiction (ibid.).

What 20<sup>th</sup>-century existentialist thinkers had in common was, as Dreyfus and Wrathall also point out, an emphasis on the individual, on the body, and on “the affective rather than rational side of human being” (Dreyfus and Wrathall 2006: 4). Besides, some of them, like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, went one step further and insisted “that the world is not just lacking in essence, but absurd, and thus incapable of being made sense of” (ibid.). In spite of the impossibility of finding a goal for human existence, this philosophical framework emphasizes, in Camus’ version, the freedom and responsibility of the individual, whose ultimate goal must be “to live authentically” in a world which is understood to be absurd (ibid.). When reading McCarthy’s novels, and more concretely *The Road*, the writer’s interest in these theories becomes evident. As I contend in the following pages, the novel echoes the main tenets of Camus’ absurdist philosophy as described in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus philosophizes about the meaning of life, which, according to him, is “the most urgent of questions” (Camus 2005: 2). As the French thinker states, “judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (Camus 2005: 1). The main reason why Camus engages with this issue is because he has realized that, when confronted with the feeling of absurdity, many people decide to commit suicide. In this way, he sets out to analyze the extent to which suicide is a solution to the absurd. One of the main issues dealt with in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is, therefore, the notion of the “absurd” which, according to him, “at any street corner [...] can strike man in the face” (Camus 2005: 9). Seeing themselves forced to carry out the same actions every day—“rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and

Saturday, according to the same rhythm” (Camus 2005: 11)—men are finally confronted with a sense of meaninglessness. Upon recognition of the humdrum of everyday life, they start to wonder which the true meaning of life is. However, they soon realize that most of their existential questions have no answer. Thus, the feeling of absurdity, which according to the philosopher “is born [precisely] of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 2005: 26), becomes for them “the most harrowing” of all passions (Camus 2005: 20). The situation in which the father and the son of *The Road* see themselves, I contend, recalls that of Camus’s absurd man, even if there is a fundamental difference between the two scenarios that needs to be acknowledged. In particular, the fact that the two protagonists are not only faced with the feeling of meaningless repetition to which Camus makes reference but also surrounded by an atmosphere of devastation and unremitting violence—and, thus, traumatized and faced with the feeling that it is ultimately impossible to enjoy life on those terms.

From the beginning of the novel, McCarthy conveys a sense of hopelessness. After the unknown catastrophe took place, the protagonists find themselves living a daily anxious “routine” in the new wasteland. In this post-apocalyptic landscape, there is “no sign of life,” the nights are “dark beyond darkness” and it is “cold and growing colder” (McCarthy 2006: 20, 1, 13). The father and the son are travelling south towards the coast, but they do not really know if the situation will be any better there. Besides, they are surrounded by violence. The protagonists are always on the lookout, fearing that they might be attacked by cannibalistic survivors at any moment: their fear becomes habitual. The situation is so harsh and there is so little hope that things will improve that, very often, father and son ask themselves whether life is worth living, as has been shown above. However, as happens with the Camusian absurd man, they do not manage to find any definite answer to their existential doubts and until the very end of the story they show symptoms of being lost in life and structurally traumatized: “he walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover” (McCarthy 2006: 138). It is even possible to read a parallelism between the situation of the father and the son and the situation of many people in contemporary

society. As happens to the protagonists of the novel, even if not in such radical ways, the constant and ubiquitous violence which surrounds human beings in contemporary U.S.A. and in many other parts of the world does nothing but increase our existential doubts and make us question the meaning of life.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus overtly criticizes some existential philosophers such as Lev Shestov, Karl Jaspers or Søren Kierkegaard for turning to religion when faced with the impossibility of finding answers to their existential questions: "Existential philosophies, I see that all of them without exception suggest escape. Through an odd reasoning, [...] they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them" (Camus 2005: 30-31). Clearly influenced by Nietzsche and his proclamation of the "death of God,"<sup>4</sup> Camus rejects the hope in the afterlife and claims instead that "the absurd, which is the metaphysical state of the conscious man, does not lead to God" (Camus 2005: 38). In *The Road*, McCarthy openly invites his readers to ponder on this idea. From the very beginning of the novel, the country is described as "godless" (McCarthy 2006: 2) and, even though throughout the book we can find the man trying to speak to God several times, in most occasions he reaches the conclusion that there is no God, as hinted in the following quotation: "Are you there? he whispered. 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? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God" (10). According to Lincoln, the journey the protagonists undertake is, in fact, a trip "with no spirit guide, no blind maestro, no hobo philosopher, no book of revelation" (Lincoln 2009: 170).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus also recognizes that suicide is indeed a possible solution to the absurd. As he points out, "the Absurd is not in man [...] nor in the world, but in their presence together." In this way, "there can be no absurd outside the human mind. Thus, like everything else, the absurd ends with death" (Camus 2005: 29).

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God firstly in his 1882 work *The Gay Science* and then in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, published the following year. In these works, Nietzsche described a phenomenon which was taking place around him: people were losing their faith in God and they were not seeing the deity as a source of absolute moral values anymore.

However, later on Camus discards suicide and declares that the absurd “escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death.” Instead, he sees revolt as “one of the only coherent philosophical positions” and states that living involves keeping the absurd alive (Camus 2005: 52). It is worth mentioning here that, in the same way as Camus proposes to learn to live with the feeling of the absurd, LaCapra suggests that we should learn to live with our structural traumas, a parallelism that reinforces the connection between the two critical frameworks used in this paper. As LaCapra puts it, “one may well argue that structural trauma related to absence or a gap in existence—with the anxiety, ambivalence, and elation it evokes—may not be cured but only lived with in various ways” (1999: 727).

The two different positions of suicide vs. revolt can be clearly traced in McCarthy’s novel, as we find characters who react in two different ways to the existential emptiness they have to confront. On the one hand, there are those characters who decide to put an end to their lives because they have lost all sense of hope and the will to live. Obviously, the character who best represents this group is the man’s wife—and mother of the boy—who commits suicide even before the protagonists’ journey starts. The fact that she decides to commit suicide shows that she has recognized, in Camus’ words, “the absence of any profound reason for living [...] and the uselessness of suffering” (Camus 2005: 4). As mentioned above, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus discards suicide as the better option and McCarthy seems to offer a similar answer in *The Road*, as the mother’s decision to commit suicide is often portrayed in a negative light from the man’s perspective. On the other hand, we have the characters who, in spite of the harshness of the situation, never give up, as is the obvious case of the man and the boy, and also of the other survivors of the disaster, who—cannibalistic predators or not—wander along the country exerting their wish to live in spite of the meaninglessness of life. The father, according to Walsh, “embodies a particular type of stoic heroism that we often find in McCarthy’s characters as he continues in his ‘ardent hearted’ quest despite his awareness of the futility of his task” (Walsh 2009: 262). In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus compares the attitude of those who never give up to that of the “absurd hero” Sisyphus, King of Ephyra (Camus 2005: 116). According to the Greek myth, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to carry a rock up a mountain, only to see it roll down again once he had

reached the top. In spite of having been assigned such a hopeless task, Sisyphus was able to adapt to his new life and to enjoy the pleasure of living the here and now. In Camus' words, "this universe henceforth without a master seems to [Sisyphus] neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 2005: 119). The message that we get from *The Myth of Sisyphus* is, therefore, that, when faced with the absurdity of the world, the answer is in life rather than in death. Camus suggests that believing in the absurd "is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality" (Camus 2005: 58). Consequently, he urges us to live with the here and now and to do "nothing for the eternal" (Camus 2005: 64). As happens with the Camusian absurd man, the father in *The Road* keeps trying throughout the novel to find reasons why life is worth living, no matter how bad his and his son's existing conditions are. As Keren points out, the two protagonists "simply endure and their endurance becomes a major literary representation of revolt in the face of the absurd" (Keren 2012: 237).

It is worth mentioning here that, because existentialism is more of a *normative* theory about acceptable responses to the existential feeling of absurdity, one may well wonder whether applying Camus's views to analyze the choices made by the traumatized characters of *The Road* is the most appropriate thing to do. When bringing the two perspectives together, the message that the novel seems to convey is that maintaining the will to live is the only morally acceptable option for the survivors of the catastrophe and, by extension, for trauma victims. This is particularly problematic in contexts of extreme violence like the one described in the novel, where victims may find it ultimately impossible to accept the here and now and, consequently, to maintain the will to live. In this respect, it is my contention that although McCarthy does seem to privilege, like Camus, the attitude of those characters who want to go on over that of those who decide to quit, he is also well aware that suicide may ultimately be the only way out of that hopeless life. The fact that there are moments when the father considers the possibility of giving up and committing suicide, as has been mentioned above, and that he carries throughout the story a gun with "a single round left" (71) to be used in the case of being found by the cannibals is proof of this.

Therefore, as shown above, McCarthy depicts in *The Road* the two different attitudes which, according to Camus, can be adopted upon the realization of the absurdity of the world: suicide vs. revolt. As also explained above, it is revolt that according to Camus renders life meaningful, an idea which appears to be shared by McCarthy's in his presentation of the story—even if suicide always remains an option for the writer. Nevertheless, it is my contention that, apart from stressing the need to maintain the will to live in spite of the absurdity of the world, the writer also has a second existential concern: to analyze the moral code followed by people in the face of this absurd and ravaged world. In his work *The Rebel*, Camus warns us of the risks of seeing the world from an absurdist point of view. According to the French thinker, the feeling of absurdity may, at first, lead us to a dangerous nihilism which can be used to justify terrible actions such as the killing of other people:

The sense of the absurd, when one first undertakes to deduce a rule or action from it, makes murder seem a matter of indifference, hence, permissible. If one believes in nothing, if nothing makes sense, if we can assert no value whatsoever, everything is permissible and nothing is important [...] Hence, if we profess the absurdist position, we should be ready to kill, thus giving logic more weight than scruples we consider illusory. (Camus 2000: 13)

However, Camus later on suggests that, when we delve deeper into the absurdist analysis, we realize that killing other people is not a valid moral option:

For the absurdist analysis, after having shown that killing is a matter of indifference, eventually, in its most important deduction, condemns killing [...] The moment life is recognized as a necessary good, it becomes so for all men. (Camus 2000: 14)

In short, according to Camus, pertaining ethics there are again two different choices which can be adopted in the face of an absurd world. On the one hand, the nihilistic absurdist may decide to leave ethics aside and do as he pleases—thus, turning to cannibalism and murder—and, on the other, the rebellious individual may choose to live authentically by affirming life and living according to principles of justice.

In a similar way, in *The Road*, McCarthy makes a distinction between the two stances adopted by the survivors of the catastrophe. On the one hand, there are some characters who, in the face of such an absurd and ravaged world, believe in nothing and, therefore, do not care

about ethics anymore. These characters are the “bad guys” (McCarthy 2006: 97), those who do not mind killing other people and eating them to ensure their own survival. This group of survivors is described in a very negative light. By comparing them to “wind-up toys” or to zombies “shuffling through the ash casting their hooded heads from side to side” (McCarthy 2006: 96, 62), McCarthy dehumanizes them and denounces their lack of moral stance, something which, as mentioned above, is also criticized by Camus in his work *The Rebel*.

On the other hand, we have those characters who want to live, and they want to live authentically, faithful to their own moral principles. These characters are referred to as the “good guys” or the ones symbolically “carrying the fire” (McCarthy 2006: 81, 87), as they do not put other people’s lives in danger to ensure their own survival. As Erik J. Wielenberg suggests, they follow the “Code of the Good Guys.” According to this critic, this code is in accordance with Immanuel Kant’s “Categorical Imperative,”<sup>5</sup> and implies following some basic principles such as not eating other people, nor stealing or lying, keeping your promises, helping others, and never giving up (Wielenberg 2010: 4). In existentialist terms, these characters can be equated to Camus’ metaphysical rebel. As Camus states, “metaphysical rebellion is the means by which a man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation.” The metaphysical rebel, he suggests, “confronts the injustice at large in the world with his own principles of justice” and, in this way, “attacks a shattered world to make it whole” (Camus 2000: 29). More specifically, the metaphysical rebel fights against death and evil (Camus 2000: 30). The father and the son in *The Road*—who stand as the best representatives of this group—fight against both death (by keeping their will to live no matter what) and evil (by behaving in a humane way in spite of the circumstances). All throughout the novel the father and the son remain faithful to their moral principles, even though they are surrounded by other survivors who have set their moral principles aside. Thus, they prefer to die of hunger than to resort to cannibalism. As

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<sup>5</sup> Wielenberg refers to Kant’s “Categorical Imperative” as the notion that informs the basis of morality (25). Following Kant’s ideas, Wielenberg states that, as opposed to things—which can be discarded “when they no longer serve your purposes,” people “have an intrinsic worth that must always be valued and respected” (4).

happens to Camus' metaphysical rebel, the father "experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights but also a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself. Therefore, he implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being false that he is willing to preserve them at all costs" (Camus 2000: 19).

The father and the son represent what is left of civilization and they even use the label of "fire carriers" to refer to themselves. The meaning of this expression has been a subject of debate among critics. For Cant, carrying the fire stands simply for keeping alive the will to live (271). However, for other critics, such as Michael Sauder and Chad Michael McPherson, carrying the fire refers to the transmission of some moral values. As they put it, "it is the transmission of these vestiges of the old world, of some semblance of norms and morals, to which 'carrying the fire' refers rather than simply survival for its own sake" (Sauder and McPherson 2009: 478). However, in line with this reading of the novel in terms of trauma and existentialism, carrying the fire seems to refer both to keeping the will to live and to doing so in an authentic and ethical way. Knowing that they are together in their quest for a place with better living conditions and that they are doing the right thing by remaining faithful to their moral principles is precisely what seems to encourage the two protagonists to keep going. Thus, for them, to be carrying the fire becomes a form of resilience in the face of their structural trauma, as well as a way of fighting the melancholy of a pre-apocalyptic past.

In sum, McCarthy is as concerned in *The Road* with the ethical stances adopted by the survivors of the catastrophe as he is with their drive to go on in spite of the adverse circumstances. In line with my contention here, in his article "Secular Scripture and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," Schaub points out that "the status of the ethical, as well as the reason for being, in the absence of the social" is "a central problem of the novel" (Schaub 2009:158). As he further adds, "one may wonder if McCarthy's motive might not be exactly the testing of whether goodness can persist in the face of violence, when an act of charity may lead to one's own disembowelment, or, even more starkly, whether goodness can persist in the absence of a world endowed with meaning" (ibid.). Camus asks a similar question in *The Rebel*: "is it possible to find a rule of conduct outside the realm of religion and of absolute values?" (Camus 2000: 27). By portraying two characters who are able to remain faithful to their own moral principles in spite of living in an absurd world

without any values or social institutions that regulate human behavior, McCarthy seems to be claiming, in line with Camus's rebellious hero, that it is possible to behave in a humane way no matter the circumstances, a belief that also has particular significance in our contemporary world.

### *Conclusion*

Since its publication in 2006, *The Road* has attracted the attention of many critics. One prominent reading of the book sees it as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Although the novel undoubtedly shares some of the characteristics which are typical of 9/11 fiction, reading it exclusively from this perspective can lead to very narrow results because, as I hope to have demonstrated in this paper, the meaning that the novel conveys goes beyond being only a non-violence message. When analyzed from the combined perspectives of trauma studies and Camus' existentialism, which may, nevertheless, be in conflict with one another in some respects, a more complex reading of the novel surfaces where its relevance lies strongly on both the portrayal of the emotional consequences of a collective trauma and on the existential message that the book conveys in the face of utter destruction.

In addition, much of the novel's success is indebted to the contemporary reverberations of the message that it conveys about widespread violence and its traumatic consequences for the human population. In this respect, this paper contends that the situation in which the characters of *The Road* find themselves could work as a metaphor for the condition of many human beings in contemporary society. As happens in the case of the father and the son, violence saturates our lives. One only needs to look at the news to realize that wars, terrorism, rape, racism, political corruption, and the effects of global warming play a significant role in present day reality, the sociological result frequently being an increasing awareness of trauma and existential angst. By depicting two characters who persevere in their survivalist task in compliance with an ethical behavior and in spite of the adverse circumstances in which they see themselves immersed, McCarthy stresses the fact that we—as human beings trapped in a difficult sociopolitical situation—need to keep trying to find reasons why life is

worth living, fighting social injustice and trying to make things change for the better.

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