

Cormac McCarthy's *THE ROAD* – SOCRATIC SEMINAR QUESTIONS

1. Cormac McCarthy has an unmistakable prose style. What do you see as the most distinctive features of that style in *The Road*? How is the writing in *The Road* in some ways more like poetry than narrative prose?
2. Why do you think McCarthy has chosen not to give his characters names? How do the generic labels of "the man" and "the boy" affect the way in which readers relate to them?
3. How is McCarthy able to make the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* seem so real and utterly terrifying? Which descriptive passages are especially vivid and visceral in their depiction of this blasted landscape? What do you find to be the most horrifying features of this world and the survivors who inhabit it?
4. McCarthy does not make explicit what kind of catastrophe has ruined the earth and destroyed human civilization, but what might be suggested by the many descriptions of a scorched landscape covered in ash? What is implied by the father's statement that, "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world," (32)?
5. As the father is dying, he tells his son he must go on in order to "carry the fire." When the boy asks if the fire is real, the father says, "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (279). What is this fire? Why is it so crucial that they not let it die?
6. McCarthy envisions a post-apocalyptic world in which "murder was everywhere upon the land" and the earth would soon be "largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (181). How difficult or easy is it to imagine McCarthy's nightmare vision actually happening? Do you think people would likely behave as they do in the novel, under the same circumstances? Does it now seem that human civilization is headed toward such an end?

7. The man and the boy think of themselves as the "good guys." In what ways are they like and unlike the "bad guys" they encounter? What do you think McCarthy is suggesting in the scenes in which the boy begs his father to be merciful to the strangers they encounter on the road? How is the boy able to retain his compassion—to be, as one reviewer put it, "compassion incarnate"?
8. The sardonic blind man named Ely who the man and boy encounter on the road tells the father that, "There is no God and we are his prophets" (170). What does he mean by this? Why does the father say about his son, later in the same conversation, "What if I said that he's a god?" (172). Are we meant to see the son as a savior?
9. The Road takes the form of a classic journey story—a form that dates back to Homer's The Odyssey. To what destination are the man and the boy journeying? In what sense are they "pilgrims"? What, if any, is the symbolic significance of their journey?
10. McCarthy's work often dramatizes the opposition between good and evil, with evil sometimes emerging triumphantly. What does The Road ultimately suggest about good and evil? Which force seems to have greater power in the novel?
11. What makes the relationship between the boy and his father so powerful and poignant? What do they feel for each other? How do they maintain their affection for and faith in each other in such brutal conditions?
12. Why do you think McCarthy ends the novel with the image of trout in mountain streams before the end of the world—"In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (287). What is surprising about this ending? Does it provide closure, or does it prompt a rethinking of all that has come before? What does it suggest about what lies ahead?
13. Why do you think the author left out quotation marks and apostrophes in his dialogue? Consider how the writing matched the bare bones of their existence.

14. Examine the following quotation and analyze its importance literary importance to the overall theme of the novel: "Scrolls of fallen wallpaper lying in the floor like ancient documents."

15. Examine the following quotation and analyze its importance literary importance to the overall theme of the novel: "...crude tattoos etched in some homebrewed road faded in the beggared sunlight."

16. Examine the following quotation and analyze its importance literary importance to the overall theme of the novel: "...they stood looking where the last of that ragged hoarde seemed to hang like an afterimage in the disturbed air."

17. Examine the following quotation and analyze its importance literary importance to the overall theme of the novel: "Ten thousand dreams ensepulchred within their crozzled hearts."

18. Examine the following quotation and analyze its importance literary importance to the overall theme of the novel: "..see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle."

19. Do you think The Boy is truly good, or is it more accurate to call him naive? Relate this to man vs man (good vs evil).

20. The Man does not seem to believe in God, and society's laws vanished in the disaster. So what does The Man refer to for moral guidance? Do you think The Man has a defined moral code? If so, how did he construct it?

21. Where does evil come from in the novel? Is it created by circumstances, or is it something hidden inside human beings?

22. The mother commits suicide before she really has to engage with evil. Do you think McCarthy considers her one of the "good guys" or does she fit into neither category?

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A book so compelling, it often reaches into the hearts of readers to ask the unutterable, "Could you...would you consider this?" In a world of post-apocalyptic curiosities, readers are drawn back to the inevitable precipice of good versus evil in this Pulitzer prize winning novel.

Man vs. Nature: Coevolution of Social and Ecological Networks

By Stephen Lansing, professor of anthropology at the

University of Arizona and the Santa Fe Institute

Since the Industrial Revolution, we've come to think of nature as the stage on which the human drama unfolds, separate from humanity. [Cormac McCarthy's book](#) brings us back to reality and opens the conversation at the Santa Fe Institute about the impact of humans on the environment.

As early as 1820, one observer wrote that truly "external" nature—nature apart from humanity—"exists nowhere except perhaps on a few isolated Australian coral atolls." Not only do humans directly alter many ecosystems through development and agriculture, we impact apparently untouched habitats in remote regions of the earth through pollution and climate change. Yet we depend on nature for "ecosystem services" such as water purification, pollination, fisheries and climate regulation. For better and for worse, humans are constantly coevolving with species and the environment. Many traditional societies have found creative ways to remind themselves of the critical interdependence of the human and natural worlds—consider the water temples of Bali, for example. Claude Lévi-Strauss, perhaps the greatest anthropologist of our time, believed that this interdependence is fundamental to human thought.

According to Lévi-Strauss, when we think about nature we are always already thinking about ourselves.

In the past decade, scientific journals and the media have been filling up with reports of our changing relationship to nature. The most prominent example is climate change, but there are many others: the destruction of the world's tropical forests and reefs, the eutrophication of lakes and coastal zones, the beginning of a new age of mass extinction. In *The Road*, McCarthy does not dwell on the scientific details of these catastrophes. Instead, he imagines a world that represents their logical outcome and asks us to imagine what that might feel like. What if there was a near-complete breakdown of the complex networks joining humans with one another and with other species? It's a question that stirs and troubles our sense of who we are.

"There was yet a lingering odor of cows in the barn and he stood there thinking about cows and he realized they were extinct. Was that true? There could be a cow somewhere being fed and cared for. Could there? Fed what? Saved for what? Beyond the open door the dead grass rasped dryly in

the wind" (p. 120).

About the Author

J. Stephen Lansing is a professor of anthropology at the University of Arizona, with a joint appointment in ecology and evolutionary biology. He is also a professor at the Santa Fe Institute and director of Yayasan Somia Pretiwi, an Indonesian foundation promoting collaborative research on environmental problems in the tropics. Stephen chaired the anthropology department at the University of Southern California for five years and later became a professor in the School of Natural Resources & Environment and the department of anthropology at the University of Michigan. He has been a Fulbright fellow, a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, a lecturer at Udayana University and a researcher at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.