

Rhythms of Ethical Responsibility: Embodied Care and Survival in Cormac McCarthy's *the Road*

Zayneb Jaatout

Department of English Studies, University of Mohamed

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100701126>

Received: 06 August 2026; Accepted: 11 August 2026; Published: 22 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Critical readings of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* have examined the novel's religious and redemptive possibilities, its representation of ethical choice, its ecology of ruin, and the limits of parental care. These approaches establish that care and moral value remain central to McCarthy's devastated world, but they leave a narrower problem unresolved: how does the novel distinguish ethical responsibility from behavior conditioned by scarcity, fear, and repetition? This article develops the concept of rhythmic responsibility to answer that question. The term names a temporally organized practice with seven interrelated dimensions: repetition, embodiment, vulnerability, interruption, correction, repair, and transmission. Drawing selectively on Judith Butler's account of precarity, Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, Jacques Derrida's understanding of inheritance, and Rob Nixon's account of attritional violence, the article reads walking, rationing, sheltering, touch, vigilance, and restraint as the material rhythms of care. Their ethical force does not arise from recurrence alone. It becomes visible when those rhythms answer vulnerability, undergo interruption, accept correction, attempt repair, and continue in altered relations. The encounter with the thief is therefore central, the father's retaliatory violence breaks the pattern of care, while the boy's protest exposes the failure and initiates an incomplete repair. After the father's death, the boy inherits neither a stable doctrine nor an unaltered paternal code. He carries forward a practice that allows him to correct the father and extend responsibility beyond kinship. *The Road* consequently presents ethical continuity as fragile, revisable, and transmissible without making it redemptive or reducing it to survival habit.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy; *The Road*; rhythmic responsibility; embodied care; environmental humanities

INTRODUCTION

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* begins after the event that would organize a more conventional catastrophe narrative. The cause of the disaster remains unnamed, political institutions have vanished, and geography has lost most of its former significance. What the novel gives its readers is not the spectacle of destruction but the prolonged materiality of its aftermath, ash in the air, cold in the body, hunger measured against dwindling provisions, and movement adjusted to exhaustion. The father and son travel through a landscape where ecological collapse has entered the most ordinary actions. Their central problem is therefore more difficult than staying alive. They must determine whether survival can retain an ethical form when law, community, and confidence in the future no longer support it. The novel relocates that problem from declarations of principle to the repeated work of walking, feeding, warming, watching, withholding violence, and attending to another body.

This material emphasis does not enter an empty critical field. Kunsza (2009) interprets the novel's pared language and practices of naming as signs of a redemptive movement toward renewed meaning. Guo (2015) examines the father's ethical choices and understands "carrying the fire" as a metaphor through which goodness and human continuity are passed to the child. O'Connor (2017) develops a mortal ethics grounded in the novel's confrontation with bodily finitude, while De Bruyn (2010) places care, visual memory, and ecological ruin in sustained relation. More recently, Johns-Putra (2019) has challenged the adequacy of parental care as a model for intergenerational environmental ethics, showing how the intimacy of the father-child bond may also narrow ethical concern. These readings make it impossible to claim that criticism has neglected care, embodiment, the fire, or ethical choice. The more precise unresolved issue concerns the temporal and practical form of

responsibility. Critical accounts often identify the values represented by care or the fire without fully explaining how repeated survival practices become ethical rather than merely habitual.

That distinction matters because repetition is morally ambiguous in *The Road*. The father and son perform the same actions because the damaged world leaves them few alternatives, they inventory food, scan the road, search houses, build fires, and sleep in guarded proximity. Such routines may protect relation, but they can also harden into exclusion, suspicion, and violence. Repetition by itself therefore cannot establish responsibility. A behavior can recur because it is compassionate, because it is necessary, or because fear has made it automatic. The novel makes this ambiguity especially visible whenever the father's protective habits cease to be caring toward anyone outside the father-son pair. The boy's interventions then disclose an ethical criterion that survival routine alone cannot provide.

This article asks: How does *The Road* distinguish ethical responsibility from survival habit when both take the form of repeated embodied action? It argues that McCarthy represents care as rhythmic responsibility, a repeated and environmentally conditioned practice that remains open to interruption, correction, repair, and transmission. Rhythm does not mean harmonious regularity. It names a pattern maintained through variation and pressure, capable of breaking and being taken up differently. Responsibility becomes perceptible when a character answers another's vulnerability even when self-protection would permit indifference or harm. The boy is crucial to this distinction. He does not simply receive the father's moral identity; he repeatedly tests it, exposes its contradictions, and extends its demands toward strangers. What he inherits is therefore not a finished paternal ethic but a revisable practice of attention and restraint. Four theoretical coordinates support the close reading. Butler's (2004) precarity clarifies relational vulnerability; Alaimo's (2010) trans-corporeality locates that vulnerability in material exchange; Nixon's (2011) slow violence describes the incremental deterioration of the aftermath, not the possibly sudden originating event; and Derrida's (1993/1994) account of inheritance frames transmission as critical selection rather than passive receipt. These concepts remain analytical supports for McCarthy's scenes rather than substitutes for them.

The argument proceeds in four stages. The first section defines the seven dimensions of rhythmic responsibility and distinguishes the concept from care ethics, relational responsibility, embodied ethics, and habit. The second examines the environmental conditions that shape the rhythms of bodily care. The third turns to "carrying the fire" as a symbolic language whose ethical meaning is enacted through practice and inherited through critical selection. The fourth centers rupture and repair, especially the thief episode, to show why the boy's responsibility cannot be reduced to obedience or survival conditioning. A final section reads the father's death, the new family, and the trout coda as an uncertain transmission of care rather than proof of either redemption or absolute despair.

From Moral Principle to Rhythmic Responsibility

The disappearance of institutional authority in *The Road* does not produce a world without norms. It exposes how norms depend on material relations that are often concealed when social structures remain intact. The father has no court, religious community, school, or civic order to confirm that he is acting well. Even the categories he uses "good guys" and "bad guys" have no external authority. Their meaning must be produced within conduct. The question is no longer whether a rule can be stated but whether a relation can be sustained without converting vulnerability into an opportunity for domination.

Butler's (2004) account of precarity clarifies the pair's unequal dependence, neither life is self-sufficient, but the boy relies on the father's knowledge, physical strength, and decisions. Early in the novel, the child is described as the father's "warrant," a formulation that gives the boy ethical importance while also making him authorize the father's endurance (McCarthy, 2006, p. 4). After killing the road agent, the father turns this dependence into a mandate; "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 77). The declaration joins care, divine authorization, and lethal power. Paternal protection is indispensable, yet its self-appointed authority can make the father treat his judgment as beyond correction.

Rhythmic responsibility names the temporally organized practice through which vulnerable lives are sustained under material and environmental pressure. It has seven interrelated dimensions. Repetition gives care continuity across meals, nights, journeys, and recurring danger. Embodiment locates responsibility in concrete acts such as

feeding, warming, touching, sheltering, watching, and adjusting pace. Vulnerability makes those acts responsive to dependence, exposure, and the possibility of loss. These first three dimensions explain how care acquires duration and material form. The remaining dimensions explain how repetition becomes ethically answerable. Interruption exposes a moment when an established practice no longer serves vulnerability or turns into harm. Correction redirects perception and judgment, often through another person's protest. Repair attempts to restore relation without pretending that the injury can be erased. Transmission allows the practice to continue through another person in a revised form. These dimensions are not a rigid linear sequence, an act of correction may fail, repair may remain incomplete, and transmission may include refusal. Together, however, they identify rhythm as patterned responsiveness under pressure, not harmonious repetition.

Rhythmic responsibility does not replace care ethics. Care ethics establishes the moral and political significance of attending to needs within relations of dependence and challenges the fiction of an autonomous moral subject (Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013). Tronto's account also makes maintenance and repair central to care. The present concept therefore cannot claim repetition, dependence, or repair as discoveries. Its narrower contribution is temporal and literary, it tracks how a practice of care is repeated, becomes exclusionary, is interrupted, undergoes correction, attempts repair, and passes to another agent under altered conditions. Nor does rhythmic responsibility compete with relational responsibility or embodied ethics. Butler (2004) explains why obligation begins in a vulnerability that precedes autonomous choice, while Alaimo (2010) shows how bodily life is constituted through material exchanges with damaged environments. Rhythmic responsibility takes relationality and embodiment as conditions, then asks how conduct changes across time. Its distinctive object is neither care as a moral value, relationality as the source of obligation, nor embodiment as the material site of ethics. It is the changing pattern through which embodied care is enacted and made answerable to failure. Habit merely preserves a sequence; responsibility appears when the sequence can register another's unmet need, admit interruption, and change course.

The novel's form supports this account. Its short sections move through inventories, searches, meals, fires, dreams, coughing, and renewed travel. Plot advances, but the experience of reading is dominated by return. McCarthy's paratactic sequences often place one action beside another without explaining their moral relation. The reader must notice changes in pace, allocation, touch, and speech. This formal economy does not eliminate ethical reflection; it relocates reflection into comparison. A meal shared with the old man gains force beside meals protected from strangers. The father's tenderness toward the boy becomes ethically unstable beside his treatment of the thief. Repetition supplies the pattern through which variation can be judged. The phrase "we're carrying the fire" belongs to this formal rhythm. It returns as reassurance, identity, promise, and test, but the novel never fixes it into one definition. Guo (2015) is right to emphasize its metaphorical function and its connection to ethical choice. The phrase also carries religious, Promethean, communal, and narrative associations that cannot be dismissed. Its importance, however, is not exhausted by symbolic interpretation. A symbol can name goodness while the person who invokes it acts cruelly. McCarthy makes the fire ethically consequential by attaching it to repeated conduct. The phrase matters when it regulates what the characters do, when it is contradicted by their actions, and when another character uses it to demand a change. This distinction also qualifies claims that the novel replaces belief with bodily practice. Religious language remains present, especially near the end, and the fire retains metaphysical resonance. The ethical argument developed here does not require the disappearance of symbolism or theology. It asks a different question, how does any declared value become credible in a world where no institution can enforce it? *The Road* answers through enactment. The fire is believable only to the extent that bodies carry it through food, warmth, restraint, and response.

Embodied Care Under Environmental Exposure

The rhythms of care in *The Road* are inseparable from environmental damage. The landscape is not a passive setting through which an already formed moral subject moves. Ash determines visibility and breath; cold dictates proximity; contaminated or scarce food reorganizes time; the absence of animal and plant life makes every remaining resource finite. McCarthy compresses this condition in the vision of "the cold relentless circling of the intestate earth" (2006, p. 130). "Intestate" describes more than barrenness. It imagines a world that has died without leaving an orderly inheritance, a material estate that cannot be transferred intact to the child. Alaimo's (2010) trans-corporeality provides a precise vocabulary for this situation. The bodies in *The Road* do not confront "the environment" from a protected exterior. They inhale it, absorb its cold, ingest what can still be found within

it, and weaken as its systems fail. The father's cough is simultaneously personal illness and environmental record. The boy's hunger cannot be separated from ecological collapse, just as their fatigue cannot be separated from ruined infrastructures and prolonged movement. Ethical capacity is material in this sense. Patience, judgment, and generosity are exercised by bodies whose energy, temperature, and safety are continually eroded.

Nixon's (2011) description of slow violence as “incremental and accretive” (p. 2) helps explain the novel's attention to deterioration, but the concept requires careful use. The original catastrophe may have been sudden; McCarthy refuses to specify it. What becomes slow is the violence of the aftermath. Malnutrition, respiratory exposure, cold, species loss, and the collapse of shelter unfold through duration. They lack the dramatic visibility of the initial event but steadily reduce the conditions of life. The narrative's repetitive pace formalizes this attrition. Each return to hunger or coughing resembles the last while registering a body that has less capacity than before. Care responds by organizing limited capacity. Food is not simply possessed; it is counted, divided, delayed, and sometimes offered. Warmth is produced through the labor of collecting fuel, finding cover, drying clothing, and arranging bodies. Sleep must be distributed with vigilance because one person's rest requires another's watchfulness. Walking is adjusted to illness and the shorter stride of the child. Touch checks temperature, offers reassurance, and keeps the pair oriented in darkness. These gestures are ethically significant because they convert scarce material resources into a relation. A blanket, a portion, or a pause becomes care through its allocation.

Sleep demonstrates how thoroughly protection has entered bodily rhythm. Rest never suspends responsibility; it redistributes exposure. The father chooses concealed places, listens while the boy sleeps, and wakes to check danger, weather, and the child's condition. The arrangement is caring because one body accepts wakefulness so another can become temporarily defenseless. It is also asymmetrical. The father's vigilance gives him authority over when they rest, when they move, and what the boy is allowed to know. The same routine that keeps the child alive can restrict his agency. McCarthy therefore refuses the easy equation of care with gentleness. Care is a form of power whose ethical quality depends on how protection and vulnerability are managed.

Food makes the relation equally visible. Dividing a tin is arithmetical, but the calculation includes judgments about whose need counts, what must be preserved for later, and how much uncertainty the pair can bear. The father sometimes conceals his own deprivation so that the child will eat, turning self-denial into paternal care. The boy, however, notices unequal portions and resists being made the sole beneficiary. His attention converts receiving into another kind of responsibility. Care circulates when the person protected begins to question the costs imposed on the protector and on those left outside the exchange. The allocation is never innocent. The father routinely gives priority to the boy, and the narrative invites readers to understand why. Yet the same priority can make other lives appear expendable. The father refuses the boy's requests to help strangers because every shared resource may shorten the child's survival. Johns-Putra's (2019, pp. 56–81) critique of parental care is important here, intimate concern for one's own child can model responsibility toward the future while remaining ethically narrow and anthropocentric. *The Road* does not solve this problem through the father's devotion. It dramatizes the conflict between intensive care for one vulnerable person and responsibility toward lives outside the family.

The boy keeps that conflict visible. His attention repeatedly moves toward people the father has classified as threats, burdens, or lost causes. He asks about a child glimpsed in a town, wants to help the burned man, worries about the people they leave behind, and insists that starvation cannot justify cannibalism. In one of the novel's clearest exchanges, he asks whether they would ever eat another person even if they were starving, and the father answers that they would not, acknowledging that they are already starving (McCarthy, 2006, p. 128). The prohibition does not maximize survival. It establishes a limit within survival, a refusal to preserve one body by turning another into material.

The bunker episode must also be read through material allocation rather than treated as evidence that comfort weakens ethics. The stored food and water temporarily release the pair from extreme scarcity. The father inventories the supplies, washes the boy, prepares meals, and permits rest. Abundance does not dissolve their care; it expands what care can presently provide. They leave because the refuge cannot be secured indefinitely and discovery would trap them, not because suffering is required for moral alertness. The episode exposes a harder truth, adequate resources make care easier, but they cannot restore a stable social world. Responsibility

should not be romanticized as a virtue produced by deprivation. Scarcity tests and deforms ethical relations; it is not their moral source.

Arrival at the coast delivers a related disappointment. The journey south has given movement a provisional direction, but the sea offers neither warmth nor rescue. The father's plan cannot change the ecological conditions that govern their lives. Once the hoped-for destination fails, ordinary routines resume, searching, drying, rationing, guarding, and moving. This is not proof that direction has never mattered. The coast has organized effort and kept the pair oriented. Its failure shows, however, that ethical continuity cannot depend on the destination fulfilling its promise. Care must survive the collapse of the plan that carried it forward. Movement itself should not be idealized. "Going on" can preserve life, but it can also become a command that overrides grief, fatigue, and the claims of people left behind. The father repeatedly decides when attention must end and travel resume. The boy's questions slow that tempo. His reluctance to leave a scene is ethically important because it interrupts the conversion of every encounter into an obstacle. Rhythmic responsibility therefore includes both motion and pause, the discipline to continue and the capacity to stop when continuation would make another life disappear from concern.

Environmental exposure therefore performs two opposed functions in the novel. It makes dependence undeniable, but it also narrows attention. Hunger can intensify tenderness toward the child while making the stranger's need intolerable. Fear can sharpen vigilance and justify cruelty. Rhythmic responsibility develops within this contradiction. The body must remain responsive under pressure without treating pressure as purification. Care is ethical not because it emerges from ruins but because it continues to negotiate how the burdens of those ruins are distributed.

Carrying the Fire: Inheritance Without Guarantee

The fire is the novel's most concentrated language for ethical continuity. It has consequently attracted symbolic, religious, and humanist readings. Guo (2015) connects it to the father's choice to remain good and to transmit humanity to the child. Kunsu (2009) places the phrase within a broader linguistic movement toward renewed meaning. Those interpretations identify real dimensions of the refrain, but symbolism alone cannot account for the novel's ethical tension. The father can say that they carry the fire while acting in ways the boy recognizes as incompatible with it. The phrase does not guarantee conduct. It creates a standard that must be made and remade through practice. The literal fires threaded through the journey keep the refrain attached to material need. Fire warms the boy, dries wet clothing, makes food safer, and marks a temporary place of rest. It also consumes scarce fuel and risks making the pair visible. Maintaining it requires judgment about location, duration, and danger. The symbolic fire gains force from this practical ambivalence. It is not an abstract light untouched by the ruined environment; it is heat that must be produced, protected, and sometimes extinguished. Carrying it describes a value, but also the labor and risk required to keep a vulnerable body warm.

Its earliest ethical work is relational. "We're carrying the fire" reassures the boy that their survival has a form and a limit (McCarthy, 2006, p. 83). They do not eat other people, abandon one another, or deliberately become the figures they fear. Yet the phrase remains undefined enough to require interpretation in each new encounter. It does not give the father a rulebook for deciding how much food to share or how much danger to accept. Instead, it binds both characters to an identity that their behavior must continually substantiate. The fire is thus symbolic and procedural, it names a value while requiring that value to be realized through embodied action. The distinction becomes clearer when inheritance is considered as a task. Derrida (1993/1994) refuses the idea that inheritance is a complete possession transferred unchanged from one generation to another. A legacy must be selected, interpreted, and reaffirmed under conditions its source cannot fully anticipate. That structure describes the boy's relation to the father. He receives stories, prohibitions, survival skills, and a vocabulary of goodness, but these elements do not form a coherent doctrine. The father's conduct is itself divided. He teaches restraint and tenderness while also acting through secrecy, threat, and retaliatory violence. To inherit him responsibly, the boy cannot reproduce every paternal action.

Much of the transmission occurs without explicit teaching. The boy learns the timing of care by watching the father distribute food before eating, prepare a protected place to sleep, conceal fear long enough to keep them moving, and direct scarce energy toward the weaker body. These actions form a practical repertoire. Their

repetition gives the child an embodied sense of what attention looks like before he can explain it. The novel's many observations that the boy watches the father matter because ethical learning takes place through posture and sequence as much as through speech. What passes between them is a way of noticing need and adjusting conduct.

The fire gives that repertoire a memorable verbal form. Near death, the father tells the boy that the fire is inside him and has always been there, "I can see it" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 279). The assurance appears to make the father the source and witness of the child's moral identity, but the scene also loosens the fire from paternal possession. If it is already within the boy, it cannot depend on the father's continued authority. The child will have to decide what carrying it requires in circumstances the father will not enter. Transmission becomes possible at the moment control becomes impossible. The father's stories of the lost world cannot provide the same continuity. Many of his memories belong to objects, places, and living systems the boy has never experienced. They can console, but they can also burden the child with nostalgia for a world unavailable to him. The fire differs because it can be practiced in the present. It does not require the boy to reproduce the father's memories or accept the past as a model of wholeness. Its content remains open enough to travel into conditions where former names, institutions, and expectations no longer function.

The father's death therefore does not complete a simple movement from instruction to obedience. The boy has already shown that he can judge the person who taught him. His moral vocabulary comes from the father, but his use of it exceeds paternal intention. When he insists on helping others, he is not rejecting the fire; he is contesting the father's restricted application of it. Fidelity to the demand of care may therefore require disobedience to the one who first named that demand. The boy does not invent himself independently, yet neither is he only the container of a paternal legacy.

Formal repetition reinforces this transfer. The refrain returns when certainty is weakest, but each occurrence changes who speaks, who answers, and what the phrase must do. At first, the father stabilizes the boy through it. Later, the boy asks questions that force the father to defend the identity it names. At the end, the child uses the fire to evaluate an unfamiliar man and the community he offers. Repetition carries memory while allowing altered use. The words remain recognizable; their ethical authority shifts toward the person who has learned to ask whether action corresponds to them. The boy consequently inherits an evaluative pattern, not an undivided paternal example. He learns how the father cares and how that care can fail. Paternal violence enters the legacy as negative knowledge, something received in order not to be repeated. The fire therefore signifies no pure continuity between generations. It persists through selection, refusal, and revision.

Rupture, Repair, and Responsibility Beyond Kinship

The difference between ethical rhythm and survival routine becomes clearest in encounters with strangers. Within the father-son bond, protection and biological interest largely coincide. The father has compelling emotional and practical reasons to preserve the child, and the child depends on him. Encounters beyond that bond create harder tests because responsiveness may consume resources, delay movement, or increase exposure to violence. The boy's concern for strangers repeatedly introduces precisely those costs. The burned man on the road establishes the conflict early. The boy wants to stop, while the father judges that they can do nothing and must continue. The decision is understandable in survival terms, they have almost no capacity to treat catastrophic injury, and remaining visible creates danger. Yet the boy does not allow incapacity to erase the man's claim on them. His distress keeps the abandoned person ethically present even after practical help has been refused. The scene does not prove that compassion can solve devastation. It shows that the father's calculation of possibility and the boy's recognition of vulnerability are not identical.

The encounter with the old man called Ely develops a more material response. The boy persuades his father to offer food and permit a temporary companionship. Their provisions do not transform Ely's condition, and his conversation provides no stable spiritual wisdom. The value of the episode lies in its limited sharing. A meal interrupts the default isolation of the road without pretending to rebuild society. Care appears as a finite redistribution of time and food. Its scale is small, but it exceeds the closed economy of parental survival.

The boy's repeated concern for another child works similarly. He cannot know whether the child is real, safe, or reachable, yet he continues to ask about him. The father treats pursuit as dangerous; the boy experiences departure as possible abandonment. Here the novel reveals an essential difference in ethical perception. The father sees uncertain strangers through threat assessment, while the boy also imagines them as lives with needs comparable to his own. Neither perception can simply replace the other. Vulnerability without caution would be fatal, but caution without interruption risks making indifference permanent.

The thief episode brings this conflict to crisis. After the man steals their cart and provisions, the father recovers the goods and forces him to remove his clothes and shoes. He leaves the thief exposed to cold, transforming the recovery of resources into a potentially lethal punishment. The act follows a survival logic of deterrence and retaliation, but it breaks the rhythms of proportion and protection that have defined the father's care for the boy. The child immediately recognizes the breach. His plea "He was just hungry, Papa" reframes the thief as another vulnerable body instead of reducing him to the act of theft (McCarthy, 2006, p. 259).

The boy's response is ethically decisive because it interrupts an action that directly benefits their survival. Keeping the thief's clothes poses no additional material cost, yet returning them requires the father to relinquish revenge and accept the possibility that an enemy remains alive. The boy weeps and continues protesting until the father turns back. They do not find the man; they leave his clothes and shoes on the road (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 256–260). Repair is therefore attempted but incomplete. The thief's suffering cannot be undone, and the narrative provides no assurance that he recovers the clothing or survives.

The exchange after the punishment reveals how protective responsibility becomes self-authorizing. The father tells the child, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything." The boy answers, "Yes I am. . . . I am the one" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 259). The reply contests the father's monopoly on ethical judgment. The boy worries about the life paternal protection has excluded, refusing to let the burden of care grant unlimited punitive power. Responsibility is separated from control, protecting the child does not make every protective decision ethically valid. That incompleteness strengthens the ethical argument. If the scene ended in full restoration, care could appear as an easy mechanism that cancels violence. Instead, McCarthy shows a rhythm damaged by action and only partially resumed. The father's return does not make his conduct good; it acknowledges that the boy's judgment has altered what happens next. Responsibility consists here in the capacity to be stopped, to recognize a breach, and to redirect conduct despite the impossibility of erasing harm.

The scene also changes the direction of inheritance. The father is the child's protector and teacher, but the boy becomes the agent who recalls him to the meaning of the fire. He does not argue from an abstract philosophy. He names hunger, cold, fear, and probable death. The short declarative sentences keep returning attention to the thief's exposed body, while the repeated "I am" in the boy's reply appropriates the father's language of responsibility. McCarthy thus gives the child agency through interruption, he cannot command the father, but his sustained protest changes what the father does.

The episode condenses the concept's dimensions into a textual sequence. Repeated paternal care has established attention to hunger, temperature, and bodily exposure; the punishment interrupts that pattern by inflicting exposure on another person. The boy's protest supplies correction, the father's return initiates repair, and the abandoned clothes mark repair's incompleteness. Transmission occurs when the child applies the lessons of care beyond the filial bond and uses them to judge the person who taught him. The scene therefore demonstrates, instead of merely asserting, why ethical rhythm must remain revisable. The phrase "good guys" undergoes a corresponding change. After the father kills the road agent, the boy asks whether they are still the good guys, and the father assures him that they "always will be" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 77). At this stage, goodness is a paternal guarantee, an identity conferred by the same authority that defines protection. Later, the boy asks, "There are other good guys. You said so. . . . So where are they?" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 185). The question exposes the distance between the father's category and the social world it supposedly describes.

After the father's death, "good guys" becomes an explicit test of a new relationship. The boy asks the armed stranger, "Are you one of the good guys?" and then presses him to explain how that identity can be known (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 282–283). He uses an inherited phrase, but no longer accepts paternal-style assurance as

proof. The term has moved from reassurance, to criticism, to a criterion for risk. Being good cannot be possessed once and for all; it must be renewed through conduct.

The boy's agency develops across this progression. His plea for the burned man does not change the father's decision; his request to feed Ely produces a limited sharing; his sustained protest after the thief's punishment redirects their course; and his interrogation of the stranger shapes whether he will enter a new community. Agency here does not mean independence from paternal language or material dependence. It means an increasing capacity to interrupt, evaluate, and redirect the practices on which the boy still relies. The boy's ethical reach nevertheless has limits. He cannot create durable institutions, restore ecosystems, or distribute care universally. The narrative remains centered on a human child whose survival organizes its affective force. Johns-Putra's (2019) warning about parental care therefore continues to matter even when the boy moves beyond kinship. His compassion opens the filial bond; it does not automatically become an adequate politics of future generations or a fully more-than-human ethic. *The Road* offers a minimal practice for resisting dehumanization, not a social program for ecological repair. This limitation is also the source of the novel's honesty. The boy does not save the burned man, find the other child, or know the thief's fate. Responsibility is not measured by successful rescue alone. It appears in the refusal to let practical failure become moral invisibility. Rhythmic care keeps another's vulnerability within perception, occasionally changes the distribution of resources, and interrupts violence when it can. Its achievements are partial because the world in which it operates has destroyed most conditions for collective action.

After the Father: Ethical Continuity Without Certainty

The father's death removes the relation that has organized every routine of the journey. The boy remains beside the body before stepping back onto the road, carrying grief without the practical structure through which grief had previously been managed (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 279–282). The danger of this moment is not only physical. If responsibility depended entirely on paternal command, the father's death would end it. The boy's encounter with the armed stranger tests whether the inherited rhythm can enter a new relation.

The child does not accept the man immediately. He asks whether the stranger is one of the good people, how he can know, and whether the man carries the fire (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 282–283). These questions show both continuity and judgment. The boy uses the father's vocabulary, but he does not treat the words as sufficient evidence. He listens to the man's answers, considers the existence of the man's family, and decides whether to risk trust. Responsibility after the father is neither solitary self-reliance nor passive transfer to a new guardian. It is a negotiated entry into another structure of dependence. The stranger's family also changes the scale of care. The father-son pair has survived through an intensely closed intimacy, but the new group includes another adult, a woman, children, and a dog. Its existence does not prove safety or moral coherence, but it creates a form of community the father has rarely allowed himself to trust. The boy enters a network in which care can be shared across several bodies. This redistribution matters, responsibility no longer rests on one exhausted protector, and inheritance no longer moves along a single paternal line.

The family prevents the ending from supporting the absolute claim that the novel imagines no future. A woman receives the boy, and religious language returns when she speaks to him about God. The boy's continuing conversations with his dead father further complicate any simple division between embodied ethics and transcendence (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 285–286). The ending permits spiritual, psychological, and memorial interpretations without resolving among them. Ethical continuity does not require that uncertainty to disappear. It requires that the child remain able to enter relation without abandoning the standards he has learned to test.

The final trout passage complicates renewal even further. Kunsza (2009) reads the coda's "maps of the world in its becoming" as evidence of order and redemptive possibility, while Stark (2013) emphasizes the novel's demands of witnessing extinction and irreversible loss. Both pressures are present. The remembered trout carry patterns older than human knowledge, but the passage places them in a world that no longer exists. Its beauty cannot be converted into evidence that ecological regeneration will occur. It preserves an image of more-than-human plenitude while marking the inadequacy of human memory to restore it (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 286–287). This coda places a necessary limit on the article's account of care. The father and boy can preserve a relation, but they cannot preserve the ecological communities on which relations depend. Human ethical persistence is

meaningful without being sufficient. The trout expose the scale of what the fire cannot save. At the same time, remembering their patterned bodies keeps extinction from becoming a neutral background to the human story. The novel closes by widening attention from the surviving child to forms of life that have vanished, leaving responsibility oriented toward a world it cannot recover.

The boy's survival should therefore be read neither as redemption nor as empty continuation. The new family offers a real but unverified future; prayer remains possible but not conclusive; ecological memory survives while its objects may not. Rhythmic responsibility is adequate to this uncertain ending because it makes no claim to guarantee outcomes. It names the work of sustaining, judging, and extending care when the future cannot validate the effort in advance.

CONCLUSION

The Road distinguishes responsibility from survival habit by making repetition vulnerable to ethical interruption. Walking, rationing, sheltering, warming, touching, watching, and refusing violence form the rhythms through which the father and son maintain relation under environmental collapse. Those practices are not ethical simply because they recur. Their moral force becomes visible when they answer vulnerability, accept correction, and continue in altered form after a breach. The thief episode provides the argument's decisive evidence. The father's retaliation demonstrates that a practiced caregiver can redirect care into punitive exclusion. The boy's protest identifies the breach and compels an incomplete attempt at repair. Because the correction comes from the child, inheritance no longer means obedience to paternal authority. The boy receives a vocabulary and repertoire from the father, then uses them to judge him and to extend concern beyond kinship. Rhythmic responsibility is therefore transmissible without being identical, durable without being automatic, and reparative without erasing damage.

This reading also changes the significance of carrying the fire. The fire retains its symbolic and possibly theological meanings, but those meanings become ethically credible only through practice. Its value is neither disproved by the father's failures nor secured by his declarations. It survives through renewed acts of care and through the boy's refusal to let paternal protection define the full boundary of responsibility. The novel offers no reason to idealize such minimal ethics. Care remains uneven, anthropocentric, and materially constrained. It cannot rebuild institutions or restore extinct worlds, and the child survives partly through resources and protection denied to others. The unspoken danger in celebrating endurance is that it can make catastrophic deprivation appear morally productive. McCarthy's novel resists that comfort when read closely, scarcity damages ethical capacity, repair remains partial, and the trout coda preserves irrecoverable ecological loss.

Rhythmic responsibility is consequently not a solution to collapse. It is the form ethical life takes when solutions have largely disappeared but vulnerability continues to make demands. The boy's final movement into a new family leaves those demands open. What he carries forward is not proof that goodness will prevail. It is a disciplined readiness to recognize when care has faltered and to begin it again.

REFERENCES

1. Alaimo, S. (2010). *Bodily natures: Science, environment, and the material self*. Indiana University Press.
2. Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.
3. De Bruyn, B. (2010). Borrowed time, borrowed world and borrowed eyes: Care, ruin and vision in McCarthy's *The Road* and Harrison's ecocriticism. *English Studies*, 91(7), 776–789. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2010.518045>
4. Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New International* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1993)
5. Guo, J. (2015). McCarthy's *The Road* and ethical choice in a post-apocalyptic world. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 17(5), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2732>
6. Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global*. Oxford University Press.
7. Johns-Putra, A. (2019). *Climate change and the contemporary novel*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108610162>

8. Kunsu, A. (2009). "Maps of the world in its becoming": Post-apocalyptic naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 33(1), 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jml.0.0076>
9. McCarthy, C. (2006). *The road*. Alfred A. Knopf.
10. Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press.
11. O'Connor, P. D. (2017). Anti-matters: Mortal ethics in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *European Journal of American Studies*, 12(3). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.12337>
12. Stark, H. (2013). "All these things he saw and did not see": Witnessing the end of the world in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *Critical Survey*, 25(2), 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2013.250206>
13. Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. New York University Press.