

**Care is the art of mutual vulnerability.** Discuss this proposition in relation to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

To consider the proposition that 'care is the art of mutual vulnerability' we must first unpick the relationship between care and vulnerability. One could argue that without vulnerability, there is no need for care. Care is how we deal with our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others; to preserve and protect those that matter to us. One should also consider how great and how often we encounter vulnerability. There are certain identities that encounter vulnerability more than others, sometimes existing in a perpetual state of vulnerability. When we consider the end of the world, we find that we are all mutually vulnerable. As Richard Seymour states in his book, *The disenchanted Earth: reflections on ecosocialism and barbarism*, 'no matter how brutally the resources of the planet are marshalled to protect racial and national boundaries, the collapse of the earth's systems would not respect those boundaries.' (Seymour 55) The question of how we navigate the looming death sentence of climate catastrophe lies in how we can empower ourselves through our mutual physical and emotional vulnerability to care for the wellbeing of humanity and the planet. Without this, humanity may fall into individual emotional self-preservation, denying our agency as we descend into ecological collapse. Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, utilises the touching story of a father-son relationship to anchor the incomprehensible reality of our dying world. The pair's physical vulnerability to the non-stop relentlessness of a cold, wet, dark world that does not want them in it, is only matched by their emotional vulnerability with each other. As the man and the boy face the 'collapse of the food chain and the exhaustion of fertile land, the depletion of oxygen as marine life is killed off, the flooding of major cities as sea levels rise, unliveable temperatures and extreme weather making large parts of the world uninhabitable' (Seymour 55) we are reminded of what it is, in our current state of environmental melancholia, that we are so mindlessly willing to lose.

Throughout *The Road*, the man and the boy do not shy away from their emotional vulnerability to each other, attentively reassuring the other of how much they care. The father-son dynamic is profoundly unlike most examples we encounter in media

representation, honouring the value of beautiful vulnerability rather than static masculinity.

‘Can I hold your hand?’

Yes. Of course you can.’ (McCarthy 221)

In the shared isolation the man and the boy understand ‘that there is no self without others’ (Seymour 54) and that this is vital to their survival as ‘the good guys’ (McCarthy 136). Even as their physical vulnerability to the dying world is unmissable, McCarthy does not relent the importance of our connection to others, reminding us that what matters truly is how we are ‘each the other’s world entire.’ (McCarthy 4) This relationship models the care that the luckiest of us feel for those in our own lives, yet McCarthy places this dynamic on the periphery of human existence. *The Road* then becomes an example of how ‘we fully and relentlessly recognize the loss, but we hold on to the qualities we saw in the lost object’ (Seymour 21); that left mutually vulnerable to the will of the world, we have the power to remember and defend the worthy attributes of human connections that truly matter to us. With this in mind, ‘the boy was all that stood between him and death.’ (McCarthy 29)

It is important to note, as we consider how *The Road* relates to our current ecological destiny, that the dynamics of care in the relationship between the man and the boy is significantly dictated by the dangers around them, and their mutual vulnerability to the landscape. Their durable attentiveness to their connection exists simultaneously with the persistent demand to protect themselves from harm. The novel opens as most days begin. ‘When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he’d reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him.’ (McCarthy 1) The precarity of their lives is substantiated immediately, as Richard Seymour warns ‘this will not be a pleasant world.’ (55) Furthermore, their proximity to death is unfathomably to most, both what makes them vulnerable and what keeps them safe. As the threat of cannibalism oscillates throughout the novel, we come to learn that the solution to this kind of physical vulnerability is suicide.

‘He took the boy’s hand and pushed the revolver into it. Take it, he whispered.

If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying. Do you understand?' (McCarthy 119)

This moment is heart-breaking and deeply disturbing. This type of threat, akin to the dangers of the climate, befalls both the man and the boy mutually vulnerable, with the gentle release of death acting as their final solace where they may be together. It is said that 'scare tactics don't work. Rather, we must tell 'stories' of change that inspire.' (Seymour 15) yet McCarthy, like Seymour knows that 'fear is not inherently illegitimate.' (15) It is troubling but accurate, that our capacity to care in a dynamic of mutual vulnerability knows no bounds. It's the sort of encounter that might strike you just enough to acknowledge how compelling our mutual vulnerabilities can be.

This ethic of mutual vulnerability as care is not uninterrupted in *The Road*. A pivotal moment where this dynamic falters is when a thief steals the man and the boy's belongings. The man's way of confronting this situation is largely different to the attitudes of his son. At gunpoint, the man orders the thief to return their belongings and strip off his clothes.

'You didn't mind doing it to us.

[...] Come on, man. I'll die.

I'm going to leave you the way you left us.' (McCarthy 275, 276)

The creed behind his actions is explicit in his choice of words. The man denies their mutual vulnerability through individualistic justifications; limiting his capacity to care as bound down by the attitudes of a capitalist society long gone. Seymour rightfully contends that 'the issue is capitalist civilization.' (12) It is the intrinsic detail of a way of life that incapacitates care as a central need for humanity and the planet to thrive. With this dying world being the only one he's ever known, the boy does not have this predisposition. He cannot deny the mutual vulnerability of all people still living and how we cannot ignore our equal longing for care. The boy sobs, 'Just help him, Papa. Just help him.' (McCarthy 277) It is from this point onwards we witness some degree of separation between the

man and the boy, as to the boy, this act calls into question their title as 'the good guys' (McCarthy 136) and therefore their mutual relatability of what it means to care.

Whilst *The Road* appeals to this concept of 'care as the art of mutual vulnerability', McCarthy supplies us with a contesting example of 'what Renée Lertzman calls 'environmental melancholia'' (Seymour 12). This concerning aspect of human nature is present in a conversation with an old man they meet on the road.

'Things will be better when everybody's gone.'

They will?

Sure they will.

Better for who?

Everybody.

Everybody.

Sure we'll all be better off. We'll all breathe easier.' (McCarthy 183)

Environmental melancholia describes 'an undercurrent of sadness and thwarted mourning which can register in outward form as a defensive indifference.' (Seymour 12) When confronted with the end of the world, even in our imagination, many of us find ourselves preserving our happiness and peace by denying the existence of such a disastrous fortune. Whilst this act protects our individual emotional vulnerability, it does not protect us from our mutual physical vulnerability as inhabitants of the earth. 'Denial never destroys the truth, but merely represses it' (Seymour 55), meaning we repress the power we hold in mutual vulnerability that allows us to care; that allows us to take action. As in the old man 'dwindling slowly on the road behind them like some storybook peddler from an antique time' (McCarthy 185) we are presented with a mirror to confront the fact that 'we are all sleepwalking, and all half dreaming, even if we dream of being awake.' (Seymour 21)

As the novel develops and the boy grows in age and responsibility, we watch their mutually vulnerable dynamic of care shift. Such a vivid image of a father reaching for

his son in the night soon becomes a very different one; one where 'he knew the boy lay awake in the night and listened to hear if he was breathing.' (McCarthy 292) Like the man, we are forced to confront a harsh truth that 'has been a long time coming' (McCarthy 297), that the boy will surely outlive his father. This is most clearly affirmed when the man exclaims that 'you' re not the one who has to worry about everything' , to which, of course, the boy replies 'yes I am, he said. I am the one.' (McCarthy 277) Like the harsh truth of the climate crisis, the boy's concerns for his father's life 'becomes an urgent voyage, a pilgrimage, a visit to a dying patient. A stolen glimpse of what might have been won, had the earth ever been a common treasury.' (Seymour 20) This image of a young boy, taking a more active caring role, attempting to ward off the death of his father is not so dissimilar to the image of children striking school to save the planet. Untouched by the 'powerless' indifference of adults sinking in capitalist mud, the boy, and others like him, practice care as mutual vulnerability. Seymour believes that 'there is power in collective action.' (16) and it is possible that in our mutual vulnerability, there is a force for good.

For many of us, the moment you suddenly lose all hope creeps up on you. The boy poses a question to his father, if there's a chance that people live someplace else, even somewhere not on earth. The man does not entertain his child's hopes. To this, the boy finally admits 'I don't know what we're doing' (McCarthy 261). It is a moment where the boy seems to have lost all hope, melancholic. The only thing that the man can say to fuel his son's fire again is that 'There are people. There are people and we'll find them. You'll see.' (McCarthy 261) Again we are assured that it is our connection to others that is most worthy of our energy. To the man and the boy, the scariest thing of all is being alone. 'You said you would never leave me.' (McCarthy 298) Being vulnerable together is far less demoralising than being vulnerable alone. But we are not alone. Even in the man's eventual death, McCarthy does not allow the boy to be alone. After a few days of despair, a family finds the boy and takes him in. Although some may consider this conclusion to be disproportionately lucky, I argue that it is more than that. Our connection to others, our mutual vulnerability, is an unstoppable force. It is the one

thing that can drive us forward at the mercy of this dying world. 'You have to carry the fire' (McCarthy 298) because you are not alone.

In conclusion, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is a testament to the proposition that 'care is the art of mutual vulnerability'. It is because the man and the boy are mutually vulnerable that they forge a ruthless dynamic of care towards each other. Their mutual vulnerability is presented as a powerful force that can make them do anything, with their emotional vulnerability to each other as a guide. Without honouring care as shared vulnerability, the treasured relationship crumbles. Denying the effects of mutual vulnerability as care disempowers us from preserving the things we care about. In this state of denial, we mindlessly consent to losing the things that matter to us. McCarthy, above all else, reveals to us the importance of our connections to others. It is our connection to people that we dare not lose. Richard Seymour reminds us that in the face of irreversible planetary-level mistakes, we must deal with loss by holding onto the qualities within them. If, rather, we choose to live in a state of denial, this will not prepare us for what we are going to lose. The most cynical, and probably correct, of us will say that we can't escape capitalism and therefore there is no point, developing into a state of environmental melancholia. To them I say, capitalism will escape us eventually. There will be a time without capitalism whether we take it away voluntarily or if the world takes it from us. In the face of the end of the world, we are all mutually vulnerable. That does not mean we give in to it. 'We despair, but we do not submit.' (Seymour 21) We have agency. The proof is in how much we care. We care so much it shuts us down. But we forget care has the power to wake us up. If you care, about something or someone or anything at all. The power is within you.

#### Works Cited:

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Picador, 2009.

