



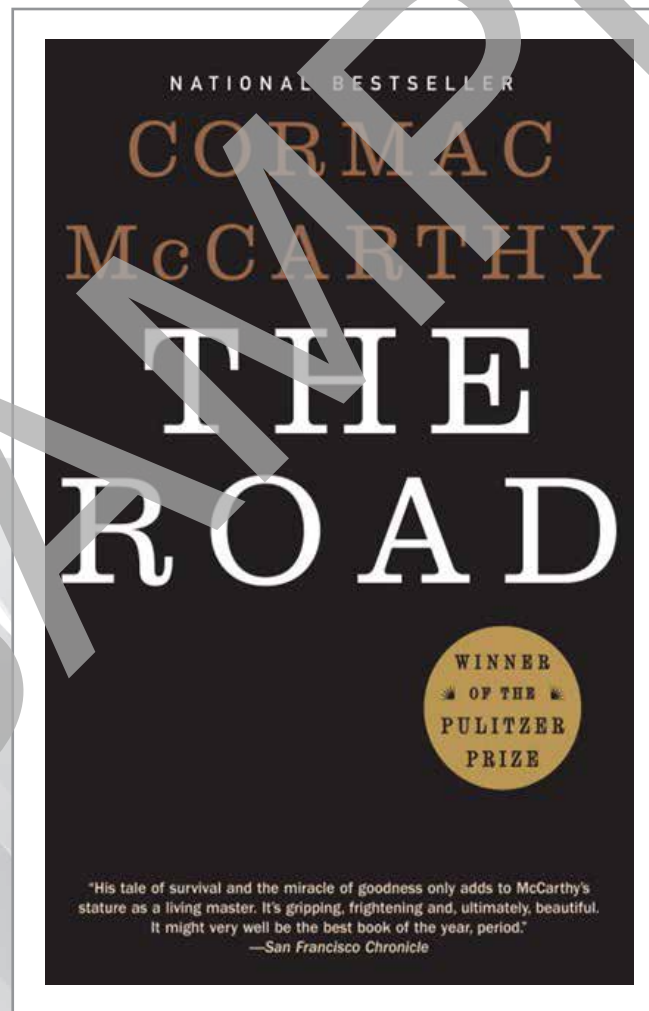
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Road

Cormac McCarthy



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# The Road

Cormac McCarthy

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Critical Thinking

Analyzing, inferring, research, opinions, predicting, compare/contrast, brainstorming

### Comprehension

Summarizing, cause/effect, compare/contrast, supporting judgments, identifying attributes, drawing conclusions

### Literary Elements

Figurative language, foreshadowing, symbolism, imagery, conflict, character analysis, plot development, point of view

### Listening/Speaking

Presentation, dramatization, discussion

### Vocabulary

Definitions, application, synonyms/antonyms, glossary

### Writing

Essay, poetry, review, journal entry, letter, synopsis, recommendation

### Across the Curriculum

Literature—book review, author interview, post-apocalyptic literature, other works by Cormac McCarthy; Science/Health—survival skills, disaster preparedness; Social Studies—social commentary, religion, history of bunkers; Art—cover art, collage; Viewing—movie version of *The Road*

**Genre:** fiction; survival

**Setting:** unknown; mountainous and seaside regions of the United States; post-apocalypse

**Point of View:** third-person limited

**Themes:** survival, sacrifice, travel, the will to live, good versus evil, love, decay of civilization, hope, family ties

**Conflict:** person vs. self, person vs. person, person vs. nature

**Style:** direct narrative mixed with dreams and memories of a society long gone; The absence of certain punctuation marks is a staple of McCarthy's work.

**Tone:** solemn and bleak, yet hopeful at times

**Date of First Publication:** 2006

## Summary

An apocalypse has occurred, and nearly all human, animal, and plant life is dead. Those still alive take to wandering for survival, safety, and companionship. A man and his son are among those attempting to survive. They travel toward the coast in hopes of finding something worthwhile, although they know the future is grim. Along the way they see gruesome and frightening signs of their deteriorated civilization. As the man grows weaker and sicker, he prepares the boy for his death. The father and son experience moments of luck and moments of terror. The man eventually dies from his sickness. A veteran, who implies he has been following the man and boy for some time, finds the boy and brings him to live with his family. These people promise they are also the "good guys," and the boy lives with them and their children, keeping mostly to himself and communing with his dead father.

## About the Author

Cormac McCarthy was born in Rhode Island in 1933 to Charles Joseph and Gladys Christina McGrail McCarthy. McCarthy attended Catholic High School in Knoxville, Tennessee and later, the University of Tennessee. He then served four years in the U.S. Air Force. McCarthy has received many writing fellowships, including a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Writing. Although many of McCarthy's early novels, such as *Blood Meridian*, *Suttree*, and *Outer Dark*, garnered positive reviews, his first widespread success and *New York Times* Best Seller came in 1992 with *All the Pretty Horses*, the first book in his "Border Trilogy." Since this success, McCarthy has published plays, screenplays, and the bestsellers *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* were met with great critical acclaim and were subsequently made into films. *The Road* also won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007. McCarthy currently resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico and is well-known for guarding his privacy, giving few interviews.

## Pages 3–48

The man and the boy awaken on the side of the road. It has been years since the catastrophic end of civilization. Everything that was once alive is now dead or dying. The few remaining people wander aimlessly like the man and the boy. As the two travel, they pass barren cities, abandoned vehicles, and many dead bodies. The man even finds his childhood home, now empty. The boy worries about their safety and asks many questions about the world he never knew. The man often dreams of his former life and his wife, who is now dead. As they cross a bridge and descend into a valley, they see smoke and fire in the distance. They must stop and wait for the raging fire to pass.

### Vocabulary

translucent  
ashen  
apparition  
thespian  
temporal  
opaque  
dogged  
marauders  
languor  
fire Drake  
heathen

### Discussion Questions

1. How does the novel begin? What does this tell you about the story and the characters? *(The novel begins with the man waking up on the side of the road. He has been traveling for a long time, and he instinctively checks on the boy, who is sleeping beside him. The man recalls a dream in which he and the boy are wandering through a cave and discover an underground lake and a blind, monstrous creature. Answers will vary. The novel begins “in medias res,” or “into the middle of things.” Disaster has already befallen the world, and the man and boy have obviously been on the road for a long time. The reader meets them in the midst of their journey, when they are ragged, tired, hungry, and already wondering if their journey is worthwhile. This gives the reader a sense of their exhaustion and anxiety. The dream enhances the idea that the two are wandering in the “dark,” both literally and figuratively. The blind beast could represent death waiting for them, or it may represent mortal dangers [murderers, thieves, etc.] that wait for the man and boy on the road.)*
2. What might the man mean by the phrase “...If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (p. 5)? *(Answers will vary. The man is referring to the boy’s complete innocence and the goodness that he embodies. The man believes that the boy might be the only good thing left in the world. All else that remains in the world is darkness, lies, hatred, violence, and anguish—things not worthy of God’s voice. And if God is represented in those things, then the man doesn’t believe in Him. To the man, the boy is the only reason to live. As far as he is concerned, the boy is the word of God.)*
3. Review the dialogue on pages 10 and 11 of the novel. What does this exchange tell the reader about the man and the boy? *(The two are honest with each other. Their words are few, and their tone is matter-of-fact. The man doesn’t hide the truth from the boy, admitting that they will die someday and that if the boy died, the man would want to die, too. This exchange shows that the boy has likely witnessed many horrors in his short life and also that he is intelligent and curious. The man does not believe in sugarcoating. He would rather his son know the truth so he does not feel a false sense of security. Though he knows the boy is a child, he seems to feel that the boy should be aware of their harsh reality.)*
4. Do you think the road is safe? Why or why not? *(Answers will vary. Some students may believe the road is unsafe because the man and boy are on constant watch [even using binoculars to scout ahead and a mirror to look behind at times] while they travel. They seem to believe something bad could happen to them on the road. Other students might think that compared to the man and boy’s other options, the road is the safest one. It is an accessible path which the man claims no one travels anymore. It is also out in the open, so no one can sneak up on the man and boy. However, the author constantly hints at the mortal threats waiting on the road.)*

5. Do you agree with the man that “...the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death” (p. 18)? *(Answers will vary. Some students may think that pleasant dreams that remind the man of better times may be comforting—moments of solace in his otherwise horrible existence. Others may think that recalling better times is too painful for someone who knows they will never regain the precious things they lost. These dreams might only distract the man from his present reality. The man believes that all of his energy must be devoted to the daily task of survival, not dreaming about the impossible.)*
6. Why doesn't the man take the jars of tomatoes he finds in the abandoned house? What does this indicate about the man? *(The man concludes that someone before him hadn't taken the tomatoes for a reason, and therefore, he doesn't trust the food. He thinks it could possibly make him and the boy sick and maybe even kill them. Answers will vary, but most students will likely agree that the man's actions show that he is shrewd. He weighs his options and always puts safety first.)*
7. What is the importance of the boy's statement: “It's because I won't ever get to drink another one, isn't it” (p. 24)? *(Answers will vary. The boy might be communicating his knowledge that he and his father are among the last of the human race. He may also be indicating that he knows the soda is a relic from the past—something that will never exist again. The boy's comment might also refer to his knowledge of his own [and his father's] impending death, either from starvation or one of the other many dangers that lurks in the ashen ruins of civilization. The boy's questions thus far show that he is keenly aware of not only his immediate situation, but also of their overall predicament.)*
8. What does the author mean by the statement: “The frailty of everything revealed at last” (p. 28)? *(The author is referring to things such as political, religious, social, racial, and financial disputes that plagued people before a catastrophe befell the earth. Realizing the “frailty” of the earth puts things in perspective for people. What seemed important before became meaningless overnight, since survival immediately became the primary concern.)*
9. Describe the dream the boy has on pages 36 and 37 of the novel, and explain how this dream might relate to the boy and his father's current situation. *(The boy dreams that he is in his old home and he has a wind-up penguin that waddles and flaps its flippers. However, in the dream, the penguin is moving without being wound. Answers will vary, but some students might think the dream symbolizes the boy's feeling of helplessness. The things in his life that once were controlled, such as the toy penguin's movements, are now out of control. The dream highlights the boy's fear of the strange world he lives in. Just as the boy feels helpless to stop the advancing “possessed” toy in the dream, he feels helpless to stop bad things from happening to him and his father in real life.)*
10. Why can't the boy and his father stay at the waterfall? What does the man's reasoning demonstrate about the world they live in? *(The man says the location is not safe because the water will attract other people and the sound of running water will mask the sound of anyone approaching. He also wants to keep moving to find food. The man and the boy have learned that avoiding others is the safest way to exist in the desolate world they live in. Encounters with others might mean confrontation, which could lead to injury or death for the man and boy. The man's comments also show how vigilant one must be in the unpredictable environment they are in. Finally, the man's reasoning demonstrates that finding food in their barren world is a constant struggle.)*
11. Why does the man enter the abandoned trailer even though he knows someone has probably been there before them? What does he find inside the trailer? *(Answers will vary, but the man probably wants to see if the trailer has been emptied of all of its food and useful items. Rather than supplies, the man finds dead bodies inside the trailer.)*
12. **Prediction:** What other dangers will the boy and his father encounter during their journey?

## Supplementary Activities

1. Imagine that the boy and his father enter a home that is furnished and supplied similarly to your own. Write two to three paragraphs describing the items you think the man and boy might take. Remember, the boy and his father look for simple, useful items, but they also re-purpose items to fit their needs. Be creative!
2. The author uses unique figurative language to describe the state of the world in the novel. For example: "...the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (p. 32). Find another instance of unique imagery in this section, and copy the line(s) onto a blank sheet of paper. Below the line(s), illustrate the image. Then, write how you think this line(s) further illuminates the man and boy's situation.
3. Using what you know about the man or boy thus far, complete the Character Buzz Words graphic on page 27 of this guide.

## Pages 49–93

As the man and boy continue down the road, they pass someone who has been struck by lightning. The man remembers the day catastrophe struck the world and the aftermath, including his wife wishing for death. A gang of men in a diesel-powered truck appear, and the man shoots one of them in defense of the boy. As they attempt to remain out of sight, the man and boy's belongings and food are plundered. They happen upon a small city, where the boy sees another young child and hears a dog bark and wishes to help both of them. The man and boy press on, despite starvation and extreme cold. They witness a small army of "soldiers" with arcane weapons marching past with slaves and carts. The man and boy hide, terrified, until the army passes. The man knows that "bad guys" are everywhere, and he ponders what to do next.

### Vocabulary

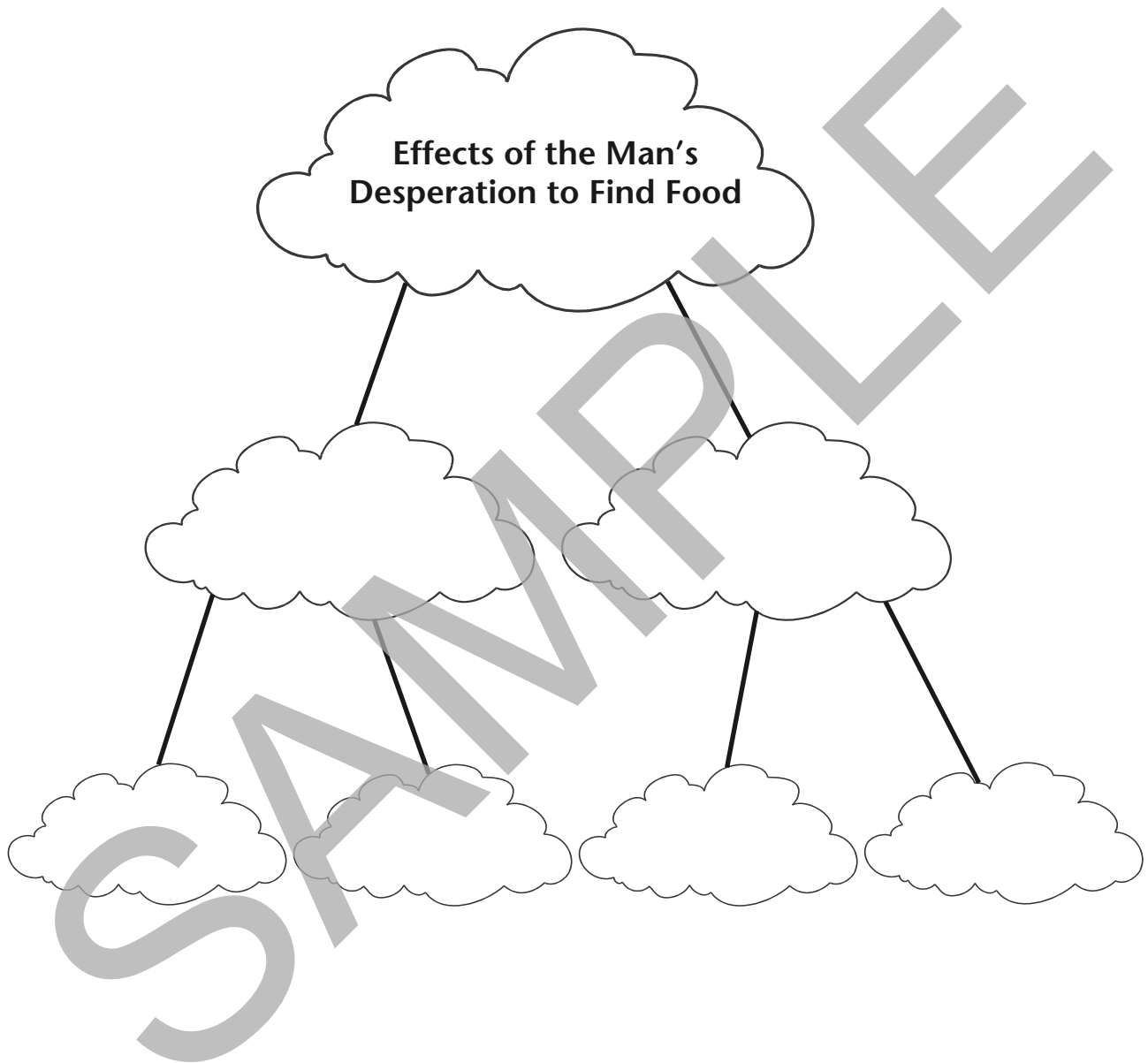
feral  
migratory  
outlandish  
sinister  
tinder  
palisade  
incandescent  
oblivion  
tableau  
phalanx

### Discussion Questions

1. What items has the man kept in his wallet until this point in time? What does he do with them, and what does this symbolize? *(Up until this time, the man has kept money, credit cards, his driver's license, and a picture of his wife in his wallet. One day on the road, he takes all of these items out and lays them on the road like playing cards. After looking at the picture of his wife one last time, he walks away from his belongings. Answers will vary. Some students may feel the man's actions symbolize his hopelessness, since he is effectively letting go of the person he once was [and, therefore, abandoning the hope that he may ever be that person again]. Other students may feel the man's actions symbolize his strength under trial, since letting go of the past will lift a burden from the man's shoulders and allow him to become a new, stronger person.)*
2. Describe the night that everything changed in the world. How did the man react, and why? *(The event happened at 1:17 [presumably in the early morning, since the man and his wife awoke to witness it]. In an epic, almost biblical manner, "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" [p. 52] began the destruction. When the man realized the power was gone, he began filling the bathtub, presumably to conserve water. The fact that the man immediately began taking precautions implies that he knew something was terribly wrong.)*

## Rainstorming

**Directions:** In the clouds below, explain the effects of the man's desperation to find food.





# Story Map

**Directions:** Fill in each box below with information about the novel.

