

## Ill-fated Motherhood: A Study of Mother Figures in the Select Novels of Cormac McCarthy

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### ABSTRACT

Over the past five decades, Cormac McCarthy had written so little and even had claimed to know even so less about women. Most of his novels are bildungsroman of men: co-existing with one another, learning from one another and killing one another. Although a few insignificant female characters are always peppered here and there in the novels they are not as rounded as the male characters. The following essay intends to highlight the three ways in which McCarthy allows the ‘mothers’ in the novels to exist (or to perish): the incapable mother, the dead mother or the mother to whom motherhood would be straightaway denied via the following novels: *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *The Road*.

**Key Words:** Mother, Motherhood, Denial,  
Cormac McCarthy, Female

Over the past five decades, Cormac McCarthy had written so little and had claimed to know even so less about women. He said, “Women are tough. I don’t pretend to understand women” in his interview with Oprah Winfrey. Most of his novels are bildungsroman of men: co-existing with one another, learning from one another and killing one another. Although a few insignificant female characters are always peppered here and there in the novels they are not as rounded as the male characters. The following paper intends to highlight the three ways in which McCarthy allows the ‘mothers’ in the novels to exist (or to perish): the incapable mother, the dead mother or the mother to whom motherhood would be straightaway

denied via the following novels: *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *The Road*.

The first mother figure we come across as one starts going through McCarthy's oeuvre is Mildred Rattner, mother of John Wesley Rattner, the young protagonist of McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*. His father, Kenneth Rattner's, death profoundly impacted his life as they rarely got to know each other. Kenneth was hardy in John's life, even when he was living, and his passing creates a gap. John's mother was deluded and lies to him about his father, saying that Kenneth was a devout man and he told her stories about his war records and the platinum plate implanted in his skull. In reality, Kenneth was an unrepentant crook. The inconsistency between Mildred's portrayal of Kenneth and the real Kenneth highlights John's challenges: he is susceptible to the misconceptions and lies that are passed down through the generations. John sobs as Mildred commands him to "find the man that took away your daddy" (McCarthy 72). He is clueless about taking revenge on an unknown person. Nevertheless, his mother has imprisoned him in a cycle of violence. Here, Mildred is portrayed as an incapable mother who had failed her only son as a parent. Because of her failure as a parent John goes about seeking life skill lessons from two local men: Arthur Ownby and Marion Sylder, his father's murderer. Sylder and orphaned John Wesley bond over the ancient traditions of bloodhounds, hunting, and trapping, neither knowing that Sylder is the murderer of John's father. And Uncle Arthur teaches John to be independent and to commune with nature. In Sullivan's words, "female death", female incompetence in this case, often becomes a "plot device, or literal pretext, for bringing male characters together" (Sullivan 68).

McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, is about Rinthy Holmes, the novel's protagonist, a mother, who is abandoned by her brother and the father of her child, Culla Holmes, after the birth of their child. Her journey through the novel is deeply influenced by her role as a mother and the quest to find her child. Culla out of shame abandons the child right after its birth in the jungle lying to the mother that it was a still born and it had to be buried. But Rinthy's maternal instincts did not let her believe her brother's words and she set on a search to find her child all alone. Her determination to find her child illustrates the depth of her maternal bond and the lengths she is willing to go to protect and reclaim her family. As she

was a single mother living in a deeply religious and conservative society, she becomes a figure of pity and scorn, reflecting the novel's exploration of social and moral judgments. And the novel ends with her sleeping next to what seemed like a burned carcass of her child. So, Rinthy was denied motherhood right from the time her child was born till its death.

In Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*, the portrayal of mother figures is quite minimal and indirect. The most significant mother figure in Lester's life is his own mother, but her presence is largely absent from the narrative. We know nothing about her. She is described only in passing, and her influence on Lester is indirect. Her departure at a young age leaves Lester in a state of emotional deprivation and sets the stage for his later difficulties. This absence of maternal care and guidance contributes to his sense of isolation and his struggles with identity and societal norms. The absence of effective mother figures in Lester's life can be interpreted symbolically. It highlights themes of alienation and the failure of societal structures to provide care and compassion. The lack of maternal warmth and stability underscores Lester's sense of being outcast and abandoned. Here, the most important person in a person's life, a mother, is not allowed to surface only the absence could be felt. McCarthy very tactfully does away with an important character only making its absence do the needful. She is mentioned only once in the novel: "The mother had run off, I don't know where to nor who with"(McCarthy 22). Because of the absence of a mother figure, a care giver, early on in his life, Lester not only becomes a social outcast but also a necrophiliac later on his life.

John Grady's mother, although not a central character, plays an important role in shaping his backstory. She is depicted as a figure who has left John Grady's life early on, having divorced his father and moved away to pursue a career in theatre. His mother sells off her inherited property, a ranch, which was like a blow to Cole causing complete dismay which he considers as an utter betrayal. Her departure has a profound impact on John Grady, contributing to his sense of loss and dislocation. Her absence from his life leaves a void and influences his feelings about family and belonging. The absence of a strong maternal presence in John Grady's life is reflective of the novel's broader themes of disconnection and the search for identity. John Grady's journey is, in part, a quest to fill the void left by his mother's absence and to seek a sense of belonging that he does not find in

his fragmented family structure. Here, Cole's mother is depicted as carefree and selfish, incapable of being a good mother to her only son.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*, the portrayal of mother figures is quite nuanced and serves to underscore the novel's themes of loss, family, and the harshness of the world. The novel, which is the second instalment in McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*, follows the story of Billy Parham as he embarks on a series of harrowing journeys across the American-Mexican border. Billy's mother is mentioned briefly but has a notable impact on the narrative. Her presence is largely defined through her absence and the effect it has on Billy and his family. She was murdered when Billy was young, and her death is a part of the emotional backdrop of the novel. Her absence is emblematic of the broader themes of loss and the search for meaning that permeates the story.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*, the wolf that Billy Parham encounters takes on a significant symbolic role that can be interpreted as a form of a mother figure. Although the wolf is not a literal mother figure, it represents a kind of primal, nurturing force in Billy's life. After Billy captures and later releases the wolf, he is deeply affected by the animal's fate and the relationship they share. The wolf's struggle and Billy's compassion for it reflect a connection that transcends the traditional human-animal divide. This bond can be seen as a form of emotional and existential nurturance that contrasts with the absence of a maternal figure in Billy's life. The wolf can be interpreted as a symbol of spiritual and existential guidance. The wolf serves as a symbolic mother figure, representing themes of nurturance, existential struggle, and the raw aspects of nature. This portrayal enriches the novel's exploration of loss and the search for meaning, highlighting the contrast between human ideals of care and the often indifferent forces of the natural world. But the pregnant wolf had to be killed off yet again preventing it from becoming a real mother to her cubs.

In *The Road*, the mother figure is notably absent. The novel depicts a post-apocalyptic world where the protagonist, a father, is the primary caregiver for his young son. The mother, who is mentioned only in passing, represents a lost past and a different kind of familial stability. Her absence is a stark reminder of the novel's themes of loss, survival, and the tenuous nature of human connection. The father's role is underscored by the absence of the mother, highlighting his struggle to uphold the remnants of humanity

in the face of overwhelming despair. The novel portrays the mother as unable and unwilling to care for the boy, while the father is competent and able. This is an example of post-feminist fatherhood, which often marginalizes mothers and represents them as superfluous or incompetent. In *The Road*, the mother only appears through the man's memories and dreams. She eventually gives in to despair and commits suicide, believing that she will be raped, murdered, and eaten. In the episode where the father was about to kill a dog, the boy cried to spare its life but the mother did not say anything and just walked off. Here, the mother is portrayed as a cold and heartless being. In life and in death, the mother was an incompetent parent. The narrative suggests that the man is a better parent than the mother. The mother was unable and unwilling to care for the child. She valued her life more than anything else. So, when she could not take it anymore she took her own life rather than to be consumed by the apocalypse.

Thus, it is evident from the above examples that McCarthy has a way of writing about women, especially mothers: the incapable mother, the dead mother or the mother to whom motherhood would be straightaway denied. Many cultures expect their mothers to be self-sacrificing, loving, and nurturing but McCarthy's mothers are usually selfish and incapable of caring. And their death or absence often becomes a plot device for bringing male characters together.

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